

MAETERLINCK'S PRINSES MALEINE AT THE N.T.G.

Richard Allen CAVE

Noot van de redactie :

Op 15 maart 1986 ging bij het Nederlands Toneel Gent Prinses Maleine van Maurice Maeterlinck, geregisseerd door Jonas Jurašas, in première. Deze opvoering was een historische gebeurtenis want Maeterlincks stuk, destijds door Octave Mirbeau geprezen als het werk van een nieuwe Shakespeare, werd nog nooit eerder in Vlaanderen geënceneerd.

Deze produktie, die haar kracht ontleende aan haar sterk plastische expressiviteit, werd noch door het publiek noch door de recensenten erg gunstig ontvangen. Toch wekte zij belangstelling en waardering in het buitenland, o.m. van de Maeterlinck-kenner Dr. Richard Allen Cave, Reader in Drama aan de Universiteit te Londen. Dr. Cave wijdde een kritische bijdrage aan de N.T.G.-produktie. De redactie van DOCUMENTA gaf er de voorkeur aan dit artikel in de oorspronkelijke taal op te nemen.

Time has not dealt kindly with certain of Maeterlinck's plays. The effects to create suspense, the techniques for building up and maintaining a mood of eerie uncertainty, of threat and impending doom have become the staple fare of horror films and pseudo-medieval cinematic fantasies. Becoming commonplace, the idiom ceases to shock and disturb. The problem is in large measure concerned with the visual dimension of the plays : an impossibly lavish budget would be necessary to realise the tortuous corridors, vast chambers, dark gardens of Prinses Maleine exactly as prescribed by the dramatist, if the action is to flow unbroken, which is so essential to the sustaining of his peculiarly charged atmosphere. A possible solution is to deploy photographic projections, though that risks challenging the cinema on grounds where it is easily superior. Or a director and designer can evolve a visual idiom of their own, one that, ignoring Maeterlinck's specific stage directions, none-

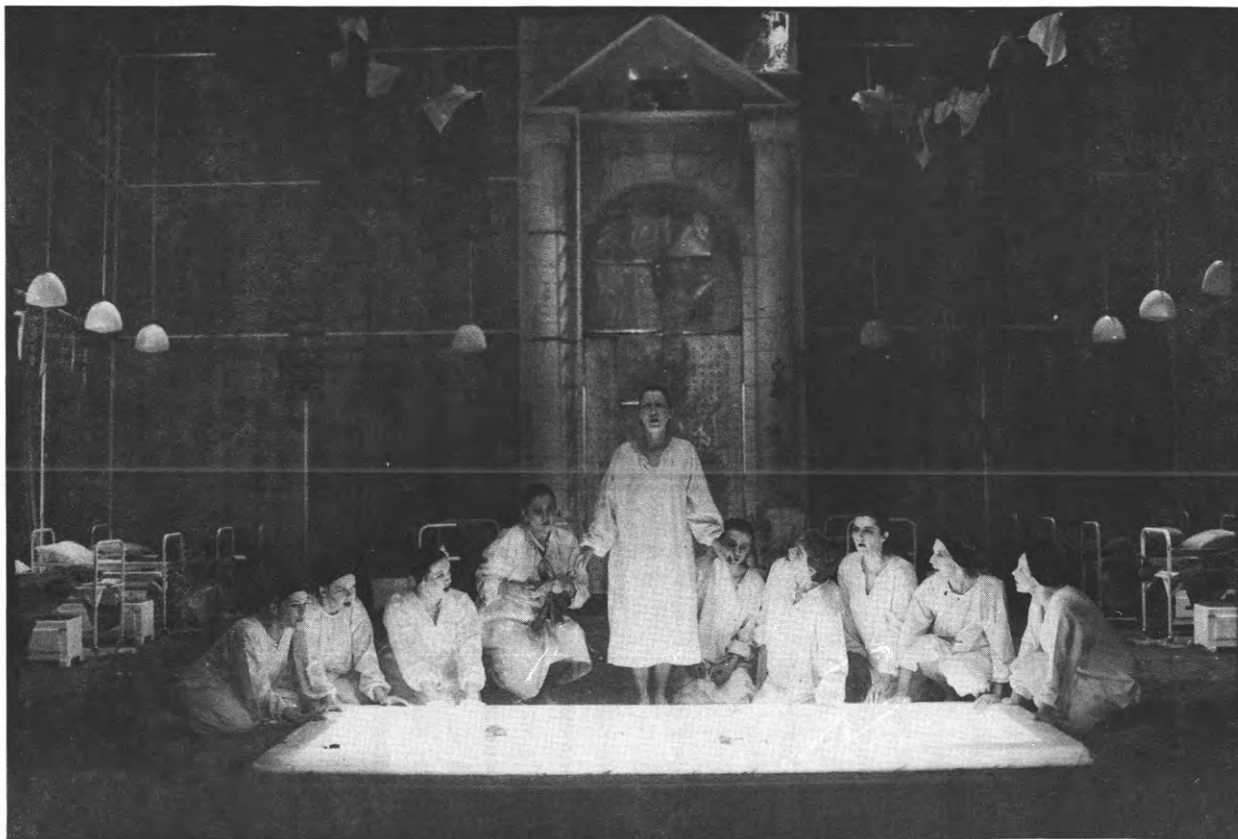
theless complements the characters' psychological states, for Maeterlinck's play is a journey into the dark reaches of the mind to the places where fear activates a heightened sensitivity and awareness. This was the option pursued by Jonas Jurašas and Andreas Szalla for the N.T.G. . They seemed to have taken their inspiration from the dream plays of Strindberg and the kinds of expressionist drama he influenced. There was a considerable aptness in this : Strindberg had begun to champion Maeterlinck's work after an excited reading of Prinses Maleine at the time of his growing relationship with Harriet Bosse in whom he discerned a stage persona ideal for Maeterlinck (she was to play in Pel-léas et Mélisande) ; for her he was to create a series of otherworldly roles, child-women suffused with a luminous goodness yet haunted by a deep sensitivity to the pains of human existence. But it was less to a play like Easter (Strindberg's gift to Bosse) that Jurašas seems to have turned than to Dream Play itself and the late chamber works, Ghost Sonata and The Pelican, where the logic of dream and nightmare prevail, where the dialogue moves through strange disjunctions (for the characters are too obsessed with their private internal dialogue to communicate directly with each other), and where the settings possess a peculiar life of their own, seemingly solid and naturalistic yet capable of weird transformations. Of Dream Play Strindberg observed :

Anything can happen, anything is possible and probable. Time and space do not exist. On a flimsy foundation of actual happenings, imagination spins and weaves in new patterns : an intermingling of remembrances, experiences, whims, fancies, ideas, fantastic absurdities and improvisations and original inventions of the mind. The personalities split, take on duality, multiply, vanish, intensify, diffuse and disperse, and are brought into focus. There is, however, one single-minded consciousness that exercises a dominance over the characters : the dreamer's.

This seems exactly to define Jonas Jurašas's starting point and the quality and effect of his production-method in staging Prinses Maleine : he placed the play firmly in the realm of the surreal, where horror, uncertainty and illogic have a fierce immediacy, and appealed to the imagination through a powerful stimulation of the senses.

The set, seen by half-light before the play began, created the right degree of tension at once : a white, curtained box with, centre-back, a towering portico and entrance-gate ; high in its facade was set a glass case containing live doves and to one side a crumbling statue of the Madonna ; ten metal institutional beds were arranged symmetrically around the walls, above each was suspended a light, a stiff-backed wooden chair and, swinging aloft, a nun's black habit with white coif ; beside each bed stood a low chest with red-upholstered seat. Into the forestage was set a vast, white bath and, to stage left, a Pietà with a halo of garish lights before which burned a single candle. The first surreal motif was the stage floor, which was covered with luxuriant grass and flowers ; the second was the lighting which, catching the movements of the water in the bath, sent reflections over the walls of the set like scudding clouds. This last detail intimated the scenic principle governing the production : everything before us could be transformed into a metaphor for something else. All that was wanting was a central focus - a dreamer.

The play started with a silent mime - the female members of the cast were seen asleep ; one becoming restless woke another who left her bed to wet a cloth in the bath with which to cool the other's forehead ; then, noticing that the light of the candle seemed to be the cause of the disturbed sleep, she crossed to the Pietà, knelt and extinguished the flame. A lighting-change brought the cast



"Prinses Maleine" in het N.T.G. (foto : Luc Monsaert).

chattering ecstatically to the bath ; instead of enacting the opening scene, the cast sang and narrated it like a fairytale that increasingly caught the imagination of the girl who had been the restless sleeper ; as the cast selected roles in the story for themselves (the caring one becoming the Nurse, another Anne, another Uglyane), it seemed appropriate that she should play Maleine. Wide-eyed with a fever-stricken pallor, she seemed the perfect embodiment of the Maeterlinckian heroine, victim of circumstance, one whose very innocence seems to call doom upon itself. As the cast told the story of the rival kings and the betrothal of Maleine and Prince Hjalmar that it was hoped might heal the war between them, the women illustrated the narrative with chessmen and toys (all black) that they dredged from the depths of the water. Then one found a dagger and the action moved into another dimension of reality as the kings appeared in the opposing theatre boxes that flank the stage. Maeterlinck's text began to be acted in the scene where King Marcellus urges Maleine to abandon her love for the Prince and she refuses ; the Maleine-actress during the dialogue simultaneously stage-managed the sea-battle that is the consequence of her refusal, burning toy-boats in the bath with a sly relish - an action that exactly captured the element of childish wilfulness that propels the Princess along a path that leads inexorably to her doom. With the King's departure, the doors of the portico swung open to admit the Prince and his companion, Angus, fleeing in terror from the battlefield. The development of the action was as if a tale had gained a hold on a feverish imagination and steadily become, in the mind's eye, a lived reality.

As Maleine pursued the Prince to his home in the castle of Ysselmonde, the cast with great ingenuity regrouped the constituent elements of the set to create the numerous locations Maeterlinck calls for : the bath became sea, foun-

tain or moat as required ; the red-topped chests old Hjalmar's throne, a ballroom, Maleine's sick-bed ; the bedsteads, up-ended, the stifling corridors of the castle or the massive windows of Maleine's bedchamber ; struck in different ways the metal frames of the bed sounded like the wind, or hail, alarm bells or the grinding-shut of some ancient door. Those nuns' habits hovered over the action like a looming storm-cloud ; lowered on pulleys, they created the enveloping darkness of the tower in which Maleine and the Nurse are imprisoned during the battle, or the forest through which they journey to Ysselmonde ; set jerking to and fro they appeared like taunting dancers at the hall where the Prince rejects Uglyane preferring Maleine. The gaunt cruciform hangers left swinging aloft, as the habits were stripped away and donned by the cast when nuns were required in the action, evoked the endless landscape of cemeteries which intrude on the reveries of the Prince and Maleine in turn. When Uglyane was being dressed for her meeting with the Prince, the entire cast held hand mirrors before her ; an instant later with a change in the lighting, the mirrors became the glistening eyes of the owls who terrify Maleine in the darkness of the forest ; and Uglyane, swathed about with vast lengths of material in the dressing-sequence, became by another sinister transformation the fountain beside which the lovers meet.

What impressed in all this was the exceptional sensitivity of the production-team in finding a fund of theatrical metaphors that took one straight to the heart of the play as a Symbolist drama. One engaged with Prinses Maleine not as a medieval fantasy but as an exploration of the workings of the mind ; one could not sustain a comfortable detachment, for the stage-world was too potent and dangerous. No liberties were being taken with Maeterlinck's vision ; everything was firmly rooted in the text. Consider as one

example of this the overall situation conceived by Jurašas<sup>V</sup> - a group of novices with a senior nun or maybe a hospital for the sick or a school for orphan girls cared for by nuns ; the sheltered girl disturbed by tales of an outside world of politics and passion which threaten her child-like innocence and poise : early in Maeterlinck's play *Maleine* is heard singing strangely while at her spinning wheel :

Les nonnes sont malades,  
Malades à leur tour ;  
Les nonnes sont malades,  
Malades dans la tour ... (I.ii.)<sup>1</sup>

Later the Prince observes :

... j'ai cru vivre tout le jour dans une salle  
pleine de fiévreux (II.iii.).

*Maleine's* father repeatedly stresses how, since her birth, the court have lived on tiptoe around her lest they should disturb her peaceful mood : "Voilà quinze ans que j'ai fait de ma cour un couvent" (I.ii.) ; Ysselmonde, he warns, is "une effrayante forêt d'intrigues et de soupçons" ; he will not talk of the place "car je ne veux pas verser de poison dans ton coeur". Or to take as another example the image of the black habits suspended menacingly over the action : these were a visual counterpart to textual images like the King's haunted cry when he lapses into madness after *Maleine's* murder :

Il y avait des vautours aveugles dans le vent  
cette nuit ! (V.iv)

There was a remarkable completeness to the concepts shaping the production.

Some cuts and omissions were inevitable, given so long a play, but these were judiciously done. Prinses Maleine is the earliest and most derivatively Shakespearean of Maeterlinck's plays : the long scenes of retainers or townfolk watching portents in nature and prophesying disaster risk being comic through being very protracted ; the main action has intensity enough. Jurašas<sup>V</sup>'s method was to prune heavily

and allow one detail to convey the required impact of the whole. A good example here was his treatment of the scene (II.iii.) where Maleine arrives in the town of Ysselmonde when her outstanding beauty seems to bring tragedy in its wake. The poor jostle first to see her and then to watch two men fighting with long knives out of rivalry for her love. Maleine and the Nurse pass on oblivious of the disturbance they cause and greet a cowherd who is preparing to bathe. Maeterlinck offers a scene of complex movement somewhat lacking in focus. Jur<sup>V</sup>asas concentrated on the incident with the cowherd who, after greeting the women, began, despite the Nurse's protestations at seeing a naked man, to wash himself with sensuous abandon in the bath, quite mesmerising Maleine. He was followed by a second herdsman, the dialogue being repeated exactly and the pattern of movements ; then came a third. The theatre re-echoed with their joyful cries and the splashing of water over their muscles till there was a sudden silence as the three men simultaneously perceived Maleine watching ; with a raw shout they pursued her intent on rape, but began fighting violently amongst themselves till dispersed by the arrival of the Prince and Angus. The scene had been invested with a clarity of definition that integrated it well into the thematic development of the play : Maleine escaped one invasion of her person only to succumb to Anne's more subtle and systematic destruction of her being.

The most extensive cutting occurred in the last two acts to sharpen the impact of Maleine's murder and the consequences of its discovery. For an English ear there are perhaps too many echoes of Macbeth here for comfort in the handling of the King as Anne's unwilling accomplice, particularly in the long scene in the throne-room (V.ii.) where the King, overwhelmed with remorse, refuses to join the court at prayer and is prey to fitful bursts of an-



guish, which Anne has to control without raising the suspicions of the courtiers. Having created a powerful sense of the characters of Maleine, Anne, Prince, King and Nurse in the opening acts, Jurašas pared away the text to allow the sequence of events in itself to convey meaning at the climax. The murder was savage, leaving Anne spent, satiated, cooling her limbs in the water ; when the Madman appeared, he was forcibly drowned by the two murderers but surfaced again to be hacked at with the dagger by the demented King. The discovery of the corpse was preceded not by Maeterlinck's scenes of suspense and delay (where the Nurse and the Prince struggle to open the chamber door and then to re-light their candle before entering, while the court vainly tries to preserve decorum as the King becomes subject to what to them are inexplicable terrors) ; instead a fearful tableau slowly took shape before us : the Nurse, as if intuitively apprehending the coming disaster, rocked and crooned over a pillow she held close to her like a fretful child and the Prince seemed lost in a catatonic trance ; Anne curled in foetal position on one of the beds, her whole frame alert with tension as a child that knows it has done wrong, seeks solace in a place of security, but is fraught with the expectation of discovery ; the child, Allan, Anne's son, climbed up to the cage of doves and was hysterical on discovering all but one had flown away and that was dead (in Maeterlinck's text the townsfolk discover that the swans that frequented the moat beneath Maleine's window have suddenly gone, leaving one of their number dead) ; and the old King in a mood of savage distraction seized the bird and began relentlessly plunging it into the water as, earlier, he had attempted to drown the Madman. It was as if the characters had become arrested in actions that epitomised their innermost selves : the image renewed one's sense of the whole environment of the play as being an institution for the sick, while capturing the essence of



“Prinses Maleine” in het N.T.G. (foto : Luc Monsaert)

one of Maeterlinck's most evocative descriptions of this tragedy :

On dirait une fête en enfer ! (V.ii.)

The Prince's somnambulistic state continued throughout the discovery of Maleine ; the Nurse and he spoke of her death in faint voices drained of feeling, as if physical fact -the sense of the body's coldness- was but confirming what in the darkest reaches of their sensibilities they already knew. This seeming paralysis of the will made deeply shocking his sudden stabbing of Anne, then of himself ; but the psychological logic was exact. His emotions had been played with by the King and Anne long enough and, out of the all-consuming despair to which they had reduced him, he took a vicious revenge.

This way of directing the play prevented the realisation of several of Maeterlinck's own powerfully conceived stage-images, most notably in the last act when the King cannot bring himself to enter the chapel to pray ; plagued by conscience, he has the lights first dimmed then re-lit, which makes him perceive that the tapestries surrounding him depict the Massacre of the Innocents ; commanding that they be torn down, he finds that behind them hang others picturing Domsday. Once again Jurasas contrived to capture the spirit if not the precise detail of this surreal conception and in a way that seemed central to his whole approach to the play. Ghent's most famous painting is the altarpiece of the Adoration of the Mystic Lamb by the Van Eyck brothers. The focus of the main panel is directed towards three emblems : the Holy Ghost in the form of a dove hovers in the middle ground above a red altar where Christ as the Mystic Lamb, the sacrificial victim, stands revealed ; in the foreground on a lawn of luxuriant grass and flowers is seen the Fountain of Life. These same three images

Maleine, altarpiece, water-dominated the setting of the play to depict a world of darkness where the light of the spirit had gone out and only evil, terror and lust prevailed. Just as Maeterlinck had used the device of the tapestries, so here Jurašas called to mind a familiar iconographic emblem to enhance our understanding of the moral and psychological themes of the play. What he created on stage was a deliberate desecration of the Van Eyck's serene vision : the red dais here was no altar celebrating the triumph of virtue and principle, but a place of sacrilege where innocence was slowly poisoned through fear and tension and finally murdered out of envy and hate. One's whole experience of the play was of the massacre of two innocents : Maleine and her Prince.

Maeterlinck's play ends on this note of unassuaged pain as the King, who should be the representative of order and care, retreats into madness to escape the guilt he feels at being seduced into complicity with Anne's evil. Jurašas, however, continued his metaphor of the play as nightmare to its logical conclusion : the Nurse, comforting the King, encouraged him to leave the stage ; she then settled each of the women to bed, particularly attending to the actresses playing Maleine and Anne, but all the women were depersonalised now, stripped of the details of costume that defined their status and identity. The room was again a ward of sleepers, calm at last ; the Nurse re-lit the candle before the Virgin and herself retired to rest. The evil of the nightmare was exorcised, though the meaning implicit in its surreal images remained deeply etched in one's consciousness.

It takes a remarkable feat of imaginative daring to forge a new style for Maeterlinck's plays today ; to have created such an autonomous poetic vision required great

sensitivity to Maeterlinck's artistry and deeply committed playing from the cast. Tone and stylised movement throughout were perfectly judged to complement the changing visual symbolism. This production of Prinses Maleine was theatre-poetry of the finest order.

## NOTE

1. All quotations from Maeterlinck's La Princesse Maleine are taken from the fifth edition published by Paul Lacomblez, Bruxelles, 1891.



St.-Baafsplein 17, Gent

REPERTOIRE SEIZOEN 1986-1987

"Lijmen en het been"	W. Elsschot
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