

Scenic aesthetics in Belgium: history of emancipation

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Abstract: I will not present here an inventory of the picturesque Belgian aesthetics, but I will try to shed light on the phenomena and mechanisms by which new types of picturesque creative processes were established in Belgium in the early 1980. In order to understand them and to perceive what underlies the diversity of aesthetic forms they take, it is necessary to understand in what historical context they appeared, that is, aesthetic, socio-political and economic. And for that, we cannot ignore the very origin of this small country.

Keywords: Scenic aesthetics, Belgian theatre, theatrical language, interdisciplinarity

A little history...

The territories that now make up Belgium were successively called the Burgundian Low Countries, then the Spanish Netherlands and then Austria, depending on the domination that was exercised over them. They returned to French authority from 1795 to 1814. In 1815, the Congress of Vienna brought together the greatest European powers to redraw their borders and distribute the territories lost by Napoleon. Thus, they merge the former Austrian Netherlands, the Principality of Liège (which forms the territories of present Belgium) with the United Provinces (current Netherlands) under the name “Kingdom of the Netherlands”. The goal was to create a buffer zone that weakened France, especially by disrupting direct access to the port of Antwerp, then the world's first port since the Renaissance. This artificial construction, object and result of strategic negotiations, did not take into account the diversity of languages that it brought together (Dutch, Flemish (Dutch patois), French, Walloon, (French patois), but also religions (Calvinism/Catholicism), that is, modes of thought and ideologies, in short very different *cultures*. On August 25, 1830, on a performance of the *Muette de Portici* at the Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie, the great aria “Sacred Love of the Homeland, make us bold and proud...” instils and triggers the “revolution” that leads to the Independence of Belgium, that is, the emancipation of the Dutch yoke and the constitution of the independent Kingdom of Belgium (Flanders and Wallonia today).

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Thus, although the Kingdom of Belgium includes the Flemish people, the emancipation of the Dutch yoke requires the emancipation or even the exclusion of the language which reminds it, the Flemish. The French language becomes synonymous with independence, that of culture, knowledge, the bourgeoisie, while the Flemish language is the language of minorities, small people and social demands. It is therefore not surprising that the Flemish author Maurice Maeterlinck wrote in French since the great official scenes of Gand and Antwerp impose this language.

The devaluation of the Flemish language created a delay in the development of the people. At the crossroads of the 19th and 20th centuries, a Flemish movement “vlamse bewerking” (“the Flemish transformation”) fought for teaching and defence to be exercised in Dutch. But it was not until 1936 that the universities of Antwerp, Gand and Leuven were able to teach in Flemish. As we can see, because of its cultural, religious and ultimately psychological complexity, the Kingdom of Belgium is at its birth the opposite of what is called a “nation”. Rather, it is a conglomerate of territories, customs, and ways of thinking that no sense of belonging has been able to link. And while many initiatives have been carried out in repeated ways by the State to create a “national spirit”, particularly through literature and theatre, the Belgian recognizes himself more in this hybridization than in uniformity, in consensus, the harmonious *meltingpot* mosaic (“mixture”), as we say in Brussels. The problem of language, more than religion, has been central to what has characterized and shared our country since 1830, because, from a cultural issue, it has become an issue and a challenge of the community, a political issue. It is also the language that will be one of the factors in the emergence of contemporary aesthetics, as I will explain.

What will happen on our stages in the 19th century?

From a theatrical and dance point of view, the Flemish scene was not of very high professional quality. In the theatre, French melodrama reigns supreme and is played by semi-amateur actors. Flemish writers try small experimental scenes with, as an international escape, the Netherlands and South Africa, where Flemish is spoken. On the dance side, ballet, in what it has most academically, entertains a well-thinking bourgeoisie who senses the smell of naphthalene. By imposing French as an “official” language, Belgium imposes on French-speaking territories a direct cultural affiliation with France that will long be an aesthetic model for our directors, but also the provider of repertoire authors and performing artists. Until 1914, the big names of the French Comedy took over the scenes from Brussels and Liège, while Belgian artists shared the second roles.

Theatrically speaking, until the 1960s, French-speaking Belgium remained a kind of French colony. Of course, stage research approaches and avant-gardes have animated the Belgian scene repeatedly, in the field of theatre as well as dance. In 1924, for example, the Dutch director Johan de Meester took over the direction of the

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Vlaamse Volkstoneel in Antwerp (a theatre whose objective was to create a Belgian avant-garde). De Meester is inspired by Meyerhold and by the German expressionism to try to overcome the obstacle of a scenic tradition based on the word, and to establish understanding through movement, kinetics, abstraction. If its polemic objective were to convey a Flemish nationalist ideological message based on the Christian entity, this is the first attempt to free from the influence of a logocentric tradition and overcome the obstacle of language.

We can also mention the novelist Herman Teirlinck and the representation of his play "De Vertraagde film" (the film in slow motion) in 1922 which will consecrate the triumph of Flemish expressionism. The work is presented as an application of Craig's theories (Abstraction, the scene as movements of the soul...) which Teirlinck tried to introduce in Flanders as early as 1909. And it's the same H. Teirlinck who, in 1930, collaborated with the architect Henry Van de Velde to create, at the La Cambre school in Brussels, a theatre experimentation laboratory in which the representation will be thought through space and its construction, and not only through text. The dramaturgy of space, the relationship between forms and language that their resonance produces then becomes an object of study, and of formation. On the dance side, we must of course mention the francophone dancer and choreographer Marguerite Akarin, known as Akarova, also influenced by Russian constructivism. This "Belgian Isadora Duncan", as she is called sometimes, gathered in the 1920s in her laboratory theatre, painters, poets, musicians to give form to the choreographic works she creates and interprets. A pioneer or visionary when it comes to thinking about the relationship between movement and space, Akarova creates a plastic universe (movement, costumes, light, expression) from playing the music, not as an illustration of it, claiming that Geometry is the visible part of instinct.

The Second World War and the censorship of all forms of non-figurative aesthetics, was going to sweep away these desires for artistic emancipation.

In the immediate period of the Second World War, it was the institutionalization of stage activity that marked our entire country.

1) by the creation of two National Theatres, sponsored by the Ministry of Communication to consolidate the Belgian national fibre at the end of the war (again, this unfortunate desire to create a national identity), one in Brussels and the other in Antwerp;

2) by granting subsidies and missions to other official scenes;

3) recognition of acting as a professional activity.

Our artistic landscape is emerging, becoming more professional, becoming more institutionalized, and enjoying growing financial support.

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At the dawn of the 1960s

A first event breaks the quiet development of official scenes

On the 1958 World Exhibition, the show *Arcane* (II), of Maurice Béjart's Ballet Theater, was indeed a major factor in the evolution that followed. The following year, Béjart created his mythical performance, "Sacre du printemps", at the Royal Theatre in Monnaie, an institution at which Béjart and his new company "Les balls du 20ème siècle" were closely associated until 1987. Béjart's contribution was in his new conception of what was called "ballet" and especially in his conception of the relationship between body and space, space and movement that would influence not only dance, but also the artistic approaches of young directors and theater actors in the early 1960. The creation of his school Mudra in 1970 in Brussels ensured the formation and therefore the filiation of his approach for generations of dancers and choreographers, creators still existing: Anne Teresa de Kersmaeker, Michele-Anne Demey...

Another element which should not be ignored is the development, at the dawn of the 1970s, on Brussels stages, of what has been called "the theatre of the body". Influenced by the theatre of Grotowski, by the experiences of the Living Theatre and by the counterculture in which the Living Theatre is enrolled to undermine the codes of the American society, some Belgian artists, including author Frédéric Baal, actress Nicole Colchat, and the choreographer Frédéric Flamand create their "vicinal lab" in attic on the Rue Verte in Schaerbeek (the district of prostitutes). Their first show, *Sabbo*, (1970) creates a break in the text-actor-decor trio by rethinking the "character" no longer as a psychological entity, but as an organic and instinctive vision. Therefore, the body is considered as a language, no longer as a "support". Maurice Béjart and then Peter Brook and Grotowski come to see the show. The World Tour takes these 18-year-old artists from New York to Persepolis, securing their "lab" with international fame and immediate recognition... Belgium, as usual, was not touched. Their research evolves but the divisions in the group separate them. In 1975, Frédéric Baal again created "I", which depicts the American dancer Anne West amid objects and sculptures by architect Olivier Strebelle. Frédéric Flamand, influenced by the Beat Generation (worked with William Burroughs, Patti Smith, Frank Zappa in the United States), will continue his research by developing a theatre based on impulse and scream and then exploring the relationship between the body and the technology. He will gradually replace his actors with dancers, moving away from the strictly "theatrical" universe to enter the world of contemporary dance (he was also director of the National Ballet of Marseille between 2004-2014). The experiments of the "Vicinal Lab" and of the "Plan K" testify to the desire, already symptomatic in many artists of this period, to open up the fields of creation, to intertwine modes of expression to find a new way of describing the world.

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Another upheaval, linked to this date to Belgium's socio-economic history, would give a more sustainable life. To understand it, you need to look at it from a socio-economic point of view. Before World War II, Wallonia had benefited mainly from industrialization. The exploitation of coal mines and the development of the metallurgical industry around Liège and Charleroi have made Wallonia a black but extremely rich country offering its population a higher standard of living than that of Flanders, which has remained agrarian. After World War II, the Walloon economy is weakened, as not only do cities bombed by the Germans need to be rebuilt (especially Liège), but also the industries that made the Walloon prosperity until the war are old, almost obsolete. And soon, the coal mines are drying up. In Flanders, on the other hand, at the end of the war, new modern factories, especially textile factories, were set up near the port of Antwerp, but also around Gand, which opened the doors to new prosperity. The economic balance is reversed between the two parts of the country and with it, the political and psychological balance of power. Flanders, now economically more powerful, finds in its new prosperity a form of cultural identity.

Since the 1980s

Due to this economic and institutional change, the hitherto underprivileged Flemish artists (except for Hugo Claus, Maeterlinck...) are emancipated not only from this condition of cultural inferiority, but also symbolically, the yoke of language to find new forms of language. In addition to the new possibilities of international tournaments that this new language, freed from the authority of text and language, above all a completely different way of working appears. Strengthened by this emancipation, the artists of the Flemish choreographic and theatrical scene base their research on the first idea that the structure of work, the way in which one organizes his work, has an influence on the work itself. As if to say: "If you want to create a new show for a new audience, you have to surround yourself with new artistic and human means." Outside the institution, without compromising the collaboration with the theatre or with the "daddy's" dance, and thus be in total rupture with the frameworks and the creative processes in force at the time. In this artistic position resonates a social or political point of view: "To define working conditions and not to accept the conditions of a manager or of a hierarchy". This emancipation of Flemish artists is also based on the aesthetic observation that the stage arts of time are out of touch with the world, reality, speak according to the coded and univocal, causal and linear aesthetics, giving rise to closed systems of representation, unlike the complexity of reality that is multiform, fragmentary, composite, simultaneous.

These artists of the time, who are now internationally recognized (Jan Fabre, Anne-Teresa De Kersmaeker, Jan Lauwers, Alain Platel, etc.) present themselves to creation as "vulnerable" beings who, voluntarily, let the chance penetrate the creative process. In contrast to any search for truth, or for harmony with reality and nature,

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they know that what is not expressed by words can be expressed by movement, light, sound, space, etc. The mixture of languages (theatrical, choreographic, musical, spatial, etc.), the fragment, the simultaneity, contribute to the development of an *aesthetic, based on interdisciplinarity*. The artistic origins of the creators are multiple and serve the creative project that can be between theatre, dance, performance, installations... Jan Fabre, for example, comes from the visual arts. Here I quote Marianne Van Kerkhoven: “That’s what we also see in science: when new things arise, often young people and other disciplines bring something. Why? Because when you’re in something for a long time, you don’t see it anymore. While when we are distant, we see better... those who are around”.

What finally characterizes the work of these Flemish artists of the 1980s is the *working progress* and the de-hierarchies of roles and functions: at each stage, the choreographer, the dancer, the actor, the scenographer, the playwright, the stage technician, can decide where we’re going to end up. It is an *open*, not predetermined process, where everyone can introduce whatever, they find along the way... This means that the process of creation itself, and what it gleans, is as important as the original creative idea.

This search mode has since generated many emulations. It is enough to note today the number of groups operating on this principle of *work in progress*, and the countless and interesting “around on-stage writing” that meet the same criteria of creation (text emancipation, de-hierarchy, interdisciplinarity, work in progress, etc.) attest to this. It is sometimes questionable whether the process has now become a “recipe”. Has it become a new form of academicism? “The” way of doing “contemporary” theatre. We can also ask the question of the institutionalization of the process; the major theatrical houses and international festivals consider this approach as innovative, or avant-garde, “saleswoman”. What is certain is that this way of working by associating different languages, by making the stage space the research ground where different languages and expressions clash to create a language, this trial and error at the start of the space opened up theatrical research among the young creators of the French-speaking part of the country. And this, until integrating the drama school curriculum.

Today, Belgium remains a hybrid and divided country: economically, politically, and culturally. Economic neoliberalism and the Flemish right wing have not yet succeeded in completely separating our country, but it is an extremely present danger. Brussels, the capital of Europe, is a region, and is a buffer zone in which both French and Flemish communities, mix, enriched by the other communities that economic and humanitarian immigration brings and by the influx of European technocrats in temporary residence. Brussels is a magnificent cultural and human vivarium, stateless in a way. Wallonia, where a part of the population is called a separatist and a “rattachist” of France, is characterized by more social and ecological

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political colours; more accustomed to the waves of immigration from its mining past, retains this ability to adapt to otherness and a form of *bonhomie*.

This communal schism, originally based on language, therefore remains characteristic of our country. But it is also what makes its strength and, in a certain way, its identity: hybridity (for a long time to come, I hope). If there is no “Belgian nation”, there is indeed a “Belgian spirit” that is based precisely on this original mixture of the German (Flanders) and Latin (Wallonia) spirit, this intrinsic non-identity, this “nothing and all at the same time”, this form of “bastardy”. It is not a nation; it is a non-nation whose strength lies in the consensus and compromise. Although strongly challenged by a part of the country (displayed by the right wing) this hybrid and mixed spirit is defended and transmitted by various events with two communities, such as, for example, the famous Kunstenfestival of Arts, whose mirror name brings together the two communities of the country (Kunsten meaning Arts), Tour Générale, (which brings together the two national theatres of the country, Dutch-speaking, and French-speaking), etc. In addition to these major events, the Dutch and French-speaking theatre companies join forces to seek a common theatrical language, especially in the field of theatre companies for children and young people.

The theatrical culture, in search for a current *theatrical language*, which is not necessarily based on *language*, word or text but invites to the mixing of artistic forms and expressions, and which, from the disorder of creation -or chaos- gives rise to the most orderly and lively forms of theatricality, this theatrical culture would be the way to relativize, or even to go beyond what questions of languages (therefore of culture, language communities and politics) have imposed from the cradle of this small country? As an example, a way forward, a possible to transpose.

It is a naive and idealistic wish. But since Belgium is the land of surrealism and the improbable, it could be that, for once, theatrical fiction subordinates’ reality...

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