



HALF 6

Column by Loek Zonneveld – 13 October 2015

ON THE SHOULDER OF GIANTS *In memory of Peter Oosthoek (1934-2015)*

Theatre directors, who start thinking about and working on performances from a *scenographic* point of view, are exceptions, not regulars. Sometimes they are real strangers. Often they are seen as mad men.

In the relatively short history of regie and scenography we have seen some giants among those mad men. Famous examples are Adolphe Appia (1862-1928), his search for 'rhythmic spaces' and his war against Richard Wagner and the traditional and conservative scenery for his own opera's. Famous also is Edward Gordon Craig (1872-1966) and his visionary décors as stylized theatre-architectures, with often a scenery of revolving screens.

In Flanders en Holland, between the two world wars, in the so called Interbellum, there have been four main theatre directors who often worked from a pure scenographic point of view: the romanticist Willem Royaards (1867-1929), the Craig-adept Eduard Verkade (1878-1961), and the two wild expressionist directors Herman Teirlinck (1879-1967) and Albert van Dalsum (1889-1971). Shortly before the second world war, an old Russian maestro joined this band of pioneers, Pjotr Sjarov (1886-1969). In the field of actor-directors, acteurs-regisseurs, he was a real giant. In the field of scenography however, he was an old-fashioned romanticist. Ton Lutz (1918-2009) was one of his his main pupils, and became a founding father of Dutch theatre-directing. So far so good for history. As one of the main pupils of Ton Lutz, pupils who went their own way, pupils who developed their own style, comes *Peter Oosthoek* within sight. (The other pupil, with his own path and his own style is, by the way, still going strong: *Erik Vos*).

Born in 1934, so eleven years before the war, *Peter Oosthoek* was trained as an actor at the Amsterdam Toneelschool between 1956 en 1960, in the same class with Joop Admiraal en Petra Laseur. During his final exam Peter Oosthoek played Falstaff. He then joined the theatrecompany of his main teachers, de Nederlandse Comedie, let's say the Toneelgroep Amsterdam of the fifties and sixties. He still admired his teachers, now his colleagues. But the company, Nederlandse Comedie, was not exactly Oosthoek's cup of tea. Too much a big theatrefactory with all kinds of big obligations. Peter Oosthoek had his first experiences as a director within the experimental group Studio in the Brakke Grond, during three years in the mid sixties. There he learned, from his grumpy old boss, Kees van Iersel (1912-1998), that directing in the theatre is not a 'nine-till-five-job', but *a way of life*. After three years he went to Toneelgroep Centrum, where he stayed for twenty-two years, making his finest work in the relatively small city theatre of Haarlem en in Theater Bellevue, here in Amsterdam.

Peter Oosthoek was an important key-figure in the Dutch theatre for several, at least *three* reasons. *First* of all he did a great job in stimulating young writers to write for the theatre. He build a bridge between the times of lone wolfs in writing for theatre (like Hugo Claus and



HALF 6

Lodewijk de Boer), and the period of writing for theatre, close to rehearsals and improvisations, near the actors and directors, close to the theatrecompanies.

Second: Peter Oosthoek was one of the best prepared directors of this country. Long before the first reading of the text, he knew everything about every corner of the play, he was always far ahead of his actors, often *too* far ahead, by the way. His nickname amongst actors was *the heavy armoured tank*.

But, *third*, and I think most important of all, Peter Oosthoek was a director who thought and worked in the preparation of performances *in terms of light and space*. He was one of the first scenographic directors in the post-war Dutch theatre. His performances were often described as choreographies, played and made with a rhythmic musicality.

For one of his masterpieces, a theatre adaptation of the famous Amsterdam coming-of-age novel *Kees de Jongen* from Theo Thijssen (Gerben Hellinga made the adaptation), Peter Oosthoek and his theatre-technicians developed a lightdesign of some two-hundred-and-fifty rectangular and circular lightlevels, for a nearly bare stage.

That was: *Painting with Light* – long before the Joop van den Ende-musicals, in which this became usual, customary, *gefundenes Fressen* to say it in well-made Dutch. That was also long before lightdesigners like Henk van der Geest, Reinier Tweebeeke en Uri Rappaport became famous in their *tricks of the trade*. Oosthoek's painting the stage with light was collective work, developed in close harmony with his technicians and scenographers, who, even for a time, spoke about the *Oosthoek-licht*, the word for a crucial moment in the performance in which the actor is scarcely seen and hardly visible. Rembrandt-like *clair obscure* in theatre.

In his best performances Peter Oosthoek made rhythms and an almost dance-like mise-en-scene, with which he juggled textmaterial far above reality. Perhaps one of his best and most moving performances was *The Cannibals*, from the Hungarian writer George Tabori, premiered in Bellevue, 16th December 1972. The play tells the nightmares about hunger, food, eating and cannibalism in the concentration camp of Auschwitz – quote from Tabori: *The best jewish witz is Auschwitz*. The text is full of such dark survivor humour, the play is a jewish slapstick of sadness and grief. The performance was an almost impersonal, disagreeable and mechanical performed, physical presentation of a series of falling, speaking, freezing, falling again, standing up again. And again: on a bare stage. The Empty Space. In the centre of the performance was Peter Oosthoek's favorite actor, one of his old teachers of the Toneelschool. Han Bentz van den Berg (1917-1976). He played a kind of reincarnation of Tabori's father Cornelius, who died in Auschwitz, and of George Tabori himself.

In 1987 Oosthoek's theatregroup Centrum became part of Toneelgroep Amsterdam. He played some great roles there, Gloucester in *Lear* for example. He also directed some strong performances, an adaptation of the novel *Werther Nieland* written by Gerard Reve. In this building, the Amsterdam Theatre School, he was a beloved and calm-helpful mentor and teacher at the regie-department. In that role of a patient maestro, he will be missed, very much missed.

Peter Oosthoek died the 27th of September, some weeks after his eighty-first birthday.