

## **My Metadrama**

On the Function of Jargon, Language, and Discourse in my Work as a  
Theater Maker

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### **Career Choice: Actress, Theater Scholar, or Theater Maker?**

It is the last weekend of June, 2011. Right before the beginning of summer, art students, artists, and other professionals join forces for the so-called “Mars der Beschaving” (“March of Civilization”). The March is the art community’s collective response to the drastic cuts in the budget for culture and the arts that were announced earlier that year by Halbe Zijlstra, the Dutch Minister of Education, Culture, and Science at that time. The disastrous policy the government was keen to implement, afflicted the entire arts scene in the Netherlands, even up until today.<sup>1</sup>

I am in my third year at the drama school of Maastricht and it will take me one more year before I graduate as an actress. As I find the Dutch government’s policy so off-putting, I decide to put on my most comfy sneakers, join the March, and walk from Rotterdam to The Hague in a huge procession of disillusioned colleagues and friends. “There is no future for theater students!” I hear some professional theater people exclaiming. The same professionals are even today still forced to juggle with financial budgets in order to keep their heads above water. According to them, there is no use in graduating as an actor after the recent government reforms, which amount to nothing less than a straightforward “bulldozing” of the arts scene in the Netherlands.

The March made me realize that, if I wanted to pursue a career in theater, I had to take control over my situation and create job opportunities for myself—however difficult that seemed back then. I blew a layer of dust off my MacBook, which until then I had only used to compile iTunes playlists for the obligatory dance performances at the Maastricht drama school. I tried to reprogram my brain, and get it back in the analytical mode in which it had been for several years, when I was studying Theater Studies at the University of Antwerp, right before my actor’s training in Maastricht.<sup>2</sup> I started typing, hoping there was still some part of my mind that could think like a proper theater scholar.

A week later, I finished my application for a talent development grant, issued by the Flemish province of Limburg, the province that I was born and raised in. My application was approved and the funding enabled me to develop the concept for my first performance in the professional field. My concept “note” ended up being a heavy 200 pages. With this conceptual chunk under my arm, I traveled by train to Rotterdam, Amsterdam, Genk, Leuven, Neerpelt, Ghent, and Antwerp, hoping to find the necessary funds to realize this once-in-a-lifetime masterplan. At that time, I was not really concerned with expanding my professional network or with positioning myself in the field, because I didn’t have the determined ambition to create my own work. I was simply graduating from acting school, facing a period of structural unemployment and secretly hoping this project would help me find a job as an actress. Once I succeeded in finding more acting jobs by doing creative projects like these, it is not surprising I found the latter the most attractive: creating my own shows is my primary focus now. The acting jobs are definitely inspiring, but always secondary to my own creative work.

Looking back at that decision to write my first grant application, which was also my first thorough dramaturgical concept, I realize it has been a formative experience. Not only because of the outcome (and I will say more on this below), but also because it urged me to put into words what kind of theater I wanted to make and how I planned on doing it. Several years have passed since then, but the craft of writing applications in order to find funding for the realization of my artistic ideas has become a crucial aspect of my professional practice. Especially since I work on a freelance basis, jumping between temporary contracts or projects that are subsidized. For many artists, developing a solid discourse on their practice is thus a vital skill, if not a survival strategy. I will use this essay as an opportunity to look with some distance at the role of jargon, language, discourse, and text in my work as a theater maker, in relation to both the writing of funding applications and the manner in which I deal with language during my creative processes. Broad notions such as language or text can obviously cover many things, which is why I first want to clarify my specific understanding of each of these terms.

When I speak of “language” in this article, I use it as an overarching term for the “means to make thoughts and feelings known,” which is the (admittedly general) definition of language one can find in the standard Dutch *Van Dale Dictionary*. With “text,” I refer to the written script that underlies a theater performance, whether it is a classic play from the dramatic repertoire, a newly written text, or a text created through improvisations. Put simply, the “text” comprises that which

is said by the actors in a performance piece. The category of “jargon”, then, includes the language I use to describe to colleagues and committees my own practice as a theater maker, in particular the language I develop to write funding applications. But “jargon” also covers the policy discourse on art, since – as I will also discuss in more detail below – writing applications requires me to navigate between my own terminology as an artist and the one used by policymakers who are in charge of granting subsidies to applying artists. In this respect, it struck me that the definition of “jargon” in *Van Dale Dictionary* already bears a negative connotation, since it is described as “language that is difficult to understand for outsiders.” With “discourse,” I have in mind the more profound dialogue on a specific work of art, an entire oeuvre, or an artist. This dialogue can take place at different levels: between the artwork and society, between different works of art and artists, between the artist and his or her own work, between art theory and art practice, between art practice and other practices. In this sense, discourse is a deeper and more embedded form of talking about / with art.

Throughout this essay, I use these different terms to construe a somewhat chronological trajectory that runs from the funding application to the preliminary research, to the actual creative process, until finally the reception of and discourse on my work. Knowing that in reality the different aspects of my artistic practice often overlap, depicting them in this manner helped me to develop a clearer view.

### **Funding Applications: Talent Development and the Dramaturgical Jargon**

My first quest for funding did lead to actual results: when I graduated in 2011, I already had four co-producers, a budget of 15.000 euro, and the show was booked ten times in different theaters throughout Belgium and the Netherlands. In the summer after my graduation, I also submitted a funding application to the Dutch Performing Arts Fund (Fonds Podiumkunsten), which was evaluated positively. So during the year I entered the professional field, my first Flemish-Dutch co-production became a fact: supported by a full production budget, I went into the Flemish woods, together with the Dutch performance collective Urland,<sup>3</sup> to turn Heiner Müller’s 1980 theater play *Kwartet* (*Quartet*) into a death metal ballad. Hence the title, *Kwartet: Een powerballad* (*Quartet: A Powerballad*).



Figure 7.1. Umland / Naomi Velissariou, *Kwartet*:  
*Een powerballad* (2013). © Jochem Jurgens

I graduated six years ago and, to this very day, I wonder how many people actually read those 200 neatly bound pages back then. I know for sure that at least one person did go through the effort. During my internship as an actress in 2011 at Frascati Productions in Amsterdam, the Artistic Director Mark Timmer invited me for a talk on my phonebook-heavy concept for *Quartet: A Power Ballad*, which I had sent him earlier that year. The morning of the appointment, I found myself standing in my tiny Amsterdam studio, wondering whether I should wear my new polka dot dress in order to make a more shiny impression (in the end, I was in the Netherlands and had just decided to become an actress); or to go for the quasi-casual, hipster-intellectual look and to jump on my bike in the tracksuit I was wearing, with my MacBook under my arm.

For some obscure reason, I chose the first option and, a bike ride through some soaring winds later, I sat blushing across that one person who had actually read my voluminous concept “note.” The first question he asked: “Are you a theater maker or a graduating actress looking for a job, Naomi?” I took a deep breath, picked a fluff of a polka dot, and answered with a half-braven face: “I will graduate as an actress, but I am a theater maker. I think.” I don’t remember exactly how this talk – which afterwards turned out to be a somewhat hidden job interview – proceeded, but it all ended well: despite my polka dots (and thanks to my concept “note”?), I got my first job at a production house.

By the end of the 2016-17 theater season, I had worked for over five years at Frascati and it was time for my so-called “outflow.”<sup>4</sup> By that time, I had come to understand that funding applications have clearly circumscribed formats: they are rarely longer than 5.000 words and the section devoted to actual content should not exceed half a page. Also coping with co-producers is now no longer such an intense activity that I have to be on the train for several days. It currently comes down to a few eloquent emails, followed by some phone calls with carefully maintained contacts. I have learned a lot about “cultural entrepreneurship” by now and I ardently use this knowledge, developing new projects.

The Dutch government has a heavily regulated policy regarding what they call “talent development.” This policy urged me to develop a particular jargon to describe my work. I taught myself to use certain buzzwords that are recognizable for policymakers, such as “learning goals,” “marketing strategy,” and “pluriformity.”<sup>5</sup> During the first five years after graduating, I have tried to sharpen my language in such a way that it became specific enough to demonstrate the relevance of my work to the committees and at the same time ambiguous enough

to continue developing my work without immediately having to commit myself to an existing style. I wanted to be clear in articulating my artistic quest and honest in expressing its infinity. In their terms, I was hoping to “contribute to the pluralism of the performing arts scene,” without being pinpointed to labels such as “generational art,” “migrant theater,” or “lecture performance.”

The jargon I have tried to develop may seem schizophrenic, insofar as it attempts to meet both the demands of the committees and my own aspirations. In order to clarify the kind of language I used to achieve this aim, it is illuminating to consider briefly the first paragraph of an application I wrote in 2015. I was applying for a grant called “subsidie nieuwe makers” (subsidy new makers).<sup>6</sup> When I eventually received the grant, it enabled me to finance my last two years at Frascati, before my ultimate “outplacement.” In the opening paragraph of the application, I described myself as follows:<sup>7</sup>

Naomi uses philosophical, scientific, and personal ideas as the basis for her work, but contemporary pop culture also plays an important role. She represents a new generation of theater makers who create performances in which the dramatic itself is the subject. This is not a theater about the theater, but a theater about a theatricalized reality. Her main theme is identity and the way in which identity is consciously construed through image and media.

The three adjectives I used in the first sentence were symptomatic of my former fear of labeling. Because, let’s be honest, most ideas or insights can be called “philosophical,” “scientific,” or “personal,” which renders these broad categories hardly distinctive of any artistic work. However, these terms do tend to have a certain appeal to most committee members, who love to see an artist’s practice cover a broad range of societal or cultural issues. Yet the most interesting part of the quoted passage is perhaps the paradox it harbors: by using in that very first sentence a rather outdated term as “pop culture,” I actually suggest that my work is incredibly up-to-date and relevant to our present time. While anyone familiar with postmodernism knows that the distinction between high culture and pop culture has long been abolished, the reference to pop culture makes a good opening for an application because, in this specific context, it hints at a sexy content or a contemporary aesthetic that spectators can relate to.

Other rather outdated terms too, like “punk” and “multidisciplinary,” usually work well for the average committee member, as well as “identity construction,”

“visual culture,” and – of course – “diversity.” These words trigger something that has to do with our present time, evoking associations of art as embedded in today’s world and addressing important issues about the society we live in. These are not the terms you would use for sales texts or program leaflets. Here, you would replace “visual culture” with “Instagram,” “identity construction” with “lifestyle,” “diversity” with “street,” and “punk” with “hip-hop.” Otherwise, only white quality-newspaper-reading aficionados between the age of 35 and 65 will buy a ticket for your show, and you obviously don’t want that.

### **The Preliminary Research: From Dramatic Jargon to the Big “Why”**

When your application is accepted, you usually have the opportunity to do preliminary research before the start of the actual rehearsals. For my artistic practice, this research is pivotal. I regard it as “financed thinking time.” Time in which I am allowed to do nothing else but think (instead of having to squeeze this time in between more lucrative activities, such as acting in television series or working in a bar).

The most crucial aspect of this research period is that it enables me to leave behind the dramaturgical discourse. I deliberately exploit that discourse in my search for funding, but it hardly serves me during the artistic process. Between finding the money to create a theater show and the actual creation of that show, there is a very important step: imagining what show you are in fact going to create. It seems obvious that, when submitting a funding application, one has already determined to a large extent the features of the show. In most cases, however, these first descriptions are pure bluff, simply because an artistic process does not work like this. Making theater (or any kind of art) is not about *preconceiving* exactly what you are going to do, how and with whom you plan to do it. Even if you have certain ideas about this (which you may or may not have written down in your application), you will rarely carry them out in exactly that manner. Of course, for artists who have been working in a fixed format or with a fixed team for years, there might be a straight line running from the conception of a piece to its actual staging. For young theater makers, however, it is a long shot to determine more than one year in advance what the next step in their artistic process will be.<sup>8</sup> Even more, writing it down can be counterproductive, because it suggests that creating art amounts to nothing more than filling in the blanks of a rationally preconceived structure.

I use the phase of preliminary research to make my ideas sensorial again, in order to get “re-inspired” by my main theme or the source material. The crucial activity

I forbid myself to get involved in while developing the application but which the research phase allows me to indulge in, is free association—to bring in everything that does not have a direct, logical link to my topic, but relates to it associatively. To draw my initial idea out of its theoretical context and add new, more intuitive layers of meaning to it. This generally comes down to locking myself up in a rehearsal space for a few weeks, with a camera, a laptop, liters of coffee, and hip-hop in the background, in order to develop some performance material, make playlists and mood boards, and create characters. Sometimes I put the camera on my feet and interview myself, sometimes I make a large wall chart with keywords and slogans, and sometimes I binge-watch YouTube tutorials about practically everything. During this research period, I stay in touch with my artistic team, since free association is usually the best way to generate organic ideas about the set, light or sound design, costumes, and text of the performance.

Until now, I have never worked with existing texts or repertoire in my performances. I sometimes write myself, but mostly I collaborate with writer Rik van den Bos, whom I like to think of as my artistic partner.<sup>9</sup> The development of the text generally runs parallel to the research stage. When I write myself, research and writing coincide completely; if I work with Rik, research and writing alternate. After six years of collaborating, Rik and I have developed through trial-and-error our own “writing system”: I come up with a plan, he makes a proposal on paper, I rework that proposal in the rehearsal studio and come up with a next plan, we repeat this system of alternations until there is a text. The writing process is generally fueled by a vast and diverse range of information and sources related to the theme of the piece.

During the research stage, I also develop most of the marketing material, since I find this distracting to deal with during the rehearsal period. Developing this content also ties in more neatly with the research stage, as the marketing of my work consists for me of setting up small formal exercises that help me find the proper aesthetic for the not yet existing performance. For my last shows, I expanded the PR material beyond its merely functional purpose by making it a part of my artistic research. I have been exploring various formats for creative marketing, such as staged interviews with myself, writing essays on the theme of the performance, or colloquia with experts on the subject in question.<sup>10</sup>

In general, the research phase is of vital importance to me because otherwise I would make “waterproof art”, dramaturgically correct theater with each artistic element being a symbol for something else and thus constituting a web of

references that can be read as a consistent whole, since they are all inspired by the same theoretical idea. If I would skip the preliminary research, I would disregard an essential element of the creative process: to answer the question, “what is my reason for making this work of art?”. The answer to this “*why?*”-question often lies in something much smaller than an overarching theme, philosophy, theory, or even a fascination. The reason *why* I need to make a piece is generally a personal, almost intimate issue that is utterly important at that specific time in my life. That is why I want to go through this “pre-process” on my own and preferably not on paper. Because once I find myself in an empty space, with nothing more than my mind and my body, I quickly get a genuine sense of what it is all about, what the urgency is, the core of my idea. Even if I cannot put exactly into words what happens at that moment, it does serve as an intuitive framework that helps me to make artistic choices during later stages of the creative process (for instance, when a team of fifteen people is staring at me with questions about lighting, soundscape, psychological motivations, or transitions between scenes). I allow myself to doubt any kind of “how”-question during the creative process, but I oblige myself to have answered the “why”-question before I begin with rehearsals, because otherwise I run the risk of undermining my own creative ideas with rationalized arguments later on in the process.

During the research for *A Tragedy (Simplified)*, a performance I created in 2013, the “why”-question revealed itself gradually and almost accidentally. With this piece, I wanted to analyze my own life as if it were a classic tragedy. Using the action scheme of the negative protagonist (a dramaturgical model I stole from Aristotle’s *Ars Poetica*), I dissected my own family history. I spent weeks in a rehearsal studio floundering with texts and music. At one point, I realized that I had been sitting on the floor of the room for about seven days, re-enacting my entire family history by toying around with coffee cups, tea bags, sugar cubes, and spoons. When the tea bag – standing in for my sister – suddenly began to preach to the spoon – representing me – everything fell into place. It finally occurred to me *why* for Christ’s sake I had to make this piece about the contemporary value of classical dramatic schemes. I discovered that I was making this piece *because* I wanted to find out whether I was responsible for the fact that my sister’s life was in ruins.<sup>11</sup> All aesthetic and substantive choices could be brought down to that one simple and far too personal question. I obviously took this central question out of its context again in order to make the personal theatrical and universal, but for me, as an artist, the true necessity of the work resided precisely in this one concrete question.



Figure 7.2. Naomi Velissariou, *A Tragedy (Simplified)* (2013). © Anna van Kooij

Once I have answered the “why?” for myself, the directorial concept – or the concrete plan of how I want to give shape to the piece – emerges by itself. In the case of *A Tragedy (Simplified)*, I knew from this point on that the whole performance had to be an evasive movement, a distraction from the facing of any guilt. To this end, I came up with the idea of making an actual entertainment show, which served as an extended delay of the end scene: the inevitable confrontation between me and my sister. Thus, after the asking of the “why?”-question, my preliminary research was thus aimed at exploring as many styles as possible that could help me to avoid this confrontation: a piece of Bill Hicks-style stand-up comedy as a diverting intro; a shadow narrative in which I turned myself into Elektra and my family history into the story of the house of Labdakos; a lecture performance on the Aristotelian action scheme in order to frame the piece against a quasi-theoretical background; a 1970s Diamanda Galas-like performance as a fake dramatic culmination; a music performance in which I adopt the physical appearance of Klaus Kinsky and make various statements on the financial crisis in Greece in order to add a supposedly political dimension to the personal theme. In short, I integrated everything that in my opinion was associatively related to the core theme of the piece, although these formal interventions were primarily meant to avoid any kind of honest dialogue between my sister and me. This had the effect of throwing spectators off the scent in their attempt to figure out what the piece was actually about. The “trick” of the piece consisted in evading the “why”-question in an interesting way for 50 minutes and to wait until the very last 10 minutes before trying to ask it in such an honest manner that spectators would be startled by it.

### **The Rehearsal: A Physical Form of Text Treatment**

I use the research phase to abandon the dramaturgical language of the application and to get into a more associative creative mode. During the actual rehearsal process, language is again put at the forefront. But rather than jargon, language here refers to text, which in my work serves – as briefly mentioned earlier – as the primary means to communicate with my audience.<sup>12</sup> Because my love for language preceded my love for the theater, it is language that during the rehearsals always takes the upper hand over, for instance, stage design, physicality, or psychology.

Over the years I have developed my own acting method, which is probably a melting pot of the various types of education I have gone through. Since about four years, I have been teaching this method in several drama schools across the Netherlands (including Arnhem, Maastricht, and Amsterdam). Even though I

call it a method, I should stress that it is anything but an absolute truth about acting. Instead, it offers actors a way to relate to a text, prior to any form of rehearsal or staging. You could also describe it as a kind of “text treatment,” even though it is ultimately about a lot more than only the text. The bottom line of the method is to extract the meaning from the text *before* learning it by heart. This sounds like a very obvious thing to do, but I find that it is in fact a very unusual approach for most actors and directors. Generally, actors are asked to learn their text before they start rehearsing a scene. During rehearsals, then, they “discover” the meaning of their words, together with the director. To me, this seems a very inefficient way of working.

My text treatment method consists of “replacing” all the words and sentences in the text by images and thoughts, in order to focus on the *content* represented by the language instead of the language itself. The primary and again obvious aim of this approach is to prompt the actor to actually *think* what he or she says at the very moment he or she is saying it, rather than just uttering a sequence of words.

When I work with actors or students (yet I do the same in my own practice), I make this text treatment physical by means of a “drill exercise,” to ensure that the images and thoughts actually enter into the body. This exercise is meant to be quite exhausting: I have the actors run through the space, throwing and catching a ball between them, while saying their lines. If I hear any word that was not linked to an image in their heads, I shout it back to them.<sup>13</sup> They then have to repeat the phrase in which the word appeared, just as long until the image corresponding to the word is etched in their memory. While they are saying their lines, it is important that they never stop running and throwing or catching the ball. Because it is in the multitasking and interaction that they develop a subconscious understanding of what they are saying. Having done this exercise with different groups of students, I learned they usually go through similar stages. They start by looking somewhat bored at hearing the obvious bottom line: “extract the meaning from the text before learning it... – of course, what else?” When playing around with the ball, then, they initially think it is an exercise typical of drama school. Yet after a while, they start forgetting their lines, and some even briefly lose their ability to speak. Because of this lack of control, they get angry (mostly at me). When they finally get beyond that anger, they feel so tired that they simply say their lines, as if these were their own words. In other words: they become one with the language. And this was precisely the aim of the exercise.

The multitasking and exhaustion caused by the the drill exercise drives the actors into a state of hyper-concentration, a lucid state (which is not the same as an emotional one). The energy they build up prohibits them from thinking anything besides what they are saying. It cleanses the text from all psychological subtext and from all possible preconceived intentions that actors might have come up with before they go into rehearsal. Tons of oxygen are literally pumped into their brain and, as they are preoccupied with the multitasking, there is no more room for anticipations, uncertainties, or subtext. Because of the physical and mental overstimulation, they are left with only two reference points: the text and each other. They share the same pulse, the same space, and the same concentration on the images inside the language. As such, they get slightly “hypnotized” by the text while finding each other in its content.

The greatest merit of all this is that, once actors have gone to the edge and experienced physically what the text can do with them (and what using their body can do to the way they approach the text), everything falls finally and definitely into place. The actors acquire a kind of “positive language trauma,” a physical reminder of the content, which means that they will never be able to say the words again without understanding (both rationally and sensually) what they stand for. One can of course repeat the exercise just before going on stage as a warm up and to keep the body and mind sharp, but the primary aim of the method has already been achieved by then.

As I write this down, I realize it may seem like some crash course or miraculous panacea for actors. In practice, however, it is a considerably meticulous, intense, and lengthy process, depending on the openness of the actors, their sense of language as well as their physical fitness (the process usually takes longer when actors have little sense for language but are physically in good shape). The method also serves as my own preparation when I work as an actress. Before a director shoots his or her first instructions at me, I make sure I have done this exercise as my homework, regardless of the acting style, content, or form of the specific show. My starting point as an actress, director, theater maker, or teacher is always the same. It all comes down to content, and the way content is contained in language.<sup>14</sup>

If I explain this method to someone, without being able to have that person actually experience it, it usually sounds pretty rigid, technical, and perhaps even counter-inspiring. Ultimately, it is a sort of syntax analysis, a physical form of linguistics, in which I seek for concrete and abstract images to flash up from the

text. These are mostly present in nouns and verbs, and to a certain extent in adjectives. I am convinced that, if you let yourself and your acting be guided by images, instead of appealing absolutisms (such as “never,” “everyone,” “always,” “everything,” or “nobody”) or personal pronouns (most actors put too much emphasis on words like “I,” “you,” “my,” and “your”), you arrive at a much richer form of communication with your audience, since it is driven by imagery and content instead of ego and sentiment. In other words, the less actors are preoccupied with their acting, the more they see in their mind’s eye and the more the audience will experience. The text thus becomes a living organism: the written characters turn into human beings, each style figure unveils its dramatic potential, each noun sounds like an image in your mind, and each verb like a movement (no matter how abstract or concrete they may be). Through this exercise, the text transforms into a score of images and thoughts. The actors’ hyper-concentrated state of being makes them follow their first-degree impulses, with the result that their acting acquires an inner logic and becomes, apart from credible, very lively and unpredictable.

It is important to point out that this method has nothing to do with dramaturgy. It is impossible to enact dramaturgy. Dramaturgical indications (such as “in the post-war climate everything was loaded with an enormous sense of guilt”) or applied dramaturgy (such as “the crux of the scene is halfway through your second reply”) are of little help to actors. These are theoretical constructs formulated from a distance and, even though they might be useful for directors to reflect on their work, they are lethal to the instinct and imagination of an actor. The only kind of directions that I understand as an actress are the ones that literally refer to what is going on on stage: “You see his shoulders and realize that you want him back,” or “You feel so ugly that you don’t know how to push that bite of spaghetti down your throat.” When I perform in my own work, I find it crucial to nourish myself with these kinds of assignments. Otherwise, I would start acting with the outcome of the piece in mind, as I know better than anyone else where I want it to arrive. Acting-as-creating, being both the creator of the piece *and* its performer, is a continuous battle between distance and devotion. The distance you need in order to obtain a dramaturgical overview and the devotion you need in order to forget about all this when you enter the stage.

I am aware that the idea of “think-what-you-say-at-the-moment-you-say-it” appears to be a direct legacy of the acting style of theater groups such as Maatschappij Discordia, whose key principle for actors is to “reside in the present moment,” the “here and now” of the performance. What defines my acting

method in relation to these approaches is that they are similar means to opposite ends, as I will explain in the following section.

### **The Reception: From Jargon to Discourse**

If the work I have created so far belongs to a certain style or movement, I can only define its features based on what others have written about it. This means I need the terms of art criticism, or – as I will call it hereafter – the *discourse* that has emerged because of my work and that of others.

When I say “criticism,” I am not referring to reviews. For artists, reviews are rarely useful. They mostly serve to guide newspaper subscribers in how to spend their free time and are often way too short or, even worse, hastily written to make a significant contribution to the discourse on an artist’s practice. This makes it even more painful that reviews often have a decisive influence on ticket sales, the selection for festivals, and sometimes even on the awarding of funding.<sup>15</sup> In the context of this essay, I would like to leave the subject of reviews aside and focus instead on discourse: the potentially deeper and more substantive dialogue between the work of a theater artist and its analysis by a theater theorist (instead of a theater critic). In my young professional career, I had the opportunity to enter into such a dialogue a few times. The most substantial exchange was spurred by Simon van den Berg. In his contribution to the survey of the 2013-14 theater season published by the Dutch magazine *De Theatermaker* (*The Theater Maker*), van den Berg wrote the following:

From the beginning of the twentieth century, theater makers have investigated, deconstructed, and renewed the classical repertoire; postdramatic performances have taken a hard look at the principles of drama; and now we see how a younger generation is applying these ideas on the role and functioning of drama to the world. Their ultimate aim is to make propositions on how theater can still say something on a complex reality for which dramatic schemes fall short. This seems to be *metadramatic theater*: performances that take “the dramatic” itself as their subject. (Van den Berg n.p.; italics added)

After introducing the term “metadrama,” van den Berg continues by stating that metadramatic theater artists have forsaken a major Dutch tradition in contemporary theater. This tradition sought to establish a relationship between theater and reality by highlighting the present moment of the performance.<sup>16</sup> According to van den Berg, however, a younger generation of artists (to which I,

in his opinion, belong) has been exploring new strategies that go beyond the mere emphasis on the situated and temporal nature of theater. He draws the contrast between the older and newer generations as follows:

The unobtrusive, ironic acting style of Discordia, 't Barre Land, STAN and the countless other directors and performers who were influenced by them, always turned the audience into a co-thinker and co-creator of the show. These [younger] artists, however, rather look at German examples, such as as René Pollesch, Rimini Protokoll, or Vegard Vinge. Theater makers like Laura van Dolron or Marjolijn van Heemstra wanted to respond to the mediocracy by staging themselves as timid, inquisitive, and vulnerable characters. Velissariou does exactly the opposite as she turns herself into a hyper-slick media personality. (ibid.)

This last sentence primarily applies to the performances I created during that particular season, while in the meantime I have explored also some different directions. Yet the most important point is that van den Berg rightly suggests that I deliberately distanced myself from the “here and now”-principle that the generations before me turned into a prevailing artistic credo.<sup>17</sup> Because the current “here and now” is definitely not the same as twenty years ago.<sup>18</sup> Because reality now is already theatricalized, even before we can make theater of it.

Reality itself is now dominated by the fictional. It has indeed become a platitude to say that we all construe our own identities in a digitally technologized culture of endless possibilities. We work hard to keep our Instagram account bustling with likes; we maintain parasocial relationships with characters from HBO series; we capture moments from our everyday life and color them with smart filters; and we ride our bikes through metropolitan cities listening to personalized Spotify soundtracks, protected from the city noise by a pair of oversized hipster headphones.

The idea of a continuous construction of identity has therefore not only become a commonplace in art criticism. For my generation of artists, it is – just like the notion of multidisciplinary – a given fact, almost a premise of art, which we don't even want to question or criticize anymore. For my own artistic practice, the logical consequence of this fictionalized reality is that fiction necessarily fulfills a different function in theater than it did a few decades ago. To put it bluntly: because the present moment is already fiction, “authenticity” and “realness” become problematic terms when speaking about theater.

Rather than showing the performer behind the character (or the reality behind the fiction), my work actually does the opposite: the only thing you get to see is characters, precisely because the performers were already characters in the first place. Yet the key difference between these characters and those in (classical) dramatic repertoire is that they are aware of themselves being a character. This consciousness enables them to analyze their own suffering at the very same time as they are undergoing it. In contrast to classical characters, who are often suffering because of what is happening to them, these metadramatic characters are the victims of their excessive self-awareness: while they can lucidly analyze their condition, this does not alleviate their suffering. On the contrary, this analysis only makes it worse, because they can never step out of their role. A quote from my performance *Sontag* (2017) exemplifies perhaps most clearly what I mean by this. At a certain point during the piece, the character named “the critic” says this:

The horror is not the fact that there are two worlds. The outside world and the way we behave in it, on the one hand, and on the other hand, the true version of ourselves that we are deep down inside and which is fundamentally misunderstood by the outside world. The horror lies in the fact that there’s only one world. This one. Look at me. ... There is no one else behind this behavior. And if there ever was, then he has rotted years ago. Like when you crack a walnut and notice that the nut has already perished. All that remains is a little membrane in an empty space. (Van den Bos 12)

The problem these metadramatic characters are facing, is not that they are trapped in a dramatic construction, but that they are well aware of the ingenuity of that construction and of the fact that this awareness makes no difference whatsoever. “The pain is in the meta,” I often say to my students, after which I usually put on a funny long face, sigh, and look the other way.

### **The Politics: From Discourse on Art towards Art and Engagement**

As I suggested at the beginning of this essay, the reason why I did not dare to use the term “metadrama” in the opening paragraph of my funding application (even though it was by then already a truly useful term to describe my work) has to do with the fact that it is often misinterpreted as theater about theater, or art about art. For this reason, the only sentence in that paragraph that implicitly refers to metadrama is this one:



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Figure 7.3. Naomi Velissariou and Ingrid Wender  
in *Sontag* (2017). © Sanne Peper

This is not a theater about theater, but theater about a theatricalized reality.

In an application, it is important to find the right balance between formal experiment and social relevance: you need to indicate that your work is innovative and that it “explores something completely new,” while you also have to demonstrate that it is about an “extremely hot topic” and thus relevant to our time. In terms of funding or subsidies, you probably get the highest score for a transdisciplinary, interactive, site-specific spectacle with a multicultural cast, set in a disadvantaged urban district or problem neighborhood. In the discourse on the funding of art (or the justification of art by politicians to their voters and other taxpayers), the idea has grown that theater should serve the same purpose as journalism in order to fulfill a clear and identifiable function in society.<sup>19</sup> This movement, which is also called the “social trend,”<sup>20</sup> is perceived positively as a rapprochement of artists with the audience, giving rise to what I generally describe as “journalistic theater.”

In my opinion, this tendency is too convenient for politicians who increasingly defend the value of art in terms of social work. Nearly every Dutch political party – except for the populist Party for Freedom (PVV) – speaks in their program under the heading “art and culture” (regardless of how brief or extensive this paragraph is) about the “connecting power of art,” advocating that art should “build a bridge” between itself and society, between different segments of the population, ultimately resolving any kind of separation between people.<sup>21</sup> These are charming sound bites for politicians or policymakers, but from an artistic point of view, the “power to connect” is an empty phrase, not the most challenging motto to get inspired by. To build a relationship with your audience and the outside world is, of course, admirable and necessary, but there are also other, more critical qualities to art. “Build that bridge yourself,” I think in my most rebellious moments, “and leave me in peace so I can think *outside* the box of your political system.” To me as an artist, it is important I can choose *not* to be explicitly political. In my work, I aim to evoke implicitly today’s human condition instead of taking an explicit political standpoint on a specific issue. In order to develop that view on our human condition, I need to take a distance, otherwise I would never be able to go beyond the particularity, topicality, or regionality of certain issues. My social critique resides in the fact that I try to show how we stand in the world today. And it is up to the spectators to form their own opinion or political standpoint on that state of affairs.

For me, art is by definition socially engaged, insofar as artists cannot escape from having a specific perspective on the world in which they create their work. Thus, artists necessarily – albeit implicitly – make a political statement about the world in which they live. It goes without saying that the apparent revival of political theater in the guise of what I called “journalistic theater” should be encouraged as a trend. But we should also acknowledge that there is an acute risk in turning this politicization of art into a normative criterion that also steers the financing of it. Even if it is applaudable that this explicitly politicized art seems to appeal to a wide audience, politics should refrain from appropriating this tendency. And subsidy providers have to make sure that art which addresses “hot topics” is not favored over art which exercises a more implicit political power. From this perspective, the sublimated critical competence of an artist deserves appreciation, even if he or she does not punch the political reality in the face. By keeping a healthy distance and by using the means of the theatrical apparatus that journalism lacks (such as presence, corporeality, and formal experiment), art should “depict the unthinkable,” instead of offering a concrete solution for all our worldly problems.

### **Epilogue**

While working on this essay, I began to realize that, if I were to count my working hours, I would come to the honest conclusion that I devote only about 25 per cent of my time to the actual creation of my work. I spend the other 75 per cent developing the jargon of an application or policy language on the arts, and the biggest part on cultural entrepreneurship. When artists have even the slightest background in academia, they are constantly invited to participate in colloquia, committees, juries, lectures, debates, and panels, or they are asked to write columns, opinion pieces, or essays – like this one. The greatest advantage of such activities is that they enable artists to develop their own jargon and discourse, both on their practice and its embedding in a larger (inevitably political) context. However, one of the potential risks involved in the growing demand that artists should be able to illuminate their practice, using a specific jargon, is that it threatens to exclude those artists who are less versed in using policy-based terminology to promote their work. These artists, often the most brilliant ones, rather speak that “other language,” the sensorial language of imagination.

At the same time, developing discourse on artistic practices is not the sole responsibility of the artist. Art criticism used to serve this need too. But yet another unfortunate effect of the devastating cuts in the budget for culture and the arts in the Netherlands is that theater criticism is currently anything but a

thriving discipline. At the moment, there are hardly any Dutch theater theorists who discover tendencies, map out evolutions, or help to deepen our understanding of newly created works, even if there are so many examples they could draw on. And yet, their discourse would be essential to us, a lot more than the politically embedded jargon that we have “learned to describe ourselves with.”

Due to the fact that, in recent years, I have made a clever use of jargon and discourse, I have become a part of the very structures I experienced as normative when I stood at the beginning of my career. But this text is of a different order: it serves no other purpose than describing my poetics. It is a public reflection on my own practice, at a time when I find myself in a state of transition and re-orientation. By looking back on the years I worked in the relatively safe environment of a production house, by zooming out and analyzing my working methods and artistic interests, I aim to create a foundation for a deeper dialogue, a more elaborate discourse on my metadrama and all of the conceptions behind it.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on the March of Civilization (only in Dutch), see: <http://www.marsderbeschaving.nl/de-mars-der-beschaving/> (Accessed 16 October 2017).

<sup>2</sup> To give a bit more explanation on my professional background: before being confident enough to call myself an actress, I had been straddling for ten years between the practice of acting and studying theater and film theory. After high school, I first spent two years in Dora van der Groen’s drama class at the Royal Conservatoire of Antwerp. Like many others before me, I received a negative evaluation at the end of my second year, which convinced me to drop out and to try my luck in another domain. I went to the University of Antwerp, where I obtained a Bachelor’s degree in Dutch and Theater, Film, and Literary Studies, as well as a Master’s degree in Theater and Film Studies. After that, I went back to drama school, this time in Maastricht.

<sup>3</sup> The performance collective *Urland* consists of Ludwig Bindervoet, Thomas Dudkiewicz, Marijn Alexander de Jong, and Jimi Zoet. They graduated from the Maastricht drama school the same year as me and are currently a part of Theater Rotterdam.

<sup>4</sup> “Outflow” (or, in Dutch, “uitstroom”) is the glossy word policymakers use for artists leaving behind the relatively protected environment of a production house in order to start working autonomously in the professional field.

<sup>5</sup> A standard criterion for nearly any funding application in the Netherlands is that the project must make a “contribution to the pluriformity of the performing arts in the Netherlands.” According to this requirement, it is necessary to assess the added value of your project in relation to what is already happening in the arts scene. As the Dutch Performing Arts Funds explains, you must ask “to which extent the work makes an interesting contribution to what is already there or what is already made.” (see [https://fondspodiumkunsten.nl/content/subsidieregeling/i\\_102/toelichtingdeelregelingprojectsubsidies2.pdf](https://fondspodiumkunsten.nl/content/subsidieregeling/i_102/toelichtingdeelregelingprojectsubsidies2.pdf)).

<sup>6</sup> The “subsidie jonge makers” (subsidy young makers) is granted by the Performing Arts Fund NL. As described on the Fund’s website, it involves a “subsidy for beginning talented makers to develop themselves in a longer trajectory (maximum two years), in collaboration with companies, stages, and festivals” ([https://fondspodiumkunsten.nl/nl/subsidies/subsidie\\_nieuwe\\_makers/](https://fondspodiumkunsten.nl/nl/subsidies/subsidie_nieuwe_makers/); Accessed 17 November 2017). The grant is emphatically aimed at talent development in the broad sense of the term. Thus, it not only includes the financing of performances, but also research, workshops, internships, and other activities of the applicant, which are essential prerequisite for a positive evaluation of the proposal.

<sup>7</sup> In the quoted fragment, I describe myself in the third person because the application is formally submitted by the production company and not by the artist herself. The procedural decision to have these applications submitted by producers instead of the artists was taken after a long period of protests against the abolition of subsidies for producing institutions that provided structural support for talent development (the so-called “production houses”). To compensate for this deficit, subsidies are now allocated to the institution that partners with the artist who is applying for the grant.

<sup>8</sup> In the case of the “subsidy for young makers,” the period between submitting the application and receiving the grant can be as much as three years.

<sup>9</sup> With respect to my work, Rik is the ideal author, since his writings are visual rather than anecdotal. His texts are both poetic (albeit that the poetry resides in the content of what he writes and not in the formal density of the language) and deeply cinematic (all his characters describe what goes on in their mind as if it were a movie in which they are the main character). His language comes very close to daily colloquial speech, except for the fact that no “normal” person would ever come up with those things that Rik has his characters saying.

<sup>10</sup> For example, in the case of *Sontag* (2017), a piece I created on the figure of Susan Sontag, I asked columnist and writer Simone van Saarloos to do a fake interview with me on the creation of the performance. I shot the video in the style of an online item of the Dutch public broadcasting channel VPRO and invented a format for interviews with vigorous female artists or business women, which I called “daadkracht” (“vigor”). The video is available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3l9LwuNuvqA> (Accessed 13 December 2017). I additionally wrote an article on the art of failure for the Dutch news platform *De Correspondent*, which can be found at <https://decorrespondent.nl/5869/mens-durf-te-falen/1291993637077-e985c9f2> (Accessed 13 December 2017). I also organized a colloquium on “ego and engagement,” inviting various journalists, philosophers, and writers to contribute to the discourse on this topic with an essay.

<sup>11</sup> By applying the dramatic schemes of Aristotle to the actual lives of me and my sister, I could find out who of us was the protagonist and who was the antagonist. Based on this dichotomy, it is possible to define who was guilty of whose tragedy and, in doing so, the question of guilt or character flaw (*hamartia*) could be dissolved, theoretically at least.

<sup>12</sup> I would like to reiterate that when I use the notion of “text,” I am referring to the writings developed by Rik van den Bos and/or me, rather than texts belonging to the classical repertoire of drama.

<sup>13</sup> The fact that I shout certain words back to my actors presupposes that I am able to hear from their pronunciation whether the actor was producing a mere linguistic utterance or if he or she was also *thinking* the word when pronouncing it. Unfortunately, I am not capable of explaining in words how language can sound whether replete with or devoid of meaning, as I could only demonstrate this by means of real examples that can actually be heard. I guess this is one of the instances in which discourse shows its limits with respect to the actual practice of making theater.

<sup>14</sup> Unless it is a work of art that does not contain language of course. But that would be food for entirely different thoughts.

<sup>15</sup> The slippery question of what kind of reviews could be beneficial to the performing arts scene has been the topic of heated debates in the Netherlands (cf. Van Tongeren).

<sup>16</sup> In this incredibly influential tradition, the actors refused to hide behind a fictional character, stressing their actual being on the stage *as* actors through various strategies, such as inserting discussions about the play they were staging or about other issues, directly addressing the public, or adopting a rather detached style of speaking. These tendencies were prevalent in both Dutch and Flemish theater from the 1980s onwards.

<sup>17</sup> When I was admitted to the drama class of Dora van der Groen at the Royal Conservatoire of Antwerp, the predominant mode of acting taught to students at that time was firmly grounded in the acting method developed by Maatschappij Discordia. Next to the personality of the actor, language is central to this method, insofar as the actor is supposed to “just say the text” in the here and now of the performance. This approach has had a formative influence on me, but back then, it felt too rigid, which ultimately delayed me from discovering my own potential as an actress.

<sup>18</sup> In his 2017 essay, “Ich hätte gerne mitgemacht” (“I would have loved to participate”), theater maker Willem de Wolf, who currently also teaches at the Royal Conservatoire of Antwerp, offers a similar critical reflection on the legacy of Dora van der Groen, Maatschappij Discordia, Compagnie de Koe, and others. See also theater critic Robert van Heuven’s 2017 article “Generatie ‘ik en wij’” (“Generation ‘I and we’”).

<sup>19</sup> The growing demand to present art within a larger, discursive context is another manifestation of the same trend. Theater venues increasingly offer so-called “context programs” with side events related to the featured shows. These programs allegedly meet the desire of the audience to learn something new, to go to the theater to deepen their understanding of certain issues, and to have a “useful” evening, in addition to the information they already receive through the huge amount of talk shows and news channels they watch. The success of “journalistic theater” and context programs resembles that of a medium like the Dutch online news platform *De Correspondent*, which brings news in a personal way because it has been proven that this approach contributes to raising awareness about pressing issues of today. In this way, to the extent that both media (journalistic theater and “personal journalism”) are accessible, entertaining, and highly informative, they are often considered to have an emancipating power.

<sup>20</sup> The idea of a so-called “social trend” was, amongst other things, at the center of the meetings of the focus group “Artistic Developments,” organized by the Dutch Council for Culture. I was also a member of this focus group. The aim of these meetings was to develop an analysis of the artistic field, which served as the basis for the advice the Council passed on to the Dutch Minister of Education, Culture, and Science.

<sup>21</sup> See, for instance: <https://www.kunsten92.nl/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Fragmenten-uit-Verkiezingsprogrammas-10-02.pdf>; <http://www.hartbovenhard.be/debat-de-kunst-van-verbinding/> <https://www.apache.be/2012/12/12/de-kunstenaar-als-publieke-werker-een-gesprek-met-henk-oosterling/> (Accessed 11 November 2017).