

A contemporary classic

Antwerp's Het Toneelhuis bucks the municipal theatre system

REBECCA BENOOT

When Pierre Bourla designed his Antwerp theatre in 1827, little did he know that it would eventually house a revolutionary company. Diverse and politically grounded, Het Toneelhuis is a pioneer, not only in the local contemporary theatre scene but also worldwide, leaving the conventional idea of a theatre troupe behind to create an entirely new multi-disciplinary model.

The Théâtre Royal Français, named after its resident theatre company, opened its doors in 1834 but would go down in history as the Bourla theatre. With 900 seats, it's not Antwerp's largest theatre, and it's not even its oldest, but it is its most cherished due to the magnificent Neo-classical architecture. A circular front supported by columns, with statues of the nine muses on the rooftop, gives way to an interior with arched ceilings intricately decorated with beautiful mosaics and enormous chandeliers that exude all the grandeur and sophistication of the theatre's 19th-century clientele.

In 1932, the Koninklijke Nederlandse Schouwburg (or Royal Dutch Theatre) took up residence in the Bourla. Not long after, the theatre became a protected monument. However, as the popularity of theatre in general went

into decline, so did the building. In 1980, the Dutch Theatre moved out, and the building became abandoned.

Finally, the city of Antwerp decided to renovate, restoring Bourla's original interior (which had been largely altered in the 1860s). The Bourla reopened in 1993, and the Dutch Theatre returned. In 1998, they merged with Blauwe Maandag Company (Blue Monday Company) and became Het Toneelhuis.

Luk Perceval, founder of Blue Monday, became Het Toneelhuis' first artistic director. Legendary Flemish actor Josse de Pauw took over in 2005 but passed on the torch to long-time theatre director Guy Cassiers the following year.

Born in Antwerp, Cassiers had left his directorial mark on a number of theatres in Flanders and the Netherlands, most notably winning awards for his productions with Rotterdam's RO theatre. Drawn to the possibilities of cross-media aspects, he is best known for his ingenious integration of music and film technologies on stage.

Cassiers steered Het Toneelhuis in an entirely new direction. He moved away from the classic municipal theatre model in which each theatre has its own troupe and permanent director, instead inviting six Flemish perform-

ance artists to take up residence with him in the Bourla. "What we're aiming for is not only special for Belgium; people in foreign countries are also interested in the concept, in the rethinking of a city company," he says.

Out of adversity

"We started three years ago at the same time as the Belgian elections, which is important," says Cassiers, referring to Flanders' shift to right-wing politics. "Things were changing rapidly in Antwerp, politically speaking, due to, for instance, the Vlaams Belang, which got a lot of votes. For us, it was important to take a stand."

That they did. Cassiers' first production at Toneelhuis was *Mefisto For Ever*, the first of the *Triptiek van de macht* (*Trilogy of Power*), which explores the complex relationship between art, politics and power. Adapted by Tom Lanoye, the story about a theatre director who collaborates with the Nazis was adapted from Klaus Mann's novel *Mephisto*.

"I think we have a political responsibility as artists. We wanted to imprint that responsibility in the form of our company," explains Cassiers.

Cassiers may be mayor of this small town called Het Toneelhuis, but he wouldn't have got anywhere without his fellow citizens. The original six collaborators are: Renaissance man Benjamin Verdonck, long used to turning city of Antwerp into one large urban project; choreographer and dancer Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui; playwright and filmmaker Wayne Traub; Lotte van den Berg, with her brilliant site-specific performances; De Filmfabriek, headed by Peter Missotten, which specialises in multi-media projects, and the entire company of Olympique Dramatique, four lads whose work is unabashedly physical, comic and, occasionally, violent.

Probably the best example of the power of collaborative influence is their first season's *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters*, based on the novel by British author Julian Barnes in which he combines fact and fiction to create an alternate reality. This unique project became a true phenomenon, mainly due to the life-sized aquarium produced by Missotten, which took centre stage in a climatic drowning scene enacted by Olympique Dramatique. Cherkaoui, Traub and Van Den Berg assisted in making this performance about art and destruction a revolutionary spectacle.

Although the seven artists of the Toneelhuis continue to assist and influence each other, they mostly produce their own projects. This means that no Toneelhuis production is quite like the last.

"We focus on the importance of diversity," says Cassiers. "Our seven artists all start from a different discipline. In that sense, you can say that we are a miniature city where we respect the differences of the others and try to see how, by living together, we can create something new."

As with any other community, people move in and out. With the departure of Van den Berg, Cherkaoui and Traub, who are all starting

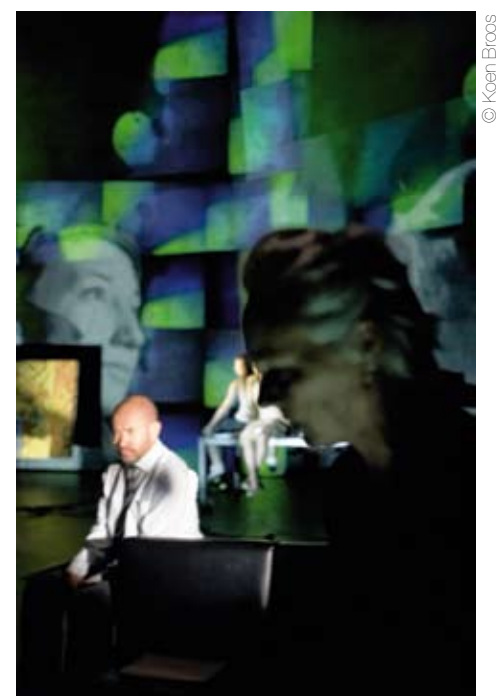


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their own companies, Toneelhuis is welcoming playwright and poet Bart Meuleman and writer/actor Abke Haring.

Selecting "inhabitants" can't be easy; so how did Cassiers go about it? "The quality of their work is the most important thing," he states.

The heart of Toneelhuis is the Bourla Theatre, but that doesn't mean that every artist has to work inside it. "The big stage is for large-scale performances, but an artist like Benjamin Verdonck looks at the theatre from the point of view of an outsider, and it's also important for us to have those kinds of artists who go into the city and create a direct dialogue with passers-by."

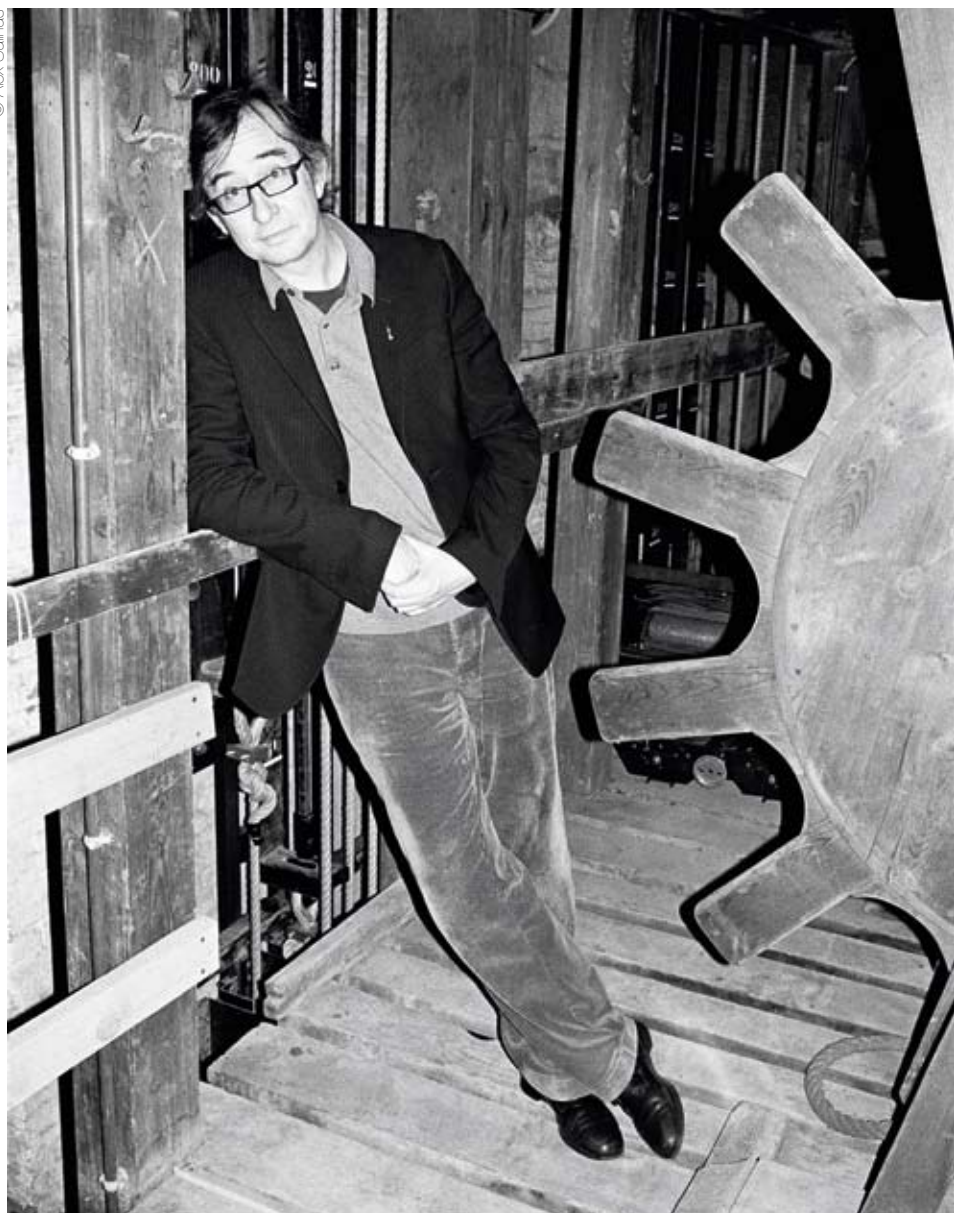


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Guy Cassiers' *Mefisto For Ever* was invited to the inimitable Festival d'Avignon: "A kind of theatre we seldom get to see," said Radio 1

Cassiers' novel approach

Guy Cassiers' own work, on the other hand, is also quite distinctive. He often bases his work on novels with solitary figures, and he regularly uses film and video installations, which creates a flowing mix between classical and contemporary. "It has to be relevant today; the theme is more important than the form," he says of his plays. "I read a lot, and novels give me plenty to work with. The way we are influenced today by all kinds of other media creates more possibilities to develop a form of theatre



Toneelhuis artistic director Guy Cassiers turned its formula inside-out



Antwerpenaars are decidedly pleased with Pierre Bourla's 19th-century Neo-classic masterpiece, which in 1994 won the Europa Nostra Award for renovation

that is not only based on dialogue but also on monologues and on the thoughts of the characters."

Cassiers integrates these influences, but he strives not to reproduce. Rather, he wants to "deconstruct the elements and use them in a completely different way. By deconstructing the form and the language, I hope the spectator can reconstruct the image in his own mind. Every work I develop is to stimulate the artist inside the spectator."

Cassiers is also fond of taking on big projects and scaling them into pieces. Right now he's working on a stage adaptation of *The Man Without Qualities*, the whopping 1930 three-volume book by Austrian writer Robert Musil. The first of the trilogy will premier next summer in the Bourla. "In a way, it is about re-creating Europe," says Cassiers. "The book takes place at the beginning of the First World War, but there are so many similarities with today's political situation that I think it's important to review the content."

Het Toneelhuis also frequently hosts visiting companies; this season, KVS, NTGent, De Roovers and Music Theatre Transparant will all grace the stage. Most of Toneelhuis' original works are in Dutch, but, depending on the company, you'll also find English and French-language theatre.

Even though Het Toneelhuis takes all its productions on tour, both nationally and internationally, a lot of non-natives attend the performances in Antwerp due to the intoxicating location. Attending a performance in the Bourla satisfies a desire for the timeless glory of the theatre – mahogany, velvety seating, surrounded by statues of ancient muses – while providing extremely contemporary productions and modern adaptations.

The same can be said for the building's bar, De Foyer, a majestic Antwerp landmark on its own. Eat and drink under its stained-glass dome, decorated with flowers and fruits. It's the perfect ending to a stylish night out. ♦

→ www.toneelhuis.be

Open season

A typically mind-blowing programme awaits at Toneelhuis

Under the Volcano, based on British novelist Malcolm Lowry's 1940s masterpiece, is a trademark Guy Cassiers adaptation combining literature and video installation. Josse de Pauw is awe-inspiring as Geoffrey Firmin, a British consul in Mexico whose world starts to crumble after a disastrous love affair and one too many mezcal. Love, booze and sublime performances share centre stage with original footage shot in Mexico. **Running now in Antwerp**

Olympique Dramatique will combine noise, pathos and cruelty in their adaptation of Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*. This seriously alternative performance will shock and amaze, which is generally the best way to describe most of what this company does. The bard's most horrific play like you've never seen it before. **Premieres in Brussels on 6 November**



Fear of the unknown and a little audience participation are the key elements in De Filmfabriek's makeover of Belgian writer Maurice Maeterlinck's one-act play *The Intruder*. This performance thrives on its threatening atmosphere combined with a truly bizarre tale and Peter Missotten's distinctive installations. **Premieres in March, 2010**

Bart Meuleman collaborates with Olympique Dramatique for *In the Penal Colony*, inspired by Franz Kafka's short story about an exquisite death trap. By deconstructing this multi-layered and politically-charged story, Meuleman gets the chance to prove that he is an exceptional addition to Het Toneelhuis. **Premieres in April, 2010**

One of the most anticipated events of this season, however, is without a doubt the first part of Cassiers' adaptation of Austrian author Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities*. Ulrich, played by long-time television and stage actor Vic de Wachter, is the title character in this epic political satire set in 1913 Vienna, seasoned with a dash of romance. **Premieres in June, 2010**



Where the wild things are live

The exceptional Bronks Festival introduces theatre to kids

MARIE DUMONT

Witty, inspiring and bursting with imagination, the annual Bronks Festival, which kicks off this Friday in Brussels, is a superb opportunity to tear kids away from computer and television screens and introduce them to the magic of live theatre. Dozens of productions from Belgium and elsewhere will bear witness to the genre's extraordinary vitality. Those who expect simpering variations on *Mary Poppins* are in for a shock.

The programme, curated by artistic director Oda Van Neygen, is an eclectic jumble of styles and themes, the only common point being that none of the productions talks down to children. All ages are catered for: preschoolers will be enchanted by Tof Théâtre's *Premiers pas sur la dune* (*First Steps on the Dune*), a gentle maritime fable happening inside a

gilded picture frame and featuring a tiny rubber duck as protagonist. Their elder siblings, meanwhile, will be invited to ponder the fate of migrants sent back to their countries of origin in *Enkele reis* (*One-way Ticket*), a house production based on the award-winning French novel *Un Aller simple*.

While some shows tap into age-old myths and stories (like tg Winterberg's *Alice*, a cross between *Alice in Wonderland* and *The Chronicles of Narnia*), others have their feet firmly planted in the modern world. The interactive *Kroes* uses new technologies to conjure up a virtual 3D environment, which the young viewers shape as they go along. The sobering *Mondays*, meanwhile, meditates on the recent wave of shooting sprees in schools.

Most productions are in Dutch,

but the festival stages a few shows in French as well as a number of pantomimes in which the music, sets and actors' gestures speak for themselves. Take HetPaleis' *Danske*, a wordless show that delves into children's games, silly walks, wild dances and other hieratic playground rituals.

The event is split between different venues around the capital, including Leopoldpark in the European quarter and a grand, faded mansion in Schaerbeek that will serve as a backdrop for a poignant meditation on dashed dreams and the passing of time (Studio Orka's *Berninna*).

Many productions, however, take place in Bronks' brand new theatre on Varkensmarkt in downtown Brussels. Long awaited by Van Neygen and her staff and finally inaugurated last March, it is a bright and airy building with



a giant window in lieu of façade, a café, workshops, open rehearsals and quirky installations (see photo, page 5). Kids can try the Human Jukebox, essentially a guitarist trapped inside a box who will play thousands of songs on demand. Forget computer

games – your children will probably think it the coolest place on earth. ♦

6-15 November

Across Brussels

→ www.bronx.be