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# Of Voices and Votes

## A Group Discussion with Alexander Devriendt (Ontroerend Goed) on the Performance *Fight Night*

In *Fight Night*, five actors are put into the position of political con-tenders currying for the audience's favour and, in effect, their vote. Equipped with electronic voting devices, the audience decide which of the contenders will advance to the next round, which will be elim-inated, and which will ultimately emerge victorious. By voting, the vox populi is transformed into mute statistics. *Fight Night* calls into question the relevancy of ideologies, political campaigning, and vot-ing strategies by for once letting the numbers speak for themselves.

*Participant: Fight Night* is a coproduction between Ontroerend Goed and The Border Project.[1] Could you please tell us how this collabora-tion came about, how the project started, and how you worked on it?

*Alexander Devriendt:* We, Ontroerend Goed, were invited to perform at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe where we received our first invitation to Australia. In Australia, the artistic directors of the Sydney Theatre Company, Cate Blanchett and her husband Andrew Upton, saw our show and offered me the opportunity to work with their company. The problem was that they didn't tell me they wanted me to direct their company rather than my own, and that they offered me only one month's rehearsal time. I in return demanded three months worth of rehearsal and insisted on using my own company. *A History of Every-thing* (2012)[2] was the result of this collaboration between Ontroerend Goed and the Sydney Theatre Company.

I explain this because, at the time, I felt I was being drawn toward the commercial side of theatre which I don't find interesting at all. For *Fight Night*, I wanted to work with a small company like The Border Project because I felt that it was in many respects similar to our own company. But because we were scheduled to play the piece only eight times in Belgium yet 120 times abroad, it was important to immediately set topical boundaries as soon as rehearsals started. We decided the piece shouldn't centre on Belgian politics. I like to think of it as a play about democracy in general.

*Participant:* You mentioned 120 performances abroad. Where has the production been staged so far?

*Alexander Devriendt:* In Hong Kong, England, Scotland, Holland, and Australia. There were also versions in Turkey and Texas which I coordinated.

*Participant:* Was Hong Kong the only place you've toured so far which isn't a democracy?

*Alexander Devriendt:* Yes. I was very glad when we gave our performance in Hong Kong two months ago. It resonated deeply with the audience, despite the fact that they don't have a democratic system. And they made references I never intended. For instance: »The bear in the woods.« I don't know if you remember that line. It's the only line I borrowed, taken from a presidential election commercial made for the 1984 Ronald Reagan campaign. For Reagan, the bear obviously stands for Russia. But in Hong Kong, the bear stands for China.

*Participant:* When I saw *Fight Night* yesterday I thought that everything was fake, that it didn't make a difference whether I pushed the button or not.

*Alexander Devriendt:* There are always people who doubt that this show is real. I tried to give the audience a hint when, at a certain point during the performance, I said that 40 people hadn't voted. I really did

read out the exact number of people who hadn't voted in the previous round. But of course I can't make you believe that. Neither can I make you believe in the democratic system.

*Participant:* In my opinion, it was interesting to see the audience transformed into statistics, to see its composition in terms of age, sex, income and so on.

*Alexander Devriendt:* Yesterday's performance was very different in comparison to the other shows we've had so far because there was such a concentration of people aged 25 to 40.

*Participant:* Is the audience usually older or younger?

*Alexander Devriendt:* Generally, the audience is more mixed. Yesterday for instance, there were almost no minors in the audience.

*Participant:* Do you believe in the show, in the ideology of it?

*Alexander Devriendt:* I believe in the show, but it has no inherent ideology. I believe in certain things, for example that I'm a social democrat. But I don't want to talk about those things because most of the audience are also left. I don't want to make a show that takes a stand on left or right. I want to make a show about a system that we can influence in only very minute ways.

*Participant:* I wonder how many versions of this production are possible. Could you also tell us something about the rehearsal process?

*Alexander Devriendt:* We get through approximately 70 % of the script each night. Depending on which of the contenders are voted for and which are eliminated, the script changes. This is especially true for the part we call ›Talk Show‹, during which the actors respond to questions asked by the moderator. They only voice support for what they believe in as individuals, and not as stage personas. So not even the actors themselves, who otherwise know each other's scripted lines by

heart, have a clear idea of what the others will say during ›Talk Show‹. This added element of surprise really conveys a feeling of authenticity and gives the audience the impression that absolutely nothing has been scripted. The same goes for the first round called ›Blind Round‹, during which the actors appear onstage but stay mute, forcing the audience to vote based on the actors' outward appearances alone. Here, nobody knows what's going to happen, it's entirely beyond any one person's control – even my own. In the ›Coalition Round‹, however, we exert a certain amount of authorial control by always letting those in first and fifth position in the polls form coalitions – that was my decision. But those in positions two, three and four are free to form alliances as they choose.

About the rehearsal process*:* The actors learn each other's lines in order to be able to rehearse the different permutations in which these lines might occur. So they know a lot more than they can actually perform onstage.

*Participant:* As far as I understand it, the electronic voting system registers and evaluates the audience's participation and choices, on the basis of which it draws a fairly representative picture of the audience's political opinions and, concomitantly, of the political climate of the city you are performing in. Is that correct?

*Alexander Devriendt:* That is at least what I want to achieve, and I do feel that this is exactly what happened in many places.

*Participant:* Do you mean that it is necessary for the audience to vote honestly in order to achieve this?

*Alexander Devriendt:* I am not judgemental about whether the audience trust the electronic voting system or not. For me, it's only a game. But of course every text may refer to something outside. If the audience want to make such connections as they can. If they want to see it as a game, that's also fine. If they want to draw references to the *Britain's Got Talent*-shows, that's fine too. I personally feel that many

political references could be drawn. But if a member of the audience can see no such references being made to actual political systems, then no such references exist.

*Participant:* How honest do you think the audience are when disclosing information about themselves?

*Alexander Devriendt:* I sometimes compare my visual impression of the audience with the data provided by the electronic voting system – data which reflects the audience's responses to questions concerning their age, sex, etc. I feel that the audience only really start lying when asked about their financial situation and their age.

You, an intellectual and theatre-interested audience, are more inclined to lie about age and money. Also, you probably immediately grasp the dramaturgical structure and premises of the piece and want to experiment with them or manipulate the outcome of the voting process. That poses a problem inasmuch as the piece was designed for audiences who would give honest answers to serious questions, and not for audiences who would actively distrust the dramaturgical setup and voting system and engage with them on a level of play.

*Participant:* Did you discuss how to collect and statistically evaluate the votes? Did you perhaps consider letting the audience vote by show of hands or something like that? Or was it one of your initial ideas to hold the vote in mutual anonymity – with the audience giving their votes anonymously via electronic device and you collecting and evaluating the data behind the scenes?

*Alexander Devriendt:* The voting system is very much an allusion to the Facebook ›Like-Button‹: Just press the button, don't move, don't be active. To be honest, I personally don't like interactive theatre. I'm usually that person at the back of the auditorium who doesn't participate. In my work however, I try to question that kind of reluctance in an audience, though I also try to respect it.

*Participant:* Has the cast changed?

*Alexander Devriendt:* Yes! Currently, there are ten people who are able to play the show. And we will go to Avignon next year and then there will be five new people. It's nice, it makes it exciting. *A Game of You* (2010) for example can be played by up to 20 people.

*Participant:* You might be considered something of a global player…

*Alexander Devriendt:* Yes, a little bit. It's nice to have the financial possibility to work with different teams – which, however, I don't do if the show is too personal.

*Participant:* Did you start with one team?

*Alexander Devriendt:* Yes. We didn't have enough money to create *Fight Night* with different groups. The first cast to play *Fight Night* did so for three years running. But the actors couldn't possibly commit to one single production because they all worked freelance. So we had to adapt the show accordingly.

*Participant:* Did you develop the script with the first and second cast, while the third cast had a finished script to learn and rehearse with?

*Alexander Devriendt:* No, the script keeps changing according to the personalities of the new actors cast for the production.

*Participant:* Do you know the decisions made by each individual audience member?

*Alexander Devriendt:* In a way. I know the audience members as seat numbers only and not as individuals. I couldn't for instance say who sat in chair number 15. So although I know the decisions made by the person sitting it that specific chair, I still don't know who he or she is as an individual.

*Participant:* Do you feel you know more about the audience at the end of each performance than you did before?

*Alexander Devriendt:* Yes, but it's difficult to generalise because each audience is also a specific subgroup of an entire and heterogeneous populace.

*Participant:* Do you make any decisions before the show starts?

*Alexander Devriendt:* The only tedious but important decision I have to make beforehand is whether or not to interfere in the performance's voting process. For instance, if one of the actors has been voted out by the audience in the four previous performances, we try to keep him in the race in the next show, despite the audience's votes. Meaning that in the ›Coalition Round‹, the actors form coalitions in such a way that that specific actor cannot be voted out by the audience. It just isn't good for the show if somebody hasn't spoken his lines for five days straight.

*Participant:* What was the most unexpected moment that happened during the 120 shows you have already performed?

*Alexander Devriendt:* The most unexpected thing ever to happen was when, after having been prompted by one of the disqualified political contenders to question the entire voting system and occupy the stage, 300 members of our Hong Kong audience actually did storm the stage yelling and screaming. That moment changed the meaning of the show completely, and in retrospect I think we were very fortunate to have been at the right place at the right time. Those are the moments you remember, moments when you realise your performance has triggered a very powerful response and has made a difference.

### Anmerkungen

1  *Fight Night* was presented as part of the AUAWIRLEBEN Theaterfestival Bern programme, and given on May 6ᵗʰ 2015 in the Turbinensaal at the

Dampfzentrale Bern. Performance cast: Angelo Tijssens, Charlotte De Bruyne, Gilles De Schryver, Michel Geyzen, Roman Vaculik, Suzanne Grotenhuis.

2   Cf. Wehrle, Annika (2015): »Time Will Reverse. Theaterhistoriografische Überlegungen zu Ontroerend Goeds *A History of Everything*«, in: Beate Hochholdinger-Reiterer, Mathias Bremgartner, Christina Kleiser, Géraldine Boesch (eds.): *itw : im dialog. Arbeitsweisen im Gegenwartstheater*, Berlin: Alexander.

Englisches Lektorat: Marcel Behn

## Zitiervorschlag und Hinweise

Hochholdinger-Reiterer, Beate/Boesch, Géraldine (2016): »Of Voices and Votes. A Group Discussion with Alexander Devriendt (Ontroerend Goed) on the Performance *Fight Night*«, in: Beate Hochholdinger-Reiterer/Géraldine Boesch (Hg.): *Spielwiesen des Globalen*, Berlin: Alexander, S. 135–142 (itw : im dialog – Forschungen zum Gegenwartstheater, Bd. 2), http://dx.doi.org/10.16905/itwid.2016.15.