

## English summary

### **Dutch mime: a distinct mode of thought in theatre practice**

In this thesis I detail the development of modern Dutch mime, a performative practice that took shape in the 1960s. In the 1940s the internationally successful film *Les enfants du Paradis* (Carné 1943) and the 1947 tour of the Netherlands by French mime artist Marcel Marceau had led to the revival in the Netherlands to the far older tradition of nineteenth-century French pantomime. A key event in this development was the founding in 1952 of the Dutch Mime Institute (Stichting Nederlandse Pantomime) which was to be the source of a new wave of modern mime that emerged in the 1960s, one that made a radical break with the traditional mime/pantomime idiom under the direct influence of the French mime innovator Etienne Decroux.

It was in Paris of the 1930s that Decroux first developed corporeal mime, a modernist interpretation of the genre that went on to gain an international following. Among them were the Dutch students of Decroux who worked under him in Paris in the 1950s and 60s and brought corporeal mime back to the Netherlands, where, in their own work, they gave a distinctive and anarchic twist to their mentor's ideas. In so doing, they laid the foundations for the development of modern Dutch mime, the subject of this thesis.

The Dutch mime tradition has received scant attention either from the field of theatre studies or within the professional practice itself. This absence of reflection on Dutch mime contrasts starkly with its important position on the Dutch theatre landscape. From the 1960s to the present day, Dutch mime has disrupted and innovated theatre practice, domestically and internationally. As a discipline, it has been central to a number of home-grown theatrical genres, including *locatietheater* (site-specific performance), *bewegingstheater* (movement theatre), *landschapstheater* (landscape theatre) and *ervaringstheater* (experiential performance).

In the four chapters comprising this thesis, I set out the development of the four fundamental paradigms associated with the practice and performance of Dutch mime: 'using the body as an instrument', 'physical stillness', 'making space visible', and 'the Below Zero principle'. They played a crucial role in the development of Dutch mime in the 1960s, and they underlie its practice to this day. I will show how these ideas have evolved within and through mime-making practice, with illustrated examples from specific performances and sources.

Extensive research of source material underpins the three methodological instruments I have devised for the purposes of study. The first is to engage with mime in terms of a *mode of thought*. I argue that it is in and through mime practice that modes of thought around performance and performance-making becomes manifest. My proposal is that mime *thinks*, and it does so through the practice of making. The central question posed by my thesis is this: In what *ways* does Dutch mime think? And, more specifically: What modes of thought about performance and performance-making are manifested in the historical practice of Dutch mime? I introduce the term ‘mime thinking’ (*mimed Denken*) to describe and examine the common core of the modes of thought activated in and through the practice of Dutch mime.

The second methodological instrument I use in this study is the assumption of a crucial and ongoing dynamic between Dutch mime thinking and the legacy of Decroux. I show that Dutch mime should be viewed as corporeal mime with a Dutch ‘twist’. In so doing, on the one hand I establish just how powerful the connection is between Decroux’s corporeal mime and Dutch mime as an educational tradition, and on the other I show that Dutch mime offered a singular and revitalising interpretation of Decroux’s ideas.

The third and final methodological instrument is my use of the ‘Zero’ concept as a searchlight in this study. I show that Zero is a key concept in past and present mime thinking, and that it can serve to make visible the tradition and identity of Dutch mime. The term Zero as used in this context is derived from Decroux’s corporeal mime, and pops up within Dutch mime tradition in a profusion of guises, denoting states such as ‘neutrality’, ‘physical stillness’, ‘personal objectivity’, ‘blankness’ and ‘transparency’; it is also used to refer to ideas about the relation between a performer and his or her body, and to ideas about interdisciplinarity and dramaturgy. The Zero concept has always had a part to play within the practice of Dutch mime, in the past and in the present, in all manner of forms and applications. Following in the tradition of Mieke Bal, I use Zero as a searchlight, an indispensable tool in my efforts to identify particular lines of mime thinking, and also to clarify them, make them transparent, and, most importantly of all, connect them.

The central theme of the first chapter is the concept of the body as an instrument. I ask why Dutch mime performers view their body as an instrument, and I examine the implications of this mindset. To thoroughly explicate this theme I look in detail at Decroux’s notion of *zéro*, and more specifically at his statement that a mime performer must learn how he or she ‘may rise to the level of zero’ (*s’élever vers zéro*). He believed that the performer on stage should strive to attain a particular level of objectivity (*zéro*) in order to

be able to project the symbolic, rather than the personal. This quest for objectivity on the part of the performer lies at the heart of the way in which the body is instrumentalised in Decroux's corporeal mime. I show that assigning the status of instrument to the body was one of the ways in which Decroux sought to preclude thinking about performance in terms of expression, particularly personal expression.

Whereas Decroux used the body as an instrument so that it could attain a *symbolic* dimension, the Dutch context of the 1960s saw the emergence of an *absurdist* dimension. Taking as my examples a number of pieces performed by the Dutch mime company Mimetheater Will Spoor in London in 1968, I identify the ways in which this mode of thought came to the fore in Dutch mime practice. The company's director Will Spoor was an innovator who in his mime work transformed the body into an absurdist instrument that captivated and thrilled its audience. 'Mime is music for the eyes', said Spoor. I argue that Spoor's interpretation of Decroux's corporeal mime defined Dutch mime thinking and its approach to performance in the 1960s; within this paradigm, to perform is not to *pretend*, but to *play* – to play the body as if it were an instrument.

Mime is most generally thought of as an art of movement, so why is it that Dutch mime performers so often focus on stillness? This is the question that lies at the heart of the second chapter, in which I show that the exceptional interest that Dutch mime traditionally attaches to the Zero concept is indicative of the importance this tradition attaches to physical stillness. In Dutch mime, Zero has become synonymous with stillness, which was by no means the case for Decroux. This exemplifies the 'twist' that the Dutch applied to Decroux's ideas. For Dutch mime performers, stillness is the wellspring of all other performative forms.

Basing my analysis on the work of mime performer Wouter Steenbergen, particularly his text entitled 'Het Nieuwe Stilstaan' ('The new stillness' 1993), in this chapter I examine stillness and the central part it plays in Dutch mime thinking. Inspired by Decroux, the Dutch mime avant-garde of the 1960s conceived movement as 'the repositioning of stillnesses' (*het verplaatsen van stilstanden*). I show that historically speaking Dutch mime is less about presenting movement than it is about using the body to make the passage of time visible and palpable; the mime player uses his body to play time. Stillness is of key importance in this context not only as a posture, but also as a concept throughout all considerations of the nature of performance and performance-making. This fascination for stillness finds expression in mime dramaturgy, such as in the penchant for what I term 'in-between moments' (*tussenmomenten*): Dutch mime practitioners have a long-established

predilection for showing the moments preceding and following dramatic climaxes – before or after the blow has struck; before or after the high point – the moments in which apparently nothing happens, but in which the insignificant, the unseen, can become visible. Stillness is the potentially provocative obverse to the meaning-laden, the dramatic and the spectacular. Hence, in contrast to Decroux, in the Dutch mime tradition stillness as a posture acquires a more anarchistic charge.

The third chapter explores the notion of ‘making space visible through movement’, a phrase that originated in 1965 in the context of the founding of the School for Mime-Based Movement Theatre (School voor Bewegingstheater op Basis van Mime) by Frits Vogels and Arnold Hamelberg. This school produced the influential group BEWTH. The devising of the term *bewegingstheater* introduced a distinction between this form and Decroux’s corporeal mime that was symptomatic of the new mode of thought that had just emerged within Dutch mime. While Decroux’s players trained and performed indoors, mostly in a Paris basement, in the Netherlands BEWTH’s Dutch mime performers were outdoors, engaging in an explicit dialogue with the space, the surroundings, the landscape. Fundamental to these developments was a search for forms of equivalency and exchange between performer, spectator and space.

Thinking in terms of the performer’s zero state (Vogels called it ‘personal objectivity’) enabled him or her to ‘level’ not only with the space itself, but also with the objects, materials and spectators in that space. This way of thinking was a manifestation of a deep-seated desire to break the traditional dominance of expression and the performers as the centres of attention in theatre performances. By so doing a new kind of perception was created; another form of exchange between performer and public. Here, the performer was a ‘space player’ and the spectator, a ‘co-creator’.

In chapter four, I trace the development of the ‘Below Zero’ concept in Dutch mime. I document the emergence in the late 1970s and early 80s of a ‘below zero’ tendency in Dutch mime thinking that arose out of a need to question and disrupt the objectivity, aesthetic, transparency and control of the 1960s mime avant-garde. A new, young generation wanted to find out what lay behind (or beneath) the masterful serenity of Zero. This curiosity gained expression on stage in the pursuit of a potentially destructive neutrality and the emphasis on irresponsibility on the part of the performer. The mime company I focus on in this chapter to illustrate and analyse the shift taking place in mime thinking with respect to the Zero concept is Nieuw West (‘New West’), which was founded in 1978. Their *Below Zero* (1981) had an important part to play in this process.

I use Nieuw West's work to show that *Below Zero* reflected a critical attitude to the norm and to the group's own political and social situatedness. Equally, this piece reflects the group's fundamentally disruptive attitude to the theatre audience, an attitude born out of a visceral urge to create utopian freedom on stage. The result was a work that gave centre stage to maladjusted behaviour, the grotesque, ugliness, vanity, displays of 'bad taste' and lack of control. To one extent or another, all these qualities contravene the founding principles of the Dutch pioneers, with their physical control, love of construction, objectivity, aesthetics, socialism and absence of expression.

An important conclusion of this study is that considering Dutch mime as a practice-based mode of thought makes it possible to demonstrate coherence among what at first sight appear to be widely disparate, sometimes even contrasting, forms of mime. My descriptions of the four fundamental paradigms underlying Dutch mime lay the basis for follow-up research in this area. In the conclusion I show that several overarching themes can be derived from the description and analysis of the four distinct paradigms, and that these themes are still clearly identifiable in contemporary Dutch mime practices. Interpreting mime as a practice-based mode of thought makes it possible to understand and discuss current Dutch mime in new ways.