

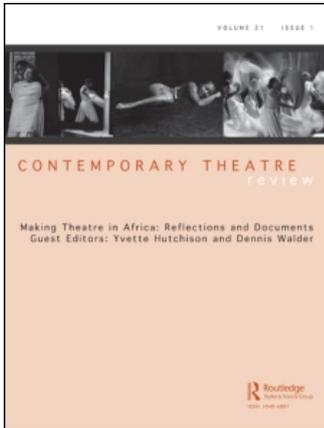
This article was downloaded by: [Crombez, Thomas]

On: 17 June 2011

Access details: Access Details: [subscription number 932852986]

Publisher Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Contemporary Theatre Review

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title-content=t713639923>

Jan Fabre and tg STAN: Two Models of Postdramatic Theatre in the Avant-Garde Tradition

Luk van den Dries^a; Thomas Crombez^a

^a Theatre Studies, University of Antwerp, Belgium

Online publication date: 27 January 2011

To cite this Article van den Dries, Luk and Crombez, Thomas(2010) 'Jan Fabre and tg STAN: Two Models of Postdramatic Theatre in the Avant-Garde Tradition', Contemporary Theatre Review, 20: 4, 421 – 431

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/10486801.2010.505767

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10486801.2010.505767>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.informaworld.com/terms-and-conditions-of-access.pdf>

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

Jan Fabre and tg STAN: Two Models of Postdramatic Theatre in the Avant-Garde Tradition

Luk van den Dries and Thomas Crombez

Impure Localities and Cultural Capitals

There are various reasons for the sudden, explosive surge of artistic innovation that emerged from Flanders in the 1980s: the lack of an established national theatre tradition; the invitations to Flemish theatres and arts centres from new experimental artists from abroad; and the funding available for emerging theatre artists both from independent producers and arts centres and, from 1993, albeit rather hesitantly, also from the Flemish government.¹ As a result, artists have been able to work within their own very personal and local structures. They were not absorbed by existing theatre institutions, but were able to maintain their autonomy. At the same time, this localism was always internationally oriented, and ‘impure’ in different respects. The stimulating artistic climate attracted artists from abroad, such as American choreographer Meg Stuart, French choreographer Jérôme Bel, and Italian director Romeo Castellucci with his company Societas Raffaello Sanzio. Their position at the forefront of the contemporary European experimental theatre and performance scene is partly also a result of their early work being programmed and co-produced by Flemish arts centres and festivals such as the annual *KunstenFestivaldesArts* in Brussels. At the same time, the work of the internationally known Flemish artists of the last generation would not have been possible without a network

1. Schaamte vzw was one of the most important producers in the early 1980s, while later, arts centres such as Kaaiteater (Brussels), 't Stuc (Leuven), Vooruit (Ghent), and Monty and deSingel (Antwerp) were decisive in fostering and developing the work of Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, Jan Lauwers, Jan Fabre and Jan Decorte.

Luk van den Dries and Thomas Crombez, Theatre Studies, University of Antwerp, Standscampus D-216, Prinsstraat 13, B-2000 Antwerp, Belgium. Email: luc.vandendries@ua.ac.be and thomas.crombez@ua.ac.be

of co-producers across Europe. This duality of local roots and scenes, of local innovation and international financial partnerships, reflects the 'globalized' Europe of the early twenty-first century. This is also the context in which the two companies explored in this article create their work. Jan Fabre's work has been supported, amongst others, by the Festival of Avignon, while theatre group (tg) STAN receives the support of French institutions such as Théâtre de la Bastille and Festival d'Automne in Paris.

Antwerp, the city where both companies are based, has for some years held a predominant position in the Flemish cultural landscape, with the Cultural Capital of Europe event of 1993 heralding its new cultural dynamism. Jan Fabre was one of the artists who particularly benefited from this event. Before 1993, his theatrical work had been produced mainly thanks to the support of European co-producers. As part of the Cultural Capital funding, he was able to realize the ambitious plan of creating an opera trilogy, *The Minds of Helena Troubleyn* (1987–1993). In this project (which still awaits its third part), he brought together the different disciplines in which he had worked for some fifteen years: dance, theatre, performance art, visual arts and music theatre. Fabre also benefited as he was given new rehearsal facilities; an old theatre venue, the Ringtheater, was rebuilt to become the Troubleyn arts centre that eventually opened in 2007. Despite Fabre's recognized status within the international performance scene, the explicit nature of his work is still a source of controversy. His challenge to the excesses of consumer society and the commodification of bodies in his 2009 performance *Orgy of Tolerance* is a case in point. With his large-scale projects, Fabre was also one of the first artists to prove that the new Flemish theatre avant-garde of the 1980s was ready to face the test of large stages and institutionalized municipal theatres. In 1999, the Antwerp Royal Dutch Theatre (KNS) repertory company was even completely reorganized to become a platform for experimental theatre-makers from outside the institution: The former ensemble of actors was greatly reduced, while a group of artists-in-residence was formally attached to the KNS, which was renamed 'Het Toneelhuis'; they were thus offered the opportunity to create work in semi-autonomous association with the institutionalized theatre.

Tg STAN: Rhetorical Counter-readings and the Independent Actor

Tg STAN, the other influential company emerging from Antwerp, has provided the model for a different type of postdramatic stage practice. Soon after the company was founded in 1988 by four graduates of the Antwerp theatre conservatoire – Jolente De Keersmaecker (the choreographer's sister), Damiaan De Schrijver, Waas Gramser and Frank Vercruyssen – it became known for its refreshingly different style of staging the dramatic canon. Examples of this early phase of work include *Achter de canapé/Yvonne op* (after *Yvonne, Princess of Burgundy* by Witold Gombrowicz, [1989]) and *Het is nieuwe maan and het wordt aanzienlijk frisser* [*It's New Moon and It's Getting Considerably Chillier*]

2. Of the English-language productions, both *Point Blank* (1998) and *Berenice* (2005) were created in Lisbon, and *One 2 Life* (1996) in Oakland, California. The first French production by STAN was *Les Antigones* (2001), created in Toulouse. Currently, many of the company's productions are either created in a foreign language or performed in various languages.

(1991), a production composed from fragments taken from the work of Georg Büchner and Thomas Bernhard. Several STAN productions were selected for the annual Theaterfestival, including *My dinner with André* (1999) and *Vraagzucht [Questionism]* (2003). Recently, the company has also gained a wider international reputation by performing and creating plays in foreign languages.² It is, however, quite difficult to pin down what exactly STAN provides a model for. The collective does not have a definitive aesthetic programme, and labels and genre definitions fail entirely in the face of the diversity of its work. In many ways, in fact, STAN is always the odd one out. The company's practice clashes with the standard approach of most Continental repertoire companies. In contrast to the host of alternative 'devising' companies, performing dramatic (and other) texts remains its fundamental strength. Thus, it can be seen to tackle head on the problems surrounding contemporary productions of canonical classics, especially in the tradition of European 'director's theatre'. There is, first of all, the question of being 'faithful' to the playtext. The question of topicality follows: how can you make a repertoire piece relevant for the present day? Are such productions less relevant than new plays? And finally, there is also the matter of directing. Most repertoire productions depend heavily on the individual views and choices of a director, which STAN find unacceptable – they prefer a collective approach.

A radical dramaturgic re-reading of a well-known play is at the heart of their productions. This is the reason for their work being rendered 'political theatre' in Flanders, even if the political dimension resides more in the questions raised implicitly than in any explicit political 'message' offered. STAN devote almost their entire rehearsal period to a collective process of discussing the chosen play and translating it (into Dutch or English or French), especially exploring its contemporary relevance and resonance. At the same time, the company's unique method of working also foregrounds aspects of 'theatrical liveness'. Their distinctive performance style, which has become the other central trademark of STAN's practice, emphasises immediacy and the transparency of theatrical means. In some of the company's performances, textual work is directly combined with a heightened awareness of the performing body, especially in its collaborations with Anne Teresa De Keersmaecker's dance company Rosas. Examples include *In Real Time* (2000), in which STAN actors collaborated with Rosas and the musicians of Aka Moon, and *Nusch* (2006), a dialogue between an actor and a dancer. These productions in particular create a link to the political use of corporeality in Fabre's performances. With regards to STAN, however, this article will mainly focus on unpacking how the classical dramatic texts are imbued with new life, offering some examples of this alternative way of understanding the 'political' postdramatic aesthetics in contemporary Flemish theatre.

Working with canonical classics, STAN have little interest in discussing its 'faithfulness' to an original script, yet they do not simply postulate the topicality of a classic, or privilege the ominous 'director's vision'. Their ability to stay close to the script is at the core of their practice. While the written words may not simply be illustrated or rendered straightforwardly

in performance, STAN's extensive dramaturgic discussions in rehearsal often focus on the precise meaning of certain words, or on minute nuances of variant translations of a foreign text. In a way, this does not contradict the group's practice of taking the knife to texts, as in *Poquelin* (2003), its farcical collage of Molière's plays where it reduced the classical French comedies to the playwright's somewhat hysterical obsessions with sex and adultery. His plays were sewn together by STAN with big, rough stitches. Equally, *Vraagzucht* [*Questionism*] (2003) brought together fragments from several short stories, which were glued together. It took its prompt from the company's critical reflection on the US War on Terror and the then recent invasion of Iraq. This example, in particular, points out how STAN's unique repertoire does not resemble that of a standard repertoire company. The members of STAN constantly read and thus accumulate heaps of paper around them, and eventually a certain play, literary texts or even essays thrust themselves to the fore, driven, we would argue, by an element of political urgency. *Questionism*, as well as the earlier *JDX – A Public Enemy* (1993), which was based on Ibsen's classic play about political scandals (*An Enemy of the People*, 1882), are the most pertinent examples of this process. The latter may be read as the company's commentary on 'Black Sunday': the day (24 November 1991) of Antwerp's municipal elections when the racist, right-wing Vlaams Blok scored a landslide victory. Other examples include *Het is nieuwe maan en het wordt aanzienlijk frisser* [*It's New Moon and It's Getting Considerably Chillier*] (1992), a collage of texts by Georg Büchner and Thomas Bernhard and of American press briefings from the first invasion of Iraq, which painfully exposed the rhetoric of the war by, for instance, exploring the use of the phrase 'collateral damage'. *One 2 Life* (1996), another example of STAN's politically engaged theatre, was a documentary play about Black Panther activist Georges Jackson, based on his correspondence. All these productions emphasized how language is always suffused by ideological constructions. This was particularly exemplified in *The Monkey Trial* (2003), a courtroom drama based on an actual trial held in 1925 against a textbook writer in Tennessee. The trial served as the basis for a theatrical reconstruction with prosecutors, lawyers, witnesses and the accused. The performance demonstrated that it was not the elementary facts that were important in this trial, but rather the display of ideology through a refined use of rhetoric nuances.

A similar sensibility can also be traced in STAN's selection of plays from the canonical repertoire. It is no coincidence that the works of the company's preferred playwrights – Chekhov and Bernhard, but also Ibsen, Wilde and Shaw – all unearth and analyse the core of bourgeois mentality. For STAN, being 'truthful' to these texts also means reminding the audiences of the fact that today's canonical classics were often considered radical in their own times. In its interpretation of the plays, the company highlights traces of greed and intolerance in the atmosphere of languor of bourgeois society (as in Wilde and Chekhov's texts), and in the almost pathological attention that the characters pay to propriety. STAN's productions continually attempt to raise awareness of the fact that bourgeois vices may be present in the attitude of every member of the audience.

While specific choices of works from the dramatic repertoire are an important factor in STAN's work, the group's distinct approach to acting and performing is at the heart of its practice. It strongly believes in theatre's immediacy, which means that it repeatedly starts from the situation in the here and now. This, in fact, perfectly ties in with spending most of the rehearsal time discussing the project around a table. As a result, the actors do not simply 'deliver' their lines uncritically. They 'present' rather than perform the text, both to each other and to the audience. Only very few cues and dialogues will be properly rehearsed or blocked beforehand. There are no more than the most basic arrangements about what the performers would do and when, or how a particular line will be delivered. Instead, decisions can be made anew every evening. The performances may, and will, be different from night to night, which grants the acting a tremendous openness and directness. While, essentially, every theatre-maker has to start anew every night, the STAN performers seem to take this premise to the extreme, providing every audience with their own, unique, performance.

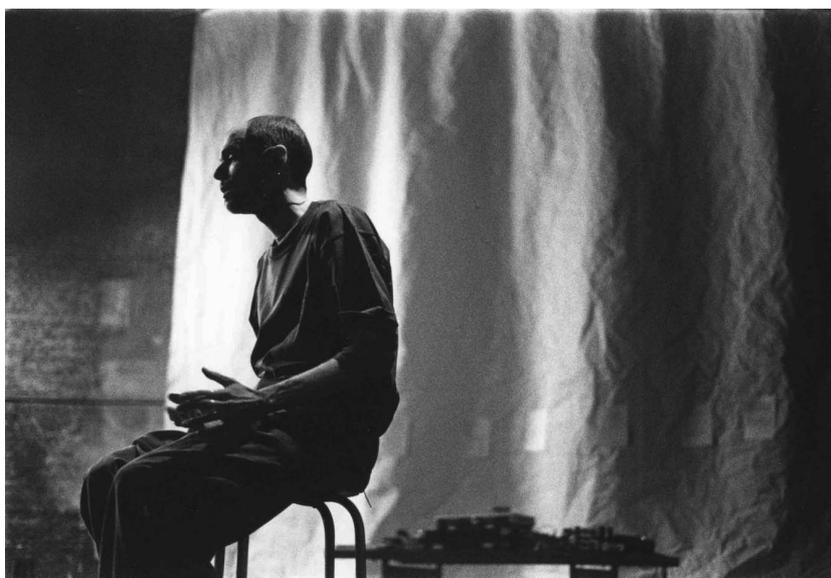


Image 1 'tg STAN do not have a definitive aesthetic programme, and labels and genre definitions fail entirely in the face of the diversity of their work. In many ways, in fact, STAN always are the odd ones out.' tg STAN's *Vraagzucht* [*Questionism*] (2003). Photographer: Bernaded Dexters. Courtesy of tg STAN.

STAN's 1999 production *Alles is rustig* [*All is Quiet*] was based on *Über allen Gipfeln ist Ruh* [*Over All the Mountain Tops*] (1981) by Austrian playwright Thomas Bernhard, who can be considered one of the company's favourite writers. We saw the play in Lyon (France) in 2007, eight years after its opening, and after it had toured (in both French and Dutch versions) the Netherlands, Germany, France, Portugal, Switzerland, Austria and Italy. Having a production in a company's repertoire for such a long time is exceptional, certainly in the Flemish context,

where most shows are only performed for a run of a few weeks. Yet, STAN operates its own repertoire system where any of its productions remain available to any theatre that wishes to put them on the programme again. The performance of *All is Quiet* in Lyon is a particularly useful example to demonstrate how productive such an approach can be. After eight years, the actors had acquired an intimate knowledge of Bernhard's play. This enabled them to invent on the spot rhetoric actions when presenting the original dialogues, true to their ethos of never repeating what they did the previous night, but instead reanimating the dialogues and actions. Even as professional spectators who have seen STAN's work and this particular production many times before, we were amazed at how new rhetoric games are produced again and again. Bernhard's dialogues, which can at times sound rather monotonous, are turned into music. Thus, the whining lament becomes a razor-sharp piece about history and its impact on the present day. STAN's use of rhetoric becomes its key to unlocking political overtones. Based on contrariness, this principle allows it to practise a rhetoric counter-reading. Instead of duplicating scripted emotions, it goes against the grain of the script's surface and looks for conflicts in a seemingly neutral passage.

Reviews of STAN's productions often evoke Brecht. This is partly justified, since the openness Brecht sought in his actors also applies here. STAN performers play with their characters, they distance themselves from their roles in order to comment on the action, and they decide upon the degree of intimacy they want to have with their role. One may describe their acting style as 'profane', in the sense that Brecht used this term in his 'Short Organum for the Theatre' (1948). It is important, according to Brecht, that actors do not understand their character 'too fast', so as to allow the contradictory acting style that is typical of epic theatre – that is, according to the axiom of 'Nicht-Sondern', not only showing what you show, but also showing that you are *not* showing the opposite position.³ Brecht's devices, meant to stimulate the spectator to think along with the actors in their critical presentation of the plot, are combined in STAN's work with central features of postdramatic performance. According to Hans-Thies Lehmann, postdramatic theatre privileges presence above representation, and allows for 'a specific experience of presence and ideally the equal co-presence of actors and spectators'.⁴ In this sense, Lehmann's description of postdramatic theatre performance as 'more process than product, more manifestation than signification, more energetic impulse than information' perfectly captures STAN's work.⁵ A good example is the above-mentioned *Vraagzucht* [*Questionism*]. The title refers to the diaries of Max Frisch, in which he collected questions, and which were one of the sources for this performance. The questions are simple but always disclose some deeper problematic: 'Would you wish to be your own wife?', 'If you have been married more than once, in what sense did these marriages resemble each other the most? At the beginning or at the end?' In STAN's production, actor Frank Vercruyssen was alone on the stage, and used questions like these to unsettle the audience. Then he took the audience on a journey through various stories by Max Frisch, Raymond Carver, Hanif Kureishi,

3. Bertolt Brecht, 'A Short Organum for the Theatre', in *Brecht on Theatre*, ed. by John Willett (London: Methuen, 1992), pp. 179–205.

4. Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. by Karen Jürs-Munby (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 123.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 85.

Haruki Murakami and Jamal Naji. His presentation of the stories was cool and relaxed, mixing them with music from a turntable he operated himself, or alternating with Frisch's biting questions. As with Brecht's concept of epic acting, the actor remained conscious of the presence of the audience, addressing the spectators directly and even inviting them to interrupt the show. Suddenly, halfway into the show, the 'War on Terror' kicked in: on a projection screen, Vercruyssen confronted the spectators with an overload of images from the military industry, consisting mainly of the newest aircraft used by the US military forces: an overwhelming, infernal slideshow illustrating the enormity of the American war arsenal. Vercruyssen first played on the visual eroticism of the images, zooming in on details, commenting on the technological prowess of the war machines. Then, he took up the questioning mode again and asked how much each one of the planes cost; how much this amount would represent if spent on social security, tackling unemployment, or Third World aid. Meanwhile he continued downloading more images of warplanes from the Internet, asking more questions, giving more prices and technical details.

Battling with numbers, images and equations, the production ultimately tried to make tangible the unimaginable, the unrepresentable aspect of this apocalyptic force of destruction. The performer became the translator, converting the virtual capabilities inherent in the statistics and images into the real, tangible and sensible. Obstinate, Vercruyssen continued to baffle the audience with more slides and more figures until the sheer repetition became nauseating, and the spectators were hit and felt uneasy deep down in their stomachs. The performance did not only convey a critical analysis of the industrial and economic realities behind the Iraq war, but above all strived for a shared experience of rage and despair. The documentary element relied not so much on analysis, as on immersing the audience, not unlike the classic political theatre of Erwin Piscator, yet without the ideological manifesto in hand.⁶ Being bombarded by military propaganda, the effect on the audience was that of documentary overload. Each spectator had to figure out what to do and how to react for him/herself.

Jan Fabre and the Politics of Theatrical Madness

While STAN foregrounds an engagement with the power of discourse and rhetoric, the work of Jan Fabre shows an obsession with, in Lehmann's terms, the liminal pain zone: 'Postdramatic theatre again and again transgresses the pain threshold in order to revoke the separation of the body from language'.⁷ Fabre's years of research into various aspects of pain may be connected to his own strong interest in science and scientific observation, which in his creations merges with other elements such as intuition and instinct. Fabre feels most closely related to biology. He shares a deep interest in the biological foundations of performing and performance processes with practitioners such as Vsevolod Meyerhold and Jerzy Grotowski. In his productions, he frequently tests the physical foundations of his performers, experimenting, for example, with the

6. Erwin Piscator, *The Political Theatre*, trans. by Hugh Rorrison (London: Methuen, 1980); Christopher Innes, *Erwin Piscator's Political Theatre: The Development of Modern German Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972).

7. Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, p. 96.

effects of exhaustion on the performers' motor capabilities, exploring the physical heat generated by the actors performing an endlessly repeated scene, or the bodily reactions to extremely loud screaming. Almost taking the role of a scientific researcher, Fabre alters the conditions of the body on stage, attempting to unearth and display the body's cultural history.

This can be traced back to the start of his theatrical career when, in 1980, after a period of solo performances, he gathered a number of actor-friends to create *Theater geschreven met een K is een kater* [*Theatre Spelled with a K is a Tomcat*]. It was the first part of a trilogy that also comprises *Het is theater zoals te verwachten en te voorzien was* [*It Is Theatre as to Be Expected and Foreseen*] (1982) and *De macht der theaterlijke dwaasheden* [*The Power of Theatrical Madness*] (1984). In this trilogy, Fabre examined theatre's potential, its boundaries, expectations and traditions. He turned theatre inside out in his desire to know what he could integrate in this medium. As far as form is concerned, these productions were more than disparate, yet each of them offered a distinct 'point of attack' on theatre. A mannerist approach characterized *The Power of Theatrical Madness*, theatre as ready-made was at the core of *It Is Theatre*, and the combative power of performance art was highlighted in *Theatre Spelled with a K*.⁸ The entire trilogy was underpinned by theatre's mediation between the fake and the real, the tension between illusion and reality, and between dreams and awakening. In each of the three productions he reached a point of radicalism, or an 'aesthetics of fright'.⁹ For Fabre, the key moment in the history of theatrical illusion is Richard Wagner's impressive *Ring des Nibelungen*. Wagner was the first composer and theatre-maker to dim theatre lights, thus emancipating a

8. The scripts of this trilogy, together with a DVD of each performance, have recently been published by L'Arche, Paris (2009).
9. Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, p. 142.



Image 2 'Almost taking the role of a scientific researcher, Fabre alters the conditions of the body on stage, attempting to unearth and display the body's cultural history.' Jan Fabre's *Histoire des larmes* [*History of Tears*] at the Palais des Papes as part of the 2008 Festival d'Avignon programme. Photographer: Wonge Bergmann. Courtesy of Jan Fabre/Troubleyn.

popular medium and turning it into an autonomous artistic product. *The Power of Theatrical Madness* quotes this emancipatory moment in an extremely long and painful scene, in which an actress is forcefully denied access to the stage. She scratches, bites and attempts to seduce the actor who is controlling the entrance to the stage; she curses and shouts, but the actor continues to reject her with a sphinx-like riddle that he repeats incessantly. Only when she can answer the question ‘1876?’ (i.e. the premiere date of the *Ring*) is she allowed back on stage, the place of birth of theatrical appearances.

Over the decades, Fabre has not lost any of the radicalism of his early years. His work still confronts and challenges the limits of theatricality, continuing to zoom in on the body as a biological organism. He focuses on bodily fluids or processes, such as the blood in *Je suis sang* [*I Am Blood*] (2001), or water in *L'Histoire des Larmes* [*History of Tears*] (2005), the brain in *De Koning van het Plagiaat* [*The King of Plagiarism*] (2005), and death in *Requiem für eine Metamorphose* [*Requiem for a Metamorphosis*] (2007). His more recent productions, however, which he created within a Flemish (and above all Antwerp-based) context of increasing xenophobia, have taken an explicit political turn. They were an angry commentary on the world's developments, reacting fiercely against a climate of conservatism. In his 2009 *Orgy of Tolerance*, the most political aspects of his work are brought to the fore. The orgy in the title referred to the ecstasy of consumption. The production centred on the assumption that the human condition in our late-capitalist, liberal western societies is first and foremost that of a consumer. In *Orgy of Tolerance*, humans are raised like shopping animals; their survival instincts are governed by consumerist behaviour. This production paints a picture of what Herbert Marcuse (already in the 1960s) demonstrated in his analysis of capitalism – namely, that it has become a mechanism of desire embedded in the human genes.¹⁰ The stage of *Orgy of Tolerance* is dominated by a set of sofas and armchairs. The couch is an extraordinary place in itself: a place to relax when at home, to get comfortable in anticipation of a moment of intimate pleasure. At the same time, it is the place from which the world is observed through television and other media. In other words, the quietest, most private cocoon is at the same time the place where images of violence, poverty, disease and mayhem enter. This ambivalence is played out to the full in the production: on Fabre's couch, the performers enthusiastically finger and jerk each other off. The couch becomes a kind of libidinal extension. One can ride it, rub oneself against it, come on or under it. *Orgy of Tolerance* exposes the illusion of couch happiness. The characters portrayed here are fundamentally lonely. They have been turned over to themselves, are full of themselves, their field of vision narrowed to a slit, a hole or a dildo which they suck and hold on to, following the momentum of an orgasm. Their well-being is weighed against their performance, which is evident from the opening scene, in which half of the performers (dressed only in their underwear) participate in a sort of masturbation competition, supported and encouraged by the other performers, who figure as personal coaches dressed up as prototypical freedom fighters with berets and rifles. When the

10. Robert Paul Wolff, Barrington Moore, Jr., and Herbert Marcuse, *A Critique of Pure Tolerance* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969).

participants climax, the coaches make sure they start over and over again. The one who comes the most is the winner. When the Beatles song *Come Together* blares out of the speakers, it forces the audience to reflect that these ‘orgiasts’ are nothing but painfully lonely masturbators locked inside their own tiny world.

Orgy of Tolerance reveals the decay of the human race. Tales from the daily race to consume are depicted, most memorably in the scene where the actors perform a farcical dance with shopping carts to a Viennese waltz by Johann Strauss. Fabre paints a portrait of the consuming human being, often with surrealistic undertones. However, beneath that weighty burlesque there is a constant threat, a sense of disquiet and danger. For instance, in one scene, ‘bad’ consumers are being tortured for not having acquired the most recent technological gadgets. Another scene features a female gallery manager who savours the letters of applicants by testing them on her skin. She caresses the paper until she finds the sharpest edge, then uses it to cut the skin of her ear lobe, the corners of her mouth, and her genitals. The applicant whose letter she finds most stimulating (physically) is sure to get the job. For the audience, burlesque impressions alternate with feelings of abhorrence. The spectator is being dragged along by scenes that are simultaneously disgusting and tantalizing. This is precisely the perversion that is exposed at the heart of this production: On the couch, we are all victims of our own orgy of tolerance.

Fabre’s hallmark lies in showing this political commitment by commenting on aspects of our consumer society through a purely physical performance. *Orgy of Tolerance*, like almost every Fabre show, is a demonstration of physical skills and corporeal energy by actors who are transformed into the many extreme characters they play. As previously mentioned, Fabre is fascinated by the biology of the body, but he does not pose as a pure biologist.¹¹ By nature, scientists are inclined towards determinism. They search for the causes of behaviour in the chemical components of the body, or in inherited instincts from distant stages of human development. Fabre, however, is much more interested in variations and escape routes. More than in the tenacity of the building block, he believes in the power of the builder: the power to push oneself in a certain direction beyond the chemistry of the body, the power to follow, both mentally and physically, a more autonomous path. It is not the human species as such that dominates in Fabre’s work, but the autonomy of the individual; hence the constant theme of transformation and metamorphosis in his work. His performers take on many shapes. In *Orgy of Tolerance*, they easily change from high-class members of a hunting party into Abu Ghraib victims, or from a Jesus-look-alike fashion model into a sexual pervert. Fabre strongly believes that we can create our own body, free from the constrictions of the laws that control it. There is a strong link to the work of the French theatre visionary Antonin Artaud in Fabre’s methodologies. A key aspect of Artaud’s body image is that it is subject to heterogeneous forces. Torn by conflicting impulses, the body is at the centre of a force field of energies which impose their will on to it. At the invitation of Muziektheater Transparant, Fabre wrote a play-text entitled ‘A Tribe Is What I Am’, commissioned for the 2004 production *Men in Tribulation*, directed by Eric Sleichim. Fabre was

11. He also refers to his method of acting, which he teaches in the training of his performers and in the many workshops he offers, as ‘biological acting’.

12. Jan Fabre, *Ik ben een fout: Theaterscripts en theaterteksten 1975–2004* (Antwerpen/Amsterdam: Meulenhoff/Manteau, 2004), p. 663. Our translation.
13. Antonin Artaud, 'Nerve-Scales', in: *Collected Works*, ed. by Victor Corti (London: Calder & Boyars, 1968–1974), vol. 1, p. 74.

mainly inspired by the texts of Artaud's collection *L'Ombilic des Limbes* [*Umbilical Limbo*] from 1925. However, more important than Fabre's literal echoes of Artaud, is the underlying intention of his text: a plea for the benefits of pain and disease; a plea for the re-creation of man; a quest for freedom, for the liberation of God in the divine; and finally the desire 'to explore other sources / and to enter in contact with / a new reality / To allow / meetings of a more subtle and rare nature'.¹² It is the same desire for wholeness, for physical and mental re-creation, that permeated Artaud's work: 'I now only have one task, to make myself'.¹³ Like Artaud, Fabre is not only a biologist, but also a demiurge. He strives to create his own organic living form. The versatility of the human body leaves space to escape.

Fabre's predominantly physical and visual model of postdramatic theatre practice complements the textual-critical model of STAN. Both employ highly specific strategies to make a political intervention on the contemporary stage. Fabre's approach is inspired by the biology of the acting process, but he also seeks to evade biological determinism by focusing on the potential of his performers for transformation and metamorphosis. Where his strategy carries motives of the historical avant-garde further – in particular, the concept of 'self-creation' in the work of Artaud – STAN can be related to a postdramatic reevaluation of Brechtian impulses, where they deliver (rather than perform) texts on stage, and their inventive topical performance-plays such as *Questionism* invoke Piscator. It is from this angle that their prototypically 'postdramatic' working methods and aesthetics effectively raise political issues, while also opening up historical and contemporary links that contribute to the dense contextual network of these performances.