

It's the effort that counts

By Anoeek Nuyens

Schwalbe has given The Netherlands a new theatre collective. The group is touring through Europe and beyond with their graduation show *Spaar ze* (2008), as they did earlier with their second instalment *Schwalbe speelt op eigen kracht* (2009). Dramaturgy specialist Anoeek Nuyens is currently creating a third play with the nine-man ensemble. In this article she closely reviews this new generation of theatre makers to which she herself belongs. What does it mean to opt for a collective in today's individualistic society? In which way does our knowledge-based society relate to the simplicity Schwalbe so prefers? And how does a young generation deal with their dreams?

Schwalbe's nine members graduated at the Amsterdam Mime School in 2008. When asked why they decided to venture on as a collective following their graduation, it turns out it hadn't been an obvious choice at all. They weren't particularly close during their student days, nor did they share similar views on theatre. Quite the contrary: the students had initially followed a variety of different paths; Floor van Leeuwen and Bas van Rijnsoever founded Mime Theatre Group Blont; Christina Flick and Kimmy Ligtvoet set up Steinboden; and during ITs Festival 2008 a number of students embarked on ambitious solo projects. It wasn't until after their graduation show **Spaar ze** that the very first seeds were planted for what later became theatre collective Schwalbe. Was it due to the performance's unexpected success? Or had the show made them realise that by collaborating they would bring a valuable addition to everyone's individual work?

For **Spaar ze**, Schwalbe's members had set themselves one important mission: to push themselves to the limit in every imaginable way. For once they were going challenge themselves as a group, and fight against or for something. In order to reach that goal it seemed necessary to search for the one thing that tied them together. The fact that they were all young students was considered too obvious and too superficial. There had to be something beyond the evident facts. Something outside themselves, something bigger than them. This was no easy feat. People in the West tend to be driven by an individual perspective. Believing in anything beyond ourselves – a God, a shared view of the world – is no longer a given. Holding on to ones' own opinion and 'unique' perspective on things seems of greater importance than agreeing with one another. Agreement has become the exception rather than the rule.

Last year, Schwalbe invited sociologist Willem Schinkel for an interview. After seeing **Spaar ze**, he stated that he had lost faith in individualism as it was used to account for greed, inhuman behaviour and lack of compassion in countries such as the Netherlands. 'We'd like to believe we're all living in the narrow confines of our individualistic concerns, but in fact we're all doing the same thing: we shop at

the same supermarkets, we watch the same television shows and we all look alike.’ A heated debate ensued in the venue. Many visitors disagreed with Schinkel. According to another visiting sociologist, **Spaar ze** in fact served to show how even though one single movement can be copied endlessly, this movement will be interpreted differently by every individual, whether they choose to copy it or not. ‘I’ve observed every player with growing fascination and managed to discover an entirely different meaning in each of the group’s nine members’ interpretation of the same subject.’

Fighting against the individual

Spaar ze shows us nine youngsters dancing to a monotonous hardcore beat for a full hour. The same movement is constantly repeated. They gradually move towards each other, and pull away again. At intermittent intervals, an actor freezes within the mass of movement and addresses his or her surroundings. The performance revolves around the extremely exhausting physical battle the players are waging. Schwalbe member Floor van Leeuwen describes this process as follows: ‘It’s like being in a trance. You become a lighter player, more vulnerable and less rational. You’re absolutely no longer capable of distancing yourself from the situation. It’s that sensation that allows you to temporarily forget that you’re at it alone.’

In **Spaar ze**, Schwalbe challenges the individual, and therefore they challenge themselves. They purposefully do not choose to present us with a shared perspective; instead they aim to show us how to co-exist without placing one person over another. Their sweat-covered faces, their bodies, gradually succumbing to fatigue; it demonstrates a boundless energy as well as underscoring the uselessness of our existence.

Our parents fought for a better world. We on the other hand, their children, have grown ‘wise’. The world hasn’t shown itself to be the world our parents envisioned. For evidence, all you need to do is to turn on the TV. We possess a will to fight, we feel love, we engage ourselves in a variety of topics and in different ways, but we will never join the masses in an uprising on one of the city’s squares, as Egypt’s youth have done. We long for this kind of action, but we’re too realistic to believe in a world that can be repaired or even the idea of a great movement or a revolution.

A CO2-neutral performance

In 2010, Schwalbe created a second performance, **Schwalbe speelt op eigen kracht**. The show addressed the subject of energy in all its various forms. This led to discussions on melting polar ice caps and apocalyptic future scenario’s, on our romantic yearning for a more earthly existence and modern humanity’s addiction to comfort. In Schwalbe’s hands, the numerous questions, desires and dilemmas and the problem of climate change and energy use were reduced to one simple motion: cycling.

Throughout the performance, the actors pedal on home trainers to generate enough power for one theatre spot to light up. This one lamp illuminates all nine players. The light will stop burning once they stop cycling, so they have to keep pedalling throughout the performance. After about an hour, covered in sweat, most players have given up. One last player tries to keep the light burning until he or

she has to surrender as well. Simon van den Berg has described it as the type of show that humbly ‘brings an elementary tragedy to the fore’. The show is entirely CO2-neutral: all materials used are second hand; the heating was turned off during both the rehearsals and the performance; and the show’s flyers are all hand-stamped on recycled bin paper.

Schwalbe again provokes us to consider the question whether this should be our world vision. The scrunched up faces, the perspiring, and wet bodies switching into a higher gear, forfeiting and stepping down: within Schwalbe’s chosen context, the minimal movements become rich with association and significance. On the one hand, they hold up a mirror for your own behaviour – there you are, spending your monthly donation money on a good cause and buying your organic groceries. We are also reminded of the daily news coverage which confronts us again and again with the many ways in which we are slowly ruining our planet. We’re forced to ask ourselves whether the world hasn’t grown too much. Are we still capable of using the knowledge we’ve gathered, or has that knowledge become so far removed from our daily existence that we can’t possibly put it to use?

Grey-bearded men

It isn’t easy to function as a collective in a contemporary world characterised by efficiency, speed and result-driven work. In Schwalbe’s case, trying to get everyone in one place for a meeting or a rehearsal can be extremely difficult. Even planning a performance often proves impossible. Once a year at most Schwalbe manages to stage a play that includes the group’s full cast. There are always people who have other responsibilities. Nowadays, actors generally join a theatre or a theatre group: freelancers simply switch from one project to another. We speak of (temporary) ‘teams’ rather than collectives or theatre groups. We work on ‘projects’ rather than plays. Challenges are created by collaborating with people you don’t know, working together in new unknown ‘projects’ rather than engaging in long-term relationships. Such developments have influenced the way in which Schwalbe chooses to structure their shows. Usually a form is used that won’t suffer from the possible loss of artistic intention or value in case one or two players are absent.

Things were very different in the Sixties and Seventies, when theatre collectives first appeared on the scene. By joining a collective, you automatically supported a particular way of thinking. Naturally, this also meant one could not easily join another collective with different ideals. Every now and then, on the first Monday of the month, I’ll visit the Republic of the Discordia Society and travel back in time. Friends and members of other collectives such as ’t Barre Land and de Roovers unite in the lounge of debate centre De Balie and discuss the world around us, politics, but also everything we do *not* know (yet). Old and new writings are read out loud, there are interviews and numerous discussions. There are grey-bearded men, brilliant-but-forgotten books are reappraised, and people recite poetry: I imagine this to be the world of theatre as it once was, a world that could never be a fixture of my daily existence.

In **The ongoing moment**, dramaturgy specialist Marianne Van Kerkhoven - one of the founders of the Flemish collective the Trojan Horse – writes about May 1968: ‘It was a time of revelation and enthusiasm – for me, for all of us. We believed that the world could be changed and that we could create a different society if we joined forces, if we acted as one: to fight for a more just world,

free from poverty, discrimination and authoritarianism, with equality and empowerment for all.’ And further down: ‘The achievements of the Enlightenment period were not questioned as much then as they are now. We still believed in the power of the mind, in the power of speech. As we believed in the power of progress, in hope, in a world that is mutable.’

Eclectic surface

Just as people believed in a changeable world thirty years back, we now believe we as human beings can be moulded. We’re bombarded with talent shows, auditions and make-overs. It seems Westerners are desperately looking for role models to imitate. We are told we can all be stars as long as we believe in ourselves and our ability to adapt. Does this type of faith lead to superficiality? In his book **I barbari**, Italian writer and essayist Alessandro Baricco describes how contemporary cultural developments take place mostly at the surface. Different kinds of theoretical enrichment, concentration and knowledge mutate and come together in a huge ceaseless stream of ideas that knows no sidetracks or loopholes but drags everything along in an all-encompassing straight line.

Schwalbe also seems to be struggling with this overwhelming current and how to properly conduct it. For if you’re always sailing without taking the time to think things over, how can you ever make the right choices? Schwalbe claims to be searching for formal simplicity within the multitude of questions about and impressions of the world, so the audience can arrive back at that multitude by means of association. Everything is expressed through a form they like to refer to as ‘performative theatre’; performativity within a fixed frame. Schwalbe keeps searching for a framework in their performances, a framework that is shaped by several rules or obstructions - always physical in nature - but that also offers freedom to everyone within the frame. The fact that everyone is free to do things in their own particular way is of great value to Schwalbe.

The mission the collective has set itself often becomes apparent to the audience: in the case of **Schwalbe speelt op eigen kracht**, it was the energy-driven lamp, in the case of **Spaar ze** it was dancing until their feet bled. Often, the physical is taken to the limit. Simple though the objective may be, it’s purposefully performed to the extreme. Leading into action, the attempt itself **is** the show. Schwalbe says to be teetering on the brink of theatre and performance. It continuously tries to capture the unexpected and the live aspect through theatrical setting and staging.

It’s just a game

For their third and latest performance, the group has once again been looking for a framework, toying with the idea to play a live game for their audience in their third instalment **Schwalbe speelt vals**. A game, Schwalbe feels, is somewhat like a framed reality – a free zone where different rules apply than in our daily lives. Forcing you to act a certain way, a game also leaves room for chance or own initiative. It’s situated between the real and the fake, between illusion and reality, between surrender en contemplation. When does thinking ‘it’s just a game’ cross over into extreme emotion? At what point

does a bit of fun become aggressive? And by which measure is a game really only a temporary zone where human instincts and urges consciously or unconsciously come to the fore?

In January 2011, I started a week of research on the new play with Schwalbe. We basically played games for an entire week. Every member of the group was appointed a day in which he or she was allowed to instruct the rest what games to play. Brimming with enthusiasm and fanaticism, the players started to wrestle on the first day. By the end of the day we found ourselves at the doctor's practice tending to one of the players' broken leg. Everyone was more careful the second day and made sure to look after each other, but these sentiments evaporated during the days that followed. As time progressed, the atmosphere, it seemed, became more and more grim. Points were scored by completing certain assignments such as calling your friends with bad news, harassing other groups in the building, and so on. Much of this behaviour was justified in the name of the game. Looking back, you regret that you allowed yourself to get carried away so easily.

During the research week it became increasingly hard to suppress the emotions which arose throughout playing after the game had finished. Minor and major annoyances about the other participants' behaviour started to develop. You've known one other for years – why would he do a thing like that? Weren't you supposed to be putting together a professional performance? At the end of the week we were mostly arguing about foul or fair play, whether everyone stuck to the rules and whether, consequently, teams had won or lost in an honest fashion.

It seems we show more of our true selves in the course of the game than we would like. We are a slave of our emotions. We bask in our components' frustration and loss, and we secretly revel in our own victories. Experiencing these emotions and testing or discovering the limits of a game make us realise that we live in a very fragile society. We have become dependent on the rules we've created. These rules make up structures and systems that only function and subsist by virtue of our compliance to those rules. We've invented civilization, but that doesn't mean we actually are civilised – although we like to believe this is the case.

They will never truly agree

British philosopher John Gray would undoubtedly praise these theatre makers for their realistic perspective on the human condition. Much of Gray's work centres around the idea that there's no such thing as human progress. Gray discusses the Enlightenment period, a time in which people strongly believed in human progress. It was generally thought that the more schools and universities would be built, the smarter and more cultivated humans would eventually become. As long as everyone was taught principles and values, the rate of crimes such as murder, jealousy and other barbaric sins would be reduced. Now, three centuries later, we are still murdering like madmen. In fact, technical developments and the industrialisation of war have led us to be capable of even greater horrors: today we're murdering far more often than three centuries ago. From a historical perspective you could argue that we're living in the latter days of the 20th century – the bloodiest century of all time.

The realisation that neither an idealistic attitude nor any manner of utopian thinking can save the world from ruin is akin to Schwalbe's approach to theatre. Schwalbe doesn't start working with a

narrative or plot: instead Schwalbe requires an active audience by making use of the audience's own knowledge base. In this way Schwalbe creates the framework within which a multitude of associations and meanings is able to thrive. Schwalbe doesn't offer its audience direction in any specific way. This is not meant to come across as a sign of cynicism or bravado: because the group visibly works hard during a performance, the audience feels they're also only attempting to figure out their relation to the world and themselves.

By questioning our modern society, Schwalbe's third show tackles a huge theme. It's not about coming up with a solution, but about trying to gain an understanding of the world. By working within a structure of collectivity, this attempt is warranted. They will never reach an agreement and can consequently never be seduced into saving the world, or succumb to the vain belief that everything can be corrected.

In his latest book, **Harde liefde. Nederland op zoek naar zichzelf**, Dutch philosopher Bas Heijne asks: 'Who, once a civilization has been individualized through and through, takes care of our general interest, of society itself? Who will take responsibility for those things that lie beyond one's own limited reach, for interests that aren't their own?' One could consider Schwalbe a miniature representation of that society: a multicultural group of people from all walks of life, with highly divergent interests. Rehearsals have led to many discussions. It's crucial that everyone is offered their own time and space to express their own views. But one's own perspective only truly becomes significant once it's positioned opposite another's. Thus, Schwalbe's members need one another to validate their individual perspectives. Once that's taken care of, society's own responsibility, of which Heijne speaks, won't matter as much. ■

Note: As of 2011, Schwalbe has 8 members instead of 9.

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Sources

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