1. INTRODUCTION

Jan Lauwers’ theatrical journey is accompanied by a constant reflection on performance. Some of his recent statements testify to the influence of seventies performance art on his own experience and at the same time show how he distanced himself from a generic and comprehensive conception of the phenomenon:

My work is strongly influenced by performances staged in the 1970s, but then without the sometimes pernicious narcissism whose substance was often too limited. In the 1970s, early 1980s, we tried to formulate an answer to ossified conventional theatre. We threw the linear story out and introduced visual, fragmentary theatre that attached importance to the physical presence of the actors, who we preferred to call performers. Yet it was always very different from ‘performance’ as such, not least because we worked with performers. In performance art the performer is the artist himself. In the theatre the difference between the creative artist and the performing artist is very important1.

Through the experience of performance, however, Lauwers continues to question his own legacy in contemporary theatre:

What’s theatre and what’s performance art? What can we do with our knowledge of performance art in the sixties? What can we do in storytelling at a time that is so tragic that the reality around us is much bigger, much heavier than anything you could do in theatre? That’s one of the things I really find interesting. In the sixties and the seventies, you could do a performance and cut yourself with a razorblade. If anybody did it now, I would be offended. I would think, come on, look around at what’s happening in the world, while you put yourself so much to the fore that you think it’s important to show that you have cut yourself, it’s almost self-pity...2.

In 1981, when Lauwers was reflecting on performance and its impact on theatre, Richard Schechner published a pamphlet identifying the reasons for the decline and fall of the American avant-garde that had dominated the theatre scene from the fifties down

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to around 1975. Among the five types of causes described by Schechner, of particular interest is the “failure to pass on what was learned to a new generation of artists”. According to Schechner, this failure caused a gradual shift towards the predominance of individual work, the expression of the performer who occupies the stage as a solitary figure. Performers freed themselves from the director and the questioning arising from this relationship, so leading to withdrawal into a kind of theatre wrapped up in itself:

Frontal staging, passive audiences, sentimental apolitical texts. Performers tend to want an empty stage so that they can be seen more clearly; they don’t want to be anyone’s puppet so they compose much of their own material – and this makes most of their work personal, and much of it sentimental. Stretch – playing many roles very different from each other – is the goal of a mature actor; self-expression that of the performer. Away with stage effects, away with other performers, away with texts written or assembled by others. What’s left is what we have: brilliant, but not enough; personalistic rather than concerned with the polis, the City, the life of the people.

Though at different times and in different contexts, Lauwers has reflected on similar topics, and his career can be read as developing around the issues cited.

2. JAN LAUWERS AND THE ‘FLEMISH WAVE’

To understand Lauwers’ performative achievements, it is necessary to examine the particular context of his formation and the early years of his career in Belgium. Born in Antwerp in 1957, he studied painting at the Academy of Art in Ghent. Lauwers’ formative period foreshadowed the importance of the visual component in his work and the eclectic nature of his artistic personality. A theatre and film director, painter and writer, he likes to simply call himself an artist who tries to use different media in a restless and unflagging search. In this regard, Lauwers’ career recalls the multidisciplinary approach to performance adopted by Schechner.

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6 On Jan Lauwers the bibliography is principally in Dutch, so this paper is based exclusively on contributions in English and only the latter will be cited. There is to date a single volume devoted to the director: C. Stalpaert, F. Le Roy, S. Bousset (eds.), *No Beauty for Me There Where Human Life Is Rare. On Jan Lauwers’ Theatre Work with Needcompany*, Ghent-Amsterdam: Academia Press/International Theatre and Film Books, 2007 (with bibliography on 367-375). See also J. Reinelt, “Jan Lauwers: Performance Realities-Memory, History, Death”, in M.M. Delgado, D. Rebellato (eds.), *Contemporary European Theatre Directors*, London: Routledge, 2010, 205-229, with the related bibliography. The official Needcompany website also contains a wealth of information: www.needcompany.org/EN (last access 2 March 2013).

7 On visual art Lauwers has stated: “It is the contemplative centre of my work and my life. Without that medium the other media would not exist. It is my necessary solitude, my only real private time” (“Most Questions Are More Interesting than Their Answers”: 451).

8 “I am just an artist who tries to use all those different media. Isn’t that the only way to survive? Why should I restrict myself? Art should not specialize. Art begins when thinking is still in its infancy. Leave specialization to the scientists and the philosophers! […] I use as many different means of expression as I possibly can. At first I found that frustrating: now I see it as a blessing. I am no longer afraid of it. The restlessness it causes serves as a driving force. Every medium raises different questions” (ibid., 449-450).

9 “In performance studies, texts, architecture, visual arts, or any other item or artifact of art or culture
Lauwers’ approach to theatre was gradual and had its roots within the situation of the theatre in Belgium in the late seventies\(^\text{10}\). The American avant-garde had made little headway on the Belgian stage because until that time the prevailing attention was directed to theatre in which speech had a central role. The plays produced were essentially bound up with political issues, the existentialist repertoire and the Theatre of the Absurd. State subsidies were channelled exclusively to companies recognized within the system, so young artists who were exploring the new experience of performance were excluded from grants and had to raise funds on their own. The early developments in performance art were ignored or greeted coldly by audiences and critics. The neglect of performance came to an end only early in the new decade, when a new generation of artists emerged who were to revolutionize the Belgian theatre. Lauwers thus came to prominence with other figures who were trained in the arts and only turned to theatre at a later stage. In particular, it is important to mention Jan Fabre’s career, which was strongly influence by performance art and – more precisely – by body art\(^\text{11}\). Fabre, who was born in Antwerp in 1958, has always been obsessed with the body, as we can see for example in his installations, and Lauwers began his activity in the same theatrical climate. The attention to the body was linked to the tendencies in performance art which had early developed in America and Europe\(^\text{12}\), but it had an original development in Flemish theatre\(^\text{13}\).

By the end of 1979 Lauwers had founded a collective of artists that took the name Epigonenensemble, changed two years later into Epigonentheatre zlv\(^\text{14}\). It was a mixed group which started by presenting performances on the borderline between reality and fiction, action and representation\(^\text{15}\). A spectacle symbolic of this phase was *Bulletbird* are not studied as such. When texts, architecture, visual arts, or anything else are looked at by performance studies, they are studied ‘as’ performances. That is, they are regarded as practices, events, and behaviors, not as ‘objects’ or ‘things’. Thus, performance studies does not ‘read’ an action or ask what ‘text’ is being enacted. Rather, performance studies inquires about the ‘behavior’ of, for example, a painting: the ways it interacts with those who view it, thus evoking different reactions and meanings, and how it changes meaning over time and in different contexts; under what circumstances it was created and exhibited; and how the gallery or building displaying it shapes its presentations. These kinds of performance studies questions can be asked of any event or material object” (R. Schechner, “Fundamentals of Performance Studies”, in N. Stucky, C. Wimmer [eds.], *Teaching Performance Studies*, Carbondale & Edmondsville: Southern Illinois Press, 2002, 10-11). See also R. Schechner, “Performance Studies. The Broad Spectrum Approach”, in H. Bial (ed.), *The Performance Studies Reader*, London-New York: Routledge, 2004, 7-9.


\(^{11}\) Apart from Lauwers and Fabre, perhaps the figures best known internationally, one can mention René Van Gijsegem, Thierry de Mey and Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker.


\(^{13}\) “The Flemish theatre-makers did not just reproduce the theatrical innovations of these international artists on local stages. Instead, they established a dialogue with them and brought specific Flemish, and often local or even individual, backgrounds and contexts to this aesthetic discussion. More importantly, while fierce battles continued to be fought elsewhere – especially those between theatre and performance – and Performance Art became a discipline in its own right, Flemish theatre-makers paradigmatically ignored borders rather than reinstating them through labels such as ‘devised performance’, ‘physical theatre’ or ‘site-specific performance’” (Orozco, Boenisch, “Editorial: Border Collisions”: 401).

\(^{14}\) Zlv stands for ‘zonder leiding van’ (‘under the direction of no one’). The group’s name refers to the collective of followers and their aversion to the figure of the director. Lauwers compares the group’s working method to that of a rock band of teenagers in which everyone plays an instrument but no one is recognized as the leader: see P. Sterckx, “Epigonen, en attendant que ça cuise à propos de ‘Couteauiseau’”, *Alternatives théatrales*, 27, December 1986-January 1987: 26-27.

\(^{15}\) The main productions in these years were *Already Hurt and not yet War* (1981), *dE demonstratie* (1983), *Bulletbird* (1983), *Background of a Story* (1984) and *Incident* (1985). See in this respect J. Adolphe,
(1983), a performance in which the theatrical fiction was continually disrupted by the preparation of a chicken that appeared in the opening scene still alive and after being cooked in the course of the performance was finally served as a main dish in a banquet. Strong emphasis was placed on the physicality of the performers, reaching its peak in *Incident* (1985), in which they retained their own names and simply showed themselves on stage, with their bodies and their frailty without the screen of pretence. Given the artistic training of the group members, the performances in these years had a strong element based on their experience of the visual arts and hybridisation of different media. In 1985 Lauwers concluded this experience by dissolving Epigonentheatre zlv to establish Needcompany, with which he made a new breakthrough\(^\text{16}\).

Needcompany was founded by Lauwers in 1986 together with the choreographer Grace Ellen Barkey as a group of artists\(^\text{17}\) of international origins\(^\text{18}\). The structure of the companions is very flexible, since it coexists with different individual achievements and more restricted artistic groups\(^\text{19}\). However, Needcompany’s work was led personally by Lauwers. Collective creation was no longer to be the pivot of the company’s focus. The figure of Lauwers gradually emerged as director in this new phase of his theatrical development, intended to moving further away from previous performative experiences. The first productions, such as *Need to Know* (1987), still show a marked prevalence of the visual element, but Lauwers’ research soon moved in other directions. His constant reflection on the theatre and actors led him gradually to approach the narrative dimension of the stage. Here we have no space to retrace Lauwers’ long career and his varied

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\(^\text{16}\) The director attributes a political motivation to the disbanding of the Zlv group: “We staged our first ‘shows’ at 5 o’clock in the morning in front of the factory gates. It was a wonderfully naïve period. When things started to get more serious and some introduced weapons, I quit” (“Most Questions Are More Interesting than Their Answers”: 452). Lauwers justifies the change to Needcompany with a banal contingent motivation, but, as we shall see, these statements conceal a more complex evolution: “I had resolved to do theatre for five years with the Epigonentheater and then stop, but we had a contract that ran for another two years, so it became seven. Then Ritsaert ten Cate from the Mickery Theatre in Amsterdam asked me to do another production. ‘But I don’t have a company anymore, the Epigonentheater has been disbanded, I need a company’. And that’s how Needcompany was formed” (*ibid.*).

\(^\text{17}\) They are actors, dancers and musicians of different nationalities, as well as visual artists and writers.

\(^\text{18}\) Lauwers considers this international dimension as a resource and does not seem to attach great weight to his place of origin: “I consider Flemishness a coincidence. At the moment, artists from the Low Countries are considered the world leaders in the performing arts because we have independent artists who know that one’s place of birth is incidental, not a place to die for, only to live for. If we can be proud of our Dutch language it’s because we don’t have any trouble learning three other languages. Because we know that what can be read between the lines is more important than the lines themselves. This is why they have no problem understanding us all over the world and have a lot of respect for us. By coincidence, you are born somewhere. It’s nothing to be proud about. Being Flemish, whatever I try to do will always be Flemish somehow. But that’s okay” (“Art Always Gets Caught Between the Pages of History’. A Flemish Coincidence - Interview with Jan Lauwers by Randy Gener”, *Critical Stages | Scènes Critiques - IATC Webjournal* | *Revue web de l’IATC*, 4, June 2011, www.criticalstages.org/criticalstages4/entry/lqquoArt-Always-Gets-Caught-Between-the-Pages-of-Historyrquo-A-Flemish-Coincidence-mdash-Interview-with-Jan-Lauwers). As a matter of fact, being Flemish should be considered a very relevant fact in Lauwers’ career, because of the political, social and linguistic conditions of Belgium. In this regard see the overview on Belgium presented in P. Nagy, P. Rouyer, D. Rubin (eds.), *World Encyclopaedia of Contemporary Theatre*, vol. 1, Europe, London-New York: Routledge, 1994.

\(^\text{19}\) Needcompany works with “associated performing artists”: currently they are MaisonDahlBonnema (Hans Petter Dahl & Anna Sophia Bonnema), Lemm&Barkey (Lot Lemm & Grace Ellen Barkey), OHNO COOPERATION (Maarten Seghers & Jan Lauwers) and the NC ensemble, including the actress Viviane De Muynck. The associates work independently and collaborate with the troupe.
production\textsuperscript{20}, which also includes film and the visual arts, but we will focus only on the theatrical side while examining some aspects of his contemporary productions.

3. “ISABELLA’S ROOM”

Productions by Lauwers and Needcompany have been well known and appreciated internationally for at least a decade, particularly through the performance \textit{Isabella’s Room}, presented at the Festival d’Avignon in 2004 and since then continuously repeated in many parts of the world\textsuperscript{21}. In 2011 \textit{Isabella’s Room} had its Italian premiere at the Venice Biennale. The production is dense and complex and would require detailed analysis, but here, while taking into account the whole representation, we will focus only on the opening of \textit{Isabella’s Room} to reflect on some of the basic features of Lauwers’ theatre.

On entering the theatre, the audience finds the stage already visible and with everything in readiness, with the actors and the director himself moving about on it and waiting for the public to settle down. For the duration of the show the stage remains fully visible and all the cast, including Lauwers, are present onstage all the time. At the beginning, the director presents himself in person to the public. He clarifies the nature of the objects on stage and recounts the genesis of the show. The whole stage is littered with African archaeological and ethnic objects strewn on tables, shelves and other furnishings and are photographically reproduced on some panels (see fig. 2) in a sort of \textit{horror vacui}. As Lauwers explains, this rich collection belonged to his father Felix. On his father’s death in 2002, Lauwers inherited the troublesome collection, apparently devoid of any practical use but hedged round with myriads of questions. The objects are evidence of a definite historical period, that of colonialism, and were probably taken by fraud or violence from their makers, after which they were transferred to a cultural context totally unrelated to their origin. As Lauwers briefly recounts, this unique heritage has confronted him with practical problems and ethical issues: “And when such a collection is just handed to you, you also have to decide what you are going to do with it”\textsuperscript{22}. The answer was the creation of \textit{Isabella’s Room}\textsuperscript{23}.

So the show opens with Lauwers welcoming the audience and telling the story of the unusual objects visible on stage (for an idea of the visual framework, see fig. 2). Then he presents the characters and actors, briefly sketching their roles. It turns out that

\textsuperscript{20} Here we can cite only the titles of Lauwers’ main stage productions with Needcompany: \textit{Need to Know} (1987); \textit{ça va} (1989); \textit{Julius Caesar} (1990); \textit{Invictos} (1991); \textit{Antonius und Kleopatra} (1992); \textit{SCHADE/schade} (1992); \textit{Orfeo} (1993); \textit{The Snakesong Trilogy - Snakesong/Le Voyeur} (1994); \textit{The Snakesong Trilogy - Snakesong/Le Pouvoir} (Leda) (1995); Needcompany’s \textit{Macbeth} (1996); \textit{The Snakesong Trilogy - Snakesong/Le Désir} (1996); \textit{Caligula, No beauty for Me There, Where Human life Is Rare, part one} (1997); \textit{The Snakesong Trilogy, reworked version with live music} (1998); \textit{Morning Song, No beauty for me there, where human life is rare, part two} (1999); Needcompany’s \textit{King Lear} (2000); \textit{DeaDDogsDon’tDance/DjamesDjoyceDeaD} (2000); \textit{Ein Sturm} (2001); \textit{Kind} (2001); \textit{Images of Affection} (2002); \textit{No Comment} (2003); \textit{Isabella’s Room} (2004); \textit{All Is Vanity} (2006); \textit{The Lobster Shop} (2006); \textit{The Deer House} (2008); \textit{Sad Face} | \textit{Happy Face, A Trilogy, Three Stories on Human Nature} (2008); \textit{The Art of Entertainment, Needcompany Plays the Dead of Martin Wuttke} (2011). For an analysis and bibliography of this extensive production, the reader is again referred to the essays in Stalpaert, Le Roy, Bousset (eds.), \textit{No Beauty for Me There Where Human Life Is Rare}.

\textsuperscript{21} See www.needcompany.org/EN/isabella-s-room. For further information on the work see the contribution by A. Mignatti, Jan Lauwers, “Isabella’s Room. Laugh and Be Gentle to the Unknown”.

\textsuperscript{22} Cited in Reinelt, Jan Lauwers, 206.

the actors on stage are not simply characters in the story but some of them represent the right and left hemispheres of the brain of the central figure Isabella and her erogenous zone. The authors of the script and music, as well as those responsible for the lighting and sound, are presented by Lauwers before the beginning of the opening scene. The tone of the presentation is playful and slightly surreal.

After the director’s introduction, Isabella, played by Viviane De Muynck, the protagonist of the story written by Lauwers, begins to speak. Isabella is ninety years old. She was born early in the twentieth century and has lived through its whole troubled history. She has now lost her sight but is able to see by means of an experimental device consisting of a camera that projects images directly into her brain. Isabella tells her story, starting from birth, while the other actors on stage interpret the principal characters in her life. They intervene in the story, singing and dancing with her at various points.

The narrator’s voice opens the story, announcing the date and title of the first scene: “1910. The Desert Princess”. Isabella begins to tell her story, starting from her childhood spent on a tiny island with her adoptive parents Anna and Arthur, lighthouse keepers and the only inhabitants of the place. She was abandoned as an infant and was told that her real father, the desert prince, disappeared on an expedition to Africa. While Isabella talks, sitting at a table, her voice merges into the singing of other actors, accompanied by music that gradually swells. Towards the end of Isabella’s monologue, some of the actors, especially those playing Anna and Arthur, begin to dance (see example in fig. 2). The scene ends with a moment of collective song and dance that serves as a link with the next episode, announced by “1918” uttered by the narrator. Isabella, fascinated by the story of her birth, grows up expecting to discover the secret of her real father, but in later scenes, starting from Anna’s death, she will discover the many secrets and lies that surround her. While the dramatic story of the twentieth century continues with its wars and epochal changes, Isabella, now an adult, moves to Paris and spends her whole life there in the room which houses the archaeological collection belonging to the father.

This paper will not retrace the course of the performance but focus on the introduction and the opening scene. We should also add that Isabella’s room constitutes the first part of Sad Face|Happy Face, A Trilogy, Three Stories on Human Nature (2008). The trilogy comprises three spectacles featuring different themes and dramaturgical approaches: Isabella’s Room is devoted to the past and Lauwers considers it his most linear spectacle in narrative structure. The Lobster Shop focuses on the future and has an almost dreamlike structure. The Deer House deals with the present, investigating the contemporary historical moment and at the same time reflecting on the here and now.

24 Lauwers announces to the audience, for instance, that “the right hemisphere will also play the drums for you” and presents “the narrator, who – and this is unique in the history of theatre – will play Isabella’s erogenous zone for you”.
26 Lauwers, La Chambre d’Isabella suivi de Le Bazar du Homard, 9.
27 See the documentation on the show’s website (www.needcompany.org/EN/the-lobster-shop). The text has been published in French in Lauwers, La Chambre d’Isabella suivi de Le Bazar du Homard, 41-75. See in this respect N. Troung, “One Must Imagine Einstein Happy. The Lobster Shop as Postmodernity’s Mega-Shop”, in Stalpaert, Le Roy, Bousset (eds.), No Beauty for Me There Where Human Life Is Rare, 91-100; A. Liuga, The World of the Lobster Shop, ibid., pp. 150-158.
28 See the documentation on the show’s website (www.needcompany.org/EN/the-deer-house). The text has been published in French in: J. Lauwers, La Maison des cerfs, Paris: Actes Sud-Papiers, 2009. See in this respect Reinelt, Jan Lauwers, 225-227.
of the theatrical medium. *Isabella’s Room* is therefore not a unique work in Lauwers’ output, but is fully embedded in a larger project that marks the more recent phase of the Belgian director’s work.

4. “I AM EVERYONE”. THE THEATRE ACCORDING TO LAUWERS

As noted above, *Isabella’s Room* has a linear narrative development: Isabella’s biography follows a chronological order based on the passing of the years and always made explicit. But the mode of the storytelling is polyphonic, so to speak: the director presents the work and remains on stage; Isabella tells her own story; the people in her life are constantly interacting with her; the hemispheres of the brain and her erogenous zone have a life and expression of their own. Apart from the dramaturgy of this spectacle, Lauwers’ work in general over the last decade tends strongly towards story-telling: he sees himself as a storyteller and calls himself a storyteller. Storytelling is not related to the dimension of orality, but has to do with narrative. To understand the significance of this definition, which obviously should not be confused with a narrative theatre, we have to consider the choice of the theatre in the director’s artistic development, begun, as has already been mentioned, in the visual arts.

Lauwers considers the transition from the conception of himself as a visual artist to the idea of the storyteller to be a natural evolution. In the case of *Isabella’s Room* his father’s archaeological collection, with its artistic and anthropological value, becomes a stimulus to storytelling: the objects in their disorder are a source of questions about reality. This is the disorder we see as spectators in the accumulation of objects on the stage at the beginning of the spectacle, but there is more to it than this. More generally, the chaos that characterises the director’s existence in personal, human and also cultural terms, is seen as an essential element to the creation of art. It is precisely this chaos, according to Lauwers, that bears intrinsically in itself the need to resort to different media simultaneously. Visual art is still the basis of the director’s work: in particular, design is a phase of deep reflection, a daily necessity, but is never resolved into a mere preparatory activity (such as developing sketches for costumes and sets) in relation to the theatrical production. Compared to the other arts, the theatre is by its nature focused especially on human nature, thanks to the physical presence of actor and audience. Lauwers believes the theatre lives by this research into people and telling stories is essential to humanity:

29 “One can conceive of the present in two ways (here we touch on the essence of theatre): the present of the world around us, by which I mean the world in its broad political and historical significance, and the present of the world we perceive when we look at someone who is doing something and knows he is being watched. The medium of theatre and the reality of the actors at the moment it occurs. Good theatre always examines the reality of the medium itself” (J. Lauwers, *Sad Face|Happy Face, A Trilogy, Three Stories on Human Nature*, 4, www.needcompany.org/EN/sad-face-happy-face, last access 3 December 2012).

30 “My father was an obsessive collector of ethnological pieces from Africa and India. I found a human heart in formalin in the cellar of my father’s house, as well as the mummy of a baboon. These two objects say something about humanity. What do they mean? Where do they come from? What is their history? And finally what is their story? I’m a storyteller” (‘My Thinking on Art Is All about Time’, 1).

31 “Disarray is a state of mind that can be productive for art. Without disarray there is no beauty” (‘Most Questions Are More Interesting than Their Answers’: 451). Lauwers cites the presence of death in everyday life, the imprint of Christianity and his father’s archaeological collection as an example of the mingling and confusion from which his works arise.
Art is actually all about man and human nature and all good art is a self-portrait of the observer. ‘One sees what one has learnt’. In good theatre things happen which cannot happen in video, film or art. As a medium, theatre has the most direct link with ‘human nature’ since it is performed by people and for people. It is essential to seek out this human nature so that theatre can redefine itself in order to survive. This means it is necessary to tell new stories. The need to tell stories is therefore intrinsic to the theatre, but at the same time it meets a widely felt contemporary need.

Hence Lauwers himself believes he became aware of this need by transforming his own artistic identity and beginning to write. From being a visual artist engaged in the theatre, he has now come to consider himself above all a writer. Recourse to writing and speech is his favoured means of access to narrative, but should be seen in a very open perspective. Speech, in its semantic and graphic dimension, interacts with the various levels of artistic expression between which Lauwers moves. The combination and juxtaposition of phrases and graphic designs, for example, characterise some sets created by the director. He likes to apply the image of the chameleon not only to his continuous and effortless immersion in different media, but also to evoke his leaps “from one world to another”. The contemplation of a work of art leads him to immerse himself in the universe of its creator, projecting him into a dimension other than himself. Lauwers

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32 Ibid.
33 “I came from the visual arts, and in the visual arts the question is not narrativity. But more and more I realize that with the increasing influences of globalization, people need stories again. I’ve come to realize that when I was young, I was listening to, for example, David Bowie and punks musicians, but somehow it was important to me that there is a full story there somehow. John Cassavetes was a very important influence to me. He was a director and filmmaker but he was also a storyteller. Twenty years ago when I started directing, I used to hate that word, ‘storytelling’ and I would say that it was not interesting anymore. Now I discovered that in every experiment I make for Needcompany, I find a solution through storytelling. Somehow I ended up being a storyteller” (Art Always Gets Caught).
34 “Yes, I consider myself more and more as a writer. In the beginning I thought of myself as a visual artist who makes theatre. But now I think the role of the writer is very important to me. Yes, that’s the biggest difference” (ibid.).
35 Speech in its semantic and graphic dimensions interacts with the various levels of artistic expression between which Lauwers moves: the juxtaposition and combination of words and drawings characterise some installations created by the director. See www.needcompany.org/EN/jan-lauwers-visual-arts; www.bamart.be/persons/detail/en/483#. See also the catalogue: J. Lauwers, Restlessness, Brussels: Bozar Books by Mercatorfonds & Centre for Fine Arts Needcompany, 2007.
36 “Writing or drawing, the energy is the same. The only difference is the narrativity. In recent years I have become very interested in storytelling. I always look for a form of narrativity that is not anecdotal. For me it is the subtext that counts. Text also appears in your drawings, paintings and sculptures. That’s true. The sculpture I made in Grimbergen in 2002 was based on the sentence “No beauty for me there, where human life is rare”, which I translated into Old Dutch. I removed parts of letters from the sentence and stood them upright, as in the famous HOLLYWOOD logo. It is a work of art, a piece of writing and a drawing in space, with the energy of the theatre. It is a clear message that is lost because the missing letters make it unintelligible. The titles are a semantic game which censures the truth, because it doesn’t exist. Take for example the work oh darling. It alludes to Munch’s painting The Scream. If you place the words ‘oh darling’ under Munch’s painting, does that make the work less powerful? These sort of questions amuse me.

When I write a word on a drawing, that word becomes a drawing. A ‘fine’ painting has nothing to do with the word ‘fine’. Sometimes I juxtapose two words like ‘liberty’ and ‘barbeque’ and I must admit that it does amuse me when people try to read things into them! Why then the chameleon? Is it a metaphor for your multidisciplinary approach or is it because you jump from one world to another? When I see a good work of art, I become that work of art. I would even go so far as to say that I become the artist. When I stand in front of a painting by Velázquez, I become Velázquez and understand the big problems he had to grapple with. I adapt shamelessly, like a chameleon. That is my great strength as an artist. A poor artist is someone who is wrapped up in himself. I am everyone. That is the only true originality” (‘My Thinking on Art Is All about Time’, 3-4).
draws great inspiration from this tendency to immerse himself in others’ visions, to look at reality from different standpoints.

Turning again to the visual arts and their influence on Lauwers’ dramaturgy, we can find the basis of the director’s whole oeuvre in the concept of the image. In the field of art and performance, the idea of the image can be related to any phenomenon, but it is not the all-inclusive scope of the term that interests Lauwers. He favours a more subjective meaning of the term and speaks of the so called “border image”. Lauwers sees the image as such only when he begins working in subjective memory: more precisely, the border image is what remains in the memory after a visit to a museum, the contemplation of a painting or, naturally, after a theatrical production. The border image combines emotional involvement and rational reflection. The artist’s primary purpose is to strike a true balance between these two poles. Lauwers’ approach to writing therefore does not coincide with withdrawal to the written dimension, but foregrounds the concept of the image in the meaning he ascribes to the term.

If we think of the opening scene of Isabella’s Room we immediately perceive the desire to create a border image: the setting of the scene, the physical presence of the actors and their voices are at the core of the spectacle, which lingers in the public’s eyes even after its conclusion. However, the text written by Lauwers makes a decisive contribution to its definition, with its mixture of drama and lightness pervading the whole duration of the spectacle. Lauwers defines his writing as contemporary tragedy:

I try to write contemporary tragedy. I read somewhere that it may be cowardly to use humour to survive, but I think it is necessity to use it to survive. I think it makes tragedies I’m writing bearable. My aim these last years has been to use a form of tragedy. Greek tragedy even, with its time and place, to use tragedy because it’s a solid heavy form and I use it to make theatre that is as human as possible. I think this ‘humanness’ is the future of theatre – the here and now as human as possible.

This is clearly not the conscious reprising of a literary genre, because, as is well known, over the last century tragedy has been the subject of numerous discussions and revisions that have profoundly reshaped its significance. Lauwers, however, makes explicit his own idea of tragedy:

It is said that today we can no longer write tragedies, because the era itself is tragic. The tragedies of the Greeks were written in connection with God or with the gods they had. We have declared that gods no longer exist, so in our era, the ancient Greeks’ grief or the

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37 One should not underestimate the important autobiographical component, however, markedly emphasized in Isabella’s Room. On this subject, see in general D. Heddon, Autobiography and Performance, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

38 “If everything is an image, then when is an image an IMAGE? That’s why I coined the expression ‘border image’. A border image is an image that stays in our memory. And that’s where all the media I use come together. Whether you come out of a museum or out of a theatre, if an image has stuck in your memory, that image wipes out real time and becomes a border image. That’s what artists should try to achieve. Art that puts the intellectual above the emotional aspect is necessary, but it is not necessarily the best art. Art that only emphasizes the emotional aspect soon becomes quite boring. Achieving a balance, that’s what it’s about” (“Most Questions Are More Interesting than Their Answers”: 451).

39 Cited in Reinelt, Jan Lauwers, 212.

40 A reprise of the tragic genre can, however, be read in the inserts of music and dance, almost a return to the ancient function of the chorus. On the presence of music in Isabella’s Room, see K. Vanhaesebroeck, “Jan Lauwers’ Bouillabaisse”, in Stalpaert, Le Roy, Bousset (eds.), No Beauty for Me There Where Human Life Is Rare, 286-296.
mourning has turned into self-pity; because we don’t have the gods to mourn anymore, it’s now self-pity\textsuperscript{41}.

If the absence of the gods generates a withdrawal of humanity into itself, as in a dynamic of self-pity, one could, however, attribute to the director that “tragic consciousness” bound up with “the intuition of the inescapable limit inseparable from the condition of man, the ambiguity and inconsistency of the human, the knowledge of suffering”\textsuperscript{42}.

For Lauwers the aspiration to a theatre “as human as possible” is translated into an art that is essentially political\textsuperscript{43}. Lauwers’ works are not politically committed. They do not deal explicitly with current issues, but are more generally responsive to the life of the \textit{polis} as a community of human beings. It is the type of communication peculiar to art that is political, not the art itself\textsuperscript{44}. \textit{Isabella’s Room} traverses the history of the twentieth century, \textit{The Deer House} is inspired by the war in Kosovo, but in both cases the historical circumstances merely form part of a fresco that still places humanity and its life at the centre.

5. LAUWERS, THE ACTOR AND PERFORMANCE

The opening scene of \textit{Isabella’s Room} finally prompts some observations on the idea of the actor that distinguishes Lauwers’ work. The initial image of the production, a sort of tableau, consists not just of the stage space and its construction, but is characterized mainly by the actors moving about it while the audience is still arriving in the theatre. If the roles of the different characters in the story are explicitly distributed among the actors of the group, it soon becomes clear that the logic of identification is excluded from the interplay on stage. The actors do not correspond precisely to the people in Isabella’s life. As we have seen, apart from the protagonist, there are her parents Anna and Arthur, her lover Alexander and his nephew Frankie, but the stage is much more crowded. We meet the Prince of the Desert, a fictional character existing only in Isabella’s mind and created out of her parents’ lies, the right and left hemispheres of Isabella’s brain, her erogenous zone, the narrator, and the sound and lighting engineers. All of these performers, including Lauwers, remain on stage for the whole duration of the show, as we have seen, freely mingling characters who were dead at the start of the story, like Anna, with young people who appear only in the protagonist’s old age. All, however, intervene in the story even if they are not personally involved in the events narrated. The dialogue between the characters is never mimetic: they do not reproduce conversations and situations of Isabella’s life, but recount events mingling their own memories with Isabella’s together with different points of view and some ironic observations.

\textsuperscript{41} ‘My Thinking on Art Is All about Time’, 4. The definition refers in particular to \textit{The Deer House}.

\textsuperscript{42} “Coscienza tragica […] che si lega all’intuizione del limite ineludibile, inseparabile dalla condizione dell’uomo, all’ambiguità e contraddittorietà dell’umano, al sapere della sofferenza” (A. Cascetta, \textit{La tragedia nel teatro del Novecento}, Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2009, 3). On the concept of the limit in the twentieth century see in particular \textit{ibid.}, 13.


\textsuperscript{44} “Art stands alone. Art doesn’t need to communicate. However, the artist does have to find a public for his art; that is his only real political task. But it’s never about political content. Politicians who concern themselves with art often confuse these two aspects. Art is not politics, but the way it communicates is. The more effective the communication mechanism, the greater its political clout” (“Most Questions Are More Interesting than Their Answers”: 452).
To refer to this situation Lehmann has proposed to use the semantic pair détachement /detachment. The French term détachement refers to separation, it indicates an idea of removal and isolation and may also designate an attitude of indifference. English detachment essentially expresses the same meaning, but with an additional nuance that emphasizes objectivity and impartiality of attitude. Needcompany’s performers move between these two poles: Lehmann sees it as a typically postdramatic kind of acting.

In contrast with the widespread but simplistic interpretation of contemporary theatre as an installation dominated by the visual element (with the addition of the actor’s body), the author identifies the focus of Lauwers’ theatre in the process that creates a “community of action” between actors and audience. At the heart of this process lies the contemplation offered to the audience by the actors. They place a sort of mirror of calm between the performance and the audience. They renounce emphasis and psychological techniques. In this way the distance between actors and audience is reduced and the theatrical situation turns into an intermediate state between the experience of suffering and the contemplation of beauty. The actors do not offer their deep emotions; they do not lay bare their souls, but seem to look at themselves from outside. The audience is invited to do the same: it will watch the show with curiosity and interest, but not total emotional involvement. In a kind of Brechtian alienation, the viewer is constantly called upon to reflect on the mechanisms of the spectacle.

Lauwers himself declares he aspires to a theatre that lives in a dynamic presentation and not representation. By the second term he means the conventional theatre and its emphasis on psychological techniques, while the term presentation alludes to the here and now of the stage action: it is the action that is decisive and not necessarily its result. In this way, we come back to the first period of Lauwers’ career, when strong emphasis was placed on the physicality of the performers and on the action which was carried out on stage. However, unlike what happens in performance, action alone does not suffice for the theatre: Lauwers’ actor is rather a “thinking performer”, who has to continue to think. The here and now typical of the presentation remains central but always retains what can be termed its reflective nature of the “thinking moment”. The

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47 Lehmann, Détachement, 76.

48 Ibid., 77-80.

49 “We have to destroy the idea of representation in the theatre and replace it with presentation. That is the only link with performance: it is the action that counts, not necessarily the result. […] That’s the difference between presentation and representation. With a presentation the moment itself, the ‘thinking moment’, is the most important for the performers. That way the work is always moving forward and is never the same. That’s what makes the subtext important. In conventional theatre the emphasis is always on reproduction” (“Most Questions Are More Interesting than Their Answers”: 453). In Italian presentazione/ripresentazione can be suggested as a translation. The term rappresentazione is not used because of for the density of its meanings which are absent from representation.

50 “Only the presence of the active, thinking performer was important. If we needed a prop, it had to be absolutely essential and of the highest quality. And that is still the case. Any scenery must be autonomous and interesting close up. What is more, the actor must continue to think. He should always present and never reproduce. I never say to an actor: ‘When you say those words, you must start crying’. I simply explain that there is the opportunity to cry in that place and then we see what happens on the night. Destroy the illusion of theatre while building a new illusion” (ibid., 452).
acting of the players in Needcompany thus nurtures the paradox between “acting” and “not acting”\textsuperscript{51}.

As was mentioned at the beginning, Lauwers feels keenly aware of the difference between performance art and theatre. In the former the performer is the artist himself, while in the theatre there is a gap between the creative artist and the artist as performer. In the case of \textit{Isabella’s Room}, since its development is essentially linear, this division has been essential to the development of the drama. However, in Lauwers’ work there are numerous experiences in which the artist and performer tend to coincide: think for example of the \textit{Needlapb}, a kind of laboratory where the creative process appears in a free and dynamic form\textsuperscript{52}.

We can now go back to the initial question, namely the relationship with performance. If the experience of performance has traversed the Lauwers’ artistic direction, arousing continuous reflections in the director, the category of post-dramatic has been repeatedly applied by critics to his theatre and it is worth bearing it in mind during this brief final reflection\textsuperscript{53}. Lehmann has placed Lauwers’ production in this orbit\textsuperscript{54}, but a strict and unambiguous definition of post-dramatic \textit{tout court} is not applicable to his theatre, or to other contemporary experiments. The suspension of judgment expressed by Pavis after the festival of Avignon in 2009 (in which Lauwers participated with \textit{The Deer House}) is significant in this respect:

Can these examples from Avignon help us to contextualize these recent developments of the dramatic and the postdramatic? It doesn’t seem very likely. Neither to affirm or challenge the relevance. In any case, they do suggest that every variety of redramatic, dramatic, post-dramatic theatre can be found, like flowers, in the wild. Whether they’re magnificent or toxic is of little importance; we’re better off admiring them from a distance than picking them to put them in a vase\textsuperscript{55}.

Even Lauwers, prodded by the critics, has questioned himself about the nature of his post-dramatic theatre\textsuperscript{56}, but the issue does not seem central to this point in his career\textsuperscript{57}.

\textsuperscript{51} For a definition of the concept see M. Kirby, \textit{A Formalist Theatre}, Philadelphia: University Pennsylvania Press, 1987, 3-21. This is not the place for a discussion of the Lauwers’ directorial method. Here it will suffice to recall his commitment to the actors not learning the gestures to be staged on the basis of the outline provided by the director, but instead being active and sharing a code with him. See “Most Questions Are More Interesting than Their Answers”: 453.

\textsuperscript{52} Lauwers clearly distinguishes between the experience of \textit{Needlapb} and performance: “There is a clear difference between the performances and the \textit{Needlapb}s. In the performances the dramaturgical research that takes place during rehearsals congeals into a form that is as transparent as possible and ready for communication to the audience. Needlapb, on the other hand, is the uncongealed core of Needcompany, the place where the working process is fluid and dynamic and has not yet acquired a definite form” (www.needcompany.org/EN/needlapb).

\textsuperscript{53} It must be added that the idea of post-dramatic, although not expressed with this term, has been widely investigated in Italy since the seventies, if we think of Giuseppe Bartolucci (see G. Bartolucci, \textit{Testi critici 1964-1987}, edited by V. Valentini, G. Mancini, Roma: Bulzoni, 2007) and the eighties, if we think of M. De Marinis, \textit{Capire il teatro}, Roma: La casa Usher, 1988. See also G. Guccini (ed.), “Dramma vs postdrammatico: polarità a confronto”, \textit{Prove di Drammaturgia}, 1 (2010).

\textsuperscript{54} See above, note 46.


\textsuperscript{56} “In the academic world there is no problem. For sure we have a close connection with academic critics. Sometimes we disagree. Sometimes we agree. For example, the critics have presented the post-dramatic point of view to explain my use of different centers in Needcompany shows. I have also been called a postmodernist. Of course I was totally not thinking about these ideas. I was not involved in these concepts until I started to read those critics and said to myself, ‘Oh, am I like that?’” (\textit{Art Always Gets Caught}).

\textsuperscript{57} “If you were given the opportunity to speak back to your critics, what would you say to them? Different
The analysis proposed here is too brief to provide an interpretative framework on the issue of the post-dramatic in Lauwers. However, it seems we could at least succeed in grasping clearly a continuous striving by the director to move beyond the crisis in performance declared by Schechner. Although starting from a very different background, for geo-historical and chronological reasons, compared to the American avant-garde, Lauwers confronts the same dangerous mechanism of the performer’s self-isolation grasped by Schechner in the late seventies. The recourse to writing, concern for storytelling and the deployment of the various dramaturgical mechanisms explored by Lauwers therefore moves in a particular direction: as we have seen, the director is constantly looking for a theatre focused on humanity, in the political sense we have considered. *Isabella’s Room* is particularly significant because it offers much food for thought in this respect. Finally, we can at least suggest a clue to its interpretation. To paraphrase the statement by Schechner mentioned at the beginning, we could conclude that in this production the theatre really becomes “concerned with the *polis*, the City, the life of the people”.

**SUMMARY**

Jan Lawrens’ theatrical journey has been marked by constant reflection on performance since the beginning of his career in Belgium in the late seventies. Starting from the well-known spectacle *Isabella’s Room* (2004) we can identify the core elements that mark his current thinking on performance and theatre. The paper highlights the tension towards narrative, but with reference to the influence of the visual arts, brings up the concept of the “border image”, a key expression to understanding the genesis of the spectacle. The aspiration to a theatre that is “the most human possible” results in a strongly political art focused on the life of the *polis* as a community of human beings. The first scene in particular brings out the idea of the actor supported by Lawrens and his striving to overcome the crisis of performance observed by some authoritative scholars.

things. First of all, a question: is this post-dramatic theatre more interesting than dramatic theatre? That’s my big question nowadays. Secondly, critics often do not draw a difference between artist’s theatre and repertory theatre. In the movies, there are often film festival where there is a special department for classics and another one for artists’ cinema. In the theatre, my work is frequently criticized using the same values as the work of Chekhov or Shakespeare. I think that’s wrong. Repertory is something else. Sometimes artist’s theatre is not taken too seriously. Artist’s theatre is the future of theatre. What I do is not unique or normal, but I have the feeling that critics still confuse the difference between a writer of characters and a writer with character. I think that’s something missing from the discussion. I start from a wide canvas. When I direct Shakespeare’s plays, Shakespeare is the artist, and I am the servant of Shakespeare. You are an artist from a different position, working with different tools. It’s not a question of different values, but it is different” (*ibid.*).