

Alexandra Portmann (Universität Bern)

## International Festival Aesthetics

An Interview with Alexander Devriendt &  
Joeri Smet (Ontroerend Goed, Gent) and Barbara Gronau  
(Universität der Künste Berlin)

*Alexandra Portmann:* Looking at your artistic work, I made two observations: Firstly, all of your performances seem to take different artistic approaches in terms of content, dramaturgy and audience engagement. Secondly, most of your productions are shown at national as well as international festivals. Before coming back to the second observation and the related question about international festival aesthetics, I am curious as to your artistic practice. Bearing in mind the wide range of performances you have already made, I wonder how you begin working on a show?

*Alexander Devriendt:* The basic starting point of our work is always the content. We start every production with two beliefs we share: Firstly, that the world is doomed. The rich will only get richer and there is simply nothing you can do about it. And secondly, that every act matters. Bearing these two opposing beliefs in mind, we ask ourselves how we as individuals relate to them. So even though we use very different formats in our performances, I think that this recurrent starting point serves as a kind of common language in our work.

*Alexandra Portmann:* Why do you use these different formats?

*Alexander Devriendt:* In my opinion, theatre is the most experimental, the most openly creative medium imaginable. It is not flat like literature, a canvas or a movie screen. I really believe that form and content should match. This is why we always try to find the best form for every content. Sometimes you end up with a conventional production like

*A History of Everything* (2012). And sometimes you feel that you need a different form to express certain contents. For instance, our show *Fight Night* (2013) is about voting. Before we started working on this show we asked ourselves, why do we vote and what makes us vote? Considering these questions, it made sense to give the audience pieces of voting advice to help them establish an emotional connection to the topic. In order to find the format for this performance, it was necessary to start with the content and only then to begin looking for its corresponding form.

**Alexandra Portmann:** After having found the topic and the appropriate form, how do you start developing the show? Do you work as a collective? How do you share responsibilities and functions within the team?

**Joeri Smet:** The division of work is normal and there is always a certain structure we follow, but we do work as a collective. Everybody who works on the show should have ownership or at least recognize him or herself in the work. In extreme cases, for instance, the actors/actresses are left alone with the audience. In such situations, they are responsible for the performance, like in *A Game of You* (2010). To give another example of our collective work, I would like to mention the show *A History of Everything*. This performance clearly reflects the history of our work together as a team and the ways in which we look at the history of the world. We are well aware that history is always told from a certain point of view, and so we incorporated the perspectives of each of the seven performers into the piece. In this sense it is a collective work, but a structured one. Alexander always uses the metaphor of a coffee filter: We put things in, he filters, and the outcome is the performance.

**Alexander Devriendt:** As regards the working process, it is important to be aware of the fact that choosing a different format also implies adopting a different artistic approach. For instance, *All That Is Wrong* (2012) is a performance about a girl who wants to write down everything that is wrong in the world. We told the actress our idea, handed her a crayon, and asked her to write down everything that came to

her mind on the topic. After six hours the walls of the room were full of writing. Following this first instruction it was my job to turn the material into a performance. In contrast to that production I had to choose another approach in *Fight Night*. Since the cast didn't care as much about politics as I did, I ended up writing most of the text. Another example would be the work on *Sirens* (2014), which is a production about sexism in the Western world. I didn't write any of the text for this production because it didn't feel right. Actresses who have to perform a production up to one hundred times must somehow identify with it, or they won't perform it wholeheartedly.

**Joeri Smet:** I think the task is always to find the universal in the very personal and to respect the truth of a performer relating to a very individual experience. It is also important to communicate this in a way which allows everybody to share in this experience.

**Alexandra Portmann:** Does the fact that you often show your performances at international festivals influence your artistic work?

**Alexander Devriendt:** I don't create performances for festivals. I create them for as many people as possible, without changing what I want to say or how I want to say it. I remember when we started with our artistic work, only few people in Belgium wanted to see our shows. It was too experimental, too weird sometimes, which is why we had to go abroad. The Anglo-Saxon world seemed to feel more connected with it. Probably because we had been reading a lot of English literature. We didn't have to change our shows because there was an audience for them. That is my objective: I want to make our performances for as many people as possible.

With respect to travelling, the only things which I perhaps inadvertently create for festivals are productions with small scenography. For example, *A History of Everything* can fit into three suitcases. This is something one bears in mind, but it doesn't necessarily limit one's imagination. So I would never intentionally create something for a festival. That would seem very uninspiring to me.

**Joeri Smet:** We haven't been commissioned to produce a play specifically for a festival as yet. What usually happens is we come up with an idea which we work on until we have a product, and then we basically sell that product to international festivals interested in it. But we do not work specifically towards that type of medium.

**Alexandra Portmann:** Since you have shown your performances in different cultural contexts, I wonder which international staging you consider the most defining or the most memorable?

**Alexander Devriendt:** I think our weirdest international stint was when we were invited to tour Morocco with our production *The Smile Off Your Face* (2004) eight years ago. In Oujda there was nothing apart from a barbershop, a grocery and a Western Union agent's. It seemed like everybody lived off Western Union. Some people had never even seen theatre before. Interestingly, the show worked in the sense that this audience got something out of it. I'm not saying that I know what, because that is pretty open. But I realized that we didn't have to change what we wanted to communicate, even when approaching a different culture.

**Joeri Smet:** Since the performance is very physical, you can imagine that it raised a lot of questions. The audience, blindfolded and alone with strangers, is also in a very unusual situation. We were aware that this might be an issue in Morocco, which is why we made some minor alterations, for instance with respect to the use of touch. The most important thing for us was that the specific experience should communicate what we wanted to say with this performance. In order to get the meaning across, we had to alter things slightly, but it was still the same performance. It was a real discovery to see that it worked, which is an important thing for us. After the show, I talked to audience members who told me about their different interpretations. Some of them said that it was like therapy. Others said it was a massage of the imagination, which I like very much. It gave us the feeling that if you create a structure which is open enough, you can actually go beyond the borders of your own Western mindset – maybe this is an illusion, but we believe in it.

**Alexandra Portmann:** Which performances were best received on national and international festivals? Are there any favourites?

**Joeri Smet:** I think that *The Smile Off Your Face*, which we have been performing since 2004, is definitely a favourite. And *Once and For All* (2008) is an absolute favourite.

**Alexander Devriendt:** I think that among all our shows, *Once and For All*, which was a show with teenagers, and *A History of Everything* are the most feel-good shows. I have observed that festivals prefer these performances to others. Just to give you an example, in contrast to *Once and For All*, our show *Teenage Riot* (2010) emphasizes a very harsh view of teenagers. Even though this show communicated what I wanted to say better than others, it played less. But we are still spoiled in the sense that most of the things we made worked in different environments and in different festival contexts. In contrast to regular theatres, festivals seem to take more risks. Whereas regular theatres tend to be wary of their audiences, festival audiences might be considered more open for something new. I know this is a generalisation so I'm not quite sure.

**Alexandra Portmann:** What, then, would you consider a clear advantage of performing within a festival context?

**Joeri Smet:** It seems to me that within a festival context some sort of community feeling develops after a while. This might be because of the regular exchange which occurs between audience members in a festival environment. There is usually a festival centre, so there is a certain vibe that allows people to talk about controversial shows. For example, our trilogy *A Game of You*, *The Smile Off Your Face* and *Internal* (2007) works very well at festivals because people exchange their personal experiences. The audience becomes a group of people who share the same kind of experience. Even if the format is a little bit shocking or unusual at the beginning, they really grow into it, they even start to find it exciting after a while. The reason for this is that the experience is being shared by a group of people within the festival atmosphere.

**Alexandra Portmann:** Even though you work with various theatrical formats, you often use the theatre space as a black box. Why do you favour this setting for your performances?

**Alexander Devriendt:** It's just a belief that the black box is a very free space into which every other medium can enter. I still like creating mirrors for real life because real life is constantly mixed with imaginary elements. A mirror should be fiction which is constantly mixed with realistic elements. Otherwise, if it is absolute fiction, it can only mirror absolute reality. If you go to a show on the street it is harder to find what is being mirrored.

**Joeri Smet:** But you really have to see the black box as something very free. You could say, for instance, that *Internal* is a black box. People in groups of five enter the stage. Then a curtain is raised to reveal five performers standing opposite them. You're like in a lineup, a blind date show in which every performer chooses one person and then talks with him/her over a glass of wine. All these things happen in a black box. The experience could be described as a sort of group therapy session with your performer partner. I mean even though it is in the black box of theatre it really doesn't feel that way for the audience.

**Barbara Gronau:** Do you consider your work to be international theatre?

**Joeri Smet:** I would say yes.

**Barbara Gronau:** And what is international theatre or what is your idea of international theatre?

**Alexander Devriendt:** I have to say, being from Ghent, Europe alone is not inspiring. I would never think of myself as a Flemish theatre artist because I believe that one is always connected to people around oneself. From the moment you go to a city you are also connected to the world abroad. This is what I meant by my notion that the world is

doomed and every act matters: Somebody in Cambodia may be quite distant from me in terms of space, but less so in terms of political ideology compared to the person next to me in the street who votes for an extreme right wing party. So I don't see myself as being much of a national theatre artist, but more of an international one.

**Joeri Smet:** When talking about international theatre, the important thing to me is to be aware of different perceptions. Even though we try to make plays that are universal, I think that this is ultimately a utopian endeavour...

**Alexander Devriendt:** ...it might be utopian and naïve, but it is something we strive for...

**Joeri Smet:** ...but you also need to accept it when things are understood differently than you intended. Then you can start arguing about whether or not to continue putting on the same play internationally despite the fact that it might be misunderstood by certain audiences.

**Barbara Gronau:** But why shouldn't the performances change? You are interested in performances that don't have to be changed while travelling around. Why is this still important?

**Alexander Devriendt:** Because wherever you are you buy a ticket to get a view of an artistic mind. I think that is still the point. I hate interactive theatre where the audience is responsible for supplying the content of a play because they simply aren't prepared for it. So wherever I go, I buy a ticket to get a world view of another mind. Too many cooks spoil the broth. For instance, what Joeri said earlier about our performance of *The Smile Off Your Face* in Morocco is that we had to change the sexual touching because otherwise we wouldn't have been able to communicate the content of the play. *A History of Everything* is Eurocentric because this is how we see the world. We do not hide it.

**Joeri Smet:** I think, however, that in this performance we ended up

departing from a Eurocentric point of view in order to show how limited it is. It's a fact that we have limitations since we have a Eurocentric perspective on history, but there's no use denying it because that wouldn't be truthful either.

**Verwendete Literatur**

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Alexander Wewerka, Postfach 18 18 24, 14008 Berlin  
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