

***Tourniquet* – review # 1**

*Author Wouter Hillaert
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Translation Nathalie Tabury*

Play of the week: *Tourniquet*

Satanic ritual without words, and therefore twice as poignant

Beyond theatre

Good versus evil seems to have become an issue again considering the current universal debate about standards, values and religion. In this moral and social issue, *Abattoir Fermé* from Malines has always leaned towards evil, towards the undesired. With irony, or sometimes so tangible that the theme became shocking on its own. From brothels to porn, rape and necrophilia.

Tourniquet is different, more serious and less direct. Whilst a woman in a bath is staring at the audience, a man behind her is running around in circles in a contraption, like a mule. The suspense slowly intensifies and will only abate half an hour later. After a silent drinking spree, the woman (Ragna Aurich) suddenly resurrects and transforms from a crumpled cat into a willing sacrifice. The two men (Joost Vandecasteele and Chiel Van Berkel) will cleanse her.

Exorcisms seem to have been the starting point for *Tourniquet*, but as it was with the theme of death in *Testament*, *Abattoir* aims ambitiously higher until they reach their own, unknowable universe. It's the dream of every artist: to create reality instead of relating it second-hand. And *Abattoir* succeeds triumphantly in this feat: extremely concentrated, wading through the continuous soundtrack of Kreng, punctuated now and again with a powerful display on the edge of what a body is physically capable of doing. The viewer leaves the theatre personally cleansed.

But *Tourniquet* is more than the best production director Stef Lernous and co. have made since 1999. This is theatre that far transcends the power of film (think about *The Exorcist* and the more recent *Requiem*) by being so physically present that it almost breaks through its own fiction. Alienation is very real here and disconnects good and evil: you don't know what to think. The only certainty is the exceptional nature of *Tourniquet* within what we presently call theatre.

***Tourniquet* – review # 2**

*Author Marc Cloostermans
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Translation Nathalie Tabury*

Happy hour at the Abattoir

The new Abattoir Fermé production offers a hypnotic experience and is one of the best plays of the year.

The most important piece of scenery is, exactly as the title promises, a tourniquet. Imagine it like this: the tourniquet on stage is a wooden beam, supported by two legs. One of these legs is on wheels. The wooden leg serves as an axis around which the tourniquet moves in circles over the tiled floor. At the start of the piece, a naked man (Joost Vandecasteele) puts the tourniquet in motion. Once this is finished, he and the others (Ragna Aurich and Chiel Van Berkel) get dressed and the beam is transformed into a bar. Van Berkel is the waiter who replenishes the glasses of his customers with gracious precision. Vandecasteele and Aurich imbibe themselves with red wine. The atmosphere becomes very sexual.

At this point in the play, it seems like the turning of the tourniquet symbolised the working week which is closed off with happy hour in a bar. Of course there is more to it. A red-white flag with a swastika is spread out over the tourniquet like a tablecloth. The three characters perform rituals in unison, which can be seen as exorcisms or as an unleashing of the devil within man.

The civilised person in a bar is deconstructed to a barbarian who dances in front of crudely built temples and who worships the sun. In a memorable scene, Aurich is (more or less) crucified. Correction: in one of the many memorable scenes. *Tourniquet* brings to mind the work of Jan Fabre even more than all previous plays by Abattoir Fermé. The way the actors totally surrender themselves, the calculated risks they take, the *tableaux vivants* that seem to be stolen from paintings, the interaction between theatre, performance and dance: all this is part of the work of Fabre and can be found in *Tourniquet*.

At the end, the characters wake up from their intoxication. Their bodies are respectively black, white and red: the colours of the swastika-flag. The weekend full of excesses is over; Monday morning bathes in a stark light. *Tourniquet* is a climax, a hypnotic play with a soundtrack reminiscent of Angelo Badalamenti. The actors don't utter a word, but it is the viewer who is left behind speechless at the end.

Tourniquet: review # 3

*Author Liv Laveyne
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Translation Nathalie Tabury*

When we asked actor Chiel Van Berkel what the new Abattoir production *Tourniquet* is about, he had to admit that he had no idea himself, but that he preferred it that way. Let this be a reassurance for the viewer, and the only reassurance for that matter, because the viewer will leave the theatre pretty cut-up, as is often the case with this company. And this time Abattoir doesn't even need to shock explicitly.

In a reply to the monthly art review *Rekto:Verso*, Wilfried Pateet-Borremans (the main character of the Chaos-trilogy and also the alter-ego of director and artistic director of the company, Stef Lernous) was very clear: 'Everything should be a lot smarter or more naïve, more extreme. This is what I have been roaring for years. But in these primitive times the story has become more important than the idea, so we have to smuggle the idea into the story. What a fuss. Instead of distributing stars to the multitude of solidly directed clean little repertoire plays, would someone please start giving them lashings?'

What is it about? No idea.

These are no hollow words of an artist to a critic. After the extreme content of the Chaos-trilogy (the astonishing *Tinseltown*, which was selected for the Theaterfestival this year), Abattoir Fermé now continues its research of the pure style which originated in *Moe maar open dolend* (2005). In *Tourniquet* anecdotic elements are even further discarded. The actors don't say a word in *Tourniquet*. Neither is there a linear narrative and yet this wordless play creates stories in mind of the viewer. It achieves this with images that trigger recognition: from dreams, nightmares, films (*Lola*), literature (Dante's *Divina Commedia*) or visual art (ranging from Caravaggio's chiaroscuro to Nitsch' orgy-mysteries). Are these fantasies reduced to theatre or a surreal enlargement of reality? In the same way that a tourniquet stems the bleeding, this maelstrom of images and the soundscore of Kreng (Pepijn Caudron) wedge themselves further and further into the mind of the viewer. *Tourniquet* is a silent film of an hour and a half on stage and with a visual power equal to that of Murnau.

Black Mass

A naked man (Joost Vandecasteele) rotates a beam, which is supported at one end in the tile floor and there are wheels attached to the other supporting point, faster and faster in circles until the tiles creak and the grooves in the tiles produce a buzzing sound. A naked girl (Ragna Aurich) washes herself in the bath. The master of ceremonies (Chiel Van Berkel) watches in the background. Life and work according to Abattoir Fermé: labouring hard and washing the sweat back off, time and time again. The three actors prepare for what is to follow: a bar-scene in the shape of a clownish mime-sketch degenerates into an evening of German cabaret, which becomes very explicit when the red cloth which is draped over the beam reveals a swastika. The fact that the actors all have blond hair or are wearing a blond wig suddenly has a much more specific meaning than only a means of creating uniformity.

These kinds of pin-pricks with direct references (the scrambled images on television of an American preacher, the animal skull above the human sacrifice) categorize this performance as ritual theatre which refers to Dionysus but also to Christianity when the female Christ is mounted on the beam. The body, and specifically the female body, is even more central here than in other Abattoir-productions. It is modelled, moulded, wrapped up and undressed by the male gaze. But whether she is worshipped or sacrificed, time and time again the woman breaks loose from the image or pattern in which she is placed, from the cross as well as the bath. Three sisters in black mourning dress pose for a family portrait, but the toast they make transforms the wine back to blood in this inversed Eucharist. Black Masses or exorcisms end in a catharsis or a toast only to start again in a circle of cleansing, resurrection and decay, of life and death patterned out by the wheel on the tiled floor.

The spectator in the dark

The only thing is that afterwards the viewer is left with one burning question: what did I actually see or did I 'imagine' I saw? Is this theatre which you should allow to just sweep over you or is it extremely intellectual and bombastic because familiar cultural images are crammed together into a blown-up balloon of references which can make your head explode any moment? Is the refusal to tell a story an easy way out for Abattoir? Are images not always more powerful than words? But if we are indeed already beaten to a pulp by the current visual culture as is the often heard reproach, then why does this performance succeed in knocking down the audience? So many questions. Abattoir wants each viewer to seek an answer to these questions personally, or not even that. Maybe this is the most intriguing aspect about Abattoir Fermé. 'Every time you think you're out, they pull you back in'.

***Tourniquet*: review # 4**

Author Roger Arteel

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Theatermaggezien, online theatre magazine

Translation Nathalie Tabury

Abattoir Fermé produces *Tourniquet*.

Wordless, but not speechless tormenting and twisting.

The theatre company from Malines, Abattoir Fermé, has been selected for the Theaterfestival (Brussels, August 23rd – September 1st 2007) for the second time. Last year *Galapagos* was selected, this time it's *Tinseltown*. Their most recent production *Tourniquet* is also worthy of the festival. Next year perhaps?

Abattoir Fermé researches uncommon issues extensively and uses this research to create scenes that are not always easy to digest. The artist here is a restless analyst of the subconscious in the true and the fictional reality. The Chaos-Trilogy that was made in the course of a few theatre seasons, in which *Tinseltown* features as the second chapter, has shown exactly what research in an artistic discourse can entail. The big city and the city-dweller, the secrets of the night, the hidden sides of people and the even bigger secret fantasies about those dark sides, still manage to fascinate and offer opportunities to an alert artist to continue further along the path of taboos (sexual taboos amongst others) that have already been broken in past productions. This is once again one of the aims of Abattoir Fermé with *Tourniquet*.

In the medical sense, a *Tourniquet* is an instrument to stem bleeding with: an instrument that twists and squeezes, so to speak. The action takes place around an improvised treadmill in which a naked slave runs faster and faster. However, the wheel of life doesn't turn out to be a wheel of fortune. It metes out breaking, torturing, tormenting and suffering, destruction but also resurrection. One man is the other man's torturer. This obviously is not a thing of the past. Exorcism and all the excesses that go hand in hand with this practice are far more widespread, even in this day and age, than one imagines.

Tourniquet was created bearing in mind all these occult, magic or other extremities. The naked man is shown as a creature in its most vulnerable shape, who is sacrificed and who sacrifices at the same time. But more than anything else, man is pictured as a plaything in the never abating ritual of fighting and embracing, of strengthening and dying out, of destroying and creating again.

Tourniquet does not relate a story. The viewer is expected to create his own story. The actors play situations, attitudes and confrontations. Their bodies become beautiful marble and crushed flesh at the same time. There are associations with totalitarianisms and winks at Antonin Artaud's theatre of fire and the anarchism of, for example, Fassbinder. But even in its

most naked form, man still acts in accordance with an ideology, in the name of a deity, of a prophet, a Christ.

The dark sound of the soundtrack by Kreng accompanies the action. Small television screens are not sufficient. The release of a word never comes. It is theatre in its purest form, naked, without the necessity of text. Like Jean Vilar said: 'Il n'y a que des corps et des sons' (*There is nothing except bodies and sounds*'), although Vilar would have included the actor's voice in his statement. But even this element is absent.

Yet this is more than mime, and the actors are not speechless. They let the totality speak. The refined performance of their bodies says exactly that which theatre only rarely dares to say these days, namely that theatre is a challenge and a discovery, both for actor and spectator. Director Stef Lernous throws Ragna Aurich, Chiel Van Berkel and Joost Vandecasteele mercilessly into the arena.

This is a piece of nature, a theatrical reality.

Fabricate your own culture and cult.

Tourniquet goes on tour next season.