

# Master presentations

19 – 20 June 2020

**Jānis Balodis**  
**Merel Smitt**

**DAS**  
theatre

WRITTEN BY  
Silvia Bottiroli

## A couple of metres farther, a few moments later

It's late spring while I am writing these lines.

In the region I come from, it is the season of fireflies. They glimmer in early night hours, in fields and forests, and sometimes even in city parks.

From a human perspective, one of the most outstanding qualities of fireflies is their relation to visibility. They are pure appearances, manifesting in and from the darkness, lighting it with their soft and extremely fragile light. Darkness is necessary for us to be able to see them. In that same darkness they disappear, to then reappear again a bit farther.

This dance is their way of attracting female partners, an invitation for reproduction. Their appearance is not just seductive to their own species, but also for us human spectators. Indeed, we are enchanted by fireflies' precision and smallness, and fascinated by the mysterious forces that guide their movements in time and space.

As spectators of this beautiful and mysterious dance, there is only one thing that we know for sure. We have to keep watching

and cultivate our capacity to spectate.<sup>1</sup> We have to switch off the lights, let darkness take all the space. We have to wait and sustain the uncertainty (will they appear tonight? Is it too early? Too late? Will they come back this year too? Is the air too polluted for them?).

Once we see the first tiny light glimmering in the night, all we have to do is stay in suspense, keep our senses alert, and wait to see the next one, or maybe the same one lighting up again a couple of metres farther, a few moments later...

Multiple lessons can be learnt from the fireflies, and from us watching them. The most valuable, in the moment I am writing in, seems to be the value of invisibility and of waiting. Fireflies are loaded with the promise that if we don't give up, if we preserve the right conditions, if we keep watching, we will indeed see. We do not exactly know when or where, but the fireflies will come back, spring after spring, to lighten our dark nights and revive their promise of enchantment and seduction.

In her famous *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*<sup>2</sup>, Peggy Phelan writes that

“performance becomes itself through disappearance”. Similar to the fireflies, performance can only be seen and caught by our senses in the moment it appears. Its volatile and ephemeral nature is so powerful in reason of its possibility – or rather its fate – to disappear. Same as the fireflies, the very possibility for performance to exist, is connected to the possibility to not be there, or not be visible.

The ontological negativity of performance, a vulnerability that is connected to the gaze of its spectators, and the promise that it always entails, are currently more crucial than ever. Theatre, as the broad field that also comprises performance, is about coming together. It is about staying in darkness. It is about trusting the invisible and waiting for something to appear.

Theatre is all about believing that our appointment will be met again. This is how the seven performative works were created by the graduating DAS Theatre participants: under the particular circumstances that forced their appointment to be postponed, doubted, dreamed about, cherished, and tended towards.

Each of these works propose a specific way for us to meet with art and with each other. Most of them renew the promise for an appointment that cannot be met now, but operates as a reminder to continue to watch and trust that the darkness will softly be enlightened again. There will we meet. A couple of metres farther, a few moments later...

<sup>1</sup> See Georges Didi-Huberman, *Survival of the Fireflies*, University of Minnesota Press 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, Taylor & Francis 1993.

JĀNIS BALODIS

# The trip to the whole castle



Some time ago we were kids. Some time ago we had summer breaks. Some time ago we went in to the yard in the morning and thought: “What am I going to do today?” Some time ago we went to some castle ruins and thought: “It can’t be that this is it! This castle here doesn’t feel whole. Where is the missing part of it?” Some time ago a girl came to us and said: “I might know what are you looking for, and I might know where to find it. Do you mind me joining you?”

*The trip to the whole castle* is a work that shifts its form and content in relation to the space and context within which it takes place. This feels like an absolute necessity in order for ‘a journey to occur’. The one and only thing that stays the same is a desire to go and find a castle, and to let the mysterious girl from the past help.

I was born in a country that doesn’t exist anymore, and, I can still see and feel its aftermath in many ways, either back home in Riga or here in Amsterdam. This might be one of the reasons why I am interested in seeing and perceiving reality as hundreds of layers of the past, present and possible future that exist here and now, all at the same time. I think that theatre might help to reveal these layers of reality that are in play, and help us to see some ways to go further from here.

# Something might happen

Before starting, I would like to propose an exercise: visualise the moment before the end. Which images come to your mind when thinking

## THE END OF EVERYTHING?

The Latvian theatre maker Jānis Balodis described it as “a situation where there are a bunch of people dancing and dancing and there, very close to that place is a corner, and around that corner is a little, mischievous kid waiting and smiling grimly. And those people – we, we are still trying to dance to that last song which is playing. Trying to take our last breath before inevitably turning the corner. And, when the corner is turned, we know that we will be completely destroyed, devoured, eaten and gone.”

Probably, the last song we hear is some guttural grunge played out by nihilistic skinny blond boys in a horror b-movie from the

90’s, with enough beat to keep you dancing at what is your last, possibly endless, party. It brings to mind any Anton Chekhov play: non-sensical situations and delusional characters wondering, as usual, about the uselessness of life and affirming they do not want to be where they are, in a complex mix of desire and hopelessness.

According to Peter Szondi in “Theory of Modern Drama”, modern dramaturgy (such as Chekhov) wasn’t – in the context of a crisis in the bourgeois order – only enacting new subjects, emphasising issues such as incommunicability or social struggles. It was, above all, looking to convert these subjects into new forms.

And this is exactly what Jānis is attempting to do. To convert the past, darkness, nihilism, hope(lessness), (im)possible futures, (dis)placement, journey, incommunicability, context, haunting, memory... into new forms, through different scenic experiments, frames and episodes.

It is not by chance that his graduation piece has a key character in it, a link that is somehow asking for new forms, who wants to see what is next. A female child ghost (maybe directly from the party before the end of everything?) who is whispering right into our ear: “I’m inviting you to a journey to find the missing pieces of a castle. You have to trust, you have to go. You can rest. And something might happen”. And the ghost really means it. *Something might happen*. Including the generous possibility for *nothing* to happen. And in this risky, genuine and paradoxical territory, the work of Jānis is placed as a radical and meaningful unknowing.

Jānis was born in a territory that doesn’t exist anymore (or to use the metaphor of the Yanomani Shaman, Davi Kopenawa, in a territory that has already experienced the end of everything). And I believe that this is the reason why Jānis is always aiming to create a concrete territorial trajectory in his works (we – physically – go from here to there). And such trajectory has a clear function: to collectively reassemble – at the very moment of the performance –

a forgotten memory. Therefore, it seems that through his work, Jānis is recapitulating the history of his own social, political and geographical territory, struggling between the ‘innocent’ European neoliberalism and the oppressive presence of Russia.

Finally, this fact brings us to another important feature of Janis’s works: the uncanniness of being in a trap, like countries in between territories. Locked between two forces, the ‘here’ and the ‘there’, waiting or hoping for something to happen. In that sense Jānis is acting as a maker who is able to translate a context to another, avoiding any universalism and using the very concept of Theatre to place, displace and replace contexts, territories and narratives. His and ours.

ps: Another text could be written to speak about the presence and importance of childhood as a concept in Jānis’s works, but about that, I will leave you with a political statement found written on some wall in the streets of Crete in 2006: “Our only homeland: childhood” signed by some anonymous anarchist group.

## PROJECT UPDATE

“The Trip to the Whole Castle” is a work of theatre made to be live-streamed. It takes place in suburbs of Riga, Latvia, and consists of a journey through the city to a dark attic in old wooden house. It is a trip through time and memories. It is a journey where the audience is invited to eliminate borders of the screen and become present at the side of the story. It is a proposal to meet your childhood memories, invisible entities and to take a rest with us in warm and dark attic. For everything to happen, we advise you to stay half asleep and half awake.

“The Trip to The Whole Castle” was developed throughout the second year of studies at DAS Theatre. After the beginning of the pandemic there was a decision to translate the material into a digital form. It felt the right thing to do because the work deals with invisible entities and relies on the use of imagination for the performance to happen. Those conditions suggested that it might be fruitful to try out to facilitate the imaginative and ghostly experience via the use of camera and a live stream.

The process and the work became a quest to see how the experience can still be theatre? How to create a set-up where the audience feels that the work unfolds now – on their screens? How is that benefiting the work? If we are not in one physical space together, can we co-create an imagined one? And what does it mean when the stream ends? How is this different from walking out of a theatre building or studio?

It’s strange – I will be happy if you join the trip, even if I won’t be able to really see you. Despite this, I hope, the meeting will happen in some different way.

### COLLABORATORS

Viesturs Balodis  
Anna Belkovska  
Ieva Kauliņa  
Teodēzija Balode

### TUTOR

Edit Kaldor

### EXTERNAL ADVISOR

Mala Kline

MEREL SMITT

# HOW TO START A MOVEMENT



HOW TO START A *MOVEMENT* is a series of interventions and missions in which different individuals get the opportunity to explore, question and disrupt the protocols, dynamics and rules of (semi) public spaces, institutions and venues. The missions consist of instructions you receive and execute together or individually. You can receive these instructions through printed cards, digital channels, verbally and so on. Some of the missions are role playing games with specific roles and instructions, others are workshops, multi-interpretable assignments or instructions you can do on your own whenever you feel the need to raise your voice or respond to the harsh reality. With some you need to be physically present, others you can do from your home using the internet, your telephone or non-electronic mail. By creating different types of missions with different threshold levels it is possible for everybody to join the movement at some point to take back their power, claim their voice, and empower themselves by setting something in motion.

Merel Smitt is an artist based in Rotterdam. She builds immersive installations and creates interventions in the public space that interfere with our daily lives. Her work is research based, site-specific and the audience, knowingly and unknowingly, participate in various ways. You may come across one of her projects in situations or settings where you don't expect art to happen.

Her projects often result in multiple outcomes that can be seen together as a whole but can also be experienced separately. The output consists of installations, websites, fictional campaigns, score-books, audio-tours, walks, role playing games and so on. The impact of the work lies within the participants; they become aware of the way certain frameworks produced by political and social systems in our society influence our environment, behaviour and interactions. Her projects can be seen as methodologies to rethink protests and social movements, occupy spaces, raise voices, and set something in motion.

[www.merelsmitt.nl](http://www.merelsmitt.nl)

WRITTEN BY  
Felizitas Stilleke

Take a close look!  
There she stands.  
On the coast.  
At the edge of a cliff,  
in the middle of the surf.  
She's facing the wind,  
breaking the waves,  
feeling the spray.  
Brave. Open. Fearless.  
Without moving  
she is standing there  
so we can see her.  
So, look! Look closely!  
She's a strong woman,  
she's an artist,  
she's an adventurer  
and she comes from the  
land of water and tides.  
There she stands.  
Breaking the waves.  
Taking up the fight  
as the strong woman she is.  
The artist, the adventurer.

Take a close look!  
There she stands.  
She is playing.  
She is observing.  
She sees everything  
and everyone.  
She guides and directs.  
She cackles and betrays.  
She loses and leads the game.  
She plays.  
You can walk through walls with her but you  
have to let it happen.  
She won't push you,  
or teach you how or when.

She'll only show you  
that it's possible.  
She'll show you  
what is necessary.  
When she's still, you will move.  
When she's playing, you will play.  
When she's watching, you will see.  
When she's guiding, you will conjure.  
She is the game within you.

Take a close look!  
There she stands.  
She wants to start a movement.  
With you.  
As you.  
Inside you.  
That's what she stands for and  
that's why she is standing  
next to you.  
Behind you.  
Beneath you.  
How to start a movement?  
How to even start?  
Look closely.  
There is already  
a movement.  
With you.  
As you.  
And inside you.  
As long as you keep moving,  
you will move the world.  
That's what she stands for.

Take a close look!  
There she stands.  
Not speaking.  
Not moving.  
Yet, she says a great deal and moves

everything around.  
Because she stands where she stands.  
She stands up against it.  
Showing herself.  
As a woman she knows how to be patient  
like the water and silent like the calm  
depth of a lake.  
She listens to every drop of the ocean but  
swirls around with rage when impatience  
catches up with her.  
Her work is a manifesto of the sea.

Take a close look!  
There she stands.  
In front of the places she builds for  
you to dwell in. Places in which your  
expectations, imaginations and  
experiences can settle down.  
She creates the circumstances for  
that to happen.  
She holds you,  
and carries you.  
And to those of you  
who cannot (yet)  
accept her invitation,  
we say:  
it is important  
to look closely.

Take a close look!  
There she stands.  
Against efficient, effective and  
result-based thinking.  
Fighting the neoliberal art market by  
deliberately questioning its ideology,  
to intentionally create an uncertainty  
that is frighteningly powerful.  
And to those of you who don't know  
how to take a stand yet,  
we say:  
Follow the movement.  
Follow the experiment.  
Follow the unknown.  
Follow her and you will discover in Merel  
Smitt's work the subversive power of  
a feminist art practice in which the ego  
loses itself through collaboration and thus  
wins everything there is to win: self-  
empowerment, solidarity, joy, creation  
and the infinite vastness of the sea.

Take a close look!  
You can see it.  
You can experience it.  
Come close!  
Closer...

## PROJECT UPDATE

HOW TO START A *MOVEMENT* began in september 2018 and has welcomed 100 participants since. When joining the movement, participants engage with everyday life in a different way. They explore, in an intimate yet collective way, the dynamics and rules that we produce, follow and maintain on a personal, political and societal level.

A participant will normally go through four parts of the *MOVEMENT*:  
part I: the individual training over the course of 18 days.  
part II: the mission briefing of half an hour.  
part III: the collective mission of 1 hour.  
part IV: the collective debriefing, varying from 15 min to 3 hours.

Due to the COVID-19 crisis only part I and part IV could be executed: the individual training and the collective debriefing. All parts of the movement are designed to function as stand-alone interventions as well as a whole, this way the movement can always take place, no matter where we are or under what circumstances we are living.

The individual training (between **June 2<sup>nd</sup>** and **June 19<sup>th</sup> 2020**), could be completed from home, within the frame of everyday life, respecting the rules of a 1.5 meter society. Over the course of 18 days each participant receives 14 envelopes in their mailbox. Each envelope consists of instructions, readings, messages, material and traces from the movement with which the participant engages with.

At the collective debriefing, in a digital space on **June 19<sup>th</sup> 2020**, the gang meets each other to share their traces.

At the moment the experience is limited to a small group of people. A larger audience is reached online through following the process on Instagram (@merelsmitt) within the time-frame June 2<sup>nd</sup> and June 19<sup>th</sup> 2020.

There is also the possibility of receiving the publication of **HOW TO START A *MOVEMENT*** that will be published at the end of the summer. Please contact me at [howtostartamovement@merelsmitt.nl](mailto:howtostartamovement@merelsmitt.nl) if you are interested in receiving this.

### COLLABORATORS

Ariane Gros, Marnix de Klerk  
([takeadetour.eu](http://takeadetour.eu))

### TUTOR

Marjorie Boston

### EXTERNAL ADVISOR

Sarah Vanhee, Simon Allemeersch

### COLLABORATION & ADVICE

Eva Jansen Manenschijn, Adelita  
Husni-Bey, Amy van der Weerden,  
Rick Boerman, Felizitas Stilleke,  
Rodrigo Batista, Michael Ronen  
& my peers from DAS Theatre.

ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

**Silvia Bottioli**

COACH & STUDENT COUNSELLOR

**Juul Beeren**

PROGRAMME COORDINATOR

**John Meijerink**

PRODUCTION COORDINATOR

**Maaïke Boot**

TUTORS

**Marjorie Boston**

**Andrea Božić**

**Edit Kaldor**

**Miguel Angel Melgares**

**Lara Staal**

ADVISORS

**Konstantina Georgelou**

**Joachim Robbrecht**

TECHNICAL DEPARTMENT

**Harco Haagsma**

**Udo Akemann**

**Nadia Bekkers**

COMMUNICATION

**Ira Brand**

**Nathalie Van Regenmortel**

PHOTO DOCUMENTATION

**Thomas Lenden**

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theatre



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