Changing the World by Opening Your Mouth:
An Interview with Valentijn Dhaenens

[00:00:19] INTRO

Duška Radosavljević: Hello, welcome to the Gallery. Valentijn Dhaenens belongs to the generation of Belgian theatre-makers who have entered the English-speaking world in the second decade of the 21st century thanks to the concerted efforts of Belgian producer David Bauwens of the Ontroerend Goed fame, British producer Richard Jordan and Theatre Royal Plymouth. Their platform Big in Belgium was first launched at the Edinburgh Fringe in 2013, a year after Dhaenens' *BigmoutH* (2012) was presented as a test case and emerged successful.

With Big in Belgium Dhaenens came back to Edinburgh in 2013 with Ontroerend Goed's *Fight Night* and then with anther solo show *SmallWaR* in 2014, before presenting *Pardon/In Cuffs* (in 2015) with his collective SKaGeN to which he had belonged since graduating from drama school in 2000. In 2016 he performed at Edinburgh Fringe in Ontroerend Goed's monologue *World Without Us*, before returning with another personal solo show *Unsung* in 2018.

Although to some extent influenced by the Flemish wave of the 1980s, as we find out in this conversation, Dhaenens and the others of his generation can be seen to have forged a new set of interests and aesthetics that distinguish them from those who came before them. In addition to a more explicit interest in politics and the audience engagement that marks this new Flemish wave, Dhaenens' own work as a solo artist can be seen as additionally emblematic of reinventing the form of the theatre monologue.

This conversation took place on Zoom on 29th May 2020.

[00:01:58] FINDING A VOICE

Duška Radosavljević: The format of this conversation is: we retrace your steps as an artist and understand how any formal training you might have received has influenced your way of working and making theatre, and also how any other formative influences, just in terms of popular culture or anything you've absorbed and internalised from your surroundings, might have influenced this particular approach to how you make theatre and performance. To go back to your early days, you trained as an actor in, where was it? In Brussels or Ghent?

Valentijn Dhaenens: In Antwerp. It's quite a famous school in Belgium, it's the Royal Conservatory, and it was famous because it was headed by this 'monstre sacré', we say, this very well-known actress, pedagogue, very important woman, called Dora van der Groen. She was one of our finest actresses, but she also was even more a very famous pedagogue because she created a method which is very different from the well-known American and English methods. I think if you were to explain it a little bit, it had more to do with the likes of Artaud and Grotowski the way she taught. This woman has been a gigantic influence on lots of theatre groups of my generation and even older generations. For instance, we have in Belgium a lot of theatre groups without hierarchy, 'collectives' we call them, and most of them are from this same school that I come from. Every class that finishes theatre school – normally we only finish three, four [graduates] each year – starts a group, or lots of them have started a group. Some of those groups still exist and are very important to the Flemish theatre scene. A group that you might know is called STAN, they play a lot in France, they play all over the world, but I guess they are most popular in France. But there are lots of them, they are a bit older than we are, and SkaGeN is also one of those groups. For me this collective was a very important way, because I was kind of immature, I guess. I was very young when I was at theatre school, and I didn't always get what they were talking about, and this collective gave me a way of finding my own voice because we started right away, and if I would have had to do it on my own I would never have come to monologues like *BigmoutH* that I did, like, ten years ago. So the education continued for me just being in this collective. We have this funding system in Flanders – which is under pressure now and will hopefully stay – it's quite unique where we got quite a lot of funding right from the start for just finding our own voice, working in a very small group, just four to six people without hierarchy, without directors or scenic people or even technicians – maybe one technician – but most of the time we did everything ourselves. We started to find our own things that we were good at and some people are better at dramaturgy, other people are more interested in the technical side of it. So, that's a bit how it's worked and how my early career started.

DR: Did you all study at Antwerp together, all of you who are in the collective?

VD: Yes. SKaGeN used to be six people – it was one class of this theatre school.

DR: And when was it that you were at that school and you founded the company?

VD: We finished school in 2000 and started right away. We actually started touring our final performance from the school under the wings of another company called De Koe – The Cow. That's also a collective, a very small one, with just two, now three people. And we were taught by one of the people of The Cow company and that worked really well; this company decided to support this new founded company called SKaGeN, and they put us on tour and that was the start of our company.

DR: Was it that voice training was a particular aspect of the training you got with your professor?

VD: No, it's hard to describe in five minutes because she used methods from different areas, but I guess it's all about the world you create, the imagination that you can share with an audience. For example, one of the theatre texts that we worked on with this professor called Dora van der Goen was *Lucifer* by Vondel. It's a very old 18th century [play], in Old Dutch language that is even for me very hard to understand. She wanted us to work three months on this one theatre piece, and we only did one scene – we could pick a scene – because it had a lot of distance, even if it was related to our language it was not our language, and that distance created the possibility to create, like, a mind palace. It's about angels who have fights in Heaven, actually. And so it was the perfect build up to make your imagination work on something that's not of your own world. I remember training on just three sentences for hours, and it reminded me a bit of a movie called *Whiplash* in which the drummer is trained and every time he hits a beat, 'Too slow!' the teacher says: 'Too slow, too slow!!' And I had a very similar experience, like, I would only say two words and the teacher would go: 'No, no that's not it. No, it's not there…', and you say again those two words, you say them a bit differently, you get totally mad because you don't understand what the woman wants. But in the end, of course – and it takes a lot of time – you kind of start to understand that you can project an image in the space that you share with an audience. That is related to voice but it's more a mental thing, that in front of you, when you're on the stage and you share a space with an audience, you can actually put certain areas over there in the space, and just mentally project them somewhere and it creates an emotion, a very different emotion than when you keep it all here. And that's very quickly how her training worked.

DR: Great, that's really helpful and very important as well for what we are actually working on.

[00:09:04] THE FERTILE GROUND OF THE FLEMISH THEATRE

DR: What we saw of your work in the UK context, the temptation is to associate it with the trends that we've witnessed in the UK in the early 2000s, which were to do with verbatim theatre. To what extent was there a trend of verbatim theatre or documentary theatre in Belgium in the early 2000s?

VD: It's quite common, I would say, or a lot more than what I saw from the UK theatre. Since we don't have a big tradition, that's also a good point for us Belgians – or let's keep it to Flemish people because I'm not that much into French-speaking theatre in Belgium – but we don't have any Molière or Shakespeare or Goethe. We have this Vondel that I just talked about, *Lucifer*, but that's like you can do it once and you're finished with it. It's not like we have this big tradition. So in that way, I think, Flemish theatre has been since the '80s much more experimental and looking for new ways to make something that defines us, that defines Flemish people. It's a lot related to the dance movement in Flanders, which is also very big. I don't know if it's known in the UK but we have a lot of dance companies that are touring all around. I guess the most important, or most famous one, is Rosas from Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker. And for instance, Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker's sister is called Jolenta de Keersmaeker, and she's then again part of STAN, which is another collective that was ten years ahead of us. It's a very small art world here in Flanders and we influence each other a lot, I guess, and the one thing that keeps us going is always looking for something new, for new ways of performing theatre, and also we don't like traditional theatre. And that really started in the '80s. It was a kind of crisis here as well because lots of people like traditional theatre, but in the '80s we had lots of these new collectives but also new directors who came along, like Ivo van Hove, Luc Perceval, Dirk Tanghe – I can name ten of them that work internationally. And they all did these very new adaptations of classic plays, or they made totally different plays that didn't have a classic play at the start of their project. Also, they put their self forward, they didn't have a lot of respect when they did an old play, it was all about them. It's about Ivo van Hove who uses Euripides to say something about society today. This movement became big and was a big influence from the '80s on, when I was still very young of course, but that continued going. And because it went well, also internationally it was recognised, this movement, I guess we were all very much influenced by it and also very much aware that if we want to make a difference, we should not do it by doing Shakespeare as good as possible, but just try to follow our own personal: 'What it means to me, what am I in society?' So, the personal is very important in Flemish theatre, and so the documentary side of it is close to that thought, that you always start from yourself, what surrounds you, what you are annoyed by, what you see on television, it can be anything. It's a very free and liberated mind[set] – we think it is, some people might disagree of course.

DR: When did you actually make your first piece that we might consider to belong to this, genealogy of documentary theatre? And was *BigmoutH* the first one that used that interest in voice and testimony?

VD: Yes, it was. What I learned in this collective and what we are famous about in Flanders with the plays we have made since 2000 – so a lot of plays, like, 30 plays probably – is that we use a lot of collage, the technique of collage. So we stick stuff together from anywhere. We once did a real play – that's it. And all the rest was, like, more adaptions, collage. We made an adaptation of *The Peste* by Camus, for instance, but we did it with a lot of video. We were playing in front of a blue screen and we were projected in a movie on top of us, and that was like in 2010, I think – so that's long ago. We've always looked for different ways of doing stuff. *BigmoutH* is also a collage of speeches, so the system of collage we used already in school, it's a very typical thing for our company. We're, I guess, a bit known for that, that we always pick from different things and put them together in a kind of surprising way.

[00:13:59 to 00:18:11] Excerpt from *BigmoutH* (2011)

[00:18:12] MAKING *BIGMOUTH* (2011)

DR: Why oratory? How did that idea come to you?

VD: It was my first monologue. I'd never done a monologue or solo play, not even in school. I guess it goes back to when I was 16, and I had a very good teacher in school. Not a theatre teacher, just normal school [teacher]. I got fascinated by the idea that you can change the course of the world just by opening your mouth. When you're in the fifth grade in Belgium, in school, it's called 'Rhetorica'. That year you're focused on the power of language and on all kinds of literature, but also on speech. For instance, the Goebbels speech I use in *BigmoutH*, I read it first when I was 16 years old in class, and I was amazed by it because I really liked it, I thought it was beautifully written, and of course the outcome was terrible. It was very racist, but it had these long sentences, difficult sentences that I could get – there's an audio tape of it and you can hear the entire sports palace shouting back when he asks: 'Wollt ihr den totalen Krieg?' ['Do you want total war?'], and the whole crowd goes mad. It was almost like a pop concert, I think. It attracted my attention and I started to study it a little bit and get to know this speech, how come it works this well? I guess that was the first thing where I got in contact with speech. And the other thing is American culture. American culture has always been important in the work of SKaGeN because we might be the first collective in Belgium that focuses more on popular media, where the others are more into really theatre literature. We were, like, the first ones who started doing scenes from a sitcom in the middle of a Greek play or doing scenes from movies, or children's programmes on TV that we copied. We had this interest not only in books and serious literature but also just, yeah, the popular culture. And I personally was very into American culture, like lots of people, so much that I sometimes thought that I'm also an American citizen, in the way that if I look at my bookshelf, still today, if I look at my music collection, the movies I like, I can easily say, like, 70% is

American. I know much more about American culture than French culture, and France is just next to us and it's a very big culture, of course, which is much more important to the generation that is older than me. But that was another thing – that in American culture, speech is very important. I started to look at all these other speeches and the thing about Americans is that they don't have this relativism that we have inside us, or this introvert thing. Everything is out – it's never big enough, and it's very theatrical, as well, to use. I guess those two things: my fascination for speech in the way that you can just change the course of the world by opening your mouth, and on the other hand, the American culture that has a beautiful tradition in speech (but also the speech changed a lot since the '60s – it had to be shorter and just to have one-liners) – I think those two things were the starting point of *BigmoutH*. When I was about to do something alone for the first time, that was also very important, because in a collective you always work together, even when there's only one person on stage, there's a collaboration, and for this one I remember saying to my fellow colleagues: 'I want to do this on my own, I don't want any interference, just come and see the premiere on that date', which was hard for them to understand. I just wanted to feel what I was able to do without negotiating everything, because that's another downside of a collective – that everything you have to discuss, there's no hierarchy, there's no directors, so every even good idea gets smashed sometimes because you're not able to explain it in a way that you can persuade the others to go with this idea.

DR: The way the piece comes across, it looks like vocal mimicry comes easily to you. Is that the case, or was it a product of hard work, getting yourself to sound like the various people whose speeches you did?

VD: There's some mimicry work but also I had from the start – 'I'm not going to pretend to do JFK', for instance. It didn't have to be a show about mimicking: 'Look how good I can do someone?' For instance, a lot of speeches were done very differently. Like I mentioned before, the Goebbels speech – the centre bit of the show for me – he shouts all the time, it's like this German shouting, the cliché we have of Nazi propaganda. The key for me was that I could do something different with it, and I did it very softly spoken. I edited the speech more to the women, because it's a speech where he addresses the women, and I did it very softly spoken. I think the speech is even better now [*laughing*] than when Goebbels did it – not in the way that he could persuade people because that was very magic, I guess – but just in the way that you hear what he actually says. When you're not yelling it, you get to see how beautifully written it actually is, how well it's put together.

DR: How long did you work on that piece?

VD: Very short in a way and very long in another way. I promised myself to read a speech each day for a year, because I wanted to work intuitively – something I had missed working in this collective where you have to discuss everything. And I thought: 'If I'm just going to read one speech every day, it's like eating a whale – you just start bite by bite.' And just by reading a speech a day and putting them on stacks I was hoping they would start communicating in some way, which happened after a while. It was stressful at some moments that I thought it's never going to work. I took a lot of time – a year – just to find the speeches that I wanted to work with and look at: 'Oh, look this speech of King Baudouin, it was just three weeks before the Congo speech of Lumumba, the independence speech, and the King Baudouin was there when he spoke this independence speech.' When I read it, there was months between those speeches, but [looking] at the dates there was only three weeks, so that's how those speeches came together. The Goebbels speech is similar. With Patton's speech, there was also the D-Day speech, so it's about the same timeframe but they're just on the other sides. Patton is very aggressive, while Goebbels uses very long sentences. That's how the play intuitively came together, but then really working on it, we only had six weeks I think. I had three weeks with the technician to the premiere. It went really quickly.

[00:25:22] TALKING TO THE HEART

DR: At what point did you decide to use the loop station? Was that there at the beginning of conceiving this piece or–?

VD: Yes. The one thing that was important to me, because it was a show about what you can do with your mouth, is that I could do it all live and nothing was pre-recorded, but of course it was manipulated in a lot of ways. I thought of doing all these speeches in one mix and I thought: ‘It’s not going to work doing speech after speech, people will need some time to just sit back and grasp on what they’ve just heard.’ So I came up quite easily with this idea of putting in small sounds, little songs, to put a bit of timeframe of the speech that was going to come or the speech that they’ve just heard, just to have these intervals that could also talk to the heart, and not use their brains all the time. I didn’t know what I was going to sing but I’ve always been quite a singer, I mean not a very good one – well, I’m okay with singing, but I’ve always got harmonies in my head or even when I hear a song on the radio I always try to look for a second voice – that comes quite naturally and easily quickly to me.

DR: Have you had training as a musician?

VD: No, well, no. No, not really. As a kid I learnt the notes, and I was in a choir for several years, I played a little bit of guitar, but I never did really serious musical training.

DR: In terms of stagecraft for that piece – I saw it in Soho Theatre [but from] what I’ve seen in a video of that piece, it looks like you have a really long desk and it looks like you’re in a laboratory of some kind? Was that incidental or deliberate in some way?

VD: No. I was looking for a co-producer. SKaGeN still hasn’t got a lot of money, but then back in the days, for every production we needed at least one co-producer, and we had this relation with a theatre in Leuven – Leuven is the biggest university town in Belgium – and they have this beautiful hall where they used to cut up animals and stuff. And it’s a lecture hall that is really old, in old wood – and it was just made for that venue. I wasn’t planning on touring yet or anything. The theatre in Leuven is next to this auditorium, it’s actually in the same building. I just proposed: ‘Maybe I can open the academic year’ – which opens at the end of September in Belgium – ‘with this show which will probably relate to students?’ And they got it and said: ‘That’s a really good idea. Let’s try it.’ Word of mouth spread really quickly, and I only did six shows, that was it. Then I started only a year after that making a version in other lecture halls through Flanders. So not in theatres and I only played it – in the beginning, I only wanted to play in lecture halls. It became a little bit of fun for me as well to come in these spaces I had never been before.

DR: Did you ever think of the piece as a lecture performance?

VD: Yes. You could see it as a very quick and very subjective history through political speech. For a lot of people it works that way. I mean, it was of course very successful, but it was maybe even more successful for students and young people, like 16 year olds who have to study the Greeks in school but are never really into it or don’t know why. Just by hearing this Socrates – and then, of course, some good teachers went to see the show with their children and then gave lessons about Socrates afterwards, so it was a good companion for intellectual practice on different levels. But it’s also a bit like when you go to a pop concert and you have a song, it takes three or four minutes, then you have another song. The speeches, at least in Flanders – it was less abroad – but in Flanders everyone knows something about the speech. The King Baudouin speech is, of course, not known outside Belgium, but in Belgium most people know about what happened when I was young, when our king resigned – but the speech was never spoken. It was a speech that was spoken only in the parliament, it was never made public. I found this speech through a politician, and so it was kind of revealing as well. That’s something that I missed, of course, when playing abroad. For some people it was a bit like a pop concert: even when you don’t like this speech it only takes four minutes, then another one starts, so it attracted lots of different people on different levels.

DR: Had you used loop stations before, or did you use it for the first time for this?

VD: Yes, the first time. It was quite hard because I knew some musicians who worked with it. I knew a violin player who makes concerts with just her violin and she beats on the violin and that gets into loop. But it’s always a loop in the bars, so you start with the tempi and then you have to keep the tempi. For what we did, it had to be a little more sophisticated that it could change from chords that weren’t in the same beat, so it took quite a lot of time to figure it out. In a way we weren’t on top of these things back then when we started with these loops.

DR: When you say ‘we’, you mean your technician?

VD: Yes. Yes, me and Jeroen [Wuyts], the technician. Yeah.

[00:30:49] MAKING *SMALLWAR* (2013)

DR: And then *SmallWaR* was the next piece, that we saw at least, which kind of works in an interesting way in relation to *BigmoutH* because in some ways it continues that theme of working with found documents, but in other ways there is a lot more complex approach to its visual content, and the proliferation of characters that we see on stage. How did that come about?

VD: I was playing a lot of *BigmoutH* then, in 2012, I got a little bit annoyed as well – which is a kind of diva thing, because it went really well and everybody was happy – but during this show I said these terrible things, I led people into war, I invited people to death, in a way, but still everyone was very excited after these shows. It was like the one thing that I wanted to show – that language can put people in the wrong direction – they didn't get that. Or, they got it but they were mostly excited by just the virtuosity of the show. And I started to think about the counterpiece to *BigmoutH* that became *SmallWaR* because I wanted to show the victims of all these speeches – I guess that's how it started. I started making ideas for this show that talked about the small people, the victims of those big politicians, I wanted to make a show that didn't relate in any way to a politician, that only had testimonies of soldiers, of nurses, that actually had to do the wars – those people we're talking about in *BigmoutH*. We also had the 100 year [anniversary] of the First World War. I grew up in the area where it was fought a lot. In my class when I was young, I still had farmer's sons who once in a while found these bombs on their field while ploughing. I was always fascinated by the First World War because it was, in a way, close by. It was also the first industrial war, chemical warfare was invented then, the first war with planes – the tank was invented in the First World War. So the wars we do today are still very much similar to this First World War in the way how they are done. And then I started reading diaries of nurses – first I started with nurses for some reason. Ellen La Motte was the most important one – she's an American nurse who came all the way to Flanders to help. Enid Bagnold is a French nurse, and both of them, they also write beautifully, and very hard, very cynical. In the diaries you see them turn around and just day after day, they start with all of the hope and it gets terrible. And they're very honest about it. It was also like, *BigmoutH* was very male, masculine, there's even just one woman in it and she's also half masculine. It was also a critique on the show that it didn't have any serious women in it. I wanted in *SmallWaR* to show the feminine side as well, so I decided to play a nurse, something I always wanted, to play a woman.

[00:34:12 to 00:35:55] 'There Was a Boy' from *SmallWaR* (2013)

DR: I would like to know a little bit more about the decisions you made around the mise-en-scène for that piece – the use of the screens and so on. I was re-reading my notes in relation to that piece, and I was remembering a scene which was quite inventive where a dead soldier dictates his letter to his unborn son, to the nurse, which was a very beautiful lyrical moment that you constructed out of this material that had started off as being factual. Maybe you could tell us a little more about some of the decisions around the construction of this piece?

VD: I got very fascinated by trying to make a play that was in everything opposite to *BigmoutH*. So trying to make a counter play – male/female. But also *BigmoutH* has enormous dynamics – it goes very soft, it goes very hard, it's very musical – and to relate to this war piece, I got very fascinated reading about First World War, about the monotony of it. The soldiers waiting for three weeks in the mud, nothing happening, and being cold and rats everywhere, and being annoyed, and then… We always imagine wars like we see in movies with the bursting of bombs and shooting and running around, but most of the time it's waiting and being agonised by fear and this traumatic feel of stillness. I wanted this also in *SmallWaR*, as opposed to the dynamics of *BigmoutH*. It was very hard for me to do this because as an actor you want to put dynamic into something, but I said to myself: 'Try to keep the same pace in everything you say, everything you do, it has to have the same pace.' So I didn't want to make a show about bombs and explosions and big things, but the trauma, the nightmare, the stillness. Also like a record: at the end of the record the screeching that you hear, that was one of the first sounds that I wanted to have in *SmallWaR*, the record that keeps on playing after the music. There's a lot of this sound in the show but it's very subtle, most people won't notice it. And also, in a way, since First World War, English soldiers – and now I think most of the soldiers – are obliged to write a letter to their family, to their friends, in case they would die if they go to war. So you have all these young kids that have to imagine themselves: ‘Okay, I’m dead now. What should I write to my mum, to my–‘, and I found this idea very strong. I found a lot of literature that put together these letters, and so the letter you mentioned about the soldier writing to his unborn son is one of those. It’s also documentary, it’s not like I invented this letter. At the end of the show you see his name. I forgot now his name, but you have subtitles at the end and I mention all the soldiers that I copied in the show.

DR: But the way in which that scene was staged was that, because you used the screen, we had you playing the soldier on screen dictating to the nurse on stage who is also played by you. Presumably you again worked on this show completely on your own? Did you? Maybe with some technicians–

VD: Oh, just one, it was a nightmare! I totally underestimated the amount of work. But, yeah, just with two people: me and the technician, the same one from *BigmoutH*, we made the show.

DR: Right. And so now there was a visual element to it, whereas in *BigmoutH* there was just sound, now you felt you had the chance to–

VD: That’s the thing that I forgot to say. *BigmoutH* was about sound and I wanted everything to be the opposite, this show should be about what you see as well. So I wanted to do with video what I did with audio – all the soldiers are looping all the time. It’s like, you pick three seconds and they go – and you keep repeating those three seconds and they move a little bit and so they stay alive. The amount of speeches relates to the amount – if you would put the two texts next to each other you would see that the amounts are about the same, and the way it is structured, but in a very different dynamic.

DR: Did you get a different kind of response from the audience?

VD: Yes. Very, very different. I didn’t have a lot of people who were saying they were disappointed. But I guess lots of people were disappointed after *BigmoutH* – I did, like, this very tragic, slow piece where people went out in silence – a bit that I missed about *BigmoutH* [where] everyone was like ‘wahay!’, very happy with the show. So in a way, I made my point, but still, I was a bit surprised by how the reactions were very different. But then I started touring it internationally, and then *SmallWaR*, I did it together with *BigmoutH*, and for some reason in some places *SmallWaR* worked better. Like, I did it in Hong Kong, I remember, and for some reason all these people were in tears after the show. While *BigmoutH* works in every culture, almost every culture – I did it in India, I did it in Iran – *SmallWaR* is very different from [area to area].

[00:41:21] THEATRICALISING DOCUMENTARY MATERIAL

DR: And then you took your interest in voice and working with testimony back to your colleagues at SKaGeN ensemble and you made a piece together which was based on the testimonies of small criminals, right?

VD: Yes. It’s actually a documentary by Raymond Depardon, who is a Magnum photographer as well, but he made beautiful documentaries. One is called *Délits Flagrants* [*Caught in the Act(s)*], and it’s [set] on Christmas Eve, and he just points a camera in Paris at a police office in the basement where people who did something stupid, or mostly small crimes, they get there and then the prosecutor decides whether they have to be in front of a judge, or they can go (because it’s their first time they did something), or it gets postponed to a later date. Those conversations were recorded and we started with a documentary on making this show. You say it in a way like: I did *BigmoutH, SmallWaR*, then I went to my company and – but it’s not like that. We do so many plays, we do two to three plays a year with my company. So this one – it started with me, it always starts with someone, so it was, like, more my idea and my play, but it was made in a very collective way. It was less a show that was only mine, you understand? It was a show – like we did several ones [before]. In our trajectory it’s not that different.

DR: Okay, that’s great. Thank you for correcting me on that, because you’re right! I might have perceived this in a linear way, but actually you probably had a concurrent number of trajectories working at the same time. What was your intention with making *Pardon/In Cuffs*, in terms of the form, what was it that you wanted to do with this documentary material that the actual screen documentary wasn’t doing?

VD: Yes. The main thing for me was that I was very fascinated by these people who are at a point of ‘it’s life or death’, almost. It’s like they have to lie, they have to try to defend themselves, say they have done nothing, find out reasons why they did it – because they had a bad education, or a bad upbringing. So I saw these people struggling on one side. And on the other side you see this bureaucratic prosecutor who has all the power, and I find it very shocking to see those two against each other – this prosecutor who’s in a routine, as well – all night people come in and he doesn’t really care a lot, he or she. I wanted to tell something about that, just the power of differences and that you get, maybe, sympathy with both of them, because they’re both in a position. You feel it’s not fair and if they’ve done a criminal act, you can see how the world is not fair to different people, and how we all end up in a position and we try to make the best of it.

DR: But what about these choices you were making that I seem to have perceived as going towards metaphorical representation of the subtext of those texts, those found texts? How did that decision come about? To what extent is it something that is your company’s methodology of working and aesthetic approach? Or to what extent was it something that just emerged out of your grappling with this particular–

VD: We always have a strong form layer in our shows: the clothes we wear (there wasn’t a lot of form in there), but also we’re on a swivelling round, there’s music in between – the prosecutor playing the keyboards and doing nasty stuff. It’s to create this dreamlike layer but also representing people in different clothes showed the difference in stature, and also [it can] create a special night out or something. Like, we go to the opera, and that’s how people dress then. So it’s something intuitive as well, it’s not very political. It’s more to create a distance from reality – which the documentary is very close to reality – and to theatricalise this documentary material. We always look in forms for dreamlike tactics to show a different perspective on realistic material. We tend to make sure that people don’t get involved in a naturalistic way like you would if you see *Death of a Salesman* [where] everything is done so that you get sympathetic with the main character. We always try to create a distance: that you see the actor much more than the character. That’s a very SKaGeN thing that we always do. We always hope for the people to have some more distance, to see the bigger thing.

DR: Also I think the significance of that is something to do with the way in which that phase of interest in documentary theatre has gone very much in this direction of wanting to be as faithful as possible to the real-life subjects whose stories these were, and your approach seems to make a very conscious departure from that in saying: ‘Yes, there is this material that is drawn from real life, and then this is theatre, you know, we are putting it in a theatre context.’

VD: We want people to see the manipulation that we do. And the manipulation is actually the most important thing we want to tell people something about, what we think about a certain subject. We never want to have people in [such] a way that they are mostly into the drama of the main character, we always hope that they have a broader view on what they see. Because we think: ‘Well, movies have taken a little bit of theatre in the way that they’re much better in creating with lots of soundtracks so that you go into the journey of the main character.’ And we think in the years that we are working in now: ‘Well, theatre hasn’t got that main position anymore of telling a story the way movies can much better.’ That’s also a reason why we try to have another way. It’s also much harder – like, when you’re in a cinema you really get sucked in by this big screen and you’re really into it, while in a theatre, in my opinion, you never forget that you’re in a theatre. You hear people coughing, you feel a space, so it’s a totally different relationship to the story.

DR: Great, excellent. Thank you. Then *Unsung* came to Edinburgh a couple of years ago, in 2018, and *Unsung* was your other solo show, your new solo show, that seems to have left this idea of documentary material behind and it’s something you’ve written from scratch?

VD: It’s actually very documentary, but you can’t tell probably. But every scene that’s in there is based on a real-life politician. Maybe the most well known to you: you have this famous brother battle between Gordon Brown and Tony Blair, that’s like the second scene in the show, I’m playing in a restaurant and I’m actually saying as Tony Blair to Gordon Brown: ‘It would be much better if I’m the one who [is] the head of the Labour Party because the elections are coming.’ It’s actually all snippets based on – there’s an entire speech of Trump in there, where he actually says nothing, some people noticed that was

Trump. A much older Mitterrand is in there, like, I don't know if you remember but I had these small video tapes that I had with my mistress… And, like, four or five years ago the letters of the French president, President Mitterrand, were released *Lettres à Anne* – *Letters to Anne*, his mistress. And Mitterrand was known for snobbish – well, not snobbish but as a very harsh person – while in these love letters to Anne he's very lyrical, very French, with lots of romantic sentences. So it was actually less obvious, and we didn't say the names of everything. I also wrote it together with the speech writer of [Guy] Verhofstadt, who is, like, our biggest politician – he's now at the European Parliament leading the Liberals. I got to know this person who is a political animal and knows all the biographies of political people and their history. It was written together with him, also with snippets but less cited.

[00:50:13 to 00:52:50] 'Trump's Cruz endorsement speech' from *Unsung* (2017)

[00:52:51] AUDIENCE

DR: Because you said that it was quite foundational for you as an artist, in terms of the training you received, to think about this communication with the audience, we've touched on how the audience received *BigmoutH* and how the audience received *SmallWaR*, [but] we haven't quite talked about how the audience received *Pardon/In Cuffs*. How did the audience receive this latest piece, what was that particular relationship?

VD: It was very well received, I think. Maybe this was the most popular in Belgium because – well, as you might know, we don't have a government for a year now, after the last elections and it was the same at the elections before. And so people are very tired of our politics and have this very cynical feel about it. I wanted to show in this play – we have all these debates on television and politicians like you have in every country I imagine, but still I think the standard in most English debates/political programmes is much higher than the ones we have in Belgium. We also have extreme right-wing politicians that are in those debates, it's a battle and it hardly talks about any real subjects, it's just about winning. And I wanted to stress that. That a politician – and I focused on the last weeks before an election in the play – a politician needs to win the elections first and then he can start with the content, what he really means. But to win an election it's not about sincerity, it's not about good ideas, it's about knowing how to manipulate the mass, or to look: 'Where can we still get votes? Which is the audience that is still doubting? Let's not work on the people that are already won for our ideas, forget about them.' So it's about mathematics, it's about statistics. And I guess I wanted to show the loneliness of a politician in this position. It's also a bit of a sad thing: you have decided, or you have been put forward, to lead a party or to go into elections, it's a very big responsibility and you really don't have time in debates to actually say something about education or how you would reform the public transport, or something. It's mostly about: 'I can say something about public transport but I can only say something that I'm going to win voters with.' I'm not saying anything new, of course, but this show – the main thing for me was to not say anything about a real subject. Pensions come along but you never know what this politician really thinks, and that was picked up really well in Belgium–

DR: In a way also, this piece exists within the continuity of your previous work, which was to do with *BigmoutH* and the political speeches. I mean, was that a conscious next step for you?

VD: No, because I did a lot of plays in between. In the UK it was much more related to *BigmoutH* than it was in Belgium. [In Belgium] it didn't get related that much because there were lots of other shows in between.

DR: What else has happened since and what are you working on? And to what extent are you still interested in some of these aspects of working with speech and verbatim testimony in your work?

VD: To be honest, I'm a bit tired of it, so I'm not focusing on it a lot. I've always been a very curious person. I'm very much interested in history, I'm interested in politics, in the mechanics of politics more than the real politics. So surely those main themes will continue in my work but I'm trying to avoid the speech area. I'm working now on a play about artificial intelligence in which I'm going to play a robot – not a robot that you can tell I'm a robot, but more like that me as a person was put together by all the technology that exists today. So there's a robot that can help people in a hospital with lifting people in their bed, there's another one who knows when they have to take their medicine. I'm trying to imagine if you would put all this intelligence that exists now all over the world and put it together in one robot, how I would talk to you as a person. I'm also imagining addressing the audience just as a person. It's with the KVS, it's not with SKaGeN. KVS is the Royal Flemish Theatre in Brussels. And we were about to do with SKaGeN our biggest play probably, I mean on the level of actors, with 13 actors, it's called *Het gezin van Paemel – The Family of Paemel*, it's an old naturalistic play from 1903, a Flemish play, about farmers in a crisis and the bourgeoisie that milks them and treats them as slaves. But now with Corona we're not allowed to play it, especially not with 13 people on a stage. So I'm trying now to make an adaptation and I'm doing it on my own, the whole family. That again will then still be related to *SmallWaR* in a way that I would use the same techniques but, like, 2.0 – try to level it up a little bit. I would try in every act to play one of the characters of the farmers live, and the other ones would be projected and I would record them in advance. That's something that I'm thinking about now. That would be kind of interesting if you see my work as what you describe it – that would be in the same line or it would be another interesting add to that.

DR: Great! I see the AI piece as part of your trajectory as well because you introduced it as being about how a robot talks to an audience, so I'd be really interested to see it in some way at some point. Thank you very much Valentijn, that's really helpful and really insightful.

VD: My pleasure.

Transcription by Tom Colley & Duška Radosavljević

Clips Summary

[00:13:59 to 00:18:11] *BigmoutH* (2011)

[00:34:12 to 00:35:55] 'There Was a Boy' from *SmallWaR* (2013)

[00:50:13 to 00:52:50] 'Trump's Cruz endorsement speech' from *Unsung* (2017)

Audio available at www.auralia.space/gallery2-valentijndhaenens/.

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