

## Walking a different way

Hester van Hasselt and Marijke Hoogenboom<sup>1</sup>

**In some previous universe Lotte van den Berg, Sanne van Rijn, Olivier Provily and Mette van der Sijs might have been described as just ‘semi-artists’, but nowadays they are seen as artists with an extra. They have each broken out a life in theatre to develop another skill. Sitting together around the table they reported back on their new connections with the world. They have been enriched as artists and they have a story to tell. Its title? ‘The theatre is not a sanctuary’.**

The names Lotte van den Berg, Sanne van Rijn, Olivier Provily and Mette van der Sijs from Kassys theatre company will all be familiar to anyone with even a passing knowledge of Dutch experimental theatre, and they were fully embraced by the theatre world from the late 90s onwards. But in recent years all these theatre directors have been getting training elsewhere, outside the world of theatre. In addition to their work as artists, they have variously become a funeral celebrant, a Buddhist counsellor, a systemic constellation practitioner, and a reading and healing consultant. What inspired them to make these choices, and what are the implications of adding another string to their bow?

The four theatre makers met in the repurposed bridge warden’s cabin on the former Shell site in North Amsterdam. None of them had seen each other much, or at all, over the last few years. Although they were there to share their story, they were also keen to hear what the others had been up to. The three-hour-long conversation began with a jocular yell of ‘Revolution!’ and ended with the words, ‘It was a dead-end street. I couldn’t go on.’ There was commitment and there was passion, and there was just the occasional hint of timidity. Small wonder, because practising as a reader and healer alongside your work as a rational conceptual artist is surely bound to affect your self-image. So, do you conceal your new activity for as long as possible? Or do you decide to fess up, however awkward and difficult that might feel? ‘I kept quiet about it for a long time,’ explains Sanne, ‘But it’s good to talk about it. It brings it more into the world.’

### Strange circles

For sixteen years Mette van der Sijs was the joint director of Kassys together with Liesbeth Gritter. The group made its name creating absurdist theatre, putting society under the microscope in plays such as *Baas slaat man*, *Good cop Bad cop* and *Kommer*. In 2013 both directors took time out for a sabbatical – a year off. Mette took the opportunity to reanimate another of her great interests: undertaking. She trained as a funeral director, got a job at De Ode Funeral Services in Amsterdam, and never returned to the theatre.

‘Kassys had one last international tour in January 2014. The moment I was back home I jumped into the car to go off to Almere for my first deceased.’ Her new career had started. Even during this conversation, Mette remained on call for the event that anyone should drop dead in the meantime. ‘It’s fantastic work. I get to hear so many stories. I do everything from washing the body to organising the ceremony. I really like to get the deceased’s nearest and dearest involved: their family, friends,

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neighbours; that strange circle around each of us.' After a little more persistent questioning (Why choose death?) it emerges that Mette's father was a clergyman who led funerals himself and talked with Mette about what did and didn't work for a funeral service. On top of that, her mother died when Mette was 25. 'I've experienced for myself how important it is to say goodbye properly.'

### **The humans near us**

Olivier Provily worked in theatre for ten years making work about madness and pain based on theatre texts and improvisation, for the Frascati and the Toneelschuur, and with Zuidelijk Toneel. Losing his regular arts funding in 2010 was a heavy blow for him. In the end he decided to study at the VU University Amsterdam for his masters as a Buddhist spiritual counsellor, having earlier undergone intensive meditation practice while studying to become a director and then being ordained as a Zen monk in 2006. He is now working for HVO-Querido, an organisation that implements the Amsterdam council's 'bed-bath-bread' refugee care policy. 'I make the coffee and serve food,' explains Olivier, 'And I chat with people. The people I work with are all single men; refugees with nowhere to turn. And in Bijlmer [borough of Amsterdam] I set up the beds for an emergency shelter with some Syrians.'

The experience has been transformative for Olivier. 'When I was directing for theatre, I knew it was what I wanted to do, to the exclusion of all else. I was totally focused on realising my ideas. For me there was nothing better than that. It led to some intense rehearsals and conflicts, but the sacrifices were part of it all. I wasn't much occupied with other people's needs. I think of what I'm doing now as having transformed me into someone who's more sensitive to the people around him.'

### **Shifting possibilities**

Lotte van den Berg and her company left the physical confines of the theatre long ago. Her site-specific performances were always situated elsewhere, whether on wasteland or in a sound-proof box right in the heart of the city. She explored the role of the audience and, increasingly, her role as a theatre maker. When her regular arts funding was discontinued she made use of this space to continue along this path; Lotte's medium is still theatre, but she works at its boundaries. Two years ago she completed a part-time training in systemic work, a method rooted in psychology that makes relationships in families or organisations spatial and experiential. Often this is achieved quite simply by inviting family members, co-workers, functions or even certain thoughts to take the floor in the form of human representatives; whenever one of them shifts position, you can perceive the new possibilities in the field. 'I realised that this is the same thing as what I do as a theatre maker,' explains Lotte, 'I get people to relate to one another, work out where there are blockages and how the slightest of changes can make a shift possible.'

'I found the training really inspiring, partly because I learned stuff about myself, mainly because it got me to think carefully about group processes. Directing is such exciting work, socially speaking. You spend your time exploring aspects of internal workings that you didn't know about – and you take a group along with you for the ride. You bring up a topic such as loneliness or death and you all get into it together. How should you go about guiding that process? What should you do if someone starts panicking? I think it would be worthwhile for young student directors to have their attention drawn to their responsibility in this process.'

## **Deep undercurrents**

The words 'It was a dead end. I couldn't go on,' came from the mouth of Sanne van Rijn. In 1996 she directed her first play, entitled *Zo geef ik mijn kat een pilletje* (This is how I give a pill to my cat), and she followed this up with pieces such as *Laten we flink zijn* (Let's be brave), *Zwanenmeer* (*Swan Lake*) and *Langzaam tot nul* (To zero, slowly). She worked for many years under the wings of Johan Simons at ZT Hollandia and NTGent. In 2009 she abruptly decided to stop working. She nestled herself on the couch and decided that for a year she would make no more theatre. Since then she has only produced work on commission, whether as a director, executive director or crisis manager. 'I've put my own life in the first place, and theatre is part of that.'

'I see it partly as an age issue. When you're 20 you've got lots of *grrrr* – and you can go a long way on relentlessness and determination, by having a fighting spirit. But there's a limit to it. In the end it does dry you out [Sanne gesticulates, digging at her heart.]' After attending a reading and been being affected by its clarity she decided to delve deeper into energetic work. When you get a reading done, you have someone sitting right opposite you looking at what's happening to you on an energetic level. Sanne trained as a reader and healer at Utrecht's Centre for Life and Intuition (Centrum voor Leven en Intuïtie). Wary as she was of the implications, she trod carefully, step-by-step. At the same time, she was wildly enthusiastic about it. 'It was a confusing time', she explains, 'because I thought I was doing two completely different things that had nothing to do with each other. Now I know that was nonsense. Doing energetic work doesn't make you any less smart or less able to direct well. When you do a reading, you're focused on the deepest undercurrents and what it means to be human – to be in motion. I think doing readings is valuable. What you see in others, you see in yourself.'

## **Breaking the banks**

So, what is the message underlying these new practices? What proposal do they make for working as an artist in general? It is exciting, or striking at least, that all four directors pursued training, in one form or other, in care. Before talking about this, however, they first discuss the meaning of the word 'care'. To some it leaves a sour taste in the mouth, evoking associations with Christian charity, with knowing what's best for others, with devotion that exceeds its own boundaries – Sanne's gesture suggests a river breaking its banks. What she does when reading, is not so much care as acknowledgement. 'Hey, you, look! This is who you are.' Mette uses the word 'attention'. 'It's true that I help people, but only because I know what needs to happen after a death. First and foremost, I try to be a guide, a pilot.'

In the course of their work both of them enter into short and intensive connections with other people, going deep into their grief or energy field. 'But everyone has a different role to play,' says Mette, 'I'm not the one who's lost someone, and what I'm feeling isn't on the agenda.' Sanne says, 'It's such a relief to me that these things can all coexist side-by-side, that I can completely occupy my space and the other person can occupy their own too; that it's not like it used to be when I was thinking in terms of compromise all the time.' Sanne twists her upper body tortuously and Mette laughs: 'Yes, that's exactly right, especially that movement.'

## **The sacred goal**

The thorniest issue for all of them, and perhaps the most important reason for change, seems to be the

way they work (or used to work) in theatre: all energies were focused on the sacred goal – the interminable rehearsal process, the director working in a field of tension, the team being pulled into that field. The pressure created comes not only from within, from personal aspirations, but also from without, from the broader theatre sector – the moment comes when you've really turned into a brand, explains Lotte, whether that brand is Lotte van den Berg, Sanne van Rijn or Olivier Provily. You become the solo artist going all out to get what he or she wants. And whatever the artist wants to make has to get made. There may be victims along the way, and things may go wrong, but that's not what it's all about. All the attention is focused on the image the artist wants to present. That's what's deemed successful, and that's what gets the reward.

This culture is not restricted to theatre. Everyone present agrees on that. In the banking or insurance industries we see the same hierarchical structures recurring again and again. There, too, there are people starting to fiddle about with the existing structures. 'This transition is going on all over the world,' Olivier explains, 'People are all willing to explore in all openness. That's a positive need. Theatre is also in a position to offer an alternative.' Lotte interjects: 'We could carry out a social experiment in theatre – whether that's in how you work, what you make or in the sector as a whole.'

### **Resurgent ambitions**

For the past two years Lotte and partner in life Daan 't Sas have been working together on a project titled *Building Conversation*, a series of pieces without a stage whose audience members enter into conversation with one another. In one case, they follow the rules of Socratic conversation, while in another they follow the Inuit custom of sitting silently together and seeing what kind of communication emerges. 'In *Building Conversation* we treat the conversation as an artwork in itself, as a performance,' explains Lotte. We were inspired by several conversation techniques and rituals we encountered to develop new forms, such as communicating while walking or lying down.' Lotte herself has exchanged her role as a solo-minded theatre maker for one that allows more space for others. But every day again she has to make the active choice to work this way. '[Working solo] is a tough habit to break. I often fall back into old habits, like when I say things like: 'Just let me take care of that publicity text.' Then I can send it off without anyone else having a look at it first [laughs].'

All the directors present concur that this is the real nub of the issue, because the very fact that Lotte can take it all on her shoulders and say 'I'll do it' is part of what makes her a good director. Nonetheless, Lotte is happy to have learned about a different side to herself. 'I don't see it as a step backwards or forwards. It's a different way of walking.' So it is no surprise that people need some time to become accustomed to it. The others also needed time to get used to the idea that changing direction does not automatically equate with failure; that you do not necessarily have to throw yourself into one thing a hundred percent. Olivier and Mette have frequently awoken with terms such as 'wasted resources' looming large in their mind; what were they doing, pulling the plug after so many years of study and experience? And Sanne, who nowadays only **works in** theatre on invitation – with no long-term plan – still feels unsure about her choices sometimes: '[I think] perhaps I should be an artistic director after all, am I missing the boat? But I still don't apply for job vacancies. It's more like a sort of resurgence of an old ambition, I think.'

## About love

Being an artist with an extra is all about daring to let go. While Lotte is giving the stage back to the people, Mette is bringing theatre into day-to-day experience. Strictly speaking, there is not such a big difference between a funeral and a theatre performance. As Mette explains, 'You can look at a funeral as a week-long project. You have to think in advance about what will happen in the ceremony, and work it all out in a proper scenario. Funerals are about love and farewells. There's laughter and tears, but you need to create the right conditions. Something needs to happen so that people really share this special moment. The weak point of many funerals is the absence of dramaturgy. Sometimes at a funeral I think, 'Nobody's being touched by this.' And if a funeral doesn't affect you emotionally, what will?'

Mette believes that the missing component is participation. Even before she had completed her training she had developed a series of funeral formulas, one of which she conceived together with theatre director Jetse Batelaan. 'The idea was to get the mourners all to carry the body in their hands. This summer I managed to put the plan into practice at the funeral for a young woman in her mid-30s, a much-loved person. Instead of having the body brought into the hall by just a small group of people, I got everyone present to form a double row so that the body could be brought in by everybody's hands. There were so many people that the row had to start outside the hall. The woman's best friends got her out of the car and her husband and children were waiting for her at the other end. It was so silent, except for some quiet sobbing. She was laid out on a bier. She was so light. There were so many people that some of them were reaching forward from behind the rows to support her coffin – some were only able to support her with a single hand.

Will anything of this excursion from art also feed back into art? How has Sanne's reading influenced her theatre work, for example? She is measured in her response, explaining that it has affected *how* she works, rather than *what* she makes. 'I think I've gained the courage to be more explicit. I'm better at identifying what I think is important in life. I used to be more preoccupied with exploring the form, with the concept. Nowadays in rehearsal I might say something like "This one is all about love." So I'm willing to make things explicit, and the same goes for when I'm teaching or mentoring. We theatre people can spend a lot of time beating around the bush, because making theatre has a therapeutic aspect, and that can be a tricky matter in rehearsals. I can position myself better in that nowadays.'

What's more, Sanne is finding theatre making a more pleasurable and easy going process, but that does not get in the way of progress in her work, with developments towards greater simplicity and use of visuals. 'Last year I directed the graduation show with students at the HKU, the theatre school in Utrecht. I decided to focus mainly on the process of making the piece. I decided I wouldn't work more than three days a week, I wouldn't take it home with me, and I wouldn't lose any sleep over it. During rehearsals I came up with some form-based ideas for that play that I would have killed for ten years ago.'

## Hard-hitting art

In the end, it is Olivier who points to the elephant in the room: 'We can't deny that we are all children of our times. Making this move is all well and good, but it's also dangerous.' Proposing Andrei Tarkovsky as the model for an artistic drive that stops at nothing to get its own way, Olivier conjures up the image of

the suffering artist, or even the martyr – it is a force to be reckoned with, one that should not be underestimated. ‘I know it’s out of fashion, but I believe in it,’ he says, before recalling a play from Sanne van Rijn’s early years called *Laten we flink zijn*. The red wall that occupies the entire stage is still etched onto our collective retina, and the play is a fine example of an unrelenting form of theatre. ‘I honestly think it’s lovely that Sanne is enjoying her work more,’ says Olivier, ‘that Lotte is making space for other people, and that Mette is directing funerals, but you can give me that wall any day of the week. Right at this moment – when the government is in a shambles trying to deal with the refugees and Wilders is gaining ground – it’s the perfect conditions for an ultimate answer from hard-hitting art.’

The others take their time to weigh up his comments. Sanne comments wryly that she also likes art to be hard-hitting, uncompromising. ‘But’, she adds, ‘it’s a strange idea that the working process for achieving that has got to be exhausting.’ The question then rises of precisely who is being targeted with this hard-hitting art. Everyone present knows people who have no intention of ever going to the theatre. And there is a need for more alternatives implemented directly in society. Perhaps it is more a matter of having both, of having hard-hitting art *and* interaction? Lotte points out that they can just as easily be one and the same thing. ‘The ritual that Mette and Jetse came up with is hard-hitting too. It says: “This woman is dead and there’s no escaping it.” But at the same it is gentle and supportive.’

### **The importance of doing**

Our planned time was up long ago (fortunately Mette has not been called away in the meantime), so to bring things to a close Lotte draws a provisional conclusion: ‘We’ve all apparently got the need to look beyond the confines of the rehearsal space. There’s a difference between *reflecting* society (through theatre) and *doing*. Doing is important, too. I think we need practices in order to do.’ Olivier agrees, endorsing Lotte’s views with his own experiences in the world of theatre: ‘That’s what I love about rehearsals. First you all sit around the table to discuss a particular topic, and then you go out onto the floor to shape and embody what you’ve just articulated.’ Lotte picks up on this: ‘Those moments in rehearsal are exciting. That’s why nowadays I’m asking the audience to come to the rehearsal space. It’s so you get to do it together; so people can step into it for themselves and get into it.’

‘I’d never want to go back to doing things the way I used to,’ says Olivier, ‘But I miss the theatre. I miss the creating, the composing and the improvising. I got so much pleasure out of it, despite all the effort it took. There’s a photo on my desk that I want to make a play about. It’s a photo of Africans in a cabin. It’s looking back at me every day.’

*Hester van Hasselt performed for Nicole Beutler, LISA and Jérôme Bel. In 2009 she started writing for newspapers, poetry journals and funeral services. Marijke Hoogenboom heads the Performing Arts in Transition research group at the Amsterdam University of the Arts and de Theaterschool*