

## ABOUT JOSSE DE PAUW and üBUNG

Invited by artistic director Dirk Pauwels, Josse De Pauw was artist in residence at the VICTORIA in Ghent from 1999 to 2001. Dirk and Josse collaborated earlier on work of visual and surreal exuberance at the time of the Radeis, which French-speakers were able to enjoy at the Théâtre 140 thanks to Jo Dekmine. Seventeen years have passed since then. Addicted to the stage, Josse De Pauw has never stopped seizing hold of anything to do with acting: writing for theatre, directing, creating music, cinema scripts and roles on the big screen, whilst continuing to dazzle the stage with his strong presence. Involved for many years with the Kaaitheater in Brussels, working in Ghent for a couple of years and now artistic director of Het Net in Bruges, Josse has always been prepared to open wide his theatre doors to the freedom of all disciplines. In Ghent, Victoria is a production house for all generations and a wide range of disciplines. It offers a place for (often young) artists and produces a rich variety of performances, small and large scale, local and international, from intriguing first steps to popular international hits.

In a splendid country house, Robert and Rolanda, frazzled and tense, wait for their friends, Ria and Ivo, to arrive. As soon as they hear the car horn, the 'performance' begins. Effusiveness, hugs and kisses and forced cheerfulness. A dinner washed down with wine, two couples who are not getting on, an unattached friend who is an amateur poet, and the violinist from the east, looked after by them like an exotic and romantic cherry on a cake. There is polite small talk, edited shots of things they own (mobile phones, Jaguar cars, art collection, swimming pool, sauna, the most up-to-date television and music systems, the latest cuisine) and ostentatious conversations that soon get bogged down in the flow of alcohol – before they encounter what they really feel deep down.

On stage, six children watch the film. They are twelve, maybe thirteen years old. The sound has been switched off. Dressed exactly like the six adults at the party, they have fun recreating the sound track from the big screen, dubbing voices, mimicking the action. Are they practising? If so, what for? The play is called *#BUNG*, meaning 'practice!' "The idea wasn't that they should put a lot of effort into expressing the characters' emotions. Quite the opposite in fact. They all have to be completely in sync with the lip movements of the adult he or she is the miniature version of and with the sound of the action. They had to manage the whole mechanics of it. They really set to it and got a lot of pleasure out of it right from the start of rehearsals. They love imitating grown-ups. It's important for me that their skill comes across, that they have the right rhythm and are really synchronised. I'm not putting them on stage, I'm directing a concert. They rap the monologues and dialogues, chant the lines they're dubbing. I need them to really know what they're doing. The headphones and monitors give them the freedom to move about as they hear it. We obviously didn't select the shy or unassuming ones to be involved here. But then their 'models' aren't either..."

The 'models' featured in *#BUNG* have a hard time of it, for all their luxury items, whilst saying 'what fun we're having!' They have everything they want except what is essential: affection, love and tenderness. "I wrote quite stereotypical roles on purpose because in the film I knew that the actors would venture to fill them with their own experiences, nuances, upsets and turmoils – they're incredible. Of course, the children will never be able to laugh in the same way as adults in society do, nor let themselves go like them. That's what's confrontational and beautiful about it: the differences between them." Between the film in black and white and the stage in colour, who is mimicking whom?

“We use the display of what we own and what we’re able to afford to speak for us. Then when there’s a real need to talk, it all falls apart.” Is that a problem teenagers have or adults? “When Rolanda collapses in front of the closed bedroom door of ‘her’ in-house violinist and gently cries for him to give her a child, what sound does that put into the mouth of little Louise who is imitating her?”

And when they applaud the violinist’s performance with the same cheerfulness as a champagne cork popping from the bottle? And when a bloke on his own is only there for others to poke fun at like the duty buffoon? So who and what is the *#BUNG* for? “The children aren’t on stage to put the adults, or the performance they give, on trial. In any case, we underestimate what effect that part of us needing a ‘performance’ has on human relationships. We say that it’s not honest, a lie, but it often saves us. But we’re fooling no one. Of course, children hate outbursts. Seeing grown-ups argue is scary. But if we explain that arguments do happen in real life and it doesn’t matter, that it’s about being upset or tired, not being at war, then children know there’s no harm in it. I don’t really believe in creating a cocoon of innocence, protecting them from the harshness of the real world, because it creates imaginary ‘fairy tales’. If children know about it, they are totally capable of taking in what we don’t bother to hide. Preserving purity as something of great value makes my blood run cold!”

*#BUNG* is not judgmental, nor does it criticise any one thing in particular. It does, however, play things down, streamlining the drama in places, the little crises and the void in living. Running through *#BUNG* too is the hard work of the young violinist portrayed in the film by George van Dam. He wants to master his strings so that, whether struck, scraped or plucked, they end up singing. It matters little here that the violinist is only working on his pieces to win a famous competition. And while little Stefaan on stage can already produce astonishing music from his instrument, his own strings still fight against controlling all the melody’s fluidity... “I love life, life as it is. That’s how we are! With our dreams and faults, our pleasures and stupidities, our brusqueness and roars of laughter.”

Create and allow to be created. Josse adds, “I really had no idea what would come out of this synchronisation of live children and filmed adults in the end. In any case, I was not interested in controlling the emotions that would come out of it. I don’t like putting the pressure on to have a particular outcome. It’s true that, for me, the plays’ heart beats in a little ballad, *Voorbij* (meaning over or finished), containing ridiculous rhymes murmured in Flemish by our amateur poet who has retired to the bathroom. ‘Something beautiful passed by me, close to my head, brushing against my heart. I don’t know what it was. I wanted to catch hold of it, but couldn’t find anything. Suddenly I cried, gently, for a long time, until sleep came over me.’”

*(text: KunstenFestivaldesArts, March 2001)*