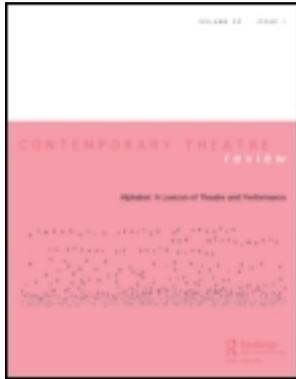


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# Canonisation in Contemporary Theatre Criticism: A Frequency Analysis of ‘Flemish Wave’ Directors in the Pages of *Etcetera*

Thomas Crombez

## Introduction

There is a remarkable scene in Jan Fabre’s theatre production *The Power of Theatrical Madness*, which premiered at the Venice Biennale in 1984. Six performers, five men and one woman – who make it clear in this scene that they are certainly not to be viewed as ‘actors’ – undress their upper bodies and start to run, but without moving from the spot. Their actual performance is that they simultaneously, while panting and sweating, have to demonstrate their knowledge of recent theatre history.

‘1967’, the first one cries. Another one replies: ‘*King Lear*, Royal Shakespeare Company, Peter Brook.’ As the performance continues, all the high points of avant-garde post-war theatre (already partly canonised) are reviewed: *Marat-Sade* by Peter Weiss and Peter Brook (1964); *Dionysus in ’69* by Richard Schechner and The Performance Group; *The Constant Prince* by Jerzy Grotowski and the Laboratory Theatre; the Living Theatre; Jean-Louis Barrault; Heiner Müller.

The historical references function as a kind of passphrase. After all performers have been pushed off the stage, only one, Els Deceukelier, is prevented from climbing back on. Whenever she tries, the other actors push her back, shouting: ‘1876’. Finally, she is able to utter: ‘Richard Wagner, *Ring des Nibelungen*, Bayreuth Fest-spielhaus.’ As Luk Van den Dries remarked, the phrase

was ‘the bail that the actress has to post in order to be admitted to the stage’.<sup>1</sup>

As is evident from this example, theatre makers from the ‘postdramatic’ generation of the 1970s and 1980s are often highly conscious of their relationship with the avant-gardes of the twentieth century. (I here understand ‘postdramatic’ in the broad sense as introduced by Hans-Thies Lehmann in his 1999 book; that is, of experimental work in the performing arts that can no longer be said to belong to the neo-avant-gardes of the post-war decades.)<sup>2</sup> It is, however, a remarkable fact that this avant-garde connection is quite absent from contemporary theatre criticism that discusses the work of Fabre and his colleagues.<sup>3</sup>

In order to explore this asymmetrical presence of the avant-garde – highly visible in the work itself, but much less so in reviews and essays – this article will take a closer look at the experimental generation of

1. Luk Van den Dries, ‘Jan Fabres Theatertrilogie: Minimal Music en Gesamtkunstwerk’, *Etcetera*, 2.8 (1984), 24–26 (p. 25). Unless otherwise mentioned, all translations from Dutch-language sources are my own.
2. Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatisches Theater* (Frankfurt: Verlag der Autoren, 1999).
3. At that moment, the most important platforms for theatre criticism included national and regional newspapers (such as *De Standaard*, *De Morgen*, *De Financieel-Economische Tijd*, *De Gazet van Antwerpen*, and *De Nieuwe Gazet*), and radio stations such as Radio 1, Omroep Brabant (later Radio 2), and Studio Brussel.

Flemish theatre directors who started out in the 1980s. Apart from Jan Fabre, this group also included Jan Lauwers, Guy Cassiers, Ivo Van Hove, Jan Decorte, and Luk Perceval. Together with the remarkable new clan in choreography (Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, Wim Vandekeybus, Alain Platel), they became more widely known as the ‘Flemish Wave’.

The special issue of *Contemporary Theatre Review* from November 2010 that focused on this group has thoroughly examined how the artists’ individual careers, and their artistic trajectories, have developed.<sup>4</sup> But the term ‘Flemish Wave’ itself is also a fascinating example of how canonisation has operated in performing arts history. At first, the expression was used mostly in the Netherlands, because many of these young makers could find better working conditions there than in their own country.<sup>5</sup> Later it was increasingly regarded as a mere marketing label, especially by local Flemish critics; but still the term has succeeded in establishing itself as an appropriate label for historicising that episode.<sup>6</sup>

Today, in 2013, both participants and scholars are starting to raise questions about the accuracy of the term. Moreover, it could very well be that the term not only designates a particular group of artists, but simultaneously obfuscates other trends in the performing arts landscape. Generational labels tend to obscure the different temporalities that were (and are) at work in the history of the avant-garde. In a 2010 interview, Erwin Jans formulated this reflection when assessing the context of the 1980s as the ‘wonder years’ of Flemish performing arts:

So there are people who do not fit into the story of ‘in the early 1980s everything began anew’. There are also people who started at other times and followed a different line. [...] If you want to write history, you should watch out for that kind of narrowing labels. It is true to some extent, but some people are excluded. If not, the theatre of that time coincides with the names of Jan Decorte,

Jan Lauwers ... in other words, with the well-known mantra of five or six names.<sup>7</sup>

My take on the Flemish Wave focuses on how it was seen (or not) as a contemporary avant-garde, and how it related to earlier avant-gardes. In doing so, I will also try to address Jans’s concerns and shed new light on how the process of canonisation took place in the case of the Flemish Wave. This will be done through an innovative methodological approach, which I will clarify in the next section.

## Methodology

I will approach the theatre directors who were part of the Flemish Wave by analysing an important slice of the critical discourse that accompanied their productions. This slice more particularly does not concern the traditional platforms of criticism (i.e. national newspapers and radio stations) but rather a new performing arts magazine, called *Etcetera*, which was launched in January 1983 with the explicit aim of charting the new tendencies in Flemish performing arts, and which continues to be published today. The magazine may be considered to have been the springboard for the new generation. Hence, an examination of its critical discourse can shed light on the processes of canonisation at work during this period.

The methods I will employ to analyse the critical discourse of *Etcetera* come from the emerging field of digital humanities. In 2011, the back issues of *Etcetera* for the period of 1983 to 2008 were fully digitised and made searchable by the University of Antwerp.<sup>8</sup> This digital collection contains more than 2,500 articles by 657 different authors, totalling more than five million words of text. Hence, it is eminently suited to quantitative sampling for research on theatre criticism. Using this corpus as the basis for my analysis, I will attempt to single out quantitative trends in canonisation.

Thus, in the first step of this article I will compare the mentions of the new and experimental generation with those of the older and more mainstream generation of theatre directors working at the Flemish municipal theatres. From this comparison, a number of interesting tendencies appear, especially the strong

4. ‘Border Collisions: Contemporary Flemish Theatre’, special issue of *Contemporary Theatre Review*, ed. by Peter M. Boenisch and Lourdes Orozco, *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 20.4 (November 2010).  
 5. Marianne Van Kerkhoven, ‘Onze jongens in de golf: Over het belang van wortels en andere zaakjes’, *Etcetera*, 5.20 (1987), 2–11.  
 6. One particularly vocal example is Wim Van Gansbeke, writing in his *Etcetera* column of December 1987: ‘the term “Flemish Wave” is a sick joke’. *Etcetera*, 5.20 (1987), 13.

7. Lieve Aerts and Karen Kerff, ‘Misschien ligt de avant-garde nu in een vertraging of in de nadruk op het procesmatige: Interview met Erwin Jans’, 11 May 2010 <<http://www.belgiumishappening.net/home/interviews/erwin-jans>> [accessed 19 September 2013].  
 8. See the digital *Etcetera* archive at <<http://theater.ua.ac.be/etc/>> [accessed 19 September 2013].

discursive presence of the experimental generation. Analysing these results, two questions stand out: why are certain artists seemingly treated in the same way as the group of experimentalists, but not included in the Flemish Wave? Second, why is the topic of avant-gardism so seldom mentioned by the *Etcetera* critics in connection with the Flemish Wave artists? I will introduce the hypothesis of the 'latent presence' of the avant-garde in order to tackle both questions. Presenting my arguments for this hypothesis will lead me to other methodological paths than quantitative analysis.

The second step of my contribution is, then, to analyse further and contextualise what 'avant-garde' meant in the Flemish performing arts landscape at the end of the twentieth century. How did artists and critics conceptualise the avant-garde? How were they influenced by the particular Flemish arts context? And to what extent did this context differ from earlier moments, such as the historical avant-garde movements from the early twentieth century, or the neo-avant-garde of the 1960s and 1970s? I will then use this contextual information to argue in favour of the 'latent avant-garde' hypothesis.

The third step, finally, will try to explain why this hypothesis is especially suited to explaining the tendencies brought to light by the quantitative analysis of *Etcetera*. To do so, I will introduce a final methodological approach, and examine the composition of the body of critics who contributed to *Etcetera*. This will make it necessary to look at the training of the (mostly young) contributors, and so lead me to analyse the contemporaneous development of performance studies in Flanders. Again, the information presented here will prove crucial to further substantiate the latent avant-garde hypothesis.

## Experiment And Tradition

Before I can start the quantitative analysis of the digital *Etcetera* corpus, I will explain the rationale behind the selection of the parameters of my comparison. My first selection concerns the Flemish Wave, and comprises six Flemish theatre directors who, from 1980 onwards, quickly achieved prominence in the performing arts. These are Jan Fabre, Jan Lauwers, Guy Cassiers, Ivo Van Hove, Jan Decorte, and Luk Perceval. Although most of them initially had their own companies (which operated on very small budgets and were only marginally present in the national

field), their work was rapidly taken up internationally, and also valorised on a critical and theoretical level. All gained international fame during the 1990s, rising to important positions in European theatre.<sup>9</sup> Three of them (Fabre, Lauwers, and Van Hove) are frequently mentioned by Hans-Thies Lehmann in the German edition of *Postdramatic Theatre*, which was published in 1999, and has since started to serve as an exhaustive, even canonical overview of the experimental performing arts from the 'post-avant-garde' period of the twentieth century's last three decades.

I will then examine the mentions of this group's names in the pages of *Etcetera*. Therefore, it is also necessary to introduce a 'control group'. By control group, I here mean a group of artists that could logically be expected to feature prominently in theatre reviews of the period under consideration. This expected prominence should be due to diverse factors: high productivity; a central place in the institutional network; and a high cultural status related to an established career in the performing arts. In other words, the control group would ideally consist of an older and more traditional group of directors with mainstream positions in the field of Flemish performing arts. This would allow me to contrast their mentions with those of the experimental generation. The ideal milieu from which to select that control group consists of the three largest, and best subsidised, municipal theatres in the Flemish region: the *Koninklijke Nederlandse Schouwburg* in Antwerp (Royal Dutch Theatre, KNS), the *Koninklijke Vlaamse Schouwburg* in Brussels (Royal Flemish Theatre, KVS), and the *Nederlands Theater Gent* (Ghent Dutch Theatre, NTG).<sup>10</sup> Taken together, their budget represented more than 25 per cent of the total budget

9. Perceval was the leading director of the Antwerp municipal theatre (Het Toneelhuis) between 1998 and 2009, and currently leads the Thalia Theater in Hamburg. Van Hove has been the leading director of Toneelgroep Amsterdam since 2001, but was frequently engaged in international productions with the Schaubühne Berlin, the Münchner Kammerspiele, the New York Theatre Workshop, the Edinburgh International Festival, and other organisations. Fabre and Lauwers continue to lead the companies they founded at the beginning of their careers (Troubleyn and Needcompany, respectively) and are constantly engaged in international co-productions. The one notable exception here is Jan Decorte, who continues to enjoy national recognition with his company Bloet, but is less visible internationally.
10. All data about theatre productions in the Flemish region were taken from the *Vlaams Theaterjaarboek* (Flemish Theatre Yearbook), which was published between 1966 and 1998.

for structural theatre subsidies in the Flemish region during the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>11</sup>

Chronologically, the selection was limited to directors of productions realised in the 17-year period from 1982 to 1998. The starting date was chosen because most of the experimental directors directed their first theatre shows during the early 1980s, and because the first issue of *Etcetera* was published in January 1983. In this issue, numerous productions from the start of the 1982–83 season were discussed. The ending date is 1998, since that year marks a substantive degree of osmosis between the centre and the periphery in Flemish theatre. The Antwerp municipal theatre KNS, traditionally a bastion of a rather conservative style of theatre, is then merged with Luk Perceval's *Blauwe Maandag Compagnie* (Blue Monday Company), which results in the new municipal company, *Het Toneelhuis*, effectively putting the ensemble and the budget of a large theatre into the hands of an artist who was considered marginal and experimental 15 years earlier.<sup>12</sup>

From the group of 130 directors who had worked at one of three municipal theatres between 1982 and 1998, I selected those nine directors who had been most active (three for each of the municipal theatres), and hence could be compared to the members of the experimental group, all of which were extraordinarily productive in the given period. Table 1 shows the number of productions for each of the experimental directors, while Table 2 presents the same figures for the nine most productive municipal theatre directors (together with the institution where they made most of their productions). On a side note, it is remarkable that all 16 directors are male.

11. During the period 1982–98, the three companies together consumed on average 26.94 per cent of the total budget for structural subsidies (not counting project subsidies, which were and are limited to the realisation of specific productions). This average figure, however, does obscure the strong difference between the 1980s, when the average was markedly higher (28.87 per cent) than the 1990s (24.11 per cent). Source: data collected by *Vlaams Theater Instituut* (Institute for the Performing Arts, VTi) and consulted via the institute's collaborators.
12. In truth, this process of rapprochement between the mainstream theatre and its margins had already started earlier, namely in the 1994–95 season, when Franz Marijnen became the leading director of the KVS and made innovation a core task of the Brussels municipal theatre (for instance, by inviting the dance company *Ultima Vez* of Wim Vandekeybus for an artistic residency).

Table 1 Number of productions realised by experimental Flemish theatre directors (1982–98), including revivals.

Productions	Director
29	Van Hove, Ivo
26	Fabre, Jan
21	Perceval, Luk
18	Cassiers, Guy
17	Decorte, Jan
17	Lauwers, Jan

Table 2 Number of productions realised by mainstream Flemish theatre directors (1982–98), including revivals.

Productions	Director	Company
27	Marijnen, Franz	KVS
21	Tillemans, Walter	KNS
21	De Decker, Jean-Pierre	NTG
14	Rouffaer, Senne	KVS
13	Buyl, Nand	KVS
12	van den Berghe, Hugo	NTG
12	Tanghe, Dirk	NTG
12	Madder, Leo	KNS
11	van Zundert, Martin	KNS

## Frequency Analysis of The *Etcetera* Corpus

From the data presented in Tables 1 and 2, one may conclude that all 16 of the directors produced a comparable amount of work during the period under consideration, and that they could hence be expected to be more or less evenly represented in contemporary critical reviews. It is this hypothesis which I will now test using the corpus of *Etcetera* articles published from 1983 to 1998.

Before I present the results of my frequency analysis, it should be noted that mentions do only reflect a single superficial aspect of the presence of an artist (namely, quantitative presence) in the corpus under consideration. The numbers do not tell us, for instance, whether the artists are referred to positively or negatively. To analyse the *quality* of the references, it would be necessary to have either a corpus that is marked up in detail (e.g. assigning the context of each

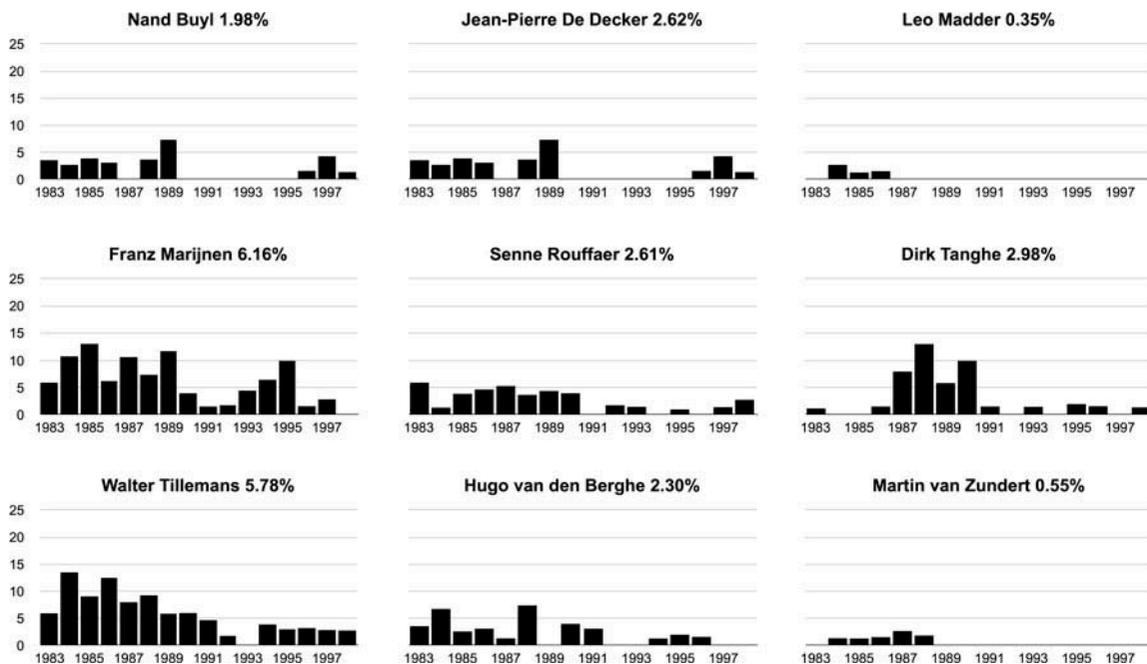


Image 1 Percentage of *Etcetera* articles (1983–98) mentioning the names of mainstream Flemish directors.

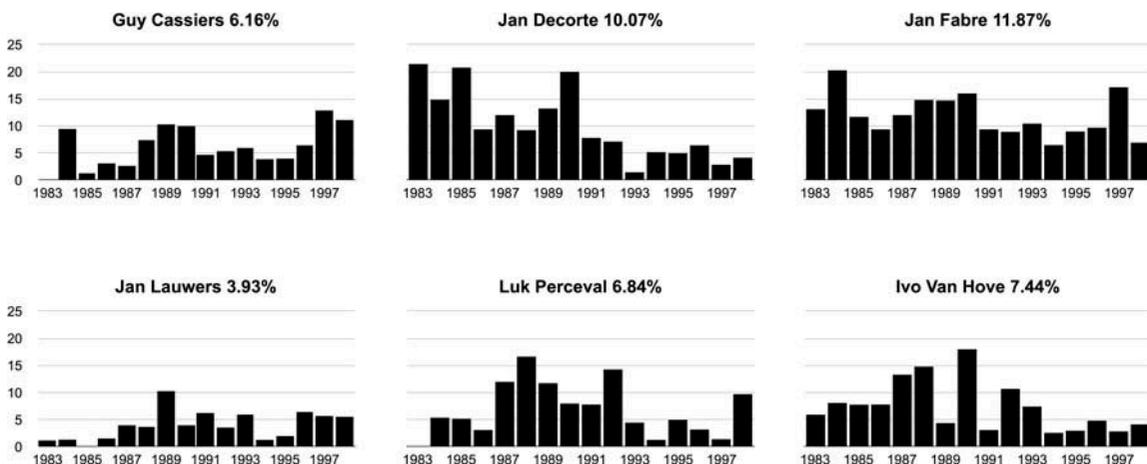


Image 2 Percentage of *Etcetera* articles (1983–98) mentioning the names of experimental Flemish directors.

occurrence a positive or negative value), or to do an in-depth analysis of each occurrence. My aim here is different, and depends strongly on *relative* frequencies. I merely wish to compare the mentions of one group of artists with the mentions of a different group. The observations that will

come out of this are, I believe, sufficiently conspicuous to help validate the argument that I want to make.

Images 1 and 2 present, for each of the 16 theatre directors, the percentage of *Etcetera* articles per year that mention his name at

least once.<sup>13</sup> The title of each small diagram includes the average percentage of mentions for that director over the whole period. Image 1 shows the frequency of mentions for the group of mainstream directors, to be contrasted with the mentions of experimental directors in Image 2.

Two tendencies are brought to light through these diagrams. The most conspicuous trend is the predominance of experimental theatre makers across the pages of *Etcetera*. The generation of Fabre and Perceval is mentioned in no less than 5 to 10 per cent of articles per year. Jan Decorte and Jan Fabre especially stand out, being present in more than 10 per cent of all articles over the entire period. During the 1980s, there are even some years when their mentions exceed 20 per cent.

This stands in strong contrast to the lacunary presence of the mainstream artists associated with the much larger, and amply subsidised, municipal theatres. Seven out of nine of the mainstream theatre directors are rarely mentioned in *Etcetera* (i.e. in less than three percent of articles on average). This is closely connected to the irregular distribution of the poorly scoring directors, which is the second significant trend. There seems to be a threshold between 3 per cent and 6 per cent. Directors scoring less than 3 per cent of mentions are also not present in every year, while directors scoring above 6 per cent are more evenly distributed across the whole corpus.

Thus, the preliminary conclusion of the frequency analysis is the pronounced bias of the *Etcetera* editors and critics in favour of the experimental group of directors, most notably Jan Fabre and Jan Decorte. At some moment during the early 1980s, their respective interventions in the Flemish performing arts landscape must have seemed of such dramatic significance, that their names started to function as self-evident landmarks for the changes that were ahead. Merely by constantly featuring the experimental group of directors, and censoring more traditional figures, *Etcetera* has strongly promoted the Flemish Wave artists. In the same way, *Theater Heute* may be said to have promoted the agenda of the *Regietheater*: not by publishing a *Regietheater* manifesto, but merely by reviewing certain productions, and not reviewing others. Although there is no consciously articulated avant-garde programme in *Etcetera*, as I will argue below, we can see that mentioning certain artists

and leaving other ones out *unconsciously* articulates an avant-garde bias.<sup>14</sup>

There are three significant exceptions to the trends just discussed. In the group of experimental directors, Jan Lauwers is not as well represented as the others, and only occurs in 3.93 per cent of articles per year on average. To be sure, there are years such as 1989 when this score goes up to 10 per cent (the year Needcompany created the award-winning *Ça va*), but the relatively low scores for the period of the *Snakesong Trilogy* (1994–98), arguably their most well-known work, remain an odd fact.

The two other exceptions concern the diagram of the mainstream directors. Two out of nine municipal theatre directors have singularly high scores, namely, Franz Marijnen (6.16 per cent) and Walter Tillemans (5.78 per cent). In the following sections, I would like to propose an explanation for these figures, which will centre around the hypothesis of the ‘latent presence’ of the avant-garde within the discursive space of *Etcetera*. First, however, it is necessary to elucidate what ‘avant-garde’ precisely meant for the *Etcetera* critics. Did they view their own cultural context as hostile to, or supportive of, avant-garde experiments? What institutions did actually support the experimental arts? Which kinds of networks were available for avant-garde artists?

## Avant-Garde Institutions

In this section, I will briefly sketch the specific context for experimental and avant-garde art in the Flemish region (and, broader, Western Europe) around 1980. To what extent did this context differ from the context of earlier avant-garde art, such as the artistic movements from the early twentieth century, or the neo-avant-gardes of post-war decades?

Unique to the Western European art scene around 1980 was the development of an extensive network for avant-garde art. It arises partly from artists’ collectives, demonstrated first in the visual arts by the rise of the ‘anti-galleries’.<sup>15</sup> But the

13. Only ‘true’ articles were counted, not editorials, colophons, advertisements, or tables of contents.

14. I am thankful to the anonymous reviewer of my essay for pointing out this crucial point, and providing the analogy with *Theater Heute*.

15. Looking at the case of Belgium, we find in Antwerp such galleries as A 379089, Ruimte Morguen, Ruimte Z, Club Moral, Vacuüm voor Nieuwe Dimensies, Today’s Place, or Montevideo; in Brussels, Galerie MTL; in Aalst, New Reform.

network also included a number of subsidised organisations, established with the express intent of making room for experiments within institutionalised art. Focusing on the case of the performing arts in the Flemish region, notable institutions were the King Kong arts centre and the Centre for Experimental Theatre (CET) in Antwerp; the *Proka* in Ghent (located in, and affiliated with, the Academy for Fine Arts); and the student art centre *'t Stuc* in Leuven. Nearby, in Brussels, the network was extended with the *Théâtre 140*, the *Beursschouwburg*, the *Kaaitheater Festival*, and the *Kunst- en Cultuurverbond* (located in the *Palais des Beaux-Arts*). Amsterdam's Mickery Theatre was just a three-hour drive away.

These institutions were defined by their strong interconnections. It was truly an 'avant-garde circuit', which had been under development since the first of these places was founded in the early 1960s. Their promoters met each other at the international gatherings of the theatrical avant-garde, at the Nancy Festival in France, or the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in Scotland. Many of these centres saw experimental theatre and performance art as part of their mission. No longer were the experimental artists sentenced to a marginal existence, exclusively chronicled through their own publications and through subversive actions in public space (as was the case for the historical avant-garde). The post-war avant-garde acquired, by trial and error, a structural embedding in postmodern society.

Still, when the avant-garde started to define its own structures, it also tended to lose the high visibility of the marginal and the eccentric. This was exactly what was happening across the pages of *Etcetera*. An avant-garde sensibility was considered to be so profoundly self-evident, that it did not need reiteration or yet another theoretical defence. Although *Etcetera* was clearly preoccupied with promoting the innovative tendencies in Flemish performing arts, there was no consciously articulated avant-garde programme in its pages.

To be sure, the term 'avant-garde' was frequently mentioned by the *Etcetera* contributors. It occurred on average in 10.84 per cent of the articles published from 1983 to 1998, with especially high scores in the 1980s (for instance, it occurred in almost 25 per cent of the 1984 articles). However, the avant-garde was almost never discussed as a contemporary, theoretical field of problems. To the *Etcetera* critics, the term was little more than a historical designation, used to contextualise such diverse movements and figures as pre-war modernist theatre and dance (Dadaism, Pirandello,

Laban), early post-war avant-garde drama (Ionesco, Beckett), or American avant-garde theatre of the 1960s and 1970s (covering everything from Richard Schechner and Robert Wilson to Charles Ludlum and Judson Dance Theatre).

Tellingly, one of the few more elaborate reflections on the avant-garde was surprisingly negative, and came from Walter van den Broeck, a dramatist who had become known with his naturalist, but politically engaged, play *Groenten uit Balen* (1971) about the contemporaneous workers' strike at the Vieille Montagne factory in Balen.<sup>16</sup>

Avant-garde theatre [...] should breach the enemy lines, just as paratroopers do, so that the bulk of the army can proceed to occupy the conquered territory without hindrance. Just as it is not enough to wear a red hat in order to be a paratrooper, it is insufficient to disturb a small number of formal conventions in order to be part of the avant-garde. And let it be stated clearly for once: it is not at all shameful not to belong to the avant-garde. An army that consists solely of paratroopers only breaches the lines, but does not really advance. Avant-garde and tradition need each other like bread needs the hungry, to use the words of the poet.<sup>17</sup>

Less surprisingly, this would be the first and last contribution of van den Broeck to *Etcetera*. His position, *ex negativo*, brings to light the general attitude to which he is the exception. The magazine may be said to promulgate a 'latent avant-garde' perspective. Put simply, the earlier twentieth-century realisations of modernist and avant-garde art were considered as an established fact, on which the contemporary performing arts continued to be built.<sup>18</sup>

16. *Groeten uit Balen* literally translates as 'Vegetables from Balen', but is actually a deliberate misspelling of 'groeten' (i.e. 'Greetings from Balen').

17. Walter van den Broeck, 'Men hoede zich voor toverlanttaarns', *Etcetera*, 1.3 (1983), 19.

18. Much later, Hans-Thies Lehmann elaborated on this point by showing how 'postdramatic' theatre takes the historical and neo-avant-garde as its starting point in order to bring about new configurations of the theatrical frame. In the English translation of Lehmann's work, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. by Karen Jürs-Munby [Abingdon: Routledge, 2006], the word 'avant-garde' is very present, occurring on 13 per cent of all pages. One such revealing statement: '[t]he formal languages developed since the historical avant-gardes have become an arsenal of expressive gestures, which in postdramatic theatre serve as theatre's response to changed social communication' (p. 23).

Especially in the early years of *Etcetera*, with references to the term ‘avant-garde’ abounding, it was often the very recent avant-garde movements of the 1960s and 1970s that were referenced. These references concerned, on the one hand, the ritualist and physical theatre of groups such as Jerzy Grotowski’s Laboratory Theatre, the Living Theatre, and the Performance Group. On the other hand, the politically engaged theatre of the 1970s was present not only through international but also through numerous national examples. Notable political theatre groups from the 1970s in the Flemish region (none of which are still active today) included the *Internationale Nieuwe Scène* (International New Theatre, INS), *Het Trojaanse Paard* (The Trojan Horse, HTP), and *Vieze Mong en zijn Vuile Gasten* (Filthy Edmond and his Dirty Mates).

## The ‘Latent Avant-Garde’ Hypothesis

The central problem then, given this ‘avant-garde heritage’, was what avant-garde theatre could still mean in 1983 and after. In this section, I will explore if and how this question was relevant to the critics who contributed to *Etcetera*. To do so, it will also be necessary to dive into their background and training, and hence in the development of theatre and performance studies in Flanders.

Richard Schechner had clearly answered the question of the avant-garde negatively in his 1981 essay, ‘The Decline and Fall of the (American) Avant-Garde’ (which had also been the topic of one of his lectures in Belgium around the same time).<sup>19</sup> On the other side of the spectrum, the American critic Curtis L. Carter would answer it in the positive (albeit in an almost naive fashion) when he described Jan Fabre’s work as a direct successor of the historical avant-garde.<sup>20</sup>

The question of the avant-garde’s contemporary relevance appears to have been the proverbial

elephant in the room for the critics of *Etcetera*. It was everywhere, but it could not be discussed in other than seemingly self-evident, historicised terms. What may help to understand this is the academic training in theatre studies of many of its collaborators. In the Flemish context, this was a new phenomenon. Academic reforms had not only led to the establishment of new institutions (such as the *Vrije Universiteit Brussel*, founded in 1970, and the *Universitaire Instelling Antwerpen*, 1971), but also of new programmes. Theatre studies was an intense field of interest, with a notable orientation towards performance rather than drama, and influenced by recent developments in (theatre) semiotics and performance studies.<sup>21</sup>

At the dawn of the 1980s, the first students graduated who had followed these courses. *Etcetera*, with its clear-cut focus on innovation, was a natural platform for testing and developing their critical skills. The composition of the body of critics that contributed to *Etcetera* illustrates this phenomenon. Looking at the group of the most frequent contributors (who authored more than ten articles between 1983 and 1998), only three out of 22 were professional theatre critics working for national radio stations and newspapers.<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, almost half of the group consisted of young graduates in theatre studies, who were either working in academia at the new research centres (and had started a PhD project) or who were searching for a position in the changing field of Flemish performing arts, such as dramaturgy or management.<sup>23</sup>

The emphatically academic background of its contributors, then, may partially account for the ‘avant-garde bias’ of *Etcetera*. They would consider their knowledge of the European and American avant-garde movements as a self-evident historical canvas for the experiments in the performing arts that were taking place in their own day. Moreover, a number of them had actively

19. Richard Schechner, ‘The Decline and Fall of the (American) Avant-Garde’, *Performing Arts Journal*, 5.2 (May 1981), 48–63 and 5.3 (September 1981), 9–19. Schechner’s lecture was translated into Dutch by Luk Mishalle and published in *DATA*, an experimental theatre journal by the Centre for Experimental Theatre, of which only three issues appeared. *DATA*, 1.3 (1981), 3–7. Schechner’s lecture took place in the context of a workshop he gave at the Centre for Experimental Theatre (CET) at the *Universitaire Instelling Antwerpen* (Wilrijk), 19–22 December 1980.
20. Curtis L. Carter, ‘Jan Fabre: Art Kept Me Out of Jail’, *Etcetera*, 1.3 (1983), 26–28.

21. The universities of Ghent (RUG), Leuven (KUL), Antwerp (UIA), and Brussels (VUB) all started with theatre courses. This signified a break with tradition, since theatre was before only taught at the much more practically oriented acting schools or conservatoires. These academic courses were always embedded in a larger master’s programme, such as Germanic philology (at UIA and VUB), art history (RUG), or cultural studies (KUL).
22. Wim Van Gansbeke, Pol Arias, and Jef De Roeck.
23. Graduates working at the university: An-Marie Lambrechts, Erwin Jans, Geert Opsomer, Luk Van den Dries, Marianne Van Kerkhoven, Johan Callens, and Klaas Tindemans. Graduates working in the field: Hildegard de Vuyst, Alex Mallems, Paul de Bruyne, and Theo Van Rompay.

participated in these experiments: Marianne Van Kerkhoven, for instance, had co-authored the political plays of *Het Trojaanse Paard* (The Trojan Horse) in the 1970s.

This ‘latent avant-garde’ hypothesis can help to understand why both Franz Marijnen and Walter Tillemans – both of them clearly committed to producing broadly accessible, non-experimental work in the large municipal theatres – were still receiving much more attention from the *Etcetera* critics than their colleagues. The two directors had strong and well-publicised connections to the earlier avant-gardes. In the 1960s, as a young drama school graduate, Franz Marijnen had wanted to escape the limitations of the conservative Flemish theatre landscape by working and living with Grotowski’s Laboratory Theatre, and then by moving to the USA, where he founded the experimental theatre company Camera Obscura. Tillemans’s avant-garde connections went back even further, to the 1950s, when he had helped to realise the first Antwerp productions of Jean Genet, Eugène Ionesco, and Samuel Beckett with *De Nevelvlek* (The Nebula, a circle of progressive writers and artists).

It is little wonder, then, that both Marijnen and Tillemans were extensively interviewed by *Etcetera*, a privilege which was never bestowed on the other municipal theatre directors.<sup>24</sup> Each time, the interviewers took their time to review the director’s earlier avant-garde period. Still, this does not imply that the interviews’ central topic would *not* be their current, more mainstream work. That is precisely the sense of the expression *latent* avant-garde: for the *Etcetera* journalists, the avant-garde was a self-evident background to contemporary performing arts. Nothing more, nothing less.

## Conclusion

At the beginning of this article, I selected a group of 16 highly productive directors from Flemish theatre in the 1982–98 period in order to test the hypothesis if both experimental and mainstream artists were equally present in critical discourse. My test corpus was the performing arts magazine *Etcetera*, launched in 1983. I analysed

the frequencies of articles per year in which the directors’ names were mentioned. This showed that the experimental group was dramatically more prominent across its pages than the mainstream group. This does not imply that *Etcetera* followed a consciously articulated avant-garde programme. On the contrary, the experimental tendency is articulated more or less unconsciously, by featuring the names of the experimental group of directors, and censoring more traditional figures.

Still, there emerged a number of interesting exceptions to this general tendency. I further analysed the case of the two mainstream directors who did receive a significantly higher level of attention from the *Etcetera* critics. To help understand this phenomenon, I introduced the hypothesis of a ‘latent avant-garde’ mentality, supported by the recently established circuit of avant-garde institutions, and by the academic background of the magazine’s contributors.

This hypothesis indirectly also casts a shadow of doubt on the accuracy of the ill-famed term ‘Flemish Wave’. On the pages of *Etcetera*, the expression is often mentioned in a derogative way. It is seen as a label with which the Dutch theatre system wished to brand the young Flemish artists as the newest hype. However, the magazine *de facto* contributed to the use of the term, by continuing to highlight this rather small group of experimentals, as was evident from the frequency analysis above.

It is worth noting the anomalies and cracks that appear in the seemingly consistent image of this ‘Flemish Wave’. Above, I noticed how Franz Marijnen and Walter Tillemans, although both generationally and artistically not part of the 1980s group of experimentals, still enjoyed the same level of attention from the *Etcetera* critics. I attempted to explain this phenomenon from the ‘latent avant-garde’ hypothesis. Looked at from a different point of view, one may also see this as a warning against using generational labels, since they not only highlight a certain group, but also tend to obscure the artists who do *not* fit the implied narratives. Hence, the different, and possibly jagged, temporalities in theatre history are rendered invisible.

My approach has therefore shed new light on the old question of canonisation, and how the rivalries between established traditions and avant-garde artists are resolved. That such conflicts are also articulated on a discursive level (through interviews, essays, and reviews) was already an established fact, or rather a strongly

24. Johan Thielemans, ‘Over de noodzaak van een sprong in het duister: Franz Marijnen’, *Etcetera*, 1.3 (1983), 20–25. Pol Arias, Marianne Van Kerkhoven, and Johan Thielemans, ‘Tillemans’, *Etcetera*, 2.6 (1984), 2–9.

felt intuition. Here, I systematically examined a large-scale corpus in order to arrive at a more precise image of how canonisation characteristically works. I was able to pinpoint such mechanisms as the exclusion or overexposure of certain artists. It shows that canons are constructed not only by artists being mentioned by (or *not* being mentioned by) certain authoritative figures in the field, but at least as much by the ongoing repetition of such selective judgements in review after review.

A last remarkable element in my examination was that the new academic training of young journalists had a tremendous impact on the criteria for the evaluation of the performing arts. The latent avant-garde mentality does not imply that reviewers are constantly mentioning established figures from the canonised avant-garde, but rather that their *implicit* frame of reference is characterised by innovation and experiment, not tradition and continuity.

I would like to argue for the findings presented here to be used as a methodology for investigating

the formation of the experimental canon on a broader scale and across other cultures. English-language theatre journals, since the 1970s mostly published in an academic context – as with *The Drama Review* (TDR), *Performing Arts Journal* (PAJ), and *Theatre Research International* – are a case in point. How did these periodicals contribute to (or stand in the way of) the canonical status of experimental theatre artists? Did they actively explore international theatre cultures, or did they limit themselves to the work that was visible on the stages of New York, London, and Paris? Was the intimate collaboration between the performing arts and academia conducive to the rise of postdramatic theatre, or was it relatively independent of that development? Such questions might be addressed by a large-scale examination of digital corpora, which could then provide a useful way of thinking through how we construct ‘histories’ of contemporary performance and the roles of critics and academics in the formation of canons of the experimental.