

Thank you, Laura Neys

A State of the Union in ABA form

A

Leuven, 2017.

We're holding audition workshops at *fABULEUS* for *PASSING THE BECHDEL TEST*, a production for which I am looking for female or transgender young adults who feel comfortable labelling themselves as queer, to collectively explore a canon of alternative, female texts. We have a short individual conversation with each young person to gauge their feelings, personality, and motivation to participate in the project. The girl sitting in front of me says: "I saw the flyer for the workshop and the theme appealed to me, I am the theme, I want to meet people like me, I want to be able to talk about it. At school, I'm the only lesbian."

I ask her if it's a big school.

She says "Yes, there are just over a thousand of us."

Antwerp, 2001

In my last year of secondary school, our Dutch teacher makes us go and see five performances. My first boyfriend takes me to deSingel, to *As Long As The World Needs A Warriors Soul*.

Fabre's work completely overwhelms me. I see people digging deep and pushing boundaries. Total surrender.

I see performers who naturally inhabit their bodies, as if after years of hard work they have optimised their body and mind to be able to express themselves as clearly as possible. What I see is the opposite of what resides in me: shame, insecurity, a feeling of being disconnected from my body and my surroundings.

In Beveren, the village I grew up in, homosexuality is invisible. Late at night on Canvas, I secretly watch tv shows like *Six Feet Under* and *Queer as Folk*, my first encounters with (unfortunately fictional) homosexual characters.

Music, too, offers solace. Tori Amos and Kate Bush on repeat. Shy and discreetly I use the library computer to search for books and articles that are catalogued under 'homosexuality'.

No one ever wrote as clearly and poignantly about these feelings as Édouard Louis did, when he directly addressed his mother in his recent book *Battles and Metamorphosis of a Woman*. "I didn't want you to know that by the time I was nine or ten I had already experienced what depression and despair meant, that I had grown old early because of those feelings, that I woke up every morning with these questions in my head: Why was I who I was? Why was I born with this desire for other boys and not girls, like my father and my brothers? Why wasn't I someone else?"

But at that moment, my struggling 17-year-old self is sitting in the front row in the Red Hall in deSingel. There are naked dancers and amplified guitars on stage right in front of me, and a very pleasant form of short-circuiting is taking place inside of me. Something dawns on me, some form of inner Messiah descends and says: the world is bigger than it seems.

These are the Internet's early years; information is everywhere and easy to find. I stumble upon videos of Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker's work and once again it feels like love at first sight: the bewildering confusion that mathematics can affect you so deeply. Then I learn that being a dancer is a profession; that you can earn a living making art. I love to dance, but the fact that it seems that the art world is a safe space where I can be myself is one of the main reasons I decide to follow this path.

Tilburg, 2003.

When I start my professional dance training, the ballet teacher asks if we have any concrete ideas about where we want to end up in the working field. I reply: "working with Jan Fabre." That total surrender still seemed like the ultimate goal to me.

I think the reason for that was that, as a 17-year-old, I couldn't possibly accept my sexuality, I simply couldn't surrender to that aspect of my life.

Four years later, I auditioned for Fabre, here at deSingel. After two rounds, I was cut and felt both disappointed, and simultaneously that it wasn't the right place for me.

Growing up is not straightforward, it is a jumbled and confusing process that continues throughout life, both as a person and as an artist.

You fall in love, you become disillusioned, you become frustrated.

Your future plans, your ambitions and your tastes all change.

A hero falls from their pedestal. Work that you never valued before suddenly moves you deeply.

You look for your place. You want to claim one. Later doubt whether you even have the right to it in the first place.

One minute you want to speak out about things you find important, the next, you want to look inwards. You want to go into the studio and work with your people, nothing more than that. Because that is where the real work happens: during the creative process.

When we judge artistic work, we often talk about form and content.

My art is created by looking for the overlap between the form, the content, and the process. To me, these three elements are inseparable.

That is also the reason why I chose a career as a choreographer: I love the social aspect that takes place during a creative process and the fact that, for a few months, you form a mini-society in which everyone becomes attuned to each other and takes care of each other.

Social artistic work is all artistic work that involves people. All my work is social artistic work.

PASSING THE BECHDEL TEST, for example, is not only an attempt to make a different canon visible to a wider audience, but the chosen working method also allows the young queer actors to go through a process of recognition and acknowledgement. In the beginning of the working process it was about discovering old and new role models, but as the months went by the young adults increasingly took on that role themselves. They realised that they can be at the centre of the world. That by claiming their place on stage, it becomes easier for them to do the same in their daily lives.

The problem with the speed at which we live our lives is that important topics are quickly overshadowed by new, equally important topics and the previous ones fade into the background. Sometimes you have to keep hacking away at the issue.

We often talk about how the art world can set an example.

We talk about creating inclusive spaces, where everyone can be safe. Finding out that this field wasn't always the unconditionally safe space I thought it was, was probably the biggest disappointment I experienced when I got into the arts.

After several of Fabre's employees testified about his abuse of power and other forms of abuse, I spoke to a few others who said: "I don't get it; I *personally* have never been bothered by him."

I'm lucky that I *personally* have never been beaten up because of my sexual orientation, but what the hell happened to empathy? Can we not link our own experiences or non-experiences to obvious structural issues?

Or another statement: "You have to be able to separate the artist from their work." But a working process inherently connects one to the other. The manner in which a painter applies the layers of paint and the techniques they have mastered to do so determine and create the finished product.

Now, years later, it's easier for me to describe what I sensed at that audition. The surrender I was looking for was forced upon me. In my opinion, that's exactly where the problem lies. It's certainly not only Fabre; other artists and even some art schools still fully impose this idea of forced surrender.

Surrender.

Surrender to me.

These are terms used in war: Surrender. Capitulation.

To dancers, actors, performers and students in art schools I say:
don't surrender.

Be yourself at all times. Stay true to yourself at all times.

Look for and find the difference between surrender and giving your all.

Don't surrender to directors or choreographers, but by all means, look for your own limits.

Performers: Let us know when it's too much.

Makers: Create enough space for performers to let you know that it's too much.

Surrender is important, it will move people. But forced surrender? No, that doesn't work.

We benefit from dancers and performers who open up and/or talk about all forms of abuse, who question things, express their hesitation and say "Time-out" or "No". That's what makes us a better, more ethical working field.

Welcome performers and employees who question you, not only about the content of your work or methodology but also about how things are managed within the organisation. Make them aware of a 'collective labour agreement' (CLA) and that they should be paid on travel days. Make sure they negotiate similar conditions with other employers. Make sure they know where and who to turn to for what. Make sure that there is information available about the artist status and subsidies, in as many different languages as possible.

Make them stronger.

B

There is a lot I wanted to talk about but don't have time to.

> I want to talk about the fact that during my first job in the arts, I performed hundreds of times in cultural and community centres across Belgium. Always an audience of toddlers, a diversity of mini-humans that I'll never get to meet again in their adult form in the theatres.

> About the fact that I believe you should make whatever you want to make, but should always keep one specific or any kind of audience in mind.

If you don't have a genuine will to win over an audience, whether it be through seduction, humour, abstraction or provocation, don't bother making the effort.

> About the fact that I do not believe that the arts will be able to expand their resources in the next few years.

> About the fact that because of that I am in favour of a radical redistribution of these resources.

> About how the greats need to make space for new, other voices because the opportunity for growth that they were fortunate enough to experience simply doesn't exist anymore.

> About the fact that no one should earn more or less than the CLA.

> About the difference between comfort and luxury. In a working field that claims to show solidarity, one cannot feel entitled to luxury as long as other organisations are up to their eyeballs in debt.

> About why continuous economic growth is so ingrained in our system.

> About the fact that I wonder if there will ever be a point where I will say: "This amount of subsidy is enough. Apart from the indexation of a few wages, we don't need anything else." Or: "For the next five years I only want to make new work every two years instead of once a year. So, let's apply for a 25% less this time around."

> About the complex and contrasting relationship between believing in your own unique signature and right to exist, and an awareness of your replaceability. The knowledge that if I were to leave my position, someone else would step in and do something fantastic with "my" money.

> About the need to deepen, specialise and not accumulate. There are so few places, don't take up two or three or six of them. There is plenty of talent out there.

> About our choreographic platform GRIP where several makers find a home and collectively support the organisation and where we strongly believe in shared values and resources.

I say yes to more organisations doing the same. Unite.

> About future visions of performance and dance ensembles in which diversity is the starting point, not a shared education, technique or outlook.

> About how it infuriates me when a journalist ends his review of Fabre's work, which was performed at the Venice Biennale just last month, with the following line: "To be seen in Belgium soon – hopefully." About what, by saying that, you've chosen to ignore and what you're perpetuating. The overwhelming responsibility of this.

> About the discouraging things that are happening in beguinage churches and China and Afghanistan and said into microphones that are accidentally left on and about the difficulty or impossibility of in light of these things seeing your work as constructive.

> About the fact that despite these dark thoughts and the fact that we as artists may well be replaceable, it remains extraordinarily clear that our field is not.

A

Flemish Parliament, Brussels, 2021.

Yesterday, the new end-of-year goals for the 3rd and 4th years of Belgian secondary school were launched.

These were approved by the Flemish Parliament at the beginning of this year. According to vrt.nws with these new goals, "more emphasis is placed on science, technology, mathematics, digital and financial skills, entrepreneurship and citizenship."

When Ben Weyts was asked in Parliament about the role of art and culture in our education, he replied, "It is a zero-sum game. The time spent on education is what it is. That means that if you want to pay more attention to one thing, you have to pay less attention to another." End of quote.

A few years earlier, the Flemish government decided that public libraries and cultural centres would fall under the autonomy of the local government. Because of that, resources have disappeared unnoticed into the municipal fund and the legal obligation to set up a library or cultural work has been abolished.

And it became clear during the pandemic that the words 'culture' and 'essential' are never used together in the same sentence.

2021, Beveren.

In the village I have returned to after having lived elsewhere for 20 years, the amount of rainbow flags that are hanging on people's houses is overwhelming. Even the town hall has its own record size flag.

A few days earlier, the homosexual David Polfliet was murdered by three young adults. On the news on VRT, chaired by Wim De Vilder (what does it feel like, as a gay news anchor to have to neutrally announce a homophobic murder?), I see a report about a school in Beveren where a teacher is leading a group discussion about what happened.

17-year old Laura Neys says on camera: "I think we should have had this conversation in primary school because the first class we've had about it was as 15-year-olds. I think that's too late; most people have already formed an opinion on this type of thing by then."

To her, I say: Thank you, Laura Neys, for that beautiful suggestion as an end-of-year goal in primary education. Quietly I wonder if anyone is watching and taking note.

I'd like to conclude with these words written by Ursula K. LeGuin, both in English and in Dutch:

"All of us have to learn how to invent our lives, make them up, imagine them. We need to be taught these skills; we need guides to show us how. Without them, our lives get made up for us by other people.

Human beings have always joined in groups to imagine how best to live and help one another carry out the plan. The essential function of human community is to arrive at some agreement on what we need, what life ought to be, what we want our children to learn, and then to collaborate in learning and teaching so that we and they can go on the way we think is the right way."

“We moeten allemaal leren hoe we ons leven moeten uitvinden, verzinnen, verbeelden. We moeten deze vaardigheden aangeleerd krijgen; we hebben gidsen nodig die ons laten zien hoe dat moet. Zonder hen wordt ons leven door andere mensen voor ons verzonnen. Mensen hebben zich altijd in groepen verenigd om te bedenken hoe zij het beste kunnen leven en om elkaar te helpen bij de uitvoering van dat plan. De essentiële functie van de menselijke gemeenschap is overeenstemming te bereiken over wat wij nodig hebben, over hoe het leven zou moeten zijn en over wat wij willen dat onze kinderen leren, om dan samen te werken bij het leren en onderwijzen, zodat wij en zij verder kunnen gaan op de weg die volgens ons de juiste weg is.”

Many thanks to Kathleen Treier for the invitation and the trust she has placed in me. I would like to thank Klaartje Oerlemans, Carolina Maciel de França, Rudi Meulemans, Ilse Ghekiere and Joris van Oosterwijk for their contributions of nuance, structure and depth. For the English translation, which can be found online, I would like to thank Naomi Gibson.

Jan Martens, Het TheaterFestival, September 2nd, 2021