

## **FLEMISH FOOLISHNESS** – Loek Zonneveld in De Groene Amsterdammer on Poquelin II:

We travelled to the south and ended up in the grande madame amongst the Belgian confectionary jars, the Bourlaschouwburg in Antwerp. It was designed in 1827 by its eponymous architect with construction starting in 1829 and the doors only going open in 1834 – the delay in building that started in 1830 was all due to the Belgian uprising against the Dutch in the north. Today this beautifully restored theatre is the residence of the Toneelhuis, with a deep stage, a sloped seating arrangement behind the stalls, embellished boxes and three balconies, including a 'gallery', together with the exuberantly painted screen – all of which was the décor for the first hour plus of the show. That's because the 'Bourla', as it is known, has been taken over by a group of actors from STAN and a number of other Flemish and Dutch troupes. Their material was penned by the godfather of French comédie, Molière, a nom de plume of Jean-Baptiste Poquelin (1622-1673), who almost single-handedly invented the people's farce with a biting aftertaste of the tragic fall that the French bourgeoisie had to endure as a caste. Fourteen years ago STAN produced four of Molière's less-known funny-or-die comedies in its hilarious casserole-like production Poquelin I. Now they have thrown two of the playwright's most famous comedies into a fast cooker, with *The Miser* and *The Middleclass Gentleman* making up Poquelin II. The difference between the first and second Poquelin is that now there is a large cast, and what they have in common is that they're not sparing the horses to put on the show.

Molière unjustly has the stuffy reputation of having produced a repertoire featuring preening wigs in Sun King clothing. The wigs have been omitted this time and the suits, shirts, dresses and pants are whimsical getups from rag baskets and flea markets. Where the audience stalls were once located there is now a gigantic tabletop, built from rough wood and measuring three by three meters. It's like the site of an execution sans the gallows, which can only be accessed using four hazardous stairs. That's where everything starts off, right before us. We're sitting in row 1 and could easily stretch out and trip the actors.

Molière is an open book when it comes to his plays. Dramaturgically, he immediately puts all his cards on the table and starts to play like a suicidal cheater whose life depends on winning. In *The Miser* the central figure is a paranoid whiner and veteran womaniser who is after the virginity of the same much-too-young bourgeoisie girl that his libidinous son is chasing. The miser's engagement and marriage must be free. His daughter is destined to be married off to another old womaniser in the city, although she is in love with her father's manservant, who must constantly curry favour with his master just to stay near his true love.

More on the 'Molière method'. He unsuspectingly stumbles into their trap and then gesticulates wildly from the edges. You can see the jokes coming a mile off, but you still jump with fright every time the exploding cigar appears right before or behind you. The plot twists, shameless in going for the shock effect, are based entirely on the basic simplicity and regularity of a puppet show – look out, behind you!

The second comedy of the evening, *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, is actually a series of extended sketches for a revue or vaudeville, which in Molière's day was neatly housed under the comédie-ballet label. It features a similar theme, this time a very rich commoner who wishes to join the ranks of nobility and so buys an entire range of snobbish hypes and

trends. He is built up by a colourful ensemble of deadbeats and other worthless individuals into a sort of socially acceptable Christmas tree.

If you wish to place this material under the spotlight as an actor, then you have to cast off all shame when it comes to exuberance in acting. You won't get very far in this playground of theatrical anarchy using nuances and subtleties, as the one Dutch actor in the company, Kuno Bakker of Dood Paard, evidently discovered the evening I was in attendance. Molière, or at least this Molière, must be presented harshly.

The fact that different registers of hilarity can be still be used therein is shown with great precision by Poquelin II. Frank Vercruyssen, Stijn Van Opstal and Willy Thomas take their comedic music in the direction of refined andantes, and Jolente De Keersmaecker prances about in a frivolous alegretto. Els Dottermans brings down the roof as a full-fledge comedian, while taking great joy out of the carnival of high school acting and comedic ingenuity that she finds herself in the middle of. And it must be stated that Damiaan De Schrijver takes the cake, without forcibly outclassing his fellow actors or treading the boards as a virtuoso. In *The Miser* he starts off as a grumpy prompter who soon moves onto playing a chef who has to create a feast from carved-up chicken bones and potato peels, and who unambiguously hauls bootlickers and hypocrites over the coals. As the stunned snob Jourdain in *The Middleclass Gentleman*, he avidly gives it everything he's got (and that is a lot) in the closing part of the evening. Molière triumphs as a rough outsider theatre lout by showing no respect whatsoever. The evening of Flemish foolishness offers a type of vital all-in theatre that, if we do not look out, will slowly but surely become rarer.