

# Repertoire, ensemble and internationalization in Flemish city-theatres in the 2010s.

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There are not many elements that are as important for the reputation of an organization or institution today as internationalization, and there are not many elements that have as many artistic and economic strategies and issues. This is especially true in Flanders, a small region that often lacks enough (domestic) presentation opportunities for its artists (Janssens 2017a). It has also experienced drastic changes that have made artists look outwards, away from any purely Flemish repertoire, and brought with it a desire for more horizontal ways of creating instead of relying on fixed ensembles. If this field has one burden, it is specifically the legacy of the Flemish Wave and the theatre collectives. This has put the region's three city-theatres in a difficult situation, where they, starting in the 2000s, have felt the need to answer to the needs of the field and do something about their reputation as old-fashioned institutions. Dealing with new aesthetics, new social-political philosophies, and changes in artistic direction, all three have taken different paths to negotiate their value for the Flemish performing arts scene. Internationalization is one of the needs in the Flemish field that are most at odds with the traditional mission of national theatres but has nonetheless been an

important aspect in the 2010s for the city-theatres. Instead of serving as strong anchors in the theatre scene, they themselves have looked at an alternative way of existing in the nation. Internationalization thus becomes a way of negotiating the position of the institution in the field.

One advantage of the Flemish field is that the strategies available, even for institutions, are quite varied. While national theatres in Europe often have to deal with the demands of a big and well-known repertoire (Holdsworth 2010, 27), Flanders has a limited repertoire and a history of deconstructing what little repertoire is available. This can be seen as beneficial for artistic freedom according to some theatre-makers (Anthonissen 2019), but also means that the city-theatres cannot follow the traditional mission of national theatres, which has actually been the staging of repertoire to build the nation's cultural identity. Interestingly, all three city-theatres were historically meant to function as national theatres, with only NTGent containing a reference to the city in its name. Compared to this ideal of the national theatre, the contemporary history of the city-theatres shows a different type of institution. Additionally, the friction between the concept of Flemish/Belgian cultural identity and the actual theatre-makers and institutions has caused the city-theatres to stop being true proponents of a Flemish or Belgian civic pride. Consequently, their relationship with internationalization, globalization, and/or cosmopolitanism has developed differently from other European national theatres.

By analyzing the motivations and artistic missions of city-theatres and their artistic direction, an institutional evolution can be discerned; sometimes with many twists and turns, sometimes with the continuous building of a new reputation. In the following case studies, we will see in what ways Flemish city-theatres have institutionally constituted themselves with internationalization strategies and how these can be interpreted along the lines of cosmopolitan, global, and nationalist discourses. Each city-theatre has developed their own

international institutional dramaturgy in the face of a changed field, from an urban-cosmopolitan, to a global and a city-local perspective. KVS, as a city-theatre in the big cosmopolitan city of Brussels, has looked at the specific constellation of this spatial reality to redefine itself, moving from a traditional Flemish theatre to a multilingual hub. Through the distinct social-political visions of its artistic directors in the 2010s, the theatre has reached far beyond its walls, while maintaining its physical position as an important aspect of their institutional dramaturgy. Alternatively, NTGent in the second half of the 2010s has seemingly broken the importance of their walls, instead looking at a global community, after having been one of the last places for a more Flemish repertoire. Lastly, Toneelhuis stayed mostly loyal to their own artistic voice and opened itself to the city rather than to the global world. Looking at the world outside of its walls has led to many projects for local artists but has limited its reach. As will become clear, none of these strategies constitute strong revolutions within Flanders, but can rather be important for understanding the institutional possibilities in the field of performing arts in the face of increasing internationalization and globalization in Europe. When there is no strict repertoire to take into account, there are less rules to break and more freedom to constitute an international-institutional dramaturgy. The mission and profile of the artistic director can be crucial for the strategies an institution employs to form their own position in the field.

## **International waters, the Flemish Wave**

When it comes to the internationalization of the Flemish performing arts scene, the most important cultural moment that comes to mind is the “Flemish Wave”. As a term it has garnered a lot of discussion, but is nonetheless often used by academics and professionals. The Flemish Wave refers to the period in the 80s where such Flemish choreographers, directors, and performers as Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, Jan Fabre, and Alain Platel broke ground and created experimental work that experienced a wave in popularity internationally. As Rudi Laermans and Pascal Gielen (1998) point out, what constituted the “Flemish wave” was mostly four or five names (330), but it was an important factor for the rise a more international reputation for the Flemish performing arts. Not only were these directors gaining ground outside of Flanders, but non-Flemish

choreographers like Meg Stuart became part of the “Flemish” Wave and working with non-Flemish performers became commonplace (331). As Janine Hauthal (2023) has pointed out when discussing (post-)migrant theatre, this has resulted in bi- and multilingual expressions, making the “Flemish” performing arts Flemish in name but not (exclusively) in language (742). This somewhat high degree of internationalization can still be seen today, which has left some professionals wondering for a few decades now how Flemish the Flemish scene really is.

In the Flemish scene, it has thus become increasingly important for artists and institutions to internationalize, meaning to tour internationally, employ international artists and/or appeal to international audiences, to be or stay part of this “Flemish aesthetic”. This paradox, of finding a connection with international conventions as part of the new Flemish scene, is what makes it hard to truly talk about a Flemish artistic authenticity (Laermans and Gielen 1998, 5). Additionally, the idea of Flemish authenticity is not neutral in social-political terms. Additionally, the renewed wave of right-wing Flemish nationalism makes “Flemish identity” a tainted concept, one that artists often want to move away from and deconstruct in more cosmopolitan ways. The internationalization that this new aesthetic movement almost required was also very different from the internationalization that was already present in the field. Big institutions such as the Flemish Royal Ballet brought in international choreographers and directors, but they still had to fit within the ruling dance tradition of the Flemish Ballet (Laermans and Gielen 1998, 334). Opera, on the other hand, has historically been quite international, with productions almost always having a wide range of nationalities (Blackwood 2021, 88). Different institutions will bring with them different strategies, possibilities, and limits to internationalization.

Before we actually analyze the degree (and strategies) of internationalization present in Flemish theatre institutions and how they relate to a historical concept of national theatre, it is important to first consider what “internationalization” entails, in which ways it influences the field and is utilized by actors in the field. The term is often used to denote various phenomena that sometimes have widely different processes or are regarded in very different ways. Internationalization is not always (just) a process that crosses borders, but

also a matter of perception (Garde and Severn 2021, 7). Therefore, the “internationalization” of a field could mean collaborations with foreign entities, the frequent presence of non-Flemish artists in a Flemish production, and even a change in aesthetic that aligns with other styles from abroad. There are also often various reasons for a desire for internationalization, some more “romantic” than others, as sometimes international tours are an economic necessity, not a desire for an international aesthetic (De Moor 2019). In various institutions, the programming and production of international artists was partly to gain more symbolic capital and connect with the importance of the Flemish Wave (Gielen 2003, 55). Economic aspects, however, are often a crucial driving force for international touring schedules and coproductions. In comparison with visual arts, it is harder for theatre pieces to break even with a domestic touring schedule. While in a museum, an artwork can be seen every day for a few weeks, theatres are less inclined to show a piece that many times. More and more, theatres are even opting for “one-shots” instead of a series of shows (Verdonck 2018). To stay economically viable, the whole field seemingly relies on internationalization (Leenknecht 2017b; Janssens 2017a; De Moor 2019). However, these forms of international collaboration, while necessary, are difficult because of the nature of theatre as an art form. International touring is expensive and recent discussions about the ecological impact of theatre have influenced international travel behavior, with supporting organizations such as Kunstenpunt calling upon artists to make their travel more sustainable (Kunstenpunt 2020). While it can be important to go beyond the borders of your home country to seek different audiences (Hesters and Tielens 2017), it also costs a lot of “human energy” for a team to be on the road for so long and so often (Verdonck 2018). All these “costs” have caused internationalization, in the form of international coproductions and touring schedules, to slowly stagnate (Leenknecht 2017a; Janssens 2017a). The 2010s experienced a more conscious outlook on what internationalization implies for an artist, an organization, or an institution, while the demands of internationalization stay strong for artists wanting to stay relevant and looking to cultivate a professional network. They have also been partly romanticized within a more cosmopolitan idea of theatre (Buyalev 2016; Verdonck 2018; Meerzon 2020, 17). Internationalization has become an economic and professional necessity in Flanders, but not one that is utilized easily or uncritically.

When we look then at the “romantic” reasons for internationalization, the international aesthetic or reputation an artist or institution might want to pursue, it is important to consider which phenomenon we are actually talking about. Notions of “internationalization” in theatre are tied to ideas of globalization and/or cosmopolitanism, with internationalization and globalization sometimes serving as mere synonyms and globalization often being used as a more philosophical concept (Rebellato 2009, 4–5; Garde and Severn 2021, 3). Complicating things further, professional discourse within Flanders uses internationalization as an umbrella term for various possible aspects (touring, performers’ national identity, professional network, etc.). Both internationalization and globalization situate themselves at a supranational level. Running next to those terms, cosmopolitanism in theatre is slightly more situated, as it often describes stagings of cosmopolitan identity within a spatial dimension (e.g., the migrant in a city) or collaborations where the festival or institution itself wants to create a cosmopolitan attitude for themselves (Meerzon 2020, 16–17). Part of the overlaps and differences can be found in the entanglement between culture and economics that some theorists, such as Dan Rebellato (2009), try to separate by defining globalization as an economic phenomenon and cosmopolitanism as a cultural one (10–11). For this article, the definition of “internationalization” as defined by Ulrike Garde and John Severn in their edited volume, *Theatre and Internationalization* (2021), will be used (7). For Garde and Severn, internationalization encompasses a broad number of connections and expectations, while acknowledging state-based influences on the workings of the theatres. The economic and cultural aspects of a theatre within a certain state can have consequences for the way internationalization can be pursued and in what way it is perceived by the audience and by the field. Perception is an especially important factor in internationalization in theatre, as a single element might remind an audience too much of another national style thus rendering it “international” in the eyes of spectators and critics (8). It also limits how much internationalization an audience will palate, as productions that are “too foreign” will not be well received, meaning a careful balance between familiar and foreign must be struck (11). For Garde and Severn, all these processes and perceptions fall under the notion of “internationalization”.

Instead of untangling the various aspects into neat parts, the history of Flemish theatre itself might actually invite us to regard its full entangled discourse. When applied to theatre institutions, another tension arises, as the Flemish city-theatres were historically meant as national theatres (Opsomer 1988). This tension is what makes it difficult for any institution to simply internationalize, as they still carry an expectation, from both the field and the funding bodies, to stay “Flemish” theatres. This does not necessarily mean that a national theatre is always at odds with a cosmopolitan attitude, it simply means that the encounter of nationalism with cosmopolitanism contains many different expectations and implications, such as the fear that cosmopolitanism comes at the cost of national autonomy (Holdsworth 2010, 68). According to Nadine Holdsworth (2010), international exchanges can actually enrich national cultural practice (79). However, Flemish city-theatres today differ from the typical idea of the national theatre. Even in popular discourse they are rarely called “national theatres”, but have been called city-theatres (“stadstheaters”) for a few decades now, or sometimes repertory theatres (“repertoiretheaters”) (Opsomer 1988; Tindemans 2011; Jans 2023). Aside from terminology, their function also sits uneasy within the definition of a national theatre as a theatre with “civic pride and cultural prominence, producing works by national playwrights and theatre-makers” (Holdsworth 2010, 27). First, the idea of “national theatre” as an art form has complicated by the division of cultural departments among the Flemish, French, and German communities. An organization or institution wishing to be subsidized will inevitably have to align itself with one or the other. This is made visible, especially in Brussels, where two separate “national theatres” are only a ten-minute walk away from each other: the Royal Flemish Theatre (Koninklijke Vlaamse Schouwburg) and the National Theatre of Wallonia-Brussels (Théâtre National Wallonie-Bruxelles). While these city-theatres have cultural prominence, the idea that they carry “civic pride” is not widely present. In discourse, this expectation is named, but most critics quickly dismiss any idea that these city-theatres actually succeed at representing the nation or Flemish community in a way that they should (Opsomer 1988; Tindemans 2011; Hendrickx 2022). These discussions do not center the expectation that the city-theatres should represent the nation’s culture and history in a traditional sense, but that they should represent the diversity present in the nation. These demands can be seen as more cosmopolitan than truly national.

A second concern when looking at the typical conception of a national theatre is that new play development in Flanders differs from the way it is stimulated in other countries. Due to the aesthetic changes of the past few decades, in the 2010s theatre lost its last true ensemble and/or repertoire pieces. Instead of classic playwright-director relationships, Flemish theatre is known for more director and/or actor-centric productions (van Schoor 1979, 269). The few authors that have built up a steady repertoire can all be read on a “lazy Sunday afternoon” (Hillaert 2013, 34). Consequently, Flanders’ repertoire and dramatic canon is actually an international textual repertoire and discussions on repertoire include various texts that are not written in Dutch, such as plays by Shakespeare, Ibsen, Goethe, Albee, and Molière (Hillaert 2012; Laermans 2019).

This issue has been intensified by the loss of the ensembles in the 2010s, with all three city-theatres in a matter of a few years getting rid of a fixed ensemble to work with more fluid models (Jans 2023). This inevitably has consequences for the possibility of repertoire, as it is always dependent on the bodies that “repeat” it (Coussens 2021). In this, we can still see the legacy of the 80s and 90s, where theatre-makers popularized the idea of working in democratic (horizontal) collectives and instigated a wave of more flexible and ad hoc collaborations (Van Baarle 2022). This reached into the city-theatres as well, which started looking more and more at the arts centers such as Vooruit, DeSingel and Kaaaitheater. These arts centers from the 80s onwards became important sites of the new Flemish-international aesthetics while city-theatres lagged behind and failed at following the dynamic theatre field (Opsomer 1988; Tindemans 2011; Jans 2023). In the 2010s this preference for horizontal ways of working further led to the declining popularity of working for big stages, the “grote zaalvoorstellingen”. Starting in 2013, KVS even set up development projects for young artists to make their way to their newly renovated big stage (Coussens 2014). Within the city-theatres, the collectives with their smaller productions won from the traditional ensembles with their large pieces.

In all this, a clear evolution towards process-based, devised theatre can be identified, where only a few artists at city-theatres continued to work with repertoire, and often still in a heavily adapted form. Here lies a key difference with other neighboring countries, where repertoire is often still an important part of a national theatre’s



artistic planning. Instead, theatre-makers for the decades since the Flemish Wave have increasingly opted for devised theatre and starting the rehearsal process without an actual text. This desire for improvisation and theatre made in the rehearsal hall has far-reaching consequences even for text-based theatre. In Flanders, playwrights work almost exclusively on commission and only rarely write full texts out of their own accord (Coussens 2018). With fewer playwrights starting their own work, it becomes even harder for a textual repertoire to flourish, or at least not in a form where it is easily transferred to other makers. While authors like Freek Mariën, Stijn Devillé and Rebekka de Wit are well-known, the chances of other theatre-makers restaging these texts are relatively low. One of the few exceptions is *Camping Sunset*, who restaged Tom Lanoye's Shakespeare-adaptation in 2019, but even that is an adaptation of an adaptation, which is—if we are being slightly pedantic—not really a staging of a repertoire piece.

This means that, in Flemish artistic planning, where repertoire would go is now a space for a variety of other works by a variety of artists. There is no requirement for directors and theatre-makers to deal with existing textual traditions, instead they can build on what has been made without necessarily having to reuse the foundation they are building upon or at least being able to select what they reuse and how. This gap can therefore also be filled with an increasingly international artistic planning, making the city-theatres a lot less “national theatre”, but also a lot more than that. Each city-theatre has continually worked on their own profile both within the field and internationally. When they finally started to shake off the “burden” of repertoire and ensembles, they developed other strategies to define themselves as city-theatres. What follows is an analysis of the three city-theatres and the ways in which they have negotiated their position in the city and in the world when they have not positioned themselves through a national canon.

## Three city-theatres and the world outside their walls

### *KVS: The local and/as the global*

In the 2010s, KVS's artistic profile was in the hands of director and writer Jan Goossens and from 2016 onwards those of actor and writer Michael De Cock. Both directors would prove important for the profile of KVS as a hub for multicultural and diverse encounters, putting themselves forward as clear opinion-makers. Like many other artists who saw the decline of city-theatres in the previous decades, Goossens' social-cultural mission as artistic director was to put KVS back on the map with innovative artistic planning. From the beginning of his appointment, Goossens tried to deal with the multicultural space KVS was situated in and the contemporary evolutions in the artistic field. While KVS had consecrated its position as a sort of "national" theatre, it was too disconnected from the artistic avant-garde, which was reinventing their aesthetics as well as their institutions (Goossens 2016, 27). In the following years, Goossens would attempt to change KVS's institutional dramaturgy into a truly multicultural, cosmopolitan theatre with a clear, beneficial presence in the city of Brussels (Tindemans 2011; Goossens 2016, 36; Boenisch 2022, 76; Jans 2023). Part of this, according to Goossens, was about realizing that KVS was more than a Flemish institution, but truly a city-theatre. Michael De Cock would further strengthen this connection with the city and further develop this urban-cosmopolitan dramaturgy.

The institutional dramaturgy of Goossens' KVS was something he clearly and explicitly articulated. Goossens had a regular column in the newspaper *De Morgen* where he voiced his vision on theatre and art. In an interview in 2011, he talks about his desire to shift attention away from typical Flemish theatre-makers, arguing that it was only interesting "30 years ago" and that now their "core business" had significantly changed due to the internationalization of the city-theatre (Op de Beeck 2011). Both Goossens and De Cock essentially argue that this institutional approach is crucial in a city such as Brussels, with its "radically mixed and multilingual" society (Goossens 2016, 29; Gielen 2016). The institutional dramaturgy of KVS has been developed under the rationale that an urban-cosmopolitan dramaturgy is the *only* way to be relevant as a city-theatre

in Brussels. Any other approach would align too much with the national theatres of old. Under De Cock, KVS broke even further from old traditions and the last members of the ensemble were asked to leave as De Cock put together a theatre of theatre-makers (Sels 2015).

Goossens tried to make his claims for diversity even more true through a clear political presence, going as far as to cut ties with the newspaper *De Morgen* after a racist column (Sels 2014). While this decision did not go down well in the press, it showed how KVS put itself within the public debate, outside the stage. Goossens ran his city-theatre not just as a place for art, but as a significant actor in the social-political field of Flanders. De Cock has also been incredibly vocal about political decisions, putting his weight behind many different discussions, both in the press and on X/Twitter, such as the rise of alt-right cultural policy during the Covid-19 pandemic and other debates on culture, education, and politics. Again, these reactions often garner significant attention, some of which is directed back at KVS itself. The institutional dramaturgy of the previous decade has led KVS to sit uneasily within the political landscape, especially in the last few years with the rise of right-wing politics.

The internationalization of KVS can be seen as a cosmopolitan process, both in a social and aesthetic sense, as the rationale for their institutional dramaturgy is focused on Brussels' social situation as a cosmopolitan city. Their artistic commitments to various artists such as Junior Mthombeni, Pitcho Womba Konga, Faustin Linyekula, and South American artists through the Proximámante-festival show their international side. However, the focus on Brussels has also brought with it a distinctly local focus. With projects such as TokToCKnock in the 2011/2012 season and many other community projects, KVS has attempted to find the balance between the global and the local (Goossens 2016, 33; Jans 2023). The reality of Brussels as a multilingual and multicultural city opens up cosmopolitan possibilities, as, according to Meerzon, cosmopolitan theatre often leads to the staging of multiple selves, identities, and languages, which can otherwise be alienating for a monolingual audience (Meerzon 2020, 35–36). The internationalization of KVS is thus not about going past urban/local communities or purely about building a grand international reputation. Its internationalization is still rooted in the locality of Brussels. In the case of international collaborations with Congo and South Africa, it is about decoloniality. In the case

of South America, this tie is not rooted in historical ties, but in the desire to connect with Brussels' multiculturalism.

To further strengthen the locality of the Flemish city-theatre, KVS has still collaborated with various Flemish artists, such as Thomas Bellinck and Jozef Wouters under Goossens and Bruno Vanden Broecke and Valentijn Dhaenens under De Cock. With *Para* (2018), actor Bruno Vanden Broecke, director Raven Ruëll, and writer David Van Reybrouck looked at the Belgian military intervention in Somalia. The play was in line with a previous semi-documentary play, *Missie* (2007), on Belgian missionaries in Congo. While focusing on Belgian history, these plays carry a connection with Flemish culture through KVS as Flemish theatre, but also through Bruno Vanden Broecke, who has a well-known comedic TV career and has become a "household name". Furthermore, KVS connects with "Flemish repertoire" through its longstanding coproductions with Wim Vandekeybus and his dance company *Ultima Vez* and choreographer Lisbeth Gruwez. In these collaborations, KVS shows the outcome of its mission to evolve away from traditional theatre towards a city-theatre for performing arts.

The absence of traditional dramatic texts in the 2010s further strengthened the idea that repertoire would be unable to represent society at large. If the city-theatre should be a site of critical dialogue and provide "its important societal function in creating narratives that relate diverse and plural individuals to a new shared common" (Boenisch 2022), a place that "holds a mirror up to society" (Holdsworth 2010, 79), then it follows from the institutional dramaturgy of KVS that repertoire needs to make way for an urban-cosmopolitan dramaturgy that is able to address the diversity of Brussels. Looking at the position of repertoire at large, it is also easy to see that this choice was not very revolutionary. But rather a choice, perhaps, that was long past due considering the state of the Flemish performing arts (Goossens 2016, 27).

### ***NTGent: radical changes in artistic direction***

Internationalization during the previous decade at NTGent was slow to pick up and in certain ways limited to the usual neighboring countries France, Germany, and the Netherlands. It was one of the few city-theatres that still strongly relied on a collective of players

and repertoire. Especially with the arrival of Wim Opbrouck as artistic director, NTGent turned into a “theatre of actors” (Desmet and Op de Beeck 2011; Van der Speeten 2013). Despite the centrality of the actors, it is not entirely correct to call NTGent a traditional ensemble theatre, as Wim Opbrouck as artistic director tried to apply the structure of the collective in the city-theatre. He explicitly did not want NTGent to be known as *his* theatre, but as a brand in its own right (Desmet and Op de Beeck 2011). NTGent still cultivated a strong ensemble and developed a repertoire for a big stage. After five years, Johan Simons briefly returned to take up leadership of NTGent, leaving only two years later to return to Germany.

In the first half of the 2010s, the internationalization of NTGent was limited to an international touring schedule and connections with the Netherlands and Germany, some of which were established through the network of Johan Simons as a Dutch director in Flanders who had previously worked in Germany. Simons tried to keep this network, even when he returned to Ghent, combining his artistic direction with the Ruhrtriennale and even the city-theatre of Rotterdam (Van der Speeten 2015). In the end, it is this desire to maintain international connections rumored to be one of the reasons NTGent ended up in an (artistic) crisis (Ceulemans 2017). After these struggles and multiple people leaving the city-theatre, NTGent began looking for a new artistic direction, which they found in Milo Rau, in combination with Steven Heene and Luk Perceval. The arrival of Rau as new artistic director brought with it a wave of internationalization. Rau, as the first artistic director from a non-Dutch country at a Flemish city-theatre, was expected to broaden NTGent’s network and allow for both local and international projects to flourish (Sels 2017; Anthonissen 2019). While he was part of an artistic trio, he very quickly made a name for himself as *the* artistic director. At the start of his appointment, he decided to get rid of the last ensemble in Flanders. With his *Ghent Manifesto*, he tried to prescribe rules for the “city-theatre of the future”, essentially calling the previous institutional dramaturgy outdated. While perhaps revolutionary for the history of NTGent, the decision to get rid of the ensemble and deconstruct repertoire was in line with the evolution of repertoire in Flanders and with the other city-theatres. Interestingly, the perception of internationalization that Rau would bring was quite high, although his decisions were in line with Flemish theatre aesthetics, meaning again that the expectations of internationalization are not

always directly related to the actual processes behind them (Garde and Severn 2021, 8).

When we look at the creative process of Milo Rau, we can, however, see a process of internationalization and globalization through the artistic process of documentary theatre. Before he was appointed artistic director, Rau and his collaborators at the International Institute of Political Murder (IIPM) had already tackled parts of Belgian history before, such as *Five Easy Pieces* (2016), a production about the crimes of Marc Dutroux, and *Histoire du Théâtre I: La Reprise* (2018), about a homophobic murder in Liège. These pieces do not come from a distinct link with Belgian history, but rather are part of his interest in re-enactment and recollection within the idea of “theatre of the real” (Climenhaga 2021, 10). His artistic project, which is essentially applied to NTGent through the *Ghent Manifesto* (2018), looks at these different tragedies and political realities and attempt to reenact them on stage and experiment with reality through theatre. While his first piece as artistic director, *Lam Gods* (2018), took a piece of Flemish history as its central point, he has moved on to various other political situations. A number of other pieces, such as *Orestes in Mosul* (2019) and more recently *Antigone in the Amazon* (2023), very explicitly lose any national connection with Belgium as a country. While the actors reflect on the distance between their home country and the external place the tragedy is being staged, there is nothing truly Belgian or Flemish about the play. The distance could be felt from any country, the documentary theatre could have been produced in other theatres, with the biggest distance, in the case of *Orestes in Mosul*, felt between the Eurocentric theatre and acting style and the Arabic acting style, further made explicit in the piece itself (Hauthal 2023, 746). One of the rules of *The Ghent Manifesto* states that touring *needs* to happen in other countries. From the outset, these productions are created with different cultural audiences in mind, meaning it is less about how cosmopolitan individuals negotiate their divided selves and more about how global citizens tell their stories. Similarly, many of the other plays of NTGent artists work on meta-theatrical themes, such as the work of Luanda Casella and the international productions of Ontroerend Goed. One example of a series of productions that put Belgian history at the forefront is the *Sorrows of Belgium* trilogy (2019 – 2022). The trilogy was directed by Luk Perceval and borrowed its name from a novel by Hugo Claus. With its fragments

of coloniality, nationalism, and terrorism, it attempted to show the history of Belgium, but most importantly, it showed the unresolved fragmented Belgian identity. In its attempt to document this history, it ended up showing the difficulty. Its novelty also shows how little these sorts of “plays-of-the-nation” actually happen.

Interestingly, there is an unexpected benefit to the aesthetics and scenography that is usually present in Milo Rau’s pieces and that of other house artists, such as Luanda Casella. As they highly rely on the text being projected during the performance, they eliminate one of the issues that often arise when touring textual theatre across linguistic borders: surtitles (De Moor 2019). Rau has the added element of frequent multilingual theatre, which often already needs surtitles, even at “home”. This allows the play to be toured internationally, even when it utilizes a lot of text, because it already has an artistic and practical strategy to deal with the added text on stage. As an artistic strategy, this would be harder in cultural contexts where classic repertoire is still the mainstay of the artistic planning. While it is not unimaginable that a director might come up with an artistic concept for a Beckett or Shakespeare production where surtitles play an important part in visual aesthetics, a larger theatre will not program the same concept multiple times in a row. However, when the broader profile of the theatre relies on international artists, documentary and/or deconstructed theatre, a public tends to get used to the visual presence of a black bar for surtitles.

The internationalization of NTGent under Milo Rau encounters the same issue that arose in the Flemish scene in the wake of the Flemish Wave: internationalization seemingly coming at the cost of Flemish authenticity (Laermans and Gielen 1998, 5). While it is true that Rau internationalized NTGent as a city-theatre more than his predecessors, it is difficult to conclude that he internationalized *Flemish* texts specifically. In a globalized world, he put NTGent on the map and broadened its reach significantly, compared to what its international status used to be (Hauthal 2023, 748). Internally, his leadership caused some distress, eventually leading to a public discussion in 2022 between a dissatisfied Luk Perceval and other artists in the field, including KVS’s De Cock, who defended the evolution away from ensembles (Hendrickx 2022). NTGent has thus been a house of internal turmoil and significant change, moving from ensemble theatre to a director-led globalized theatre. When

comparing Rau's approach with KVS, different political strategies arise. Where Goossens and De Cock were eager to be very vocal in broader political discussions, Rau keeps many of his political statements in his pieces. In that sense, his internationalization does not necessarily seek to represent a cosmopolitan reality, but a political-global situation.

### ***Toneelhuis: Antwerp repertoire***

To talk of Toneelhuis's artistic planning in the 2010s is to talk of the artistic direction of Guy Cassiers and the many makers he attracted and supported with Toneelhuis. At the start of his time at the theatre, he quite radically decided to change from a traditional ensemble to an "ensemble of theatre-makers", a decision which was not welcomed by all of the previous ensemble (Ceulemans 2022; Jans 2023). At the time, Toneelhuis was a pioneer in deciding to rethink the traditional fixed ensemble and work on "new" repertoire by adapting novels instead of staging repertoire. In 2011, however, Toneelhuis would briefly work with an ensemble again, ahead of their collaboration with Internationaal Theatre Amsterdam (ITA), which still maintains a repertoire practice. During this time, Cassiers and other theatre-makers would again briefly work on classics (Hillaert 2011). The collaboration with ITA would become institution's most notable international collaboration in the years that followed, with repertoire pieces such as *Maria Stuart* (2014), *De Welwillenden* (2015), and *Vergeef ons* (2017). At the same time, Toneelhuis looked across Belgium's linguistic border, programming productions from Fabrice Murgia, the artistic director of Théâtre National Bruxelles-Wallonie, beginning with *LIFE : RESET* (2014). Still, it was hard to shake off the reputation of Guy Cassiers, as Murgia was compared to Cassiers in some Flemish reviews.

The biggest internationalization that can be identified with Toneelhuis is primarily in the choice of texts and plays that were adapted and performed. Cassiers drew on a large Western repertoire, often switching between American and Western European works. During Cassier's tenure, Toneelhuis's artistic planning consisted of textual theatre and theatre inspired by texts. American plays and novels like Tracy Letts' *August, Osage County* (2007) and William Gaddis's *J R* (1975) were adapted and performed alongside European texts. The makers of Toneelhuis would also tackle various Flemish and Dutch



novels, such as Olympique Dramatique's *Onvoltooid verleden* (2012), based on a 1998 Hugo Claus novel. These texts run next to each other, as if part of one, big, Western repertoire. This choice, however, was not all that iconoclastic to begin with. While the adaptations of novels have been innovative for Flemish textual theatre, combining texts from various cultural traditions is a given in a context where there is so little Flemish repertoire to choose from. Toneelhuis did not build on a "Flemish" repertoire with its textual tradition, as might be identified with NTGent in the first half of the previous decade, but it also did not follow the same cosmopolitan route as KVS. Even before the current collective artistic direction, especially with the relatively limited internationalization, Toneelhuis has employed more of a city institutional dramaturgy aimed at Antwerp's artistic scene with a focus on being an "artist-driven" city-theatre. City institutional dramaturgy is thus in certain ways a more apt term than urban dramaturgy, as the city plays a different role with Toneelhuis than with KVS. While Toneelhuis tries to recognize the multiculturalism of Antwerp and Flanders with the works of makers such as Mokhallad Rasem or the Antigone adaptation *Antigone in Molenbeek* (2020), it is not truly a cosmopolitan or international approach to the theme. This city-local approach is also distinctly present in the production *Risjaard Drei* (2017), where Olympique Dramatique chose a classic repertoire piece, Shakespeare's *Richard the Third* (c. 1592 – 1594), and staged it in the typical Antwerp dialect.

The focus on the development of local artists can also be seen in Toneelhuis's festivals. In previous decades, they developed programs and festivals targeting new productions. Cassiers put this forward as an attempt to "renew" the city-theatre and help new artists find their way to the big stage, similar to KVS's project from 2013 (Coussens 2014; Van der Speeten 2016). With LAFS, Antwerpse Kleppers, and P.U.L.S., the city-theatre has made its own space in the city and created space for the growth of urban and national talents, often new young makers, who have at times become part of the "house-makers" (Jans 2023). These "urban" projects, however, do not infiltrate the city as much as previous KVS projects, once again showing the difference between a more city-local dramaturgy and an urban-cosmopolitan one. Toneelhuis's interaction with the city is not one about cosmopolitanism or even globalization, but is almost nationalistic in its position.

Toneelhuis's innovations and position-taking in the 2010s can also be situated more strongly in the artistic field, and less in the social-political. The biggest innovation of Toneelhuis under Cassiers, compared to traditional repertoire traditions, was its visual focus, partly attributed to Cassiers' prior education in the visual arts. Although this evolution was also found across the Flemish performing arts scene (Jans 2023). Cassiers as an artistic director was focused on the artistic freedom present at his city-theatre, even in the face of economic crisis (Van der Speeten 2014). His importance and reputation are also what made his departure all the more difficult. Guy Cassiers announced his departure ahead of time, but the search for an artistic director was complex. A round of interviews led nowhere, while internal struggles made everything more difficult (Ceulemans 2019). Interestingly, two of the candidates in 2019 are now part of the collective artistic direction. It is no surprise then that negotiating Toneelhuis's position after Cassiers' departure was a difficult process. Cassiers always had the clear mission to make Toneelhuis a house of makers, in contrast with traditional theatres where the artistic director is the most important voice. Interestingly, he was never as much of an opinion-maker as the artistic directors of KVS, yet Cassiers has been as much the face of Toneelhuis as its other artistic directors.

Tindemans points to more artistic reasons for Cassiers' importance for Toneelhuis, arguing that his directing style overpowered his attempts at making Toneelhuis a "house of makers" (2011). Today, with the theatre's new collective artistic direction, internationalization can still be seen as based on their own productions and work, with less international invited artists in comparison with KVS and NTGent. While Toneelhuis would neither program a traditional dramatic canon as much as national theatres historically did nor would it truly reinstate an ensemble, it did significantly work on a new repertoire of Western textual theatre and the development of artistic talent in Antwerp. Cassiers had gathered a group of theatre-makers around him that shared his desire to work with text and adaptations of novels. However, it was never truly about pure repertoire, aside from coproductions with ITA. Even more classic pieces of dramatic texts such as *Augustus ergens op de vlakte* (2014) and adaptations of Flemish (historical) texts such as *Van den Vos* (2013) differ from a traditional concept of a dramatic canon. Under Cassiers' directorship, Toneelhuis was a city-theatre in the sense that

it supported and developed the artistic development of the people and collectives present in its city or brought outside talent to the city. The 2020s might prove crucial for a major change in institutional dramaturgy, but only time will tell how the connections between the city-theatre and the world outside its walls will develop.

## Conclusion

In the interplay between internationalization, repertoire, and ensembles, the artistic style and institutional decisions of the director(s) matter greatly. Two of the three city-theatres in Flanders have seen a change in leadership, but only in the case of NTGent did this involve a radical change in institutional dramaturgy. However, in each of these cases, there was little to no true iconoclasm within the performing arts, as each “innovation” has built on a history of the fluid Western repertoire in lieu of a Flemish repertoire and collective creative processes, all of which finds their origins in earlier decades. This situation within the Flemish performing arts scene has allowed city-theatres to easily build their own strategy when it comes to Flemish repertoire and theatre. While all three have talked about breaks with tradition, it is clear that even when the choice was innovative, it was not completely revolutionary or institutionally dangerous. Due to the legacy of the Flemish Wave and the connected theatre collectives, there has not truly been the expectation from the audience and the field in the twenty-first<sup>t</sup> century that these institutions develop a “Flemish” or “Belgian” repertoire.

Part of the reason for this situation is also tied to the social-political landscape. In Flanders, it is hard to define the local from the national from the global. As the city-theatres are tied to the Flemish government, they can hardly carry a “national” claim. Similarly, there are no real “national” plays that deal with “civic pride” (Holdsworth 2010, 27). Instead, the identity question is often skirted, except when it is addressed in a highly critical way, with little space for a feeling of the Flemish or Belgian community. The closest a play has come to saying something about a national feeling or identity is Perceval’s *The Sorrow of Belgium* trilogy produced by NTGent, which attempts to show Belgian history, moving from the colonial past to political collaboration during World War 2 to terrorist attacks, but never truly talks about a Belgian identity to feel connected to, only snippets of

its dark history. While this trilogy does not *need* to do it, it is striking that this is the closest the city-theatres have come in the 2010s to a “play-of-the-nation”. Even a full trilogy produced by a city-theatre, historically the places that have safeguarded national identity, does not succeed at displaying this pride. Instead, some city-theatres have tried a more global or cosmopolitan approach, where the city is not connected to a nation, but is connected to its multicultural community (KVS), its global community (NTGent during the second half of the 2010s), or its local artists and city population (NTGent and Toneelhuis during the first half of the 2010s).

When internationalization happens within Flemish city-theatres, it happens in steps, not all at once. The border with the Netherlands is incredibly porous, to such a degree in fact that it hardly registers as “international”, even when it technically is. The next step are the neighboring countries, with a few collaborations with France and a tighter network with Germany, as directors such as Luk Perceval, Johan Simons, and Milo Rau maintain strong connections with German theatre. In the previous century, this was the step that was the most common one to take. Other projects that connected with the city’s many ethnicities were pursued, but it was only in the 2000s and beyond that international collaborations and productions crossed over to other countries. In this regard, the city-theatres lagged behind the dance scene, with the artists of the Flemish Wave crossing oceans quite early. Even today, not every city-theatre continuously connects with other continents. KVS, under Jan Goossens and later Michael De Cock, has more long-term connections with Congo and South America. NTGent has found a broader European scope under the artistic direction of Milo Rau, which was essentially written into their production and artistic process through rules nine and ten of the Ghent Manifesto (Rau 2018). Toneelhuis has a smaller international area, except for the productions of artists like Mokhallad Rasem in the 2010s, whose Iraqi background is present in his work. Each institution and leader has tried to break with traditional theatre, by looking for a new repertoire or disavowing it and replacing ensembles with fluid, collective ways of working. This has left space for internationalization, but not every city-theatre has taken that chance or taken it in the same way.

New artistic direction brings with it new strategies. As Rau's profile was a clearly international one, the new artistic directors of NTGent might opt for other strategies: complementary, different, or revolutionary. The same goes for Flanders' two other city-theatres, where a change in leadership often still means a drastic change in institutional profile. A director, as the name implies, is never just a visitor, but a commander, even when it is a group of commanders. Internationalization strategies are therefore still reliant for the network, artistic and professional ambitions, and the cultural identity of the artistic direction. This, however, also means that actors and artists who are seen as part of the vision, are at risk of losing a certain amount of agency. An institution can carry a lot of power concerning economic stability, allowing artists from abroad to reliably create a piece. This also means they are in a powerful position to use the institution as a negotiation tool. Internationalization as a tool for open collaboration and transcultural exchange can easily be described in too idealistic terms, as the bureaucracy of mobility takes its toll on artists and might only be worth the trouble precisely because of the aura of internationalization. While artistically, the city-theatres have become open ground for experimentation, there is still room for institutional improvements that allow for internationalization to be more than a temporary act within a larger process of bolstering the institution's reputation. Meanwhile, those artists that are asked desire long-term collaborations instead of continually going from one loose project to another (Janssens 2017b).

Near the end of the 2010s, there was an increase in discussions on the sustainability of international travel, with more artists calling for green travel and new guidelines put into place. Eventually, discussions on global travel and internationalization would be halted in 2020 because of the Covid-19 pandemic, after a decade of evolutions and changes. International touring schedules and transnational collaborations have become less evident after a period of intense caution. On the other hand, the frequent online communication during lockdowns have made our world seemingly more global. Two of the three city-theatres also experienced a radical change in leadership, so their international strategies may continue to evolve in different ways. It remains to be seen how the city-theatres in Flanders will develop their international connections and in which directions.

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