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Context : this is Abattoir Fermé's reply to the letter that was originally published in the previous issue of rekto:verso (March 2007). The author, Wilfried Pateet-Borremans, is the fictional character who appeared as the monstrous theatre director in the Chaos Trilogy (2005 – 2007).

*Sunday, April 1st 2007,
Jerusalem*

to Rectum Versum ; ‘the shit-sucking arse’

MWOEHAAAA!

My dear, dear little Wouter,

what a well-intended yet nonsensical letter have you written to that little club from Malines. Maybe you should cut your big head of curls, Friar Tuck, because your locks seem to cloud your head. What do you want to know about this gang? After carefully reading your measly letter, I have filtered out a few questions and I have taken the liberty to answer them, even though I am very busy right now with my new project: ‘The crucifixion of XXX-st’, in which I play Mary and immaculately squeeze out a turd from my ass and then crucify it. At the same time, the public at large is standing in a corner of the stage and quietly mumbling ‘now this man is really pushing it too far’. That’s what I call a passion play. Woehahaha! But I digress.

What is Abattoir doing?

It seems to me that in the first place they are communicating a relevant content by the quest for a democracy of theatrical means. To treat image, sound, acting, light and scenography as equals. To work stylistically with contemporary and futuristic themes without making a difference between genres, or high or low culture. To try to break open again the dinosauric medium of theatre and investigate how to stage stratification in different ways. Examine how

to transpose and abuse a centuries-old vocabulary of art history, visual culture and film history to theatre.

Bring back the ritual element into theatre by using primal elements of theatre like masks, repetition, metamorphosis, enigma and trance through physical suffering – which often results in brutality and something that resembles a plot. Of course the plays are autobiographic, but deconstructed and reconstructed. Who cares whether I am in love or not? Nobody! But working with, what used to be ‘the clichés of’ and has now become ‘the rituals of’, love, romance and sex breaks open the autobiographical element and gives it a universal dimension. The guys from the slaughterhouse are never looking for abstraction, but they are searching for a style – content is necessary for this search, because in a wordless play that consists of deconstruction and ritual the style, of course, becomes the content. After a short analysis of their body of work, in which they have also re-staged a few of my visionary plays, I also feel that there are no individual plays, but that everything is interconnected. The plays can be read separately, but are also an incestuous family portrait. Elements are recuperated and there is an intrinsic story which binds everything together. An example:

‘Pieters, the bony freak, refers at the beginning of *Tinseltown* to the way my mummy arrived in Tinseltown on a bus. Van den Wyngaert, the fucking bitch, plays my mum in *Lalaland*, who gets off the bus. In *Tinseltown*, you don’t realise this is about my mother until *Lalaland*. Here it turns out that I am God and have impregnated her, because I am the god in *Life on the Edge*, played by Vandecasteele, the hairy Neanderthal man. The bald Kaldunski in *Life on the Edge* also plays the bald me, the waitress portrayed by Van den Wyngaert in *Tinseltown* is the waitress in the basement in *Life*, is the dancer from *Indie*, my wife ‘locked up in a pen’ in the basement. Etc., etc.’

How perverted is it really? What about the sector?

Idiot! They are no more nor less perverted than most others who wander about in this world. The knife of Abattoir cuts sharp when they are working on stage, but when they have finished performing there’s a lot of warmth and care. The only reason this question gets asked, is because so many other companies are extremely well-behaved and family-oriented. So many young artist-colleagues who have never seen a play by Abattoir say that ‘Abattoir is not my cup of tea, there’s too much nudity’. Theatre has had thousands of years to develop itself and

this is where we have come to. Learning to walk on two legs, with a first and last name, dressed. Shame on you and shame on you again for stating this in your open letter to Abattoir: *'But on the other hand, I would really start worrying when gods like Jan Fabre and Jan Lauwers descend from their Olympus since Moe maar op en dolend to attend your premieres.'* At the very least Jan and Jan make auteur-theatre which exceeds all bounds and they keep struggling through obstacles which they impose upon themselves, to try and renew themselves. They have been doing this for the past twenty years as autonomous artists. Just like your Romeo Castellucci and your Pippo Delbono and your Erik Devolder. A little less cynicism and a bit more respect would become you, Woolly Beanpole. Or I will burn your special Boy Scout unit to the ground. Incidentally, you told that fat pig Lernous yourself that you went to see *Lobstershop* by Lauwers three times.

What's the secret of Abattoir?

They work their arses off, you twerp! That's the secret! They appear to be able people, who ask themselves an insane amount of questions during the first half of the creative process, and who go home with a headache from all the thinking they have done during the second half of the process, when they have started to work on stage. Why don't these people just stage an existing play? Time after time they keep creating obstacles for themselves and their audience, from which they start working. As a matter of fact, this crew of butchers make 'docu-meta-thrillers': they start from the biographical and then use fictional filters and documentary samples to relate a new truth. A thriller in its purest form is a story that doesn't give any clues about what's going to happen next. This is their first obstacle, the biggest question internally. Now what? What's next after that? And after that? After each possible question round, practice comes into play, which is a very hard confrontation. One can learn craftsmanship, but no matter how good that technique is, it is futile if there is no instinct to pare it with. Instincts drive you to create a good play. You can never explain a performance (no-one can). You can only talk about it. The lads from the meat factory know what they want to make, but often don't know how. So they start working on the floor with their instincts. Usually, when they look back at what they have created in a particular week it seems quite unfamiliar to them. Then they remember what they were trying to do, so they start reworking what they have in their hands back towards the essence. You can only grasp the mystery of reality, it seems to me, by knowing as few things as possible and letting yourself be driven by passion.

What about recuperating your own material?

An artist will always try to make the one piece that can undo all the previous work. One work which summarizes all previous work. But there is a difference between what the heart and reality dictate. Sometimes it's more interesting to see one work next to another, because together they say more about what exactly the author is trying to capture. Bearing this in mind, Abattoir is more consciously constructing a body of work rather than creating one play. They appear to prefer steering away from stories. The minute a story enters the work, it becomes dull. The avant-garde theatre maker Richard Foreman only likes the first five minutes of a film, because afterwards it becomes predictable. *Galapagos* has four set-ups, *Testament* has three, *Moe maar op en dolend* around ten. *Indie* is set-up after set-up, which creates the illusion of a driving plot. From a theatrical point of view, ideas are more interesting than the story. The ideas are translated into images as accurate as possible, and each image creates a mood, an atmosphere. You can't create an image without atmosphere, which is sometimes forgotten by young image creators. So the pieces of Abattoir rely for a large part on an atmosphere that creates an image and translates an idea. Cinematic and theatrical techniques are applied to the combination of images. Mechanisms like sacrifice, justice, fate, the fool, metamorphosis, trance and scenery are the mental space of the characters and push the dramatics of this collection of scenes further on.

Horror?

We are all flesh. When I visit an abattoir, I'm always surprised that there are no humans hanging on meat hooks. It's fascinating how we have started to look at meat. There are generations who no longer know what meat is. They only recognize it as slices in a package. The confrontation with a pig's head has become very exotic. We can see flesh and bone-structures at the same time on X-rays. In the National Gallery in London, there's a beautiful work in pastel by Degas of a woman drying her back. At the bottom of the nape of her neck, her backbone seems to almost protrude out of her flesh. This gives the body a lot more fragility. It generates. I don't think Degas tried to make a horror-pastel, just as Abattoir doesn't aim to make horror-plays. The horror originates in the dialectics between fragility and (for example) the brutality of mechanics. Of course they make a lot of plays about fragile people, about people who are not at ease. Sometimes they are even hysterical. And the actors are generous when they are playing, which can make a performance very direct. And when

you become extremely direct, you get to people: they are insulted, they start crying, shaking or become scared.

The core group of Abattoir believes in expressing one emotion, which is very nuanced and thought through. You need a big sense of order when creating a good performance. Even when you're waiting for a coincidence and you let your instincts loose on stage, it's because you're forcibly trying to organize things. Why would you, after all emotions have already been shown on stage, want to do it again? Because the spirit of the times dictates a change of instincts. The mood dictates to do things over, only sharper, more clearly, more brutal. Live the spirit of the times and then report it back to an audience through actors. That's what the slaughterhouse wants to do. That's why they don't make abstract work. Abstraction is only about the aesthetics of the artist, about what he thinks is beautiful. There's no tension in that. That's only about 'Pretty, huh? Nice. Interesting.' That's horror.

'Do you think I'm nice?' signed, W. Hillaert

Allow me, Wilfried, to ventilate my very own personal opinion which is not necessarily the opinion of Abattoir.

I get so sick of the cosiness that has left the living room and crawled into the study of the critic. I'm not even talking about quotes like 'still, I've seen a lot of enthusiastic acting tonight' and 'I didn't understand a thing, I think it was a bad play'. I mean the critic who is suddenly very concerned about the accessibility of a performance, the critic who thinks 'oh dear, oh dear, will people find this cosy and comprehensible?'. I have been yelling for years that theatre should become a lot smarter or a great deal more naïve – more extreme in other words. We miss a lot of extreme ideas. 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 bother. It stops the artist from creating.

Instead of distributing stars to the multitude of solidly directed clean little repertoire plays, would someone please start giving them lashings? Give me, Wilfried Pateet-Borremans, a column in the papers to start reviewing critics. Mwoehahaha!

What do they want from their audience?

They don't want to do anything with or want anything from their audience! Show their work, sure. Let the people make up their own minds. They are more than able to. Sometimes they laugh very loudly. And sometimes they find it very tedious, so then they leave. Sometimes they're just fascinated, and that's probably what the children of the slaughterhouse prefer: that the audience is spellbound and attentive.

How lovely that a play like *Lala-land* has fucked up your little premature theory about the Chaos-trilogy. The meat factory from Malines does not cater to expectations, least of all to those of a critic. If you are looking for self-repetitive entertainment, turn on the television, read magazines or go to see one of the many other theatre companies.

I will say it again, just once. I hate directors who think plays of five hundred years ago are relevant. I hate actors, they're work shy faggots. I hate actresses, they're all dyke whores who cock-suck their way up to the top.

But I love the audience. The posh, arty-farty crowds, as well as the gothic chicks and the internet nerds, because these tiny tots come to see Abattoir in droves. They are honest, clever and very beautiful. They often think theatre is boring. They are critical and keep the pressure on. They're not scared to ask afterwards what *Testament* was really about or to say that it's their favourite play by Abattoir. They quote me on Myspace and steal posters on the streets. A lot of them are older than me. Some of them were quietly crying in the audience during the play that didn't do anything for you. Sometimes they feel sick and walk out of a performance, but I do that as well. More and more these days, by the way. Our doors are wide open.

And that's exactly what Abattoir is aiming for.

Now I'm going to start working and hit my wife. Hard.

Yours sincerely,

Wilfried Pateet Borremans.