

Theatre company STAN ensures laughter reigns in Poquelin II

Els Van Steenberghe, Focus Knack

The boards, the costumes, the stage curtains, the text, the manners... everything is unsettling in Poquelin II, through which the theatre company STAN throws two plays by Jean-Baptiste Poquelin (better known as Molière) into the mix with an eagerness that borders on carnival-like craziness. And boy, the result is fireworks!

When 17th century Parisians felt like an evening of laughter (at themselves) they would go watch a play by Jean-Baptiste Poquelin, alias Molière. The actor and playwright understood perfectly the art of laughingly condemning the bourgeois and hypocrisy.

All this time later his plays are no less effective in hitting the target, letting you spy on the less palatable aspects of humanity. The Antwerp theatrical collective STAN already staged Poquelin in 2003, a great event that incorporated *The Imaginary Invalid* and *The Doctor Despite Himself*, among others.

And now we have Poquelin II, a feast which celebrates *L'Avare* (*The Miser*, 1668) and *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* (*The Middleclass Gentleman*, 1670). 'Feast' might actually be insufficient – it's better to call it a colourful parade of rogues yearning for money or love, running up and down a rather small stage as they shout, rave, ogle, lie and threaten.

Wooden stools of the type you often see at fairs and carnivals surround the stage, while the STAN theatre technicians did not fasten the plank of the stage too tightly, which means that they sway with the actors' feet.

The owners of those feet - Kuno Bakker, Els Dottermans, Willy Thomas, Stijn Van Opstal, Jolente De Keersmaeker, Damiaan De Schrijver and Frank Vercruyssen – play their roles with the jollity of exuberant carnival attendants and the conviction of inveterate do-gooders, the only difference being that this cast want to improve the world through laughter.

They commissioned Inge Büscher to create their carnival costumes, who cut up and cut into sweaters, t-shirts, leggings, some black lace and a few meters of shiny black material to create a colourful collection of flipped vests, jackets and blouses. They fit Molière's flipped characters like a glove.

In his shiny blue outfit, Willy Thomas is an entertainingly cheap miser who guards his money so closely he suffocates any chance of love (fortunately, his children change matters).

Damiaan De Schrijver - in a black tulle skirt, stretched orange vest, shredded blazer and tight, skin-coloured underpants – gives you bellyaches of laughter as le bourgeois gentilhomme Jourdain, who, makes himself ridiculous through all his money, stupidity and blind passion for the arts (although Molière also wove a beautiful storyline into the play that dealt with lovers finding each other).

In response to the somewhat sour question of what the actual value of Molière, the theatre company STAN responds with a roar of laughter. Poquelin II is so unusually funny, and that's not just because of what the actors tells us, but also thanks to the enthusiasm, with plastic fruit and rapiers in hand, with which they stand on the boards and how they subtly drive interaction with the audience.

For example, during the show that we attended, a member of the audience who remained po-faced for much of the performance but finally burst out laughing was told firmly: 'Aha! You laughed!' by De Schrijver. And it was him again who chased Frank Vercruyssen after the latter accidentally knocked him from his stool in the 'wings' (read; behind the stage).

By embracing coincidence with such exuberance and attention, the actors turn every performance of Poquelin II into a unique festival of nonsense and slapstick, with a structure from one of the best comedy writers in history. It is a feast and as a spectator you can only do what the 17th century Parisians also love to do: laugh uproariously, about yourself too, thanks to Molière's jokes and antics.