

BILLY'S VIOLENCE REVIEWS

BARCELONA (TNC)

Bloodbath on Shakespeare's account at the TNC

The audience applauded wildly at the Sala Gran after the strident, provocative and at times 'gore' proposal of Needcompany, 'Billy's violence'.

They had promised *sang i fetge*, blood and guts, and they certainly delivered. *Billy's Violence*, the show by the Belgian company Needcompany directed by Jan Lauwers, ended in a literal bloodbath. Friday's premiere of the production, as part of the Grec festival, left the stage of the Sala Gran of the Teatre Nacional de Catalunya (TNC) as if it were to be cleaned by Tarantino's *Señor Lobo*. In the final scene, the performers, semi-naked or completely naked, appeared inside a bathtub filled with a red, viscous fluid, smearing their bodies, sliding out, and then sliding on the floor between skulls as they manipulated puppets as bloody as themselves.

It was the apotheosis of the two-hour long review of Shakespeare's tragedies with an emphasis on violence. The company left *Macbeth* for the end as the haemoglobin icing on the cake of a journey that had the women of the Bard's tragedies and the abuse of them as special protagonists. In total ten tragedies, ten distillations, each one re-titled with the name of a female character: Marina (from *Pericles*), Cleopatra, Desdemona, Julia (Juliet), Portia (from *Julius Caesar*), Lavinia (from *Titus Andronicus*), Cordelia, Ophelia, Imogene (*Cymbeline*), and Grouch (the woman who served as a model for Shakespeare to create *Lady Macbeth*). A brave show, without contemplation or reservations (and certainly without prudishness), openly, with shocking, strident and almost unbearable moments and a language that is crude to say the least, *Billy's violence* was followed by the audience with visible tension that dissolved at the end in long applause that made the actors, the director and the author of the text, Victor Lauwers, come out to greet the audience several times.

In addition to the bathtub of blood, there was the strangulation of Desdemona in the form of male violence and the cry of "bitch!", the end of *King Lear* as an episode of senile dementia with a hint of incest with a ghostly Cordelia, *Romeo and Juliet* among flies in a necrophiliac, scatological and coprophagous key; Hamlet stalking a non-binary Ophelia with a countertenor's, gangling voice (one of the few moments for laughter), the savage mutilation of Lavinia (with the stupendous theatrical solution of placing a life jacket on her to reduce her to a dismembered torso) or the scene in which Mark Antony has the head of an admirer of Cleopatra beaten over and over again on an amplified drum that produces a chilling sound, like the [baseball bat of Al Capone/Robert de Niro](#).

The abridged tragedies can be disconcerting, reworked as they are by Victor Lauwers, who certainly wasn't having a very optimistic day when he wrote the texts. Moreover, the scenes are interlocking and packed with dances, songs, disjointed movements, repetitions and various effects in a very expressive and hypnotic collage. However, the plays are recognisable and not only that, but amongst the newly created text of *Billy's violence*, original quotations from Shakespeare appear here and there, such as Ophelia's nursery rhyme (and the references to the convent and Hamlet's make-up), *Lear's* beautiful speech

towards the end of the play ("when you ask me to bless you I will kneel and ask you to forgive me, and we will live and pray and tell old tales and laugh together at golden butterflies") or Macbeth's famous lines ("he shall sleep no more", "life is a passing shadow", "tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow").

The splendid costumes (which may seem paradoxical with so many moments of actors naked), the lighting, and the music and sound effects (fundamental) orchestrated from the very scene as a phenomenal actor in the role of the fool, the Shakespearean clown or buffoon, the composer Maarten Seghers himself. And above all, to underline the great commitment of the actors, all of them splendid, both in the main and supporting roles, with impressive ductility and technique. In this context of the Needcompany's acting excellence, we must applaud the way in which the local additions Nao Albet (fearless), Gonzalo Cunill and Juan Navarro, fully integrate themselves.

(El Pais)

Premiere at the Sala Gran. Supercoproduction of the Grec festival and the TNC (and some other theatres). The Belgian director Jan Lauwers and the company Needcompany have presented Billy's violence, a show about violence in Shakespeare's plays. And it is a lot and diverse, offering a wide range of abuses, vexations and varied amputations. Just ask Titus Andrònic.

Great white space in the Sala Gran. The green velvet curtains are history (they only appear in specials dedicated to theatre in some "traditional" media). White linoleum, white cyclorama and white microphones. Two donkeys, on both sides, pencilled in with the costumes. The musician Maarten Seghers (author of the show's soundtrack) appears onstage, amidst a montage about the violence of tragedies written in violent times. Shakespeare and Marlowe were Street Kids (On the Block?), in a brutish and brutal England. Today's Anglos, on the other hand, are refined and elegant: just look at Boris Johnson or the football hooligans. The danger of announcing to us that the show will consist of five episodes is that all of us, spectators, will be doing the mental recompte. Creators: beware of this! At home we are very short and very fond of epic theatre, but then you have to offer a bit of rhythm, variation and joy.

Billy's violence is a cold and antipathetic show. It took some time for some of you to get into it, to be honest. But once inside I enjoyed it very much, some moments more than others. The structure is simple: the name of the female character and the play in which she is the protagonist (Pòrcia, Ofèlia, Desdèmona, Cleòpatra, etc.) is projected and the performers enter the stage, put on the corresponding costumes and perform a sort of distilled summary (with more or less grace) of one of the most violent scenes of the text in question. Violence can also take the form of a cough, in times of pandemic. The cough on stage (a resource between simplicity and brilliance) activates our neuroses and makes some spectators start to shiver. At home we are very empathetic.

The violence exercised against women (and children) typical of the bard of Stratford-upon-Avon (or John Cassavetes) is crudely shown on the stage of the Nacional. Particularly violent is the passage in which Otel-lo (Juan Navarro) escorts Desdèmona (Romy Louise Lauwers) to her death. The scene in which Nao Albet's head is hung on a drum, repeatedly and with a microphone amplifier, is also one of the pearls of the film. From violence to nervous laughter there is a step, and even though we see the blood is fake, we can't help but tear up. Albet is one of the highlights of this proposal, with a very fluid interpretation, and he also stars in one of the hits of the show: the scene between Romeu and Juliet. The two adolescent lovers have their heads full of pardals - as is only natural - and the brilliant idea of faking her death ends like the rosary of the dawn. One of the side-effects of the truth is decomposition: the duet of sex, poo and flies is a hilarious example of what should have happened (if those two freaks had existed). "I love you. I am shitting myself" is one of the nicest declarations of love we have felt in a long time. Let them tell Albert Pla, who in 1989 was already clear that the relationship between love and shit is closer than we imagined. "Obrim entre els dos la tapa / mira al fondo de la tassa / mira al fondo hi ha una caca... / La gran cagada de l'amor".

The music by Maarten Seghers marries marvellously with the text by Victor Lauwers (the Needcompany is a family company, let's not forget). The minimal baroque of the soundtrack matches the basic English of the text: the English spoken by all those of us who do not have it as our mother tongue (whether we are Belgians, Catalans or Argentinians) and which obliges

us to synthesise our speeches and to take the flourish out of them. Seghers, the buffo of the show, sings the dissort (papissota) of Ofèlia, and turns the recitative style of the opera into an easy but effective gag. These two adjectives describe some of the show's passages very well: the amputation of Lavínia's tongue and arms (Grace Ellen Barkey, Jan Lauwers' partner, mother of Victor and Romy Louise) is resolved with a rubber foam cosset. The musical fragment that follows (during the scene between Cordèlia and Lear), with the company singing a single note and Barkey playing the timpani with the drumstick in his mouth, is really beautiful.

Lauwers, the old cat, knows that if a show ends well, the audience will leave with a good taste in their mouths. Here he reserves the killing of Macbeth (where not even the prompter is left alive) and places it in a pool full of blood and shit. The whiteness of the scene is quickly tainted by a very mixed mix of brown, red and black. Lady Macbeth will try, en va, to rent her hands ("It's all fucked up"), but this is not fixed even by the future maid of Neutrex. The eight performers are in the pool, accompanied by puppets of different sizes (including our friend Billy), in an orgy of blood and filth. Very much in favour of the puppets, on any occasion. Shakespeare's violence smells like candy, and as the company is from abroad, the audience applauds bravely.

Back home I was thinking of Falsestuff, the show that Nao Albet and Marcel Borràs gave us at the Grec three years ago. We never heard anything more about that show, a GREAT European show. But of course, Nao and Marcel are not Belgian.

(Nuvol)

Billy's violence', Needcompany's descent into hell

Jan Lawers once again leaves the mark of his renowned physical and multidisciplinary theatre in a piece of raw and uncomfortable harshness.

Maarten Seghers explains before Billy's violence begins. At the time when William Shakespeare wrote his tragedies, life was really violent, very violent. And we will see that. Seghers is the author of the original music, and also the jester, of the latest production by Jan Lawers and his Needcompany, a totemic director and company in contemporary European theatre. With this piece, a world premiere in the Grec programme, Xavier Albertí has bid farewell to his eight-year stint as director of the TNC. This is Lawers in his purest form, although this time the text is written by his son, Victor Afung Lawers. The cliché of the stick and the splinter fits perfectly here.

The offspring takes hold of the female characters of Shakespeare's tragedies to go his own way. Let's say that the plot trunk is there, the branches are not. Because Victor provides papa Jan with textual material, sometimes too reiterative, which serves above all as a support for his trademark *mise-en-scène*. Between the violence typical of tragedies and the fact that Victor Afung Lawers wrote the text during his confinement, the result is raw, visceral and, at times, as direct as a punch in the face. A real descent into hell, as the author has acknowledged.

Ten scenes with female characters

Billy's violence' is divided into 10 scenes named after female characters from the Bard: Portia, Desdemona, Juliet, Ophelia, Marina, Cleopatra, Lavinia, Imogene, Cordelia and Gruoch, the one who served as a model for Lady Macbeth. Neither Lawers nor his son make any moral judgement, and if you have to squeeze hard, you do, so the piece can be uncomfortable.

What the Needcompany does demonstrate is its well-known ability to deploy the physically charged, multidisciplinary theatre that has made it an indisputable reference. An almost bare space, with two metal structures on either side with copious costumes and a group of performers who give their all. Because with Lawers, as you know, multidisciplinary is almost an understatement. The performers are in full swing for the entire two hours of the show: they act, sing, move, dance and change their clothes without pause. This time, the director from Antwerp has three performers who are well known here: Gonzalo Cunill, Juan Navarro and Nao Albet.

The three of them, together with their five companions, transmit a sidereal energy from the stage, with a closing of the piece that leaves the audience speechless and overflowing with applause. However, there is also the sensation of having witnessed a brutal performance that we might want to forget about as soon as we go out into the street.

(El Periodico)

Many years have gone by since Jan Lauwers and his first company, Epigonentheater zlv, surprised us with a performative theatre that broke through theatrical conventions in search of a decoded emotional impact. A way of doing that continued with the new company, Needcompany, without losing the revulsive character and outlining a multidisciplinary style anchored in movement and plastic art in open stage spaces. These characteristics are still very much alive more than thirty years later, as can be seen in this Billy's violence, based on a text by his son, Victor Lauwers, which "reinterprets" five of Shakespeare's tragedies, focusing on the intimate violence of the female characters.

There are many words in the proposal. Surely too many, but there are also linguistic and phonetic jokes that connect with the common language, so far removed from the versification of the bard, and recall the mannerisms of Joan Brossa while providing a comforting dose of humour. The truth is that little remains of Shakespeare's originals other than the names of the characters and situations, not always, and that the violence of the title is more noticeable, and more real, in the director's demands on the actors than in the "plot" of each of the ten scenes, even though Otello may be pulling Desdèmona by the hair or Pòrcia may be carving her veins. For example, in Titus Andronicus, Juan Navarro and Gonzalo Cunill make it look (theatre, that is) like they torture a girl who ends up in a hunchback without being able to move while playing a drum with a stick in her mouth for a long, long time (reality). The best of the proposal is the strength of the powerful visual compositions as well as all the movement (which there is a lot of), the forceful soundtrack by Maarten Seghers (who also plays) and the very dedicated interpretation of all the actors. Some of the textual scenes (Marc Antoni and Cleòpatra are a pain in the ass) could be better, or rather, could be reworked. Nevertheless, there are some great trophies, such as the falsely lesbian and certainly scatological version of Romeu i Julieta, the comedy of Ophelia's betrayal, an intense and exhausting choreography (even to the spectators' patience) of the transition, and the final performance of Macbeth in the purest La Fura dels Baus style.

(Diari Ara)

The Valley of the Red River

Rivers of blood. The flamenco company Needcompany, owned by Jan Lauwers, one of the co-founders, and based in Gant (Belgium) since 1986, has dyed the programme of the Grec'21 with a deep red colour and, together with the planned revival of the dance show "Malditas plumas" by Sol Picó, has concluded with "Billy's Violence" the eighth season of Xavier Albertí's artistic direction at the helm of the TNC.

With the background of Shakespeare, the son of the creator of the Needcompany, Victor Lauwers, has dissected the violence in the tragedies of the bard. There are ten of them. And he has created a show that is energetic, vitaminic, disturbing, gore, black and controversial, which has a subtle air of feminist vindication, with five chapters of deu de les heroïnes shakesperianes: Marina (Pèrcles), Cleopatra, Desdèmona, Júlia (Juliet), Pòrcia (Juli Cèsar), Lavínia (Titus Andrònic), Cordèlia, Ofèlia, Imogènia (Cimbelí) i Gruoch (inspirer of Macbeth).

Two hours of multidisciplinary theatre, from physical theatre to music, choreography, movement and also classical text filtered through contemporary theatre. Two hours with the virtual presence of Shakespeare and only a few of the author's own phrases. The rest are sentences - or excerpts, criticisms, grudges and curses - written by Victor Lauwers, elaborated in a state of pandemic confinement that he himself justifies by saying that he was inspired, in writing them, by the stories of patients of the coronavirus stranglers who described cases of loss of memory as if they were dominated by a "cerebral fever".

As the people of the Needcompany have never deceived in their more than thirty years of history, it is clear from the outset that violence is the essence, the colour, the flair and the five senses of this show that has been created with the usual teams of the Needcompany, but under the wings of the Teatre Nacional de Catalunya, with three Catalan or Catalan-related actors in the cast: Nao Albet, Gonzalo Cunill and Juan Navarro, the latter two already repeating on previous occasions with Jan Lauwers.

The same Needcompany has spoken of the filmic violence of Quentin Tarantino - a filmmaker who is now making his debut in literature with the novel-lit of his latest film, "Once Upon a Time in Hollywood". In a certain way, the Lauwers have ironically told Tarantino to go after Shakespeare with a ringing fiddle if he wants to beat him to the punch in violence. But, between us, some of the images left by the scenes of the show "Billy's Violence" could also be compared to some of those that in the best and most agonising and shattering stage times have left the human figures of La Fura dels Baus.

Four performances of "Billy's Violence" at the Sala Gran of the Teatre Nacional de Catalunya have left the stage like a soll every day, a consequence of the epidemic tale of violence rewritten by Lauwers' son -with the permission of his father, who directed and, I would say, was also the driving force behind the whole action, and who is also the costume and set designer.

Violence in the bath - what would a bloodbath be without a good bath -, masculist violence with strangulation, violent incest, necrophilia to destroy the romantic idyll of Romeu i Julieta, a bit of scatology, mutilation with a visible stage effect, torture, aggression at the hands of the

head.... Oh, and a bit of humour, black if you like, and a bit of love, which is also possible in theatre, even though the climate is so violent.

A little bit of everything to keep the spectators between the excitement, the admiration for the interpretation of the company, the admiration for the interpretation of the company, the admiration for the realism without concessions of some violent fictional acts and, it must be said, some excess of words and some excess of repetitive movements with the danger of falling in the point of dissimulating a badallet under the mask. You feel like calling out: "Ja s'ha entès, Victor, au, avancem!"

Poetic spectacle too -if you can say poetic, of course! - of great plasticity, from the costumes, as I said, designed by Jan Lauwers himself, or the other "costume design", the one of the nude things, and always with the musical accompaniment by Maarten Seghers (a performer and musician who knows the neighbourhood because in previous seasons he has participated in musical cycles at L'Auditori veí del TNC).

But "Billy's Violence" is also a controversial show that leaves spectators with an exciting vibration and spectators with a hint of scepticism, perhaps because the latter are the ones who are on their way back, as they say, not to say that they leave the same as they were before they went in. And that is because it is very shy to pretend to create theatrical emotion with the use and abuse of the scenic representation of violence. In any case, it can be concluded that the Needcompany sends a subliminal message about the causes and why the humanity of this and previous centuries would not be humanity without violence. Let the Lauwers, father and son, come down and take refuge in this valley of the red river.

(Recomana, <https://recomana.cat/obres/billy-s-violence/critica/la-vall-del-riu-vermell>)

NEW Billy 's Violence. Needcompany. Festival Grec, Barcelona.

The Teatro Nacional de Catalunya premiered, as part of the Grec Festival in Barcelona, the latest play written by Victor Afung Lauwers, with dramaturgy by Elke Janssens and Erwin Jans, and staged by the company Needcompany. With the title "Billy's Violence", Needcompany composes a proposal of ten tasting dishes around the violence of some of William Shakespeare's dramas. The experience takes the form of an avant-garde gastronomic menu. From each of the plays there is a taste for cutting up what is of interest and placing it on an immaculate white tablecloth, which is the stage cellar, to highlight it. The play is constructed as a succession of tableaux in which it is possible to find flashes of great artistic references.

The first to make an impact is undoubtedly Ingmar Bergman, whose characters, who dance in unison to celebrate death, are reflected in the first scenes of Billy's Violence. There are eight actors on stage of different nationalities, with first-rate performers of our stage such as Nao Albert, Gonzalo Cunill and Juan Navarro. Others, such as Maarten Seghers and Grace Ellen Barkey are stable members of the Needcompany, and form part of the experimental scenic continuum that this European company has been building. With a masterful visual knowledge of colour and image, the first scenes will unfold around allegorical characters dancing in silky Venetian costumes. This homage to Bergman includes the jester, played by Maarten Seghers, who is also in charge of the musical composition.

Maarten Seghers is the one who explains the title of the play, Billy's Violence. "Billy", after Christopher Marlowe's nickname for William Shakespeare. "Violence", more obviously, for the selection of violent passages and narratives from the English playwright's plays. Seghers makes it clear that Shakespeare's production was set in a city, London, in whose streets executions and violent murders were commonplace. As a contemporary society we want to turn our backs on such cruelty (which we understand to be a thing of the past), but violence is still part of our environment, whether local, national, European or Western. And if not, just think of these days of shock at the arbitrary, mob beating of a young man in his early twenties.

The work is based on ten tableaux presented in a feminine key. Each is named after a female protagonist: Portia (Julius Caesar), Desdemona (Othello), Cleopatra (Antony and Cleopatra), Marina (Pericles, Prince of Tyre), Julia (Romeo and Juliet), Lavinia (Titus Andronicus), Cordelia (King Lear), Ophelia (Hamlet), Gruoch (Macbeth) and Imogene (Cymbeline). The women appear as victims (the majority) or executioners, and allegorically represent violence itself, in some of its different manifestations.

The tableaux are interwoven through the apotheotic stage movement of the performers, whose corporeal surrender has the appearance of a sacrificial ritual. Each piece corresponds to a type of violence. Among the most terrible is the murder of Desdemona by a misogynistic and abusive Othello. The scene stretches out agonisingly, like a dance in which the woman resists fleeing from her tormentor, pushing aside the rescuers who are peering in. He insults her, screaming like a bitch, and ends up suffocating her in a live death of unbearable technical perfection (the work of Martha Gardner and Juan Navarro is horrifying). Here we are reminded of another artistic reference, a master of violence: Alfred Hitchcock. In "Torn Curtain", Newman and an unknown woman drown the hitman in an oven for a period of time as suffocating as the gas with which they manage to exterminate him. Hitchcock argued that

viewers had become accustomed to puerile and easy deaths, when in reality killing a man is a difficult and demanding act. Such is the death of the beautiful Desdemona, deaf, anguished, interminable in time.

Another tableau: that of the lovers Romeo and Juliet, from which poison and suicide are taken as a dance to show two unconscious young people, oblivious to everything that is not them and their physicality. The sound of flies hovering over two bodies on a table narrate the effects of the poison, while a spasmodic and terrible dance takes place beneath them. The action of the poison is not romantic, but coprophagic. An insufferable death of pains and fluids like the one Flaubert narrates at the end of *Madame Bovary*. Suicide, therefore, stripped of its romantic aura, to show the cruelty of its effects and the arbitrariness of the person who chooses it.

In this suffocating circle of animality and hyper-violence, the audience is drawn in almost breathlessly, gasping for breath as a new female name is projected onto the screen. Jan Lauwers (director of *Billy's Violence*) plays with the collective imagination of Shakespeare's own plays. We know that Ophelia goes mad singing among flowers and commits suicide, that Lear is a demented old man, that Macbeth is murderous ambition. With this collective substratum, the narrative becomes utterly dispensable, and what *Needcompany* is going to propose to the audience is a game of abstraction and distillation. Lear evokes senility just by naming him, it is easy from there to take him in new directions, such as his incestuous dance with Cordelia.

During the ten passages there are moments of utter exhaustion. The play is difficult to watch, and some audiences walk out of the show. The violence is recreated on stage reaching, at times, insufferable moments. The sound of drums, flies, screams... is deafening, the blood and the naked bodies are suffocating. In this mastery of the neat sharpness of the background with the choreographed attacks there is an absolute artistic mix between the world of artists like Damian Hirst (with his stuffed animals) and the apprenticeship of performance art and dance.

The bloodiest scene comes at the end, with a bath of blood in which another scenic element is used (masterful when it comes to Shakespeare): puppets. It begins with a small homunculus emerging from a male belly, and is then accompanied by small, big-headed men or monsters, covered entirely in blood. Shakespeare's use of puppets is not unusual. Consider the difficulty of plays like *Richard III* in which two children must be brutally murdered (in 2000, the *Propeller* company brought a stunning *Richard III* in which the children were, precisely, puppets).

In the two final scenes of *Macbeth* and *Cymbeline* in *Billy's Violence*, the grotesque puppets instil a sense of heartbreak. Violence has gone beyond the human plane and must now unfold on the plane of articulated monsters.

It is worth highlighting the absolute and enormous acting work of the piece. The performers give themselves to an exhausting vocal, sound and physical experience. Accents and languages do not matter, they intermingle. The text is reduced to the minimum expression, and only at certain moments do snippets of Shakespeare's dramatic poetry emerge. It is more interesting to hammer away with repetitive, painful phrases, bullets that the protagonists hurl at each

other, as a sample of another type of violence, that which alienates the individual in a family or couple, subjugated and intimidated by what the other says to them.

Billy's Violence is an ephemeral theatre piece based on the postulates of performance. It exists to be seen in a contemporary form, but for it an outstanding exercise of plastic and interpretative execution has been carried out. Needcompany's Belgian origins are evident, a country where contemporary dance (Maurice Béjart) is a homeland. The corporal expression achieved by the performers (Nao Albet, Grace Ellen Barkey, Gonzalo Cunill, Martha Gardner, Romy Louise Lauwers, Juan Navarro, Maarten Seghers and Meron Verbelen) is overwhelming. Watching Nao Albet, I am reinforced in my thoughts about this actor. His interpretation can only come from an absolute physical preparation, and he acquires a mysticism, almost a priesthood, on the stage.

I end with reference to the audience. The trained spectator knows that the audience says a lot about the play. The stalls were a joy of young spectators, many of them actors, gaping at the exercise of stage experimentation and work displayed before the audience. The premiere is now followed by the tour. Don't forget that in any art form you have to be attentive to what the avant-garde is doing. The exercises of enquiry will be ephemeral, but the results of experimentation will not. It is on this plane that Needcompany develops its work.

(La Cla, <https://lacla.es/2021/07/19/billy-s-violence-needcompany-festival-grec-barcelona/>)

RIBADAVIA (MIT Festival)

NEW An orgy of blood

"Oh, blood, blood, blood, blood!"
Othello, Act III, Scene 3

The 37th Mostra de Teatro Internacional de Ribadavia (MIT) began with a major international event: Billy's Violence by Needcompany, a company created by Jan Lawers and Grace Ellen Barkey in 1986, which since then has established a multicultural and multinational project, always questioning artistic language and beauty as reference points for creation.

Following his path of deconstruction of the classics (L'incoronazione di Poppea, Caligula) Lawers makes in Billy's Violence a journey through ten of William Shakespeare's plays, in a selection of scenes of violence that speak both of violence in the theatre, as in Shakespeare's time, and in our contemporary experience of it.

It will be the women who will lead us into the Shakespearean universe: starting with the hand of Portia in Julius Caesar, we will pass through the scenes of Marina in Pericles, Prince of Tyre; Desdemona in Othello; Cleopatra; Julia in Romeo and Juliet; Lavinia in Titus Andronicus; Cordelia in King Lear; Ophelia in Hamlet; Gruoch who was the inspiration for Lady Macbeth; and finally the poetic final speech of Imoxene in Cymbeline, King of Brittany.

It is no coincidence that it is women who open the way to this showcase of horrors, as Lawers's work is permeated by a tenacity that opens up to the abyss, while violence against women and on women is a theme that vertebrates the whole, thus pointing to one of the most important perversions of our world, of our history: the heteropatriarchal system.

Lawers & Cía.'s relationship with the bard seems to be one of close familiarity. So much so that they call him "Billy", as if in their process of deconstructing the different pieces and scenes they were acquiring a special understanding, very close. It so happens that the language of violence is a trap, a language that makes individuals into a mafia, a boss, as we can sadly observe in our most recent reality. It is like sharing a secret: it creates comrades in arms. This is one of the results of the Needcompany's proposal: to make the public an accomplice, to make them participate in the crime as much as the perpetrators themselves, since we are attending with our hands full. Fascinated by the blood, by the cruelty, we nod.

I think that Billy's Violence is a piece that denounces violence by the mere fact of exposing it without hesitation, like someone contemplating the martyrdom of a saint. And the denunciation works, above all, by saturation. Throughout the more than 100 minutes of the play, we witness a succession of scenes that observe violence from multiple focuses and perspectives: the violence of dysfunctional relationships; the violence of abuse of power; the violence of sexualisation and commercialisation of bodies; the violence of jealousy and age; the violence of those who do not understand love if there is no abuse; the violence of death, murder, suicide; the violence of insult and contempt; the violence of power; the violence of aggression; the violence of fame; the violence of desire; the violence of frustration.

All this collection is taken from Shakespeare's original texts and is absolutely up to date. There are things that do not change with the passing of time and one of them seems to be our headquarters of blood. Violence calls for violence.

Thus, the audience is constantly violated, not only by explicit aggressions, but also by the succession of stimuli (sound, light, sensory) and the frank and open exhibition of scenes that we would like to understand as intimate: a person who pisses, another who shits, a spit, an erection, a couple who devour each other.

Saturation is important to understand that we are facing a spectacle that speaks of the normalisation of violence. That we are spectators of similar scenes and we don't even notice its terror. We can witness the beating that a couple of young men give to another in the street and we are able to take out our mobile phones to record it rather than to prevent it. We are anaesthetised, over-saturated with images of extreme cruelty, insensitive. We lack the link, the bond that unites us as a species, the empathy. That is why we can only realise that it is violence when we are in proximity, in intimacy, within the scene.

The masterpiece of Lauwers' staging is that he introduces these scenes to the audience and, almost without you noticing it, you are already overwhelmed by a stream of sounds that violate your ears (and even more so in these COVID times). Without even thinking about it, you witnessed live the prostitution of a young girl, who suddenly became all the young girls. Then, without noticing, Desdemona is already dead in your hands, and you still want more. Then you start to move and we enter the orgy.

So an orgy is a gathering of people who commit excesses and that is precisely what we are about to see. Also, that it is one of the festivals dedicated to Dionysus (in Greece) or Bacchus (in Rome). This meta-theatrical link creates a saturation of stimuli with ritual. The orgy is made of blood because this is the material most prized by Gods, the last that the human being can offer. But the gold is also of theatre and the artifice of the rite appears shamelessly exposed, time and time again, as part of the offering.

In a space of white purity, devoid of furniture and certain props, we are invited to the feast by the master of ceremonies, a jester played by the third axis of the Needcompany, the artist Maarten Seghers, who also acts as a DJ and sound performer, accompanying the scenes and their transits with his maximum resonance. The rest of the cast, made up of performers of international origin, enters and leaves the stage, creating a constant rhythm. They offer diverse focuses of attention that comment and enrich the scene, through an unstoppable corporal and sonorous work, helping to raise and lower the dramatic tension. Everything is fluid: the costume changes, the tricks, the deaths that are erected to incorporate another character, even the subtitles that accompany the texts in English. The artifice discovered as part of the action.

Part of this artifice is also in the text. I cannot agree, in this case, with López Antuñano when he affirms that, in Jan Lawers, "the reiteration of themes [...] eclipse [...] the passion for telling, the careful scenic narrative and the painstaking dramaturgical work"[1]. Deconstructed by the director's own son, Victor Afung Lawers makes Shakespeare's verses into new poetry, a dramaturgy where the words (the ones that matter) appear uninterrupted (as if they had to

be said) and where the drama is updated from the subtle: from a "kill me later", a princess's babbling, adolescent sexual excitement, the falling off a cliff, or a small pie full of contempt. A precise and essential dramaturgy for this proposal.

The whole ensemble is permeated by a keen sense of humour. Like someone who laughs at the spectacular fall on the street of a similar figure, the joke appears in the middle of the blood. If he falls, to relieve the tension of the moment. Perhaps, to emphasize sarcasm.

I leave the place in shock, questioned, as if the same blood that floods the previously unpolluted channel had splashed me in the face, asking me the question: "And now what? What are you going to do with all this violence that surrounds you?"

(Erreguete, https://erreguete.gal/2021/07/19/billys-violence/#_ftnref1)

NEW Aesthetics and violence according to Jan Lauwers in 'Billy's Violence'

Scenes of violence and sex defy decorum. Aristotle, in his Rhetoric, came to recommend that these pathetic scenes should take place off-stage, that is, out of sight of the audience. In such a way that the dramatic process that triggers or encourages these violent or sexual actions is shown, and also the subsequent process, so that the consequences are shown and, finally, some conclusion or lesson can be drawn.

But apart from moral or philosophical considerations, I have always thought that this kind of recommendation or prevention of the wise Aristotle, creator, by the way, of the first treatise on Western drama: the Poetics, is not so much due to moral censorship, but to procedural and functional issues that concern the theatre.

I will try to explain this briefly. The real, on many occasions, may not be realistic, as when dealing with violence or sex. Real is one thing and realism is something else, in the latter case a style that corresponds to a way of doing (poetics) and to procedures (rhetoric).

The real, on many occasions, can be, on stage, implausible. What in so-called "reality" produces certain affects and effects, seen as it is on a stage, imitated or represented, can produce affects and effects that are different and even contrary to what, in artistic creation, has to do with an expressive drive, and sometimes even will. This would give, therefore, an error of dramaturgy. Or if we don't like the word error, because we are intolerant of failure, then we could also say that it would give a pretentious piece. The intention was to achieve certain affections and effects close to our expressive will, as artists, which these scenes of sex and violence have ended up frustrating.

I always remember a very illuminating example for me. In 2000, in Flors by Roger Bernat, Cía. General Eléctrica, in the Mercat de les Flors in Barcelona, there was a scene with two simultaneous actions, on the left, a rotating round bed, with a heterosexual couple having live sex (I think I remember it was an actor and an actress from the world of porn, both very well endowed, in their sexual attributes, of course) and, on the right of the stage, an actress giving a monologue, confession-like, to the audience, about her amorous and sexual disappointments. At first, the surprise and morbidity of seeing these two freaks fucking live caught my attention. I had never seen anything like it on a theatre stage. But not many seconds or minutes passed when my attention shifted to the actress in the monologue, whose interpretation, attitude, expressive and emotional complexity, were much more attractive, profound, transcendent if you like, and interesting, in the end, than that real sex scene, devoid of complexity or expressive drive. The heterosexual couple, exhibiting their sculptural bodies while fucking, took a back seat, as something almost disruptive to the drama that, in that post-dramatic spectacle, was embodied by the theatre actress.

Another example, which I remember vaguely, was in a dramaturgy class by Albert Boadella, at the Institut del Teatre in Barcelona, at the end of the 1990s. Boadella explained to us that, in one of the first shows of Els Joglars, his company, at a time when they were doing more physical theatre than textual theatre, an actor who was up in a tower, playing a character, was shot down in one scene by another character who shot him from below. In one of the performances, the fake projectile launched by the gun, made of wet paper - that day the wet

paper bullet had hardened - had hit the actor who was perched on the tower in the wrong place. This incident led to his actual fall, rather than the choreographed fall he had planned, and that was a real fiasco.

So the real thing, in some cases, is neither realistic nor artistically effective, and violence and sex tend to put us in that difficult equation when we think of bringing them to the stage.

This Friday, 16 July 2021, the Mostra Internacional de Teatro, MIT, of Ribadavia (Ourense), kicked off with Billy's Violence by the great master of post-dramatic dramaturgy Jan Lauwers (so Hans-Thies Lehmann in his Postdramatisches Theater of 1999) and his Needcompany (Belgium). An example that challenges, as the monster William Shakespeare (Billy to his friends) did before him, the difficulties of dealing with violence and sex on the theatrical stage.

The show's programme alludes to the example of Titus Andronicus in order to appeal to the "catalogue of horrors and gratuitous violence into which the works of the English Bard sometimes turn" and raises far-reaching questions: why do we take pleasure in watching or reading a fictional crime, what role does violence play in the art of our time, and what differences are there in the way we see and judge it today compared to centuries past?

For this Lauwers creates a show in which an actor-musician, the composer Maarten Seghers, who takes on the allegorical figure of the Jester, will take a journey through high-voltage sequences, which are at the heart of 10 Shakespearean tragedies.

The text by Victor Afung Lauwers and the dramaturgy, created by him together with Elke Janssens and Erwin Jans, draws mainly duets and some trios from the most violent scenes of the Shakespearean repertoire, in which women become the central axis.

These duos or trios are joined in the staging by the rest of the cast, made up of Nao Albet, Grace Ellen Barkey, Gonzalo Cunill, Martha Gardner, Romy Louise Lauwers, Juan Navarro, Maarten Seghers and Meron Verbelen, performing choruses with complementary sound and dance choreographies. A scenic chorality that contributes to give density and tension not only sensorially rich, but also dramatically effective to each of the different sequences.

Marina (Pericles), Cleopatra (Antony and Cleopatra), Desdemona (Othello), Julia (Romeo and Juliet), Portia (Julius Caesar), Lavinia (Titus Andronicus), Cordelia (King Lear), Ophelia (Hamlet), Imogene (Cymbeline) and Crouch (the woman from whom Shakespeare drew inspiration for Lady Macbeth, in Macbeth), are the titles of the 10 sections that make up this puzzle, in which the play of violence speaks to us about the breakdown of love, our own and that which unites us with other beings.

The dialogues are intimate and combine affection and violence in equal parts. The scenes are completely free of historical references, which helps us to concentrate on the relational and dramatic nature of the characters. This means that the acting game with violence ends up revealing, for the reception, its most disturbing origins: unsatisfied love. Something that can reach any member of the audience.

Thus, these dialogues, mainly as a duo, woman/man, put the focus on violence and madness in intimacy, bringing it thematically closer to us. This would not be the case if it were approached with a focus on war or political strife, which also operate in Shakespeare's aforementioned tragedies.

The dysfunctionality of the love relationships, including the most dreamlike scene between an almost ghostly Cordelia and a father, King Lear, with senile dementia, is one of the successes of this post-dramatic puzzle.

The cruelty of Mark Antony, having Cleopatra's suitor's head bashed in on an amplified drum and with the application, in full view of the audience, of a stream of artificial blood, is astonishing. A brutality sublimated by the display of theatrical artifice, which affirms the play and, at the same time, generates an apotheotic plasticity and musicality.

This is one of the most admirable qualities, in my opinion, of Jan Lauwers' mastery: that the aesthetic reaches unprecedented heights of visual plasticity and musicality, promoting a kind of sensorial invasion of the reception, always from an expressive impulse and from a powerful foundation.

In the same vein, the scene of macho violence in Othello, played by the great Juan Navarro (one of Rodrigo García's fetish actors), shouting "slut" and "whore" at Desdemona, grabbing her by the hair and shaking her from one side of the stage to the other, letting go and hooking up, like two animals in a ceremony between the fight and the sexual, is surprising. A scene executed in a feverish manner and assumed from a physicality that gives it a disturbing rawness, which leaves us not knowing how to react, because there are moments that are almost comical, but at the same time terrible. The final moment of the strangulation and when he wraps her in plastic and takes her away, carrying her like a bundle, like someone carrying his immense misfortune, is chilling.

Also surprising and anthological is the almost pantomimic scene between a childish Juliet and Romeo, who seem to have taken ecstasy or MDMA, to enter into psychedelic and scatological dynamics, assuming an adolescent and even childish attitude. A brutal mixture of eros and tanatos, close to necrophilia, which the actress and the actor play with, evoking the precocious relationships between two pre-adolescents. But this rupture of the supposedly healthy or acceptable limits of the sexual relationship is also interpreted in a playful and inventive physicality that is more suggestive than realistic. Around them, the choir sets flies and mosquitoes to music in a vocal performance that is also accompanied by the body, in a way that adds sensorial immersion and the metaphor of flesh as carnage and flesh.

Right now, in a disorganised way, I am reminded of the hindrance of coughs in the first sequence. A crescendo in quantity and intensity that invades the scene and inevitably takes us back to the disease and pandemic that ravages our days. Just as the plague ravaged Shakespeare's days when he was locked up writing King Lear.

Surprising and also unsettling is the scene in which the master of ceremonies himself, the Jester, plays a non-binary Ophelia, with the tessitura of a parodic countertenor and gangly diction. A double Hamlet harasses her with his speech and his attitude. That violence that

reappears, in the present day, against functional diversity or gender diversity. While the chorus, in a carnivalesque manner, play hens around the stage. No one intercedes for the helpless Ofelia, who ends up succumbing to the siege, and from the green chromaticism that colours the stage, we pass to a violent and bloody red.

It is the bloodbath, at the banquet of Lady Macbeth and her husband, surrounded by the rest of the cast, semi-naked or naked, also manipulating cadaverous puppets, that crowns this puzzle. A final performance where the physicality is conditioned by the bloody viscous liquid, in which the whole cast basks, with the extraordinary Grace Ellen Barkey as Lady Macbeth at the top of the frisson.

Another of the merits of Jan Lauwers and his artistic team is the ability to explore and develop each of the scenic proposals that make up the dramaturgy. Any of the sequences of Billy's Violence is an example. The duration is just right for these proposals to have a development in terms of sensorial and aesthetic impact, but also in the emotional and semantic accumulation that can be derived. In this way, aesthetic raptures are never aestheticising or anaesthetising or, as Byung-Chul Han would point out, "numbingly anaesthetising".

This masterful use of the durations and the development of the scenic actions, which constitute each sequence, propitiate a deepening that does not allow us to remain in morbidity or gruesomeness for the sake of gruesomeness. Here the enjoyment passes through phases of uneasiness, of emotional shock, of not knowing what to think and even what to feel. Suddenly, something amuses us or makes us laugh and, at the same time, a kind of alert arises from our conscience that tells us: but how can you laugh at this or why this makes you laugh at that, maybe you are a bastard. Well, yes, surely, we are also bastards. Or not. Perhaps this questioning alone is a revolt against the hypothesis of the violent and annihilating impulses that can nestle in any rational animal.

It is also worth highlighting the forcefulness of those moments, apparently improvised and even uncontrolled, that take place on stage and which imply surprise, unease, doubt, tension, and exhilaration. For example, when Gonzalo Cunill, in an irado Antonio, lifts the drum and pulls it, threatening to smash it against Nao Albet, the admirer of Cleopatra, dragging the cables and uncoupling the connections with the sound control table, which is on the left side of the stage and which is managed by Maarten Seghers. It's as if the passions really have taken over the stage and threaten to break the theatrical conventions and provoke a hecatomb.

To conclude this reflection, I wonder why I was so enchanted and amazed by Billy's Violence, for I, who can't stand and don't like films with violent scenes or crime novels.

Perhaps, in addition to what has already been analysed, because the "gratuitous violence" is made effective, because of the veracity given by the acting conviction of the cast and their splendid mastery of physicality and musicality. Also because the play itself achieves an electrifying aesthetic that is by no means gratuitous. Perhaps, because underneath or above or in between this aesthetic game, in the visual and the sound, there is a background of delicate tenderness, in this acting commitment that reveals, at all times, human vulnerability and that door ajar to perdition, which was always, is and will always be there.

(Artez Blai, <http://www.artezblai.com/artezblai/estetica-y-violencia-segun-jan-lauwers-en-billys-violence.html>)