

Border Crossing

A Comparative Look at Theater Studies in Flanders and Wallonia

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Belgium consists of two major official language communities that inhabit their own space not only geographically but also mentally.¹ The Dutch-speaking Northern part and the francophone Southern part of the country are often seen as two different groups with their own cultural identity as well as political ideology.² The dichotomy between Flanders and Wallonia is further enhanced by the dual structure of Belgium's media landscape where Flemish and francophone radio, newspapers, and television channels each serve their own audience, with hardly any interaction between them. Yet the "distance" between Flanders and Wallonia is perhaps most tellingly illustrated by the fact that students at Flemish universities can enroll in Erasmus exchange programs at francophone universities, as if they are going "abroad" in the other part of their own country.

The Belgian theater scene obviously does not evade this duality, even though – as I will discuss below – some artists and institutions have attempted to narrow the gap between both communities. There is no doubt, however, that the French- and Dutch-speaking theater in Belgium have a very different dynamic. I always tell my students that, as far as theater is concerned and especially when compared to London or Paris, we are spoiled in Brussels: at least we always have everything double. There are historical reasons for this double-twisted cultural scene that typifies Belgium nowadays. One possible explanation is the absence of a clearly identifiable canon of theatrical texts for the Dutch-speaking part of the country: because Flemish literature never really had authors of the same caliber as Shakespeare in England, Goethe and Schiller in Germany, or Racine and Molière in France, Flemish theater artists were considerably less burdened by the expectation to work with a fairly standardized repertoire of canonical drama texts, often in order to respect and celebrate them rather than to critically challenge their meaning or status. Another reason lies in the fact that, for a long part of its history, French-speaking theater in Wallonia was mainly oriented toward what was happening in France. Not coincidentally, there is a Belgian proverb that says "if it rains in Paris, it drizzles in Brussels," pointing to the strong influence coming from France.

However, the allegedly clear split that divides the Belgian cultural sphere into two distinct spaces is increasingly under pressure. Brussels, for example, is no longer a bilingual city: in about half of the families, members speak more than one language and in many cases, as Eric Corijn has consistently repeated, these languages are neither Dutch nor French (Corijn and Vloeberghs 170-172). The city has meanwhile evolved into a city of multiple minorities; a multilingual, cosmopolitan environment in which identity is by definition varied, plural, and continuously changing. Moreover, during the past few years, quite a lot of cultural organizations (such as Recyclart, Auguste Orts, Kunstenfestivaldesarts, and many others) have manifestly attempted to set up concrete and bottom-up collaborations with colleagues from the other part of the country. Several theaters in both Flanders and Wallonia have recently sought to link their programs, presenting work that otherwise would only be seen by one community, with the Beursschouwburg and Les Brigittines even doing an entire “house swap” for four consecutive days.³ The collaborations between Tristero and Transquinnuennal (respectively a Flemish and a francophone collective) are also a case in point, as well as the several bilingual pieces created by Raven Ruëll and coproduced by the Flemish Theater Antigone and the francophone Théâtre National.

Various artists and institutions thus do not seem to be burdened by the cultural and mainly imaginary dividing line that runs through the country, as they happily cross the language boundary that tends to separate Flemish from francophone theater. Yet, despite these rapprochements, anyone who wants to understand the immense diversity of the Belgian theatrical landscape cannot but acknowledge that the Dutch- and French-speaking theater in Belgium each have their own history that for the large part took a different direction. Likewise, the academic study of theater in Flanders and Wallonia developed along remarkably distinct pathways, notwithstanding the sporadic contacts between Flemish and francophone research groups and scholars. In both cases, the institutional establishment of theater studies at Belgian universities is, of course, closely interwoven with how theater developed in both parts of country and with the history on which it drew or reacted against. This story is further complicated by the fact that, at each individual Belgian university, theater studies followed different theoretical and intellectual traditions, or laid at least other emphases, which makes it impossible to consider Belgian theater studies as consisting of two monolithic fields. Nonetheless, the general assumption holds that the development of theater studies in Flanders cannot be dissociated from what is now commonly known as the “Vlaamse Golf” (Flemish Wave), whereas in

francophone Belgium, theater studies rather developed in a close dialogue with the French “études théâtrales.”

In this article, I want to provide a more refined account of this assumption through a comparative overview of the emergence of theater studies on both sides of the Belgian language border that will allow me to identify a number of divergences and parallels.⁴ My attention will go less to the present state of affairs of theater studies in Flanders and Wallonia (since this would require me to talk about my own work at the ULB as well), but I will rather expose what happened before. To the extent that it is impossible to recount this history without making any reference to the actual theater practice, my discussion contains a few sidesteps to the most important tendencies in the professional field in Flanders and Wallonia. These excursions can obviously not offer the same panoramic quality as other book-length publications on Belgian theater. For example, in his edited volume *Jouer le jeu: De l'autre côté du théâtre belge (Playing the Game: From the Other Side of Belgian Theater, 2009)*, Benoît Vreux presents an effective panorama of the recent renewals in francophone Belgian theater, which I will briefly discuss in the last section of this article. Antoine Pickels and Guido Minne have done something similar for Brussels, in their *Regards croisés sur les arts du spectacle à Bruxelles (Crossed Looks at the Performing Arts in Brussels, 2003)*. With regard to the recent history of theater in Flanders, one could refer to *Toneelstof*, the four-part series published between 2007 and 2010 by this journal, *Documenta*, in collaboration with Thersites and the Flemish Theater Institute.⁵ The ambitions of the present contribution are necessarily far more modest and its focus is also somewhat different since it deals primarily with the development of theater *studies* at Belgian universities. Without aspiring to provide an exhaustive account of this recent history, I hope to reveal the different accents that characterize theater studies on both sides of the Belgian language border.

A Quest for Emancipation: The Flemish Part

In Belgium, as in many other European countries, theater studies went through a laborious struggle for emancipation largely from the 1970s onward, and this on both sides of the linguistic border. The recent history of the academic study of theater is one of gradual autonomization, as theater scholars tried to detach their research and teaching assignments from philology and to transform theater studies from an auxiliary science within literary studies into an autonomous scientific discipline.⁶ Not the text and its potential as scenic material were to be the primary object of study, but the live event itself and the processes of

production and reception that, typical for the theater, happen simultaneously within a limited span of time. At least in this sense, there seems to have been no fundamental difference between Flemish and francophone theater studies, but I will come back to this below.

During the 1980s, the emancipation of theater studies accelerated, mainly at Flemish theater studies departments: not only did the focus definitively move from text to scene, but also the theoretical substructure became broader and increasingly interdisciplinary, partly due to the influence of performance studies, which was mainly present in Flanders, yet far less in francophone Belgium.⁷ As suggested earlier, the expansion of theater studies in Flanders was also tightly interwoven with the artistic developments of the so-called Flemish wave that fundamentally changed not only the aesthetics but also the institutional organization of Flemish theater from the early 1980s onward. The experimental theater later described by Lehmann as “postdramatic” (1999) was enthusiastically supported by a young generation of scholars and critics (such as Luk Van den Dries, Marianne Van Kerkhoven, Geert Opsomer, Klaas Tindemans, and An-Marie Lambrechts), who took this transformation as leverage to obtain a greater intellectual and institutional autonomy for their emerging discipline. Reversely, the academic recognition of the sudden outburst of creative energy in the Flemish performing arts scene also fueled these artistic practices, as it turned them into legitimate objects of academic inquiry while at the same time giving them canonical value and a central institutional position within the cultural field. A crucial impetus for this double-sided dynamic of innovation in both academia and the performing arts was the founding of the theater magazine *Etcetera* (1983) as well as the Flemish Theater Institute (1987), which aimed to facilitate the development of a new critical discourse and incite thorough reflection within the broader field of cultural politics.⁸

Despite these efforts to build connections between theoretical discourse and artistic practice, the relationship between both remained quite tensed throughout these early years. It is telling, for example, that the “Brussels Kamertoneel” (the Brussels Chamber Theater) chose to stage in 1988 Rainer Mennicken’s *De Kunstopmeter* (*The Art Surveyer*, 1986), a satirical portrait of a critic who turns to theater studies in order to get a fixed position at a university and to assure himself of an income. Yet even today artists tend to take a rather derogative stance towards theater scholars by scapegoating them as failed artists or as pedantic “flics du sens.”⁹ Or, artists are suspicious of the normative influence academics can have via, for instance, advisory committees or other institutional roles as

gatekeepers. While, according to some, theater studies led to a far-reaching intellectualization of professional practice, others considered this academic research crucial for a deepened understanding of artistic knowledge. Even though theater studies departments are today no longer (and maybe they have never been) isolated islands, completely disconnected from the reality of artistic practice, the skepticism – and, in some cases, even the sarcasm – on the side of practitioners remains fairly widespread.

One of the driving forces behind the establishment of theater studies in Flanders has been Carlos Tindemans, who devoted his professional career to creating a truly interdisciplinary field of research by drawing on reception analysis, semiotics, performance analysis, and historiography (Van den Dries, “In Memoriam”; Van den Dries and Degryse). But Tindemans also stimulated the avid ambition of his younger colleague Frank Coppieters and the freshly graduated Karel Hermans to found the “Centrum voor Experimenteel Theater” (Center for Experimental Theater, CET) in 1977. They conceived of the CET as a small venue for experimental artists with a specific interest in the interactions between performance and the visual arts (Crombez 226; see also Hooijerink). In 1980, the CET also attempted to publish a journal, *Data*, of which three trial issues were printed, but because their appeal for subsidies was denied, the journal would never come of age.

Also at other Flemish universities, and roughly around the same time, theater studies began to bloom. At the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB – Free University Brussels), the untimely deceased Dina Van Berlaer-Hellemans, Professor of Literature and Theater, played a key role in the theorization of Flemish theater by establishing the “Werkgroep Vormingstheater” (Working Group for Political Theater).¹⁰ Marianne Van Kerkhoven – who, next to her practice as a dramaturge, was also working as a researcher back then – played an important role in this initiative too.¹¹ The Working Group initiated a series of six seminal books that accompanied and examined the recent tendencies in Flemish theater history, from the political theater of the 1960s to the postmodern wave of the 1980s. The Catholic University of Leuven (KU Leuven) jumped on board as well. In 1982, they established a Certificate for Dramaturgy, while, from 1988 onwards, they also offered a Specialized Degree in Theater Studies. A substantial part of the program was devoted to a practical workshop, which functioned as a laboratory for students to learn to observe and decode the complicated grammar of live performance. During the 1990s and under the impulse of Geert Opsomer, theater studies at the University of Leuven became emphatically embedded in the critical

and ideological agenda of cultural studies, importing the heritage of intellectuals such as Edward Said, Stuart Hall, and Rustom Barucha into Flemish theater studies (Opsomer, “Theaterwetenschap en culturele studies”). A lot of attention went to postcolonial forms of theater and performance which critically reevaluate power hierarchies and identity constructions (Opsomer, *City of Cultures*).¹² At Ghent University (UGent), Jaak Van Schoor advocated from the very beginning an integrated research perspective on theater as a live practice, in which all aspects of live performance (space, text, body, time) are considered to be equivalent components (Van Schoor, “Theaterwetenschap”; Van Schoor, “Uit de archiefdoos”; Stalpaert et al.). Van Schoor’s efforts would ultimately be rewarded with a complete program in theater studies, which was embedded in the Arts Department, together with art history and musicology. Up until today, students are introduced to each of these fields, but as they move on through the program, they can gradually increase the number of specialist courses specifically devoted to theater and performance.

One particular event that is indicative of the changes going on during the formational period of Flemish theater studies is a lecture delivered by Richard Schechner at the University of Antwerp in 1980.¹³ Schechner’s lecture, titled “Decline and Fall of the (American) Avant-Garde,” has ever since grown into a seminal text, in which he proposes “to borrow certain principles from theater, more specifically *theatricality*, and to start ‘interweaving’ these with other social activities” instead of “like the reformers of yore, to try stubbornly to blow up the classical structures of theater and to use them for something else” (qtd. in Crombez 233). Schechner’s visit to Antwerp exemplifies how Flemish theater scholars were keen to broaden their scope by embracing his anthropologically inspired perspective on key concepts such as theatricality and performativity. To put it in a very general way, by the end of 1980s and throughout the 1990s, theater studies in Flanders essentially developed into performance studies, as it welcomed the so-called “broad spectrum approach” advanced by Schechner, which was aimed at “treating performative behavior, not just the performing arts as a subject for serious scholarly study” (Schechner, “Performance Studies” 4).

While this international trend has deeply affected theater studies in the Flemish part of Belgium, universities in Wallonia would remain, as I will elucidate below, much more indebted to rather classical approaches, such as semiotics or text-based dramaturgy, even though this slightly varies between different institutions. Flemish theater scholars, on the other hand, were increasingly open to the influences of new fields of study emerging at that time, such as gender and queer

theory or postcolonial studies, leading to a specific interest into how sexual and ethnic identities are constructed, reiterated, criticized, and deconstructed by means of performance.¹⁴ The same tendencies also encouraged more historically oriented theater scholars to go beyond the traditional predicament to reconstruct past theatrical events in an allegedly faithful manner and in accordance with Leopold von Ranke's famous dictum "wie es eigentlich gewesen" – which is, of course, an impossible task taking into account theater's live character. More recent historical studies on theater, such as Bram Van Oostveldt's work on the trope of the natural in 18th century theater, exemplify how Flemish theater historians have been developing a form of cultural history that favors a contextual, instead of a purely reconstructive, approach in which the theatrical event is analyzed in relation to a larger network of cultural imaginations, including the varying narrative emplotments of these events in historical discourse itself (see Van Oostveldt).

A Mixed Story of Missed Encounters: Wallonia

In the francophone part of Belgium, both the performing arts scene and theater studies have developed along significantly different lines for a complex array of reasons that I can only begin to unravel here. Yet perhaps even this concise discussion can help to rectify the predominant perception of these developments by Flemish critics and spectators, who for a long time have harbored a stubborn prejudice against francophone theater by stereotyping it as moldy, pathetic, ceremonious, and – above all – deeply bourgeois. French-speaking theater in Belgium was either thought to be intellectualistic and rhetorical by proposing interesting ideas but failing to bring these themes to life on stage, or it clung to conservative views on repertoire, reducing canonical texts to the historical universe they evoked. In the first case, theater would pretend to commit itself to the world, but merely on a theoretical level, whereas, in the second case, it seemed to withdraw into a bourgeois timelessness by approaching plays from the grand repertoire as consumer goods to be savored like old fine wines. Moreover, francophone theater has often been regarded as overly oriented towards result or the eventual performance "product," with little or no room for thorough dramaturgical or practice-based research in the studio or on stage. Thus, the southern part of Belgium seemed to be locked up in its own francophone cocoon and its corresponding cultural referential framework (and to a certain degree it actually was), with France and especially Paris as its intimidating sisters-in-law. A lot of "paraître" (pretending) and only a little genuine "être" (being): that was often the verdict of Flemish critics and professionals.

It is certainly true that the renewal inaugurated by the Flemish Wave did not have its equivalent in scale and impact in Wallonia, if only because in Flanders it led to a profound reorganization of the entire cultural field. At the same time, even if the Walloon theater scene was more prone to conservative tendencies, it would be erroneous to think that there were no artists trying to break out of this cocoon by advancing a deliberately critical theater. Already in the 1970s, a considerable number of theater artists (such as Marc Liebens, Jean-Marie Piemme, Philippe Sireuil, and Philippe Van Kessel)¹⁵ were, influenced by French post-structuralism, attempting to combine ideological critique with rigorous textual research. Others, like the Théâtre Laboratoire Vicinal, focused on physical research, mostly inspired by Antonin Artaud (Vreux, “Verandering en continuïteit” 29-30), while artists such as Martine Wijckaert experimented with space and scenography to create a theater of highly effective visual *tableaux*.¹⁶ Yet it was the merit of Jacques Delcuvellerie and his artist collective Groupov, which also went under the name of “Centre Expérimental de Culture Active” (Experimental Center for an Active Culture), to really break things open. Not only did he integrate performance art and its immediate impact into theater, but he also and perhaps even more importantly aimed to reinstall theater as an instrument for explicit ideological reflection (Delcuvellerie).¹⁷ A slightly younger generation of artists who sought to go against the conservatism in Wallonia’s theater include Frédéric Dussenne, Michael Delaunoy, Lorent Wanson, or Ingrid von Wantoch Rekowski, while also itinerant companies, such as Compagnie Arsenic and the Brussels collective Transquinquennal, introduced new working formats in the performing arts scene.

In addition to these local examples of experimental theater artists, the field was remarkably eager to familiarize itself with artistically innovative work from abroad. From the 1980s onwards, for instance, a number of francophone artists took the initiative for the “Festival de Bruxelles” which presented work by the most important representatives of the international avant-garde of that period, including the Wooster Group, Odin Teatret, Mabou Mines, Meredith Monk, Il Carrozzone, Butoh artists, and many others. These foreign influences had a profound impact on various theater and dance artists from the francophone scene, such as Théâtre Laboratoire Vicinal, Elémentaire, Groupov, Pierre Droulers, and even Maurice Béjart, who at the time was the Director of Dance at La Monnaie. Some of the icons of the international avant-garde, such as The Living Theater, could be seen at the Brussels Théâtre 140 as well, an experimental venue whose founder and artistic director Jo Dekmine also invited Flemish avant-garde companies, such as Radeis.¹⁸ Even earlier than Flanders, Wallonia would

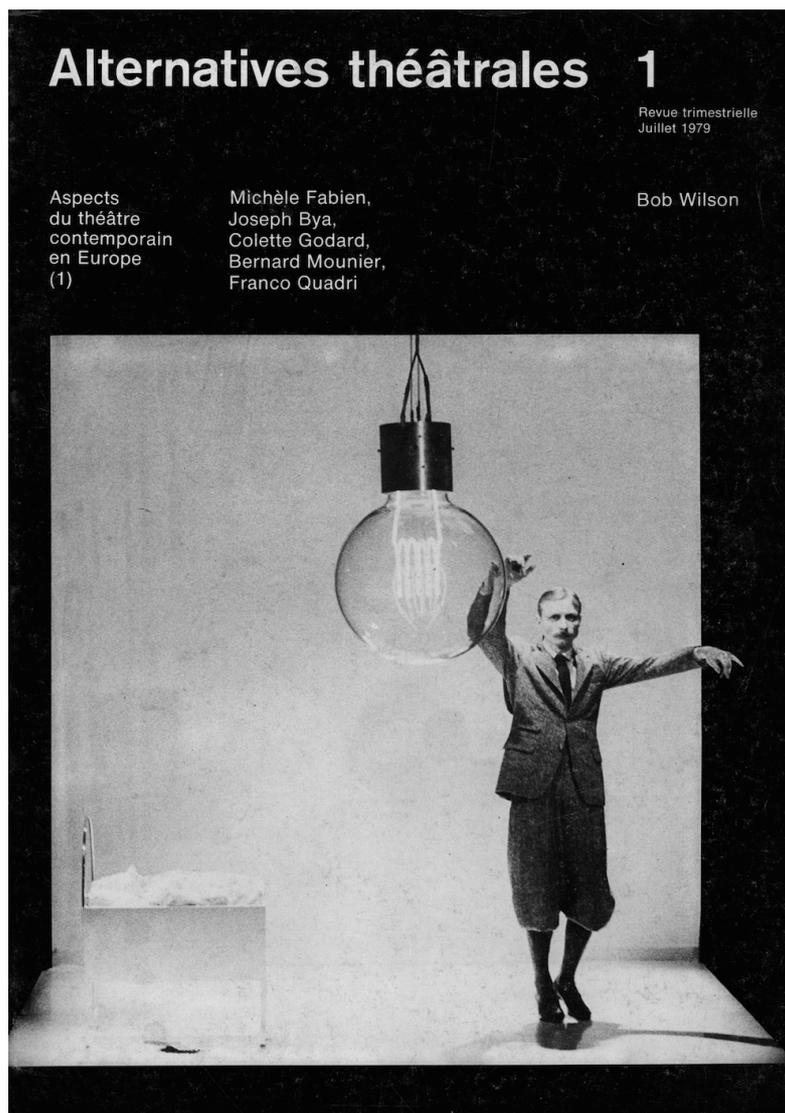


Figure 3.1. Cover of the first issue of *Alternatives théâtrales* (1979). © Alternatives Théâtrales

also have its own journal documenting these artistic developments when the first issue of *Alternatives théâtrales* appeared in 1979. Although these concerted attempts to rejuvenate the performing arts scene in Wallonia were fairly peripheral, it is nothing short of remarkable that the scholarly research on theater at francophone universities in Belgium did not seem to keep pace with either the apparent need for formal experimentation or the metropolitan dynamic to look beyond the borders of Wallonia or France. Until recently, theater studies in Wallonia was considerably less intertwined with theater practice than in Flanders, where scholars actively supported and intellectually nourished the Flemish Wave, while also drawing inspiration from these innovations for their own academic work. In francophone Belgium, in contrast, academia played hardly any substantial role in constructing the artistic identity of theater. Changes in the professional field were only very partially documented by the francophone theater studies departments in Belgium and only a limited segment of the official academic research output dealt with these developments. Notwithstanding the high quality of, for example, publications such as *Études théâtrales* at UCL or the theoretical work of several scholars, these almost never engaged with debates going on in Wallonia's artistic field and played a rather modest role in building a critical discourse on theater in that part of Belgium. Exemplary in this respect is that most publications directly engaging with the performing arts scene in Wallonia appeared outside of the academic realm. Next to the magazine *Alternatives théâtrales* mentioned earlier, another important impetus for a more intensive coverage of the francophone performing arts came from the arts venue and documentation center La Bellone. Especially from the 1990s onwards, La Bellone initiated various publications, such as the bilingual *Balcon/Balkon* (in collaboration with the Flemish Theater Institute), to take stock of the most pertinent developments in the performing arts in both the Flemish and francophone communities. La Bellone also founded the periodical magazine *Scène*, of which thirty-five issues were published between 1998 and 2012. In contrast to standard academic publications, these smaller publishing opportunities accommodated more open and creative kinds of writings, while they also ensured a closer link with the artistic and professional field, with the result that these texts found their way more easily to artists themselves.

From a theoretical point of view, then, theater studies in Wallonia remained for a considerably long time indebted to the French text-based approach of the "études théâtrales."¹⁹ This approach is highly informed by twentieth-century repertoire theater in France in which the text has indeed long been treated as the alpha and omega of theater. The main intellectual legacy on which theater studies in

Wallonia drew was likewise rooted in a primarily French intellectual tradition, with structuralist thinkers, such as Roland Barthes but also Bernard Dort, being the main references, while also the influence of psychoanalysis on dramaturgy and character development continued to be a steering force in theory and in practice, as exemplified by Barthes' *Sur Racine* (*On Racine*, 1960).

At the time when Flemish theater scholars were discovering Richard Schechner's work and the interdisciplinary approach championed by performance studies, their francophone colleagues remained rather isolated from international tendencies other than those perceived in France. They became acquainted relatively late with the Anglo-Saxon field of performance studies. It is telling, in this respect, that the first French translation of a selection of Schechner's writings was not published until 2008. Another example of the divergent rhythm by which theater studies has developed on both sides of the Belgian language border can be found in Hans-Thies Lehmann's influential notion of "postdramatic theater." For scholars working in Flanders, Lehmann's category provided for a considerably long time a crucial framework to understand the reformation the Flemish performing arts had undergone from the 1980s onwards, including the profound influence that the 1960s and 70s performance art exerted on a new generation of theater and dance artists, such as Jan Fabre or Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker.²⁰ In contrast to Flanders, a large part of francophone theatrical academia appeared to have missed out completely on the so-called "postdramatic turn." Lehmann's book too arrived late on the scene, as it was translated in French only in 2002.

In all this, it is important to emphasize that the different rhythm of francophone theater studies should not be misinterpreted as a story of delay or subordination, but rather as one in which other forces are at work. One must know that, within the French critical tradition, Brecht has always been a key reference point, ever since the hugely successful passage of the Berliner Ensemble in Paris, mainly between 1954 and 1960. His critical theater theories have had a major influence on French theater practice, as can be seen, for example, in the work of Jean Jourdeuil and Jean-Pierre Vincent (see Finburgh). Nevertheless, however revolutionary Brecht's quest for a politically engaged theater might have been, his anti-Aristotelian views on theater do not defy rather classical principles such as the fable or fictional character construction. Consequently, the French reception of Brecht and the central position of his theater theory could have been indirectly responsible for the fact that it took quite long for both practice and theory to fully embrace more performative, non-textual forms of theater.

Salient Strands in Theater Studies in Wallonia: Three Universities

Now that I have pointed out some of the most conspicuous differences in the recent history of both the practice and scholarly study of theater in Flanders and Wallonia, I want to zoom in on three francophone universities in Belgium where academic research on theater is conducted. While I am well aware of the risk to reduce complicated institutional realities to overly generalized profiles, I believe it is possible to identify at least three salient strands in the development of theater studies in francophone Belgium from the 1980s onwards. These strands coincide with three theater studies programs that also structure my discussion below.

First, I will consider the Centre d'études théâtrales (Center of Theater Studies) at the Université catholique de Louvain (UCL) in Louvain-la-Neuve, which is most clearly rooted in the French perspective on theater. I then move on to the Theater Studies Department at the Université de Liège (ULg), which rather strives to tie in with local practices, often with a distinct political and/or ideological bias. This particular focus arguably follows from the presence of the activist artist collective Groupov in Liège as well as from the city's political profile, which is marked by a strong socialist tradition and whose history but also self-image is often thought of in terms of a militant anti-authoritarian attitude.²¹ The last institution I will focus on is the Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB), where the appointment of André Helbo as Professor of Theater Studies led to an increased attention to the theoretical foundations of the field (with semiotics as its primary focus), while he also embedded his research in the broader, more international fields of cultural semiotics, adaptation studies, neurosciences, and other scientific paradigms.

Université catholique de Louvain (UCL)

When the UCL was founded as a new French-speaking university in Louvain-la-Neuve in 1968, actor and director Armand Delcampe immediately took the initiative to integrate, together with the support of Professor of Roman Philology Raymond Pouillart, a number of academic courses on theater within the programs of the Faculty of Philosophy, Arts, and Literature. This initiative also meant the formal start of the Centre d'études théâtrales (CET) at the UCL. In contrast to the Université de Liège and the Université libre de Bruxelles, where theater studies are still embedded in the Department of Communication Studies and form a tandem with film studies (united by decree in the Master's degree Arts du Spectacle),²² the UCL opted from the very beginning for the establishment of its own research center. While Delcampe chose for an explicitly text-based approach, with a clear focus on the analysis of dramatic texts and on theater that uses text as its central means of communication, he always sought to infuse this

focus with cross-disciplinary connections by inviting lecturers from other faculties or universities with expertise in psychology (Jacques Schotte), sociology (Jean Duvignaud), scenography (Denis Bablet), or dramaturgy (Jacques Scherer).

In addition to intellectual education in theater studies, the CET included right from the start a practical component in the program by means of internships which students could do within the framework of Delcampe's organization Atelier Théâtral. The students organized debates with artists and intellectuals (such as Ariane Mnouchkine, Antoine Vitez, Armand Gatti, Marcel Jacno, and others), during a weekly event called "Les mercredis du CET" (The Wednesdays of the CET). In 1975, the Drama Department of the Institut des Arts de Diffusion (IAD, Institute of the Arts of Diffusion) left Brussels and joined forces with the CET and the Atelier Théâtral. This merging fostered new synergies between theory and practice. The majority of the teaching and research activities were located at a renovated farm, "Ferme de Blocry," which up until today serves as the CET's home base and still hosts both its library and teaching infrastructure. The "Ferme" also provides students, staff, and the wider community of Louvain-la-Neuve with a fully equipped theater space. From the 1990s onwards, the CET would encourage its students to undertake internships also in other art venues and institutions (and no longer only in its own theater), with the aim of strengthening the ties with the professional field. In 1983, Jean Florence became the director of the CET and after Armand Delcampe left the ULC in the 1990s, the CET was separated from the Atelier Théâtre Jean Vilar and, even though they each started to follow their own institutional paths, they continued to collaborate, also with IAD and UCL Culture, forming together what they call the "pôle théâtre."²³

In 1992, the CET launched its journal *Études théâtrales*, which has grown into a leading academic publication for francophone theater and performance studies, not only within but also beyond Belgium. For its teaching staff, the CET recruited not only part-time visiting professors from Belgium, but also quite a lot from French universities like Paris 3 and Paris 10.²⁴ The large number of French academics at the CET has undoubtedly reinforced its orientation toward France as its main intellectual and theoretical framework. Recent developments, however, indicate this situation has changed. In 2011, UCL decided to create a new Faculty position for a Professor in Theater Studies and hired researcher and stage director Jonathan Châtel. Together with Professor Pierre Piret, Châtel is responsible for the MA program in Performing Arts. Today, education and research at the CET seem to be wider in scope as it pursues a pluralistic approach

that examines theater and the performing arts from a theoretical, historical, and aesthetic perspective. The overarching aim is to investigate the diversity of the performing arts (both in Europe and worldwide) through the lens of a series of key issues, such as corporeality, exile, or spatiality. To this end, the CET has recently partnered with the “Centre de recherche écriture, création, représentation” (Research center writing, creation, representation), while also initiating new lines of research. The research project “Theater and Exile,” for example, analyzes how contemporary performing arts attempt to understand the complexity of exile in its historical, sociological, and psychological dimensions. The program explores how various practices, such as documentary theater or socio-artistic interventions, try to formulate new, alternative responses to a major problem of the twenty-first century. On the initiative of theater scholar Véronique Lemaire, the CET has also set up a new interuniversity research group on scenography and space, which approaches space in theater as a genuine dramaturgical medium, as a particular semiotic network that places the work in the actual world rather than being a mere vehicle for the enactment of the text. The group not only ambitions to advance the dialogue between researchers and practitioners (including set designers, architects, visual artists), its members also share a keen interest in understanding the potential of scenography beyond theater, in public space, politics, or everyday life.

Université de Liège (ULg)

Contrary to the CET at ULC, the Université de Liège (ULg) has never established a separate department or research center specifically devoted to theater studies. In Liège (as well as at the Université libre de Bruxelles), academic research and teaching programs are embedded within the Department of “Sciences de l’information et de la communication” (SIC, Information and Communication Studies). The basic idea behind the institutional anchoring of theater studies in a larger department that also houses other domains is that both cinema and theater are primarily regarded as forms of cultural communication, rather than as distinct aesthetic systems situated in the broader history of art and culture.²⁵ At the ULg, the Master’s program “Arts et sciences de la communication” (Arts and Communication Studies), which is currently still offered, resulted in fact from an innovative movement that began in the 1970s and which sought to rethink the prevalent methodologies for teaching as well as examining theater and adjacent art forms, such as dance or opera. This renewal was to a large extent initiated by Jacques Dubois, a professor of modern French literature and sociology of culture at the ULg. Together with several other colleagues, Dubois created in the 1960s the “Group μ ,” which would develop a new approach to classical rhetoric by

combining it with semiotics.²⁶ Dubois was also greatly inspired by the critical sociology of Pierre Bourdieu, which eventually led to a reformation of the literary studies program: “sociologie de littérature” (literature sociology) was introduced as a full course within the curriculum, while also more popular genres, such as graphic novels or police novels, became legitimate objects of analysis. The other domains in the Department (most notably Journalism, Mediation, and Theater) were to follow the same tendency soon, with the aim to go beyond and even contest a purely aesthetic approach to culture, promoting instead the systematic contextualization of any kind of cultural production (thus not only “art” per se, but also popular practices or mass media) within the dynamics of a specific “field.” This shift in focus resulted in a double orientation at ULg’s Department of Arts and Communication Studies that still persists today: next to the “aesthetic” approach that is mainly present in film studies, there is another strong line of research that adheres to the perspective of critical sociology.

Similar to the Theater Studies program at the Université catholique de Louvain, students at the ULg are stimulated to immerse themselves into actual artistic practices and the professional field, primarily through practice-based workshops led by directors, actors, or writers. When Nancy Delhalle joined the department in 2007, she introduced a new line of research that was more historiographical in nature. Delhalle’s interest was to uncover the history of francophone theater as it developed in Belgium since World War II, which until then had never been the topic of sustained academic study. This is fairly remarkable, since – in contrast to Wallonia – the history of postwar Flemish theater had already been researched more thoroughly, both at Flemish universities and other institutions. In this respect, Delhalle’s 2006 book *Vers un théâtre politique: Belgique francophone 1960-2000 (Towards a Political Theater: Francophone Belgium 1960-2000)* offered an important and timely contribution to the historiography of theater in Wallonia. In *Le tournant des années 1970 (The Turn of the 1970s, 2010)*, a volume Delhalle co-edited with the aforementioned Jacques Dubois, the focus lies on the specific sociological embedding of theater in the local context of Liège. The contributing authors analyze how theater in Liège has always been connected to the particular industrial history of the city as well as the socio-demographic divisions that come with it.²⁷ Delhalle has played an important role in the development of theater studies at the ULg, not the least because, in 2016, she founded CERTES, “Centre d’études et de recherches sur le théâtre dans l’espace social” (Center of the study of and research on theatre in the social space). CERTES intends to examine the role of theater in our current society of the spectacle in which flat-screens and mass entertainment dominate everyday life,

while it also wants to foster critical reflection on different organizational models as possible alternatives for our neoliberal and globalized economy.

Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB)

At the Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB), it was especially André Helbo who functioned as the driving force behind the institutional emancipation of theater studies, which included the establishment of both an official Master's program and a research line specifically devoted to theater and other performing arts. His longstanding interest in semiotics provided him with the theoretical credentials to forge this emancipation, since he was drawing on an intellectual tradition that was recognizable and acknowledged by colleagues from other domains in the humanities, while this same focus also facilitated the internationalization of education and research on theater at the ULB. However, when Helbo started working at the ULB in 1980, there were already other scholars with a keen interest in theater who have also played a pivotal role in expanding the scope of theater studies at the university. American studies scholar Gilbert Debusscher, for example, promoted research on the American canon of modern playwrights (such as Tennessee Williams, Edward Albee, David Mamet, or Eugene O'Neill), but he also included the theater of the Wooster Group.²⁸ Even though the analysis of the drama text has always been De Busscher's most primary concern, he is a genuine theater aficionado who has infected quite a lot of students and junior researchers with what is described in a tribute book devoted to him as his "Thespian enthusiasm" (Den Tandt and Maufort 15). Also Paul Delsemme, who was appointed at ULB as Professor of Belgian francophone Literature in 1964, was a great theater enthusiast and included the history and aesthetics of theater in his classes. His teachings eventually resulted in the publication of *L'œuvre dramatique, sa structure et sa représentation* (*The Dramatic Work: Its Structure and its Representation*, 1979). During the same period, Roger Deldime founded the "Centre de sociologie du théâtre" (Center of Theater Sociology) at the ULB's Institut de Sociologie, albeit without a formal appointment. These examples demonstrate how, until the 1970s, the interest in theater at the ULB was vivid but institutionally deeply scattered: several individuals included theater in their research and teaching activities, but they worked at different departments and faculties across the university. At the time, the ULB did not have a coherent theater studies program, while the international development of the field did not seem to play any substantial role either.

It was only in the early 1980s and with the arrival of André Helbo that the ULB started to follow a similar path as other universities in Wallonia. Here too, the

growing academic interest in theater first sought to move away from the longstanding predominance of philology and literary studies, turning instead to communication studies as a potential partner to find the required institutional anchoring for theater studies. Helbo was first invited by the ULB to teach, amongst other things, a course in semiotics as part of the program “Animation socio-culturelle” (socio-cultural work). He subsequently set up various European collaborations with a number of foreign colleagues (including leading theater scholars, such as Patrice Pavis, Jean-Marie Pradier, Anne Ubersfeld, Hans-Thies Lehmann, and Marco De Marinis). By organizing joint seminars, exchanging staff, or promoting student mobility, Helbo promoted the international character of the education offered at the ULB. Students would eventually be able to obtain a so-called DEC2 or “Diplôme d’enseignement complémentaire” (Degree of complementary education), which today would be equivalent to a specialization degree that sits somewhere between a professional certificate and an Advanced Master.

When the Bologna reformation was implemented in Belgian higher education in 2004, the autonomous MA program “Master en Arts du Spectacle Vivant” was established at the ULB. After this institutional recognition, Helbo consistently attempted to broaden the focus from a narrow conception of theater studies to a transdisciplinary approach that takes the notion of “spectacle vivant” (the live performing arts), rather than just theater or performance, as its primary object of study. Using “spectacle vivant” as key heuristic tool, Helbo strongly insisted on liveness as the distinctive characteristic of the performing arts, while he also became interested in reception analysis and the question of how live events are decoded by spectators, which eventually spurred him to collaborate with neuroscientists. Helbo also continued his earlier efforts to internationalize ULB’s educational program. From 2005-2006 onwards, a European “master conjoint” (joint Master) was offered, which allowed students to spend an entire semester at one of several partner universities, each offering a specific and specialized program in line with its own research agenda. The joint MA was complemented in 2007-2008 with an Erasmus Mundus program in order to attract foreign students and international specialists. The partnerships with various universities under Erasmus Mundus allowed Helbo to invite not only scholars but also stage directors to lead workshops and to strengthen the relationship between the theoretical study of theater and professional practice.

Contrary to the CET in Louvain-la-Neuve and more explicitly than his colleagues in Liège, André Helbo embraced semiotics as a primordial intellectual tradition,

since it seemed to provide the methodological foundations for the study of both theater and other forms of cultural expression that could be embedded in the Department of “Sciences de l’information et de la communication” (SIC – Information and Communication Studies). Helbo is not only still active in the International Association of Semiotics, but he is also chairman of the “Association internationale pour la sémiologie du spectacle” (International Association of the Semiology of Spectacle), which had its inaugural congress at the ULB in 1981. The speakers’ list featured leading scholars in the fields of theater and performance studies, including Eugenio Barba, Anne Ubersfeld, Jean-Marie Pradier, and also Erving Goffman, who sadly passed away only a few months later.²⁹

According to Helbo, semiotics is a “discipline d’interface,” or an interface-discipline, because it enables researchers to look for cross-overs between various fields of knowledge (Helbo et al.). Helbo’s own scholarly work deals indeed with subjects such as adaptation and intermediality, which quite immediately require a cross-disciplinary perspective, yet he also draws on fields such as neuroscience and anthropology in order to rethink theater “in its eventual dimension” (Helbo, *Le théâtre* 13; own translation). Contrary to classical theater semiotics, Helbo does not regard the theatrical codes themselves as his primary objects of analysis. Instead, his main concern is to unfold “the process of assembling these codes into the production of meaning: enunciation” (ibid.). Rather than the mere articulation of a text on stage, he is interested in “the construction of the signification through the ensemble of instances that are active hic et nunc within the representation” (14).

In a 2012 interview, Helbo explains why theater would be the perfect laboratory to analyze and understand the complex processes of encoding meaning as well as decoding signification, while he also acknowledges how this raises particular challenges for any scholar interested in semiotics:

Live performance, as an object that combines the verbal and the non-verbal, text and image, the cognitive and the intuitive, permits, more pertinently than ever, to put semiotic theories to the test. It is the only art form that, within the moment and in an ephemeral manner, invites to co-construct systems of signification. (Saurée n.p.; own translation)

These claims exemplify how Helbo takes semiotics beyond its traditional focus on formalist aesthetic analysis and reconceives it as a deeply *contextual* perspective

that ought to take the interactions between sender, receiver, and the environment as its central vantage point.³⁰ Due to Helbo's mainly theoretical orientation, little of his work explicitly refers to the artistic work created on the francophone side. However, he did manage to develop a new interdisciplinary research program aimed at building a solid methodological foundation for theater studies and at internationalizing the scope of the field within Wallonia.

Today, both the MA program and the research program at ULB increasingly intensify the collaborations with the professional field (Kaaitheter, Les Briggittines, Théâtre Les Tanneurs, and many others) and art schools (ESAC, La Cambre), while also reconnecting historical research to concerns of contemporary performance practice and vice versa. Both research and education aim at understanding the spectacular ("liveness") as an integral part of our society, analyzing its role and function within global culture, while at the same time investigating its relation with other arts and new media. Recent funded research projects investigate rehearsal strategies in (post-)documentary theater and contemporary dance, in Belgium but also in other countries; (neo)baroque theatricality; intercultural strategies in 1970s performance art; the use and confines of theatrical space in Teheran (Iran); the development of artistic careers in the Brussels arts sector; etc. To support these growing research activities, ULB recently founded "CiASp | Centre de recherche en cinéma et spectacle vivant", which brings together researchers from theater and cinema studies, or acts as a cooperating partner in interuniversity research consortia, such as "B-Magic," a large-scale project on the history of the magic lantern. Performance scholars from ULB also participate, together with colleagues from the VUB and different Brussels-based art schools, in the joint research group "THEA | Theatricality and the Real". THEA aims at building (paradigmatic, theatrical, political) bridges between art practices, artistic research, and scientific research in the fields of theater, performance, and theatricality. Finally, ULB co-organizes from 2018-19 onwards a new MA program in Comparative Dramaturgy and Performance Research,³¹ which intends to familiarize students with theater practice and research in different national contexts and to provide them with profound insight into the various production conditions and processes in various countries.

And Now?

Earlier in this text, I referred to the clichéd image that Flanders cherishes on francophone theater in Belgium and which reduces it to a rather conservative and repertoire-oriented theatrical practice that lacks the sense of experimentation that would typify the Flemish scene. This is only partly true, and the same goes

for theater studies in Wallonia. Especially during the past decade, an invigorating dynamic has been thoroughly reshaping the French-speaking theater as well as the academic study thereof, even if the Flemish press or the Dutch-speaking public are only slowly becoming aware of these newer tendencies.

A younger generation of more adventurous theater makers, directors, and actors are producing theater with a great sense of urgency: they not only experiment with integrating various media into theater or explore new strategies of artistic research, they also take up explicitly political positions that are peppered with a headstrong theatrical imagination. Amongst the artists that one could range under this wave of renewal in theater in Wallonia are: Armel Roussel, Fabrice Murgia, Anne-Cécile Van Dalem, Claude Schmitz, Selma Alaoui; authors like Thomas Depryck; or companies such as Raoul Collectif, Rien de Spécial, Nimis Groupe, Cie Art & tça, Transquinquennal, le Collectif Mensuel, and many others. This generation of theater makers strives to develop its own poetics and to give shape to an imaginative aesthetic, without reducing this ambition to a purely formalist approach. Instead, they embark upon a quest for new means of expression that enable them to take a stance toward today's complex world. Their work is often frivolous and deadly serious at the same time, as they vigorously embrace humor and playfulness. Notable themes include, for instance, consumerism, hyper-individualism, and over-stimulation as the main tenets of our current neo-liberal system (e.g., *Rumeur et petits jours* by Raoul Collectif, November 2015), political populism (e.g., *Tristesses* by Anne-Cécile Van Dalem, April 2016), or the refugee crisis (e.g., *Ceux que j'ai rencontrés ne m'ont peut-être pas vu* by Nimis Groupe, January 2016).³²

It is furthermore striking that the youngest generation of actors is increasingly casting off psychological realism and emphatic rhetorical acting, which have been the two dominant traditions in francophone theater for a considerably long time. The actors of Raoul Collectif, for example, take the “now” of the performance – the event of being together in the same space at the same time – as their starting point: together they create on stage a situation that may lead to anything, there and then, at the spur of the moment. The work of Raoul Collectif shows great affinity with theater collectives like Tg STAN: they share a similar approach to theater as they both use the moment of performing as a means to undermine the “as if” or the “make-believe” that continues to impregnate the theatrical apparatus. Precisely for these reasons, Tg STAN is a company that is very much admired by French-speaking and French actors, since it radically breaks with the traditions that are most familiar to them. However, the specific theatricality of Tg

STAN is often mistakenly seen as a style one could learn to master through imitation, while it is in fact the result of a fundamentally different view on theater and a more research-oriented attitude towards the rehearsal process. In this respect, the aim of Raoul Collectif is not to imitate a particular acting style.³³ Instead, what they have in common with Tg STAN is a keen interest in research, not only during rehearsals, but also (and most importantly) on stage during the performances themselves. A shared adventure of research and trial-and-error allows them to make instant, seemingly intuitive decisions on stage while at the same time freely commenting on these decisions.

There are a number of possible explanations for the manner in which emerging artists are introducing new approaches in the francophone theater scene. Undoubtedly, the Brussels theater collective Transquennal played an important part in disrupting the prevalent acting idioms in francophone theater and in searching for alternative models. Via their collaboration with Flemish companies such as Tristero, they introduced a Brechtian, detached, and often also ironic way of acting, with actors communicating, defending, or questioning their perspective on the performance's content or story, instead of projecting themselves into a role. The influence of the Brussels Théâtre National on the French-speaking landscape during the past few years may have been even more crucial. It is in fact fairly remarkable that a theater whose name seems to refer to an established, traditional institution has actually served as a place for experimentation. Director Jean-Louis Colinet invested indeed actively in shaping new talent and made sharp, future-oriented choices: artists such as Fabrice Murgia (who succeeded Colinet as director) or groups like Raoul and Nimis first emerged under the auspices of Colinet. He definitely turned it into an open house where young artists had the opportunity to develop and flourish, with extensive coaching that prepared them for the big stage. A third possible explanation (and there certainly may be several others) is the positive impact of the actors' training offered at ESACT, the Drama Department at the Royal Conservatory in Liège, where actors are primarily trained as artists who create their own work, rather than as performers who execute the projects of others. They are required, for example, to undertake research and fieldwork, which immerses the students in specific social environments and challenges them to question continuously the role of theater in today's society as well as to explore its potential to actually intervene in that world.



Figure 3.2. Dito'Dito & Transquiquennal, *Ah oui ça alors là / Ja ja maar nee nee* (1997). © Herman Sorgeloos

The ways in which francophone theater in Belgium has recently been reinventing itself might create the momentum for a rapprochement between the artistic as well as academic communities on both sides of the language border. At least one fruitful starting point to facilitate this kind of rapprochement would be the mutual acknowledgement that the recent histories of theater studies in Flanders and Wallonia are not so different after all. As I hope to have demonstrated, there are significant parallels and convergences that connect both areas, insofar as they each had to go through the struggle of finding a legitimate space for theater studies within academia, while they each can currently also draw on a vivid artistic scene that is self-conscious about the role of theater in our present society. Trying to discern similarities obviously does not mean that differences should simply be erased. On the contrary, it cannot be denied that Flemish and francophone theater in Belgium do have distinct genealogies that, in turn, gave rise to different institutional structures (in Flanders, there is no “National Theater,” for instance). Both scenes now also face divergent political contexts, as a right-liberal government in Flanders with a clear Flemish-nationalist agenda stands opposed to the social-democratic, rather leftist government in Wallonia. However, the increasing number of initiatives to strengthen the ties between Flanders and Wallonia – a few of which I have mentioned in this article’s introduction – might indicate that perhaps the time has come for a more encompassing and sustained exchange of expertise, experiences, and intellectual traditions. This might be less utopian than it may sound. A Cultural Accord between Flanders and Wallonia that provides complimentary subsidies for intercommunity projects has long been in the making, but once it had been signed in 2013, more funds became available to support the cultural and artistic dialogue between Flanders and Wallonia.³⁴ From then on, the Ministry of Culture of Flanders and Wallonia have launched a joint call each year for partnerships between Flemish and francophone cultural organizations.

Political initiatives such as the Cultural Accord are to be applauded, but a more important step might be the closure of the longstanding and gradually ingrained cultural gap between Wallonia and Flanders that continues to feed stereotypical assumptions, not only on theater, but also on other cultural, societal, or economic tendencies in each part of the country. As far as theater is concerned, these assumptions will hopefully fade away when the awareness grows that, also in Wallonia, the artist’s own voice is resounding increasingly louder and that several emerging francophone artists are giving a sense of ideological urgency to theater again, while combining it with the joy of acting. This is perhaps the only way to support productive crossovers between Flanders and Wallonia and to amplify the

possibilities for the exchange of both artistic and academic research and expertise. At the same time, governmental policies do play a crucial role by providing the necessary structures and instruments to stimulate bi-communal co-productions and training programs. Artists and scholars from both cultural sides can learn from one another not because they have to become similar, but because they are different.

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¹ I would like to thank my colleagues Nancy Delhalle (ULg), Pierre Piret (UCL), André Helbo (ULB), Benoît Vreux, and most certainly Timmy De Laet for their very useful comments on earlier versions of this article.

² Belgium also has a small German-speaking community located in the eastern part of the country, but in order not to overcomplicate my discussion, I limit my focus to Flanders and Wallonia.

³ For more on the "house swap" between Beursschouwburg and Brigitinnes, see: <http://www.beursschouwburg.be/en/event/149559/new/#!149559> (Accessed 15 January 2018). Other theaters that have been collaborating include KVS and Théâtre National, who each year offer what they call "Toernee General," a selection of performances at both theaters. Also KC nOna (Mechelen) and Théâtre de l'Ancre have been presenting francophone work in Flanders and vice versa.

⁴ Because of this article's comparative perspective on the development of theater studies in Flanders and Wallonia, it can be considered a diptych with Luk Van den Dries' contribution to this theme issue.

⁵ "Toneelstof" is a word that bears a double meaning in Dutch, which in English would translate as "stuff of theater" as well as "dust of theater." This project consisted of four issues of *Documenta* each covering one decade (from the 1960s to the 1990s), with critics and scholars commenting on different aspects of theater practices in Flanders during those years. Each of these issues was accompanied by a DVD featuring a newly made documentary and a wealth of audio-visual bonus material largely issued from the vaults of the VRT archives. *Toneelstof* was an initiative of Thersites, the organization of theater critics headed by Wouter Hillaert.

⁶ For more on the vexed relationship between theater studies and literary studies, see Bart Philipsen's article in this issue.

⁷ Under the influence of performance studies, theater studies broadened its scope from theater in the strict sense of the word to rituals, processions, ceremonies, and other types of performed behavior, while at the same time paying attention to the fundamental contextual nature of performance through the mobilization of a broad variety of scientific disciplines as diverse as semiotics, gender studies, sociology, anthropology, ethnography, linguistics, etc. (see Carlson).

⁸ For a critical analysis of this dynamic, see Vanhaesebrouck.

⁹ The phrase “flics du sens” was coined by the French director Antoine Vitez. Literally translated, it means law enforcers (or, perhaps better even, cops) of meaning or signification (see Biet and Triau 998)

¹⁰ “Vormingstheater” is a rather difficult term to translate, but in English it would mean literally “formation theater.” It refers to a theater practice inspired by the work of artists like Augusto Boal in which theater becomes a means for social emancipation and political agency. It aims at empowering its audience through the use of specific techniques which help spectators to understand power relations as well as the constructed nature of their own social reality.

¹¹ The importance of the “Werkgroep Vormingstheater” for Flemish theater studies is more extensively discussed in Luk Van den Dries’ article in this issue, whereas Christel Stalpaert’s contribution goes deeper into the ongoing influence of Marianne Van Kerkhoven’s view on dramaturgy in Flanders.

¹² The KU Leuven did not pursue this interest in theater studies and is currently one of the few Flemish universities without a theater studies program.

¹³ Schechner’s lecture was also published in Dutch in the third and last issue of *Data*, the short-lived journal of the CET mentioned earlier. A different version appeared later in *Performing Arts Journal*, which featured a two-part essay by Schnechner, titled “The Decline and Fall of the (American) Avant-Garde” (1981).

¹⁴ For an overview of the most important developments in theater and performance studies during the late 1980s and early 1990s, see Opsomer, “Theaterwetenschap en culturele studies” and Jans.

¹⁵ For a general overview, see Aron.

¹⁶ Martine Wijckaert’s work is extensively discussed in *Alternatives théâtrales*, issue 115.

¹⁷ Delcuvellerie also importantly infused the education of actors in Wallonia with a radicality it seemed to lack until then. He particularly left his mark on the pedagogy of ESACT, the Drama Department at the Royal Conservatoire in Liège.

¹⁸ The history of the Théâtre 140 and the important role of both the venue and Jo Dekmine for the theater field in Wallonia is the topic of the volume *Jo Dekmine et le 140: Une aventure partagée*, published by *Alternatives théâtrales* in 2011.

¹⁹ I deliberately use the French term “études théâtrales” instead of the English term “theater studies,” in order to insist on the specificity of the French variant of the discipline, in which the dramatic text is considered to be the core element of theater. The Institut d’Études théâtrales (IET; Institute of Theatrical Studies) at the Université Sorbonne Nouvelle (Paris 3), founded in 1959 by Jacques Scherer and which counted important scholars as Bernard Dort, Anne Ubersfeld and Jean-Pierre Sarrazac amongst its staff, has without a doubt played an important role in the institutionalization of this text-based perspective in France. Nevertheless, reducing French theater studies to text-based “études théâtrales” is of course highly questionable, since there have been French theater scholars who did look beyond the primacy of the text. One could think of, for example, Patrice Pavis, who was one of the first in France (but not the only one) to pay attention to intercultural theater, or the work of Christian Biet, whose historical research comes close to Schechner’s broad-spectrum approach.

²⁰ For more on the relationship between postdrama and Flemish theater, see Van den Dries and Crombez; Swyzen and Vanhoutte.

²¹ For a beautiful reflection on the Liège cultural identity, inspired by Roland Barthes’ ideas on contemporary mythologies, see Jean-Marie Klinkenberg and Laurent Demolin’s *Petites mythologies liégeoises* (Little Liégeois mythologies, 2016).

²² The francophone government determines through decree what degrees universities can offer. Each university is bound to very strict regulations regarding the number, name, and nature of their degrees. The government chose to combine cinema studies and theater studies under the umbrella of one and the same MA degree, the “Master en Arts du Spectacle,” except for the UCL, where cinema studies is not included in the program.

²³ See the statement by director Cécile Van Snick on <http://www.carteculture.be/place/atelier-theatre-jean-vilar/> (Accessed 12 February 2018).

²⁴ Belgian visiting professors who taught at UCL include, amongst others, Jean Florence, Georges Jacques, Ariane Joachimowicz, and Daniel Lesage. Examples of visiting professors from France are: Robert Abirached, Georges Banu, Jean-Pierre Sarrazac, Catherine Naugrette, Bernard Faivre, Emmanuel Wallon, and Jean-Louis Besson.

²⁵ At the Université de Liège, theater studies is officially part of the Department of “Arts et Sciences de la communication” (Art and Communication Studies) that, apart from “Arts du spectacle” (which includes film and live performing arts), covers three other domains: “journalisme,” “médiation,” and “communication multilingue” (journalism, mediation, and multilingual communication).

²⁶ The Group μ and Jacques Dubois outlined their new methodological approach in the internationally acclaimed book *Rhétorique général* (1970, translated in English in 1981 as *A General Rhetoric*).

²⁷ Delhalle’s recent research continues along the same lines. Her edited volume *Le théâtre et ses publics* (*The Theater and its Audiences*, 2013), for example, deals with the interactions between changing social contexts and theatrical representation, while also considering developments such as the democratization versus the “elitization” of the performing arts.

²⁸ Gilbert Debusscher often collaborated with his colleague Johan Callens at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (Free University Brussels), as they share the same interest in American drama. This collaboration between a francophone and Flemish scholar is thus another example of people working together across the language border.

²⁹ Especially Goffman's contribution to the conference remains vividly present in the memories of those who attended the event: at the moment of his intervention, Goffman appeared to have locked himself up in the toilets, but when he did turn up ten minutes later, he candidly based his lecture on that event (Helbo, "Sémiologie du spectacle").

³⁰ This rethinking of the main tenets of classical semiotics is a project that Helbo embarked upon already during his doctoral research on the novels of Jean-Paul Sartre, in which he similarly approaches signification as the result of a collaborative interaction between signifier and receiver (*Le contrat de lecture dans l'œuvre romanesque de Jean-Paul Sartre*, Doctorat en Philosophie et Lettres, Université libre de Bruxelles, 1977, later published as Helbo, *L'Enjeu du discours*)

³¹ The other universities participating in the MA in Comparative Dramaturgy and Performance Research are Goethe University Frankfurt/Main, University of the Arts Helsinki, and Université Paris Nanterre.

³² The titles of the pieces mentioned here would translate in English as, respectively, *Rumor and little days*, *Sadnesses*, and *Those that I met may not have seen me*.

³³ See also the contribution by Naomi Velissariou in this issue. Velissariou similarly explains how she, as an emerging theater maker, took a distance from the legacy of influential theater collectives, such as Tg STAN and Maatschappij Discordia.

³⁴ For more information on the Cultural Accord between Flanders and Wallonia, see: <http://www.cultuurculture.be> (Accessed 12 December 2017).