

## **Reality Is Pure Shakespeare**

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‘A penchant for the absurd? All we do is stretch reality a little.’

Belgium’s most far out theatre company, *Berlin*, reconstructs the confrontation between a French contract killer and his Belgian (female) client in its latest production, *Land’s End*.

### **KAFKAESQUE**

The production is set inside the *Groot Moerhof*, a farm on the Belgian-French border, balancing between two countries, two legislations, two bureaucracies and two administrations.

Kafka and Josef K. spring to mind when Yves Degryse and Bart Baele (the two men behind *Berlin*) explain what brought them to this place. Degryse: ‘Fifteen years ago, a confrontation between a French contract killer and his Belgian client took place inside this very farm. A table was placed astride the border, with a dotted line marking the invisible boundary. Simply crossing it meant rendering the legal procedure null and void.’

The case is the starting point of *Land’s End*, the second production in *Berlin’s Horror Vacui* series (also called ‘Impossible and Fictional Table Conversations’). Prerecorded interviews are edited into conversations during which people who - for whatever reason – cannot be physically reunited, converse across a number of screens. *Berlin* does have something Kafkaesque about it, yet Baele and Degryse are adamant that they never seek out the absurd; it invariably presents itself.

Back to the confrontation at the *Groot Moerhof*.

Degryse: ‘The French police and the suspect entered the farm through the front door, which is in France. The Belgian woman actually had to crawl through the window to avoid accidentally crossing the border. Even going to the loo (situated on Belgian territory) presented a problem, so a Portaloo with two entrances was placed across the border.

The confrontation itself only took one day, but the palaver over technical matters seemed endless.’ Baele continues: ‘Not in the least because the border suddenly also became a sound barrier. The French examining magistrate was only allowed to question the Belgian suspect via his Belgian colleague and vice versa, while the clerks in both countries could only write down what was being said on their side of the table.’

### **JOURNALISTIC THEATRE**

Baele and Degryse were fourteen when they staged their first theatre project together at their local drama school. Degryse went on to do Drama at the Antwerp Conservatoire. (He later founded theatre company SKaGeN with a few fellow graduates.)

Baele studied scenography at the Theatre School in Amsterdam and was given the opportunity to participate in a number of interesting projects. He ended up living in the city of Berlin for three months, where he wrote in an effort to grasp and pin down the city. 'The only thing left from that period is our name. Mind you, we may well do a piece about the city one day.'

Baele and Degryse's paths crossed again. The fascinations they used to share as teenagers were still there, including a fondness for the absurd, but also this insatiable curiosity for what makes 21<sup>st</sup>-century man tick. *Holocene*, their first series of city projects, was aptly named after our geological age.

Degryse: 'We decided to break free from the rhythm of making a production, touring with it for a bit and then moving on to the next one. We wanted to take our time to find, develop and devise a project so it would outlast one measly season. All our projects keep on touring. In the years to come we will be showing *Jerusalem*, *Moscow*, *Bonanza* and *Land's End* at several French festivals, for example.'

They draw inspiration from the more or less terrifying commonplace of existence. That is how *Berlin* made a name for itself as the most journalistic and documentary theatre company around. Their creations revolve around a perfectly timed, rhythmic succession of images and conversations between characters on various screens. For obvious reasons it was impossible to film *Land's End*'s female protagonist, who commissioned the murder, and the killer she hired. That is where actors step in - speaking fictitious lines that do, however, always have an element of truth in them. 'It is the most straightforward working method for us', says Baele. 'Others are inspired by Shakespeare, we start from true stories in the world out there. The outcome is the same: an attempt to portray a universal theme through a concrete event.' 'Choosing an angle from which to tackle a project', Degryse continues, 'is not a conscious decision, but a consequence of our actions'. When we went to Jerusalem in 2003 to make part one of our city portraits, we had a mix of theatre and documentary in mind. However, the city had such an overwhelming impact that it suddenly seemed completely absurd and inconceivable to base our production upon it. Reality is invariably stranger than fiction. There is no way we could have invented the kinds of conversations we had there.

### **From Iqaluit to Bonanza**

After Jerusalem, the two went to Iqaluit - the capital of Nunavut, inside the Arctic Circle. 'After the hectic and overwhelming nature of Jerusalem, we longed for silence and more of an overview. Nunavut and Israel are both in conflict over territorial issues. The conflict zones may be staked out differently, but they are definitely there.' From the Arctic, they headed to Bonanza, a small town with all of seven inhabitants, who rarely communicate with each other. The line between paradise and hell is very thin indeed. The first week of their visit they filmed trees, plants and panoramic views. Baele and Degryse also had endless cups of coffee with the inhabitants before filming their conversations. Baele: 'We are not reporters; we are not looking for the perfect one-liner. A journalist once said: 'That's all very well, but you're not telling the audience anything new.' Of course not. We just tell things differently.' Degryse: 'We have huge qualms about approaching people and asking them personal questions. If people are reluctant to answer, we are not going to drag it out of them. Silence often speaks volumes. Baele: 'We want to be able to look people in the eye after the show.'

The last thing Baele and Degryse want to do is distort the truth. ‘Sometimes we have absolutely no idea how people will react.’

### **Autistic filming**

They are currently filming for five screens at a time. Today they are doing panoramic views. ‘Autistic filming’ is what they call it, because the camera lingers on the same image for minutes before moving a couple of inches to eventually freeze, again for minutes.

*Land’s End*, which revolves around the clumsy run-up to a murder and the completely surreal confrontation that followed, seems more neatly defined than a city project like *Jerusalem* or *Moscow*. The creative process, however, was much more troublesome. The legal maze and the court procedures were less easy to fathom than any city map. Baele: ‘The case got huge media attention, so the French hired killer got himself a top lawyer.’ Degryse: ‘The advantage and disadvantage in cases like these is that those guys are trained public orators and therefore more likely to steer the conversation. This particular one insisted that all good lawyers are also good actors, whose task it is to cause confusion. That is what it is all about in court: doubt, because it makes it harder to prove a person’s guilt.’

‘We simply put our finger on things,’ Degryse says: not unlike Kafka.

[written by Tine Hens, translated by Nadine Malfait and students]