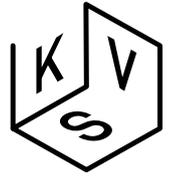


# REPERTOIRE DEBATE



Dec. 04 - 20:30

Guest speakers

GUY CASSIERS (artistic director Toneelhuis - Antwerp, Belgium)

FAUSTIN LINYEKULA (choreographer - Kisangani, DRC)

AMIR NIZAR ZUABI (director - Haifa, Israel)

Moderator

HILDEGARD DE VUYST (dramaturge KVS - Brussels, Belgium)

## A SHORT INTRODUCTION: KVS AND ITS RELATION TO REPERTOIRE

Let me first of all share a few words with you about the history of this theater. KVS – the Royal Flemish Theater – was founded in the 1880's to strengthen the cultural emancipation of the Flemish community in Brussels, and in Belgium in general. In a city and in a country where the Flemish community formed a majority of the population, but was poorly represented in official political and cultural life, building large-scale, very visible and centrally-located cultural institutions was one way of contributing to the construction of a Flemish – cultural – identity. From the start KVS was meant to be a very specific kind of theater company – namely a 'repertoire' company: built around one intendant/director and with a permanent company of Flemish actors. Both had the mission, in a rather vague and undefined but also somehow strict way, to perform, and in such a way, to reinforce the 'repertoire' – the collection of plays or theater texts that were generally known, often performed, and considered to be widely read and seen; by the community of committed theater-lovers and goers, and probably by the Flemish community as a whole. Within that collection of repertoire texts there was/is a smaller collection of texts – the canon - approved of officially as those texts that are essential to who we are and where we come from as a community. These canonized texts are the ones that every cultivated person is supposed to have read, re-read, read about, and I would even say, interiorized and identified with. And so, in short, KVS was founded with the mission of being a theater company and cultural institution, very linked from a certain point on to the official Flemish political institutions, that played, promoted and protected a partly Flemish, partly European repertoire and canon of theater texts. KVS did so for a long time. For a very long time.

Now let me also share a few words with you about the context that KVS is a part of, or the city where it has always been located, and about a few of the radical transformations it underwent in the past decades. At the time of the foundation of KVS and for many dec-

ades to come, Brussels was a city of two communities, a Flemish or Dutch-speaking one, and a French-speaking one. The former one was the majority community, the latter one had the political power. This situation only changed very slowly and gradually. As the Flemish community managed to secure a solid political representation in the city, more and more Dutch-speakers left Brussels; the French-speakers stayed, or continued to arrive; and tons of foreigners started to arrive as well, from the South of Europe, the North of Africa, Central-Africa, North-America, Eastern-Europe, etc etc. All of these evolutions transformed the reality of Brussels dramatically. From the 1960's on Brussels has become the multilingual city of many many minorities that it is today. 56% of the Brussels population has its origins outside of Belgium, a considerable amount even outside of Europe. Dutch is the mother tongue of less than 15% of the population, and soon French won't be the mother tongue of a majority of the population anymore either. Even as the generally accepted language of communication, French is receding, and English is on the rise, not to mention Arabic. In one household out of two, more than one language is spoken, and very often one of these is neither Dutch nor French. The city counts more than 120 nationalities and the most common name among male babies under five is Mohammed. Not only culturally, but also socially and economically, it is a city of huge divides. The Brussels region produces more than 30% of Belgian GDP and houses many of the richest people in the country. At the same time, it has an unemployment rate of 20%, more than 15% of the population live under the poverty line, and infant mortality is increasing.

So if we know one thing for a fact, then it would be that in Brussels we do not share a common past, we don't have a common set of cultural references and within this same city our social contexts and our lifestyles are widely diverging. If we try hard, if we commit to it on a long-term basis, then documenting and transforming these diverse lifestyles may lead to a kind of com-

mon future, albeit not based on a common language or religion. However, starting from a dominant 'leitkultur' is impossible, and aiming at integrating newcomers in a shared cultural framework, of which an established repertoire and an approved canon are a part, is literally nonsensical. In Brussels in 2012 there is no shared repertoire, and definitely not an established or accepted canon. Indeed, there are plenty of people and communities for whom the official theater houses and cultural institutions have no repertoire to offer, and for these potential spectators it is pointless to look for any references or reasons for identification in official cultural life. And last but not least, let's not fool ourselves, Brussels is not the odd man out here: it is just showing us the way and indicating what the future of cities like Antwerp, Ghent or Liège is fast becoming.

So what could and should the mission of KVS, the Royal Flemish Theater, be in such a context and in 2012? On the one hand: continuing to do what had been done for decades led to a serious crisis in the 80's and 90's. The theater had become a sort of UFO of and for Flemish people, in total ignorance of the changing reality outside of its walls. Hardly any audiences and no connections with today's Brussels, were the result. On the other hand, the dominant political and cultural trend in Flanders today is one of nation-building, of promoting a uni-lingual and culturally homogenous future starting from a supposedly common past and heritage. To put it in the words of Bart Dewever, the new mayor of Antwerp and the political leader of the hugely succesful Flemish nationalist party 'New-Flemish Alliance': 'The European nation states are all based on a historically grown ethno-cultural identity that can be regarded as a kind of 'primordial leitkultur'. The idea that immigrants need to adapt themselves to the citizenship that has been formed by the dominant 'leitkultur' is therefore only logical and normal.'

The Flemish cultural sector has shown itself to be quite receptive to some of these ideas or calls and has responded with a wide diversity of repertoire projects. It would even be fair to say that this tendency within the sector partly precedes the above-mentioned political evolutions. In the past decade, about once every two years, especially the city theaters Toneelhuis, NT Gent and KVS were blamed by cultural and political voices alike for not paying enough attention to the position of repertoire and canonized texts within their programs. However, the opposition to such claims or sometimes attacks, seems to have diminished. In any case, in the past season in which all Flemish theater houses and companies had to apply again for long-term funding, the applications showed a surprisingly high amount of quite classical repertoire projects and proposals. Was the underlying logic: if you can't beat them, join them? Or are these attempts to hijack the calls for repertoire and inject them with new texts, materials and insights? I think it would be fair to say that that was exactly the intention of the artistic team of KVS when we decided to call our current season in Box and Bol of revivals of signature productions of the past ten years, a 'repertoire season'. Shakespeare, Tsjechow and Büchner are nowhere to be seen, but we do consider productions

such as '313. Misschien wisten zij alles', 'Barakstad', 'Sur les traces de Dinozord' or 'Gembloux' to be our repertoire in Brussels in 2012. These productions are our contributions to tomorrow's Brussels, in which city theaters, repertoire and canon can be interesting players and notions that make a positive difference. It all depends on which choices we make with or within them. And representation is not the main aim anymore; co-production and the creation of new repertoire is.

Whatever the motivations or reasons behind this repertoire-revival may be, it must be clear that the notions of repertoire and canon do not belong to some sort of cultural vacuum that is disconnected from the rest of society. Both notions are profoundly political. As literary scientist and public intellectual Geert Buelens put it in a KVS-brochure a few years ago: 'The construction of a canon is an ideological exercise par excellence. But not constructing a canon is just as ideological. So let's just admit to that and explain and legitimize our choices. On the basis of these explanations a community or society can then have a discussion about what they find important, about what of its cultural heritage it considers should be protected and studied, and about what continues to move, inspire or irritate it.' And then specifically about the canon: 'A canon aims to help form a community, but at the same time highlights the differences between groups'.

At KVS we have been wondering if and how all the texts that the white Flemish middle class (so most of us here) considers to be its repertoire, have much to offer, to say or to explain to the growing group of KVS-artists and audiences that have their origins or even their bases today outside of Flanders and Europe. Our repertoire season is one attempt to come up with an alternative repertoire, a small part of which might at some point enter a newly-established Brussels canon. And then maybe one day, just as the photos of Congolese photographer Kiripi Katembo that you can see around our building, all these new elements could come together in a new repertoire of a Europe that went through a serious crisis, but came out of it alive and kicking, and much more vital than we know it today.

Jan Goossens  
artistic director KVS

(This text was written in English, because English is the language of tonight's debate. It will be made available in Dutch on the KVS website soon.)