

'Keep close those things that seem distant'

EN To recognize the other as a part of ourselves: this is the objective of the theatre and multimedia productions with and about asylum seekers by Frédérique Lecomte and Simon Plancke. They fully realize, however, that their commitment is a drop in the ocean of a polarized society. "But to us, a production alone is not enough." — TOM PEETERS • PHOTOS: IVAN PUT

"You could be my son," theatre maker Frédérique Lecomte (61) says at the end of her double interview with jazz musician Simon Plancke (24). "Yes, my mother was also born in 1958, just like you, and she also has short hair," he reacts, but she was of course referring to their shared drive to combine artistic statements with social commitment. We are at the Klein Kasteeltje, where the federal agency Fedasil runs the reception of asylum seekers and where in the courtyard, Lecomte has just gesticulatingly done what she has been doing for years: giving the most vulnerable people in our society a voice in her own particular way. With a mix of asylum seekers on the one hand and a cast of actors and musicians from her Théâtre & Réconciliation company and from the KVS on the other, they played scenes from the life of child soldiers and mothers who were forced to leave their children behind. All the while, newcomers unsuspectingly trudge between the actors and the audience with big bags. A class of teenagers and drummed-up cohabitants - likewise passers-by searching for a humane existence - look on both slightly uncomfortably but also amused. "Brussels is paradise," they are singing. At the beginning of the performance, it is very enthusiastic, but by the end it is much quieter. The colourful blend of amateurs and professionals were presenting an adapted version of

Vita Siyo Muchezo Ya Watoto (War Is Not Child's Play), which has spent the past few weeks touring across the whole country, and which is itself an adaptation of the production that Lecomte made with former child soldiers in Congo. While she does pioneering work at the source, her interlocutor Simon Plancke went to size up the situation in Dunkirk, where refugees are in transit on their way to England, crossing paths with our western lives. The confrontation with this parallel world led to *Le ravage d'Ali Baba*, a hybrid project in which interview footage from refugee camps is edited with fragments of text and sound that were written and performed by authors and jazz musicians. Plancke and his musical partners are currently touring Flemish cultural centres and concert halls with it and comes straight to the point when we speak to him with Lecomte. "Somebody wrote that we are preaching to the choir. I understand that. But how do I ensure that we don't only reach an audience that is already convinced?"

Can you first briefly explain the seed of your social commitment and how your current production grew out of it?

SIMON PLANCKE: I am originally from Kaprijke, a small village in Flanders. Before I moved to Brussels for my studies, I had never been confronted with poverty. But here it immediately felt as though I was performing in two films simultaneously. On the way to school in the Kleine Zavel/Petit Sablon, I would pass by rich and poor. Shocked by this sudden confrontation, I started volunteering at Poverello in 2014. The stories that I heard there inspired me. I had visited the Maximillian Park several times, and via the non-profit Humain, I was given the opportunity to visit the refugee camp in Dunkirk. It made such a big impression on me that I wanted to make a production about it.

FRÉDÉRIQUE LECOMTE: I am from La Louvière, a town in Hainaut with a strong left-wing tradition. Like Obelix, I fell in a cauldron, a cauldron of commitment. The theatre I make is

SIMON PLANCKE:

"As a student, I barely ever left the house. It was only later that I started wondering what music really means to me"

**FRÉDÉRIQUE
LECOMTE**
DIRECTOR, ACTRESS,
AND AUTHOR

- Born in 1958 in La Louvière
- Founded the Théâtre & Réconciliation company in 1994, which organizes theatre workshops and has created productions in war zones, with local, often traumatized communities
- Has spent the past few years working in international conflict zones
- Has also worked in Belgium with convicts, psychiatric patients, undocumented immigrants, and asylum seekers
- Made her current production *Vita Siyo Muchezo Ya Watoto* with former child soldiers in Congo
- In the version that recently toured around Belgium, the child soldiers were replaced with asylum seekers

**SIMON
PLANCKE**
JAZZ MUSICIAN

- Born in 1996 in Ghent
- Has lived in Brussels since 2014, where he studied drums with Stéphane Galland (AKA Moon)
- In the summer of 2017, he rehearsed for the first time with his current quartet with drummer Elias Devoldere and keyboard players Hendrik Lasure and Thijs Troch
- This year, they made the multimedia production *Le ravage d'Ali Baba*, which is currently touring Flanders and will perform at the Brussels Jazz Festival (Flagey, 10 January)
- The album and book of the same name appeared recently. They bring together the impressions of the musicians and of nine authors who visited the refugee camp in Dunkirk



Simon Plancke and
Frédérique Lecomte in front
of the Brussels asylum
centre Klein Kasteeltje

Frédérique Lecomte & Simon Plancke

discuss their art and their commitment

thus necessarily socially engaged. I most enjoy working with vulnerable people who are not professional actors. I started working in war zones in 1994, and from 2000 I worked in the conflict zone on the border between Burundi, Rwanda, and Congo, where I make theatre productions with convicts, refugees, and other victims of war.

Starting in 2013, I spent three years developing a production with about sixty child soldiers. I wanted to stage it in Belgium, but that turned out to be impossible due to visa problems. Instead, a team of white actors travelled to Congo. We are now performing an adapted version here both with them and with people who have applied for asylum in Belgium. Why I work with asylum seekers and child soldiers? Because to me they represent the two poles of poverty, exclusion, and the lumpenproletariat of society, and I have always wanted to increase the social cohesion between and with our vulnerable neighbours.

We often hear more explicit social engagement in the theatre than we do in concert halls. Is your work a reaction against that, Simon?

PLANCKE: No, not at all. But it is true that as a musician, you are more trapped in a bubble. Being so occupied with the research that you do with your instrument makes everything else fade into the background. As a student, I barely ever left the house. It was only later that I started wondering what music really means to me. For example, I just got goosebumps when that black man started singing with his *ikembe* (Jean-Claude Minant with his Congolese thumb piano in *Vita Siyo Muchezo Ya Watoto, tp*). That really struck at the essence. He incorporated a story into his music and that is my intention too.

It strikes me that such authenticity is central to your performances, Frédérique.

LECOMTE: Yes. I could make theatre to see my name up in lights or to make money. But of course that is not what it's about. The first thing a child does is to sing and play different roles. Those two things are crucial to being able to order our thoughts. That is why I stay as close to everyday reality as possible. In Africa, we don't use a theatre or even a stage, we just perform in the street. People and animals walk right past our performance. And I always adapt my performances to the circumstances around us. Normally, we sing at the beginning and at the end of this performance: "*Où va le Congo?*" But that wouldn't make sense here. When we performed on boulevard Anspach yesterday, we sang "*Où va le Père Noël?*" Initially, the asylum seekers did not want to sing, but I thought it was especially relevant during the Christmas season, in which everything is dominated by consumption. In this context, I think it makes sense to confront shoppers with the question: "Where is their Father Christmas?"

Mothers play a prominent role in both projects. Why is that?

LECOMTE: A number of asylum seekers who are mothers have not seen their children for years and they find that incredibly difficult. To the extent that they didn't even want to perform the scene in which they express their feelings. I was only able to convince them to share their experiences with the audience by making clear to them that the majority of Belgians think that almost all the people who apply for asylum here are single men. And that the prejudice that they all bring their families with them is maintained by populist politicians and in the media. Who better to correct this misinformation than the mothers themselves?

PLANCKE: It is precisely because the reality I saw did not correspond at all with what I saw in the media that I wanted to make a production that

media, which primarily highlight dysfunctions, have no value. I am only interested in the direct individual relationships between the witness and the viewer, which move the viewer precisely because he or she recognizes him/herself in the other person, despite the fact that they are so different in terms of geography, culture, economics, or religion. After all, we are all children, brothers or sisters, fathers or mothers. Identifying with other people can be very cathartic. Viewers often start crying during our performances, and that increases the chance that they see the other person as he or she really is. Let us therefore keep close those things that seem distant. I try to do that in war zones, where people live in conflict with one another. Child soldiers are considered monsters, but by giving them a voice, I make them human again. Here too, keeping close what

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would inform people about the real situation. I think using terms like "trans-migrant" is extremely unhelpful because they create distance between people, while my intention is to forge connections and to link the parallel worlds in which we live. That is why I think coming face to face with a mother who talks about her terrible loss is very valuable. Because I found it very difficult to make a connection with the refugees in Dunkirk, I invited several writers along. Most of them are also mothers and some also have a migration background. That helped to break the ice. When Dalilla Hermans arrived, for example, she had a child in her arms within five seconds. That would never happen with me.

Do you have the impression that audiences in a more polarized world have a different reaction to theatre, Frédérique?

LECOMTE: I don't know, but the objective remains to change mentalities through direct testimonies. To me, testimonies that are transmitted by far-right politicians and the

seems distant is more necessary than ever. Just look at how asylum seekers and refugees are the object of constant blame.

PLANCKE: But how do you ensure that you are not just preaching to the choir?

LECOMTE: That is not a problem in Africa because everyone comes to see the performances. The only way to reach a new audience here is by stepping out of your comfort zone and showing your pieces in locations that are not necessarily theatre venues, and by avoiding all forms of polarization. In fact, it helps to make productions so vague that they can be understood by all sides of the social spectrum.

PLANCKE: I think it is a question of continuing to talk to each other, and of focusing more on the things we have in common than the things that separate us.

LECOMTE: Above all, we - you with your music and me with my theatre - have to keep doing what we're doing: continuing to go to the heart of the matter and thus abolishing difference and building bridges. **B**

NL De andere herkennen als een deel van onszelf: dat is wat de theater- en multimedievoorstellingen met en over asielzoekers van Frédérique Lecomte en Simon Plancke beogen. Ook al beseffen ze dat hun engagement in een gepolariseerde samenleving een druppel in een oceaan is.

FR Reconnaître les autres comme une part de soi : c'est ce que visent les créations théâtrales et multimédias avec et sur les demandeurs d'asile de Frédérique Lecomte et Simon Plancke. Ils ne perdent cependant pas de vue que leur engagement dans une société polarisée reste une goutte d'eau dans l'océan.