

Conversation with the rain

On creating feeling machines

by Stijn Devillé

Jacob McPherson for
THE WORD magazine



After the death of their daughter, a couple moves to Singapore. She starts a demanding job as CEO of a nanotech company. He strolls through the monsoons and seems to see his daughter's words in the rain. A conversation ensues.

A purifying story about love and loss. A story based on the personal experience of our award-winning playwright Stijn Devillé, told by two musicians, two actors and a rain printing device.

Eight years ago, my daughter fell down a staircase, leaving her seemingly lifeless. This encounter left me flooded with conflicting emotions – anger, sadness, fear. No one wants to go through losing someone close, especially right in front of your eyes. After rushing her to the hospital, she thankfully recovered and survived the ordeal. I was immensely affected from this notion of grieving, but knew my pain wasn't as deep as those who have actually endured a loss. The biggest challenge for me then was in learning how to incorporate this personal experience into something that would feed genuine to the public.

The incident remained fresh in my body and mind and became a focal point for emotional discovery. Coincidentally, at a reception party, I found myself speaking with a couple who had experienced the death of their son. While talking with them, and hearing about their coping process, it became clear that societal expectations play a role in how people mourn. On this note, it was interesting to discover that the grieving process created a closer bond for the couple. The complex array of feelings they expressed reflected what I went through myself.

I also met Gilbert Declerck, co-founder of imec at that very same party, and discussed with him the immense pressure Europe faces in competing with other global regions, similarly to Asia. Such a fast-paced society trickles down to other aspects, like the rate at which we are expected to get over the loss of a loved one. Further speeding up daily life is the integration of technology. This aspect of modern society also negatively impacts privacy, personal time, and an overall sense of fulfilment. When an unexpected event like death occurs, these factors become magnified. It was clear that I needed to create a story about how a modern, urban, hard-working,



technologically “plugged in” family handles mourning.

Following guidelines from The Wooster Group's cofounder Elizabeth LeCompte on what makes a good theatre piece, my latest production *Gesprek Met De Regen* incorporates societal analysis, chronicle (space & time), and form. It's also worth emphasising how the dichotomy of form and content became an integral part of this production. There was a tension between what was drawn from reality and how the story came to life on stage. Drawing on a personal experience, it was important to maintain this connection while creating a message with universal impact. Although *Gesprek Met De Regen* is entirely fictitious, its roots and inspiration are sourced from real life – including the rain machine.

While writing the story and conducting some initial research, I stumbled upon a similar machine on YouTube. Although it was used for marketing purposes, I wondered how the device might print poetic words from water, and so I approached Luc Geurts, head of the e-Media Research Lab of the KULeuven about building a similar rain machine. Since they regularly support the artistic community, developing a mechanical device capable of expressing human emotions was a natural fit for the department. This element of rain became essential for the performance. Associated with grief, it represents life coming to a total standstill.

text & direction Stijn Devillé
 play Tom Van Bauwel & Sara Vertongen
 voice Marion De Schepper
 music Gerrit Valckenaers & Geert Waegeman
 video Walter Verdin
 light design Mark Van Denesse
 dramaturgy Els Theunis
 technical coordination Kishan Singh
 development rain printer Arne Broeders & Wouter Driessens, prof. Luc Geurts
 technicians Viktor Thys, Thomas Verachtert, Peter Lauwers, Tom Buys, Bregt Janssen
 production Ellen Haesevoets, Thomas verachtert & Miek Scheers (stage)
 sound Stefan De Reese & Tom Buys
 costume Veerle Hasselman
 kunstenvliegmerk stage design Benoit Aigret, Andreas Ketels
 technical support Berne Dries, Vic Van den Bossche, Willem Rys, Joffrey Guillaume, Brian Toms, Anton Spiessens, Tibo Spiessens, Jari Abeloos, Glenn Loddewyckx, Danny Depoorter
 pictures Katrijn Van Giel
 production Het nieuwstedelijk
 coproduction C-mine cultuurcentrum

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MORE HET NIEUWSTEDELIJK IN ENGLISH

HYBRIS
 Friday March 1
 8pm at OPEK Leuven

An encounter in the underbelly of a hospitalbuilding She, a surgeon, is trying to keep it together. He, on crutches, is waiting for news. Day and night hospitals go to any extreme /length to save lives. In overbooked operating theatres surgeons crumble under the pressure. The system is stretched to it's limits.

After the acclaimed VUUR, Christophe Aussems makes a new performance based on interviews. He spoke to doctors and patients about what happens to them when things go wrong.

Dutch with English subtitles.



ABOUT HET NIEUWSTEDELIJK

Het nieuwstedelijk is the city theatre of Leuven, Hasselt and Genk. Derived from hew' (nieuw) and 'urban' (stedelijk), our name would translate as something like 'the neopolitan', as a pun on 'the metropolitan'.

Het nieuwstedelijk has demonstrated it is a noteworthy player in Belgian theatre by winning several

awards, most notably the Flemish Cultural Price for the Performing Arts. Work of the playwrights of Het nieuwstedelijk (Stijn Devillé, Adriaan Van Aken, Christophe Aussems, Sara Vertongen, Els Theunis) has been translated and performed in French, German and English.



STIJN DEVILLÉ

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Stijn Devillé (1974) is an acclaimed Belgian playwright and stage director and is currently the artistic and general director of Het nieuwstedelijk, the city theatre of Leuven, Hasselt and Genk. His latest, and first English-speaking production Gesprek Met De Regen was on show throughout Flanders until January.

