

## When the Flemings take off

*Without a single word but with much feeling the actors from the tg STAN, de KOE and Maatschappij Discordia collectives invite us into their 'Atelier'.*

They are as serious as a judge. Or rather: as serious as children thoroughly absorbed in what they are doing, concentrating so intensely on the task in hand - the sense of which escapes adults -, that you might think their lives depend on it. There are three of them. We know them. They have the maturity of a life spent treading the boards, which has often brought them to Paris, usually to our great delight.

There are three of them and each of them belongs to an original collective, Belgian or Dutch by nationality but Flemish in culture and imagination.

The bespectacled Matthias de Koning, penetrating gaze, a bundle of nerves, co-founded Maatschappij Discordia (or 'Discord Company') in 1981. The trio's philosophy insists on intensive work around the table and few rehearsals. They have been pioneers in the art of demolishing the fourth wall. And sometimes the rest too... Damiaan De Schrijver, thick-set and bearded, sparkling eyes, roguish, co-founded tg STAN (that name, just to remind you, stands for 'Stop Thinking About Names') in 1989. On graduating from the Conservatoire in Antwerp in 1989, Peter Van den Eede, slim, with a pointed face, founded de KOE, along with Bas Teeken, which asks the pivotal question: "Why do we make theatre?"

In a way, that is also the question raised by this Atelier in which the spectators are invited to take their seats. The now unrecognizable large auditorium contains a huge console and two tiered seating banks facing each other on either side of a rather cluttered rectangular space. At the back, a piece of furniture with props which will be used as the spectacle unfolds, but in actual fact, objects appear from all directions. Our Flemings ask themselves questions about their craft. Not only about 'why', but also 'how'. That is very simple here. They throw planks onto upside-down crates. They build their stage. Mallarmé's 'plancher divin' is soon no more than the deck of a drunken boat on which the three friends lurch dangerously back and forth.

### Pictorial quotes

No script; here the word is the gesture and they know what they're about. The mess they make refers to pictorial, musical, literary and philosophical quotations, but nothing stands in the way of laughter, smiles, emotion, whether the allusions are understood or not. Because these children of collectives are devilishly cultured. Diderot is their guide; we haven't forgotten the extraordinary *Du serment de l'écrivain du roi et de Diderot*, staged here at the Bastille by tg STAN back in 2001. The most mysterious thing about this strange ceremony, which resembles a barmy playtime but whose clockwork precision is essential, is that the time passes so quickly. Without a word. Without the audience understanding everything. Without them always being convinced. And without the actors themselves giving the impression they know where they are going! That is the Flemish genius at its best.

Armelle Héliot