

**"The best thing about theatre or music is exactly that you can play together. And *together* is what this whole project is about for me. Beyond differences. Together."**

*Michael De Cock, director of the Koninklijke Vlaamse Schouwburg (KVS) [Royal Flemish Theatre] meets Judith Vindevogel and Stef Depover.*

It is hard not to fall in love with the comprehensive epic *We, The Drowned* by Danish author Carsten Jensen, in which he summarizes no fewer than 100 years of history, kneading it to a vibrant prose in which he describes the lives of three generations. It is the story of a community and of changing times, but above all a profoundly human, moving story which – literally from sentence one – grabs you by the throat and gently lets go again 700 pages later. By the end of the book you have seen the whole world, with modernity creeping in.

But the book is one thing. Making it into theatre another. That is what Judith Vindevogel, the artistic driving force behind musical theatre WALPURGIS, has been doing for the past two years, and will be doing for the next two. In her own familiar way, which miraculously coincides with the soul of Jensen's masterpiece. By making time, talking, listening, creating a community around the project. In short by gathering form and mission, purpose and content in one energy and in one project which, just like the characters from *We The Drowned*, has to sail from port to port.

It was multireader Stef Depover, a member of the artistic core group of WALPURGIS, who discovered the book. 'It was a bit of a coincidence,' he explains. 'I was immediately intrigued by the title. Carsten Jensen zooms in on the history of his native village of Marstal, which was famous for its sailors and ship builders. With *We, The Drowned* he has in fact written the biography of the sailor community which made Marstal the cradle of Danish shipping. And of how that community is trying to deal with the industrialization and globalization we have known in the past one hundred and fifty years. There have been so many societal shifts, which is normal, obviously, but in the past two centuries so many things have happened, which have had an enormous impact on the community.'

**Judith:** Many things which still have a major impact today and which are therefore still on our minds today. How globalization eats its way into a local community, for example. This will always be a strange paradox: the world is getting smaller, and yet communities fall apart. We can go everywhere much more quickly, we think we know more of the world, but at the same time we lose contact and the bond with what is close to us.

**Stef:** Over there in Marstal, they consider themselves as the first real globalists, and they're right. Islands are always very much open to the world. They have to be.

Ever since I've read the book *Sociobiology* by Edward O. Wilson, I've learned that islands are a type of natural experiment, where evolution takes place at an accelerated pace, where man and animal are subject to future changes more

quickly, and are more sensitive to them. As a result, *We, The Drowned*, is also a 'predictive' and ominous novel. If you can't find a way to deal with progress, you are either crushed or drowned. And that is exactly what has happened to Marstal.

**Judith:** What makes the novel really special, is that it has been written in the we form, it is told from the perspective of all the drowned. Because of that, it also has a magic-realistic touch. In fact, it is one big choral work. And so lyrical, begging for music.

**'Many years ago there lived a man called Laurids Madsen who went up to heaven, and came down again thanks to his boots.' The opening sentence and paragraph are fantastic, to say the least.**

**Judith:** Don't you agree? Imagination, myths, magic realism, ... It's all in there. Carsten Jensen uses it to build on the great narrative tradition of Homer.'

**Stef:** Yes, there are obviously a great many links with Homer. The sea with all its dangers, the travels, and naturally the novel which starts with the search for the absent father and therefore also has to do with identity. One's personal, genetic identity as well as one's identity within a group.

**The novel is set in Denmark. How difficult is it that this is a society and frame of reference 'different' from ours?**

**Judith:** The starting point is indeed historical and realistic. But at the same time, it is also an extremely universal and profoundly human story. Marstal symbolizes the entire world, whereas the sea symbolizes immense powers which cannot always be predicted and controlled. The ship with its conglomerate crew is a metaphor for our diverse society, and the sailor is a metaphor for man, attracted by the unknown time and again. It is a novel in which a small individual story is intertwined with the bigger story of a world on a collision course, going into themes like leadership but at the same time also showing how difficult it is to orient your own life. And particularly how difficult it is not to lose your own humanity in times of war, violence and hardship. The novel's main characters can navigate following the stars, they dominate the oceans, yet they do not have a map of their inner self.

**We were just discussing progress. Is there any progress in the novel?**

**Judith:** To be honest, I don't believe in the concept of progress. Of course, there is progress on many levels, but from a broader perspective this progress can also be called very questionable.

**Stef:** I agree, yes. Of course, there is more prosperity than in the middle of the nineteenth century and there are more social rights ... But not for everyone. Not everyone has access to that progress.

**Judith:** There's more. The progress and prosperity of one community are often at the expense of another. Not to mention the impact of the concept of progress on our planet and the ecosystem.

**Escapism appears to be an important theme? It seems as if no one has any other choice than to go.**

**Stef:** Yes, that's what happens on islands. You want to get off, and then you want to go back there again. Similarly, everybody wants to leave Marstal for a while. Those men want to see the world. The seas and adventures await. Only the women stay behind, holding on to a letter or to a few memories, safely locked away in a drawer.

**Judith:** Wanting to leave is an ancient and at the same time very modern theme.

If you read *We, The Drowned* the links with what is going on in port cities like Piraeus or the many refugees 'flooding' Europe are pretty straightforward.

**What struck me is that man is so evil in the novel.**

**Judith:** Really? No more than in reality, I think. But that dark side is definitely a theme, yes, you're right. Men are always involved in some kind of fight: with a teacher, a war, an authoritarian helmsman, but also with themselves. What characters struggle with most, is their search for something between striking and being struck. Is there 'a third way'?

**Stef:** You can indeed see three generations struggling with something dark, both on the inside and the outside. In this process, the sea is an honest counterforce in the sense that the sea is equal to all. It does not make a distinction between young, old, man, woman, rich, poor, white or coloured.

**How do you intend to incorporate all those different stories in the production?**

**Judith:** Obviously, you cannot tell every story. The novel contains at least three productions. But what is stimulating me to make this production, are the many possibilities the novel has to interconnect different worlds: artistic with non-artistic, the local community with the international community. By gathering artists with different backgrounds, and at the same time also involving the audience and the different partners in the project at a very early stage, I hope to be able to contribute to more social cohesion. A community feeling ... I think this is what we need more than ever. Jensen reminds us of what happens when we lose sight of that.

**Is this why you also started a reading club for the novel?**

**Judith:** Absolutely. I want to do my utmost to ensure that this production is supported by a community which is as large as possible. Both making it and playing it. I hope this project can leave traces, form friendships, mean more than a volatile motion from one theatre to another. I would like to be able to tell the story with and for a group of people which is as diverse as possible. And the group of people I'm now reading the book with, is very diverse. There are people who have ended up in poverty, but also newcomers, a mix of older and younger people and even a sailor.

It is really intense to read the novel aloud to each other. Only then you can experience what this collective voice means, the we form Jensen has so consciously chosen. We started off in Mortsel and the idea is to also set up a reading group for the novel in Antwerp next year. To gradually create a small community of readers, artists, entrepreneurs, ... around the book.

**For the music you will also be cooperating with the Dutch musical theatre company BOT. Why this choice?**

**Judith:** I met them two years ago. BOT are four Dutch men putting together their own instruments. I watched them do it and thought they were great. They are a kind of machinists, DIY'ers on stage. They've got something very down to earth. They're not afraid of what is rough, unfinished. They are the perfect crew to take along with us in this adventure.

**Stef:** The way in which they work together is very beautiful to see. Very simple, complex and crafty at the same time. Their shows also have this magic-realistic side to them. Sometimes instruments continue playing when the musician has already gone, sometimes instruments become characters.

**Judith:** The best thing about theatre or music is exactly that you can play together. And *together* is what this whole project is about for me. Beyond differences. Together.

**Stef:** If we want to avoid major catastrophes, there is nothing we can do but cooperate. In his essay *In hetzelfde schuitje [In the same boat]*, Peter Sloterdijk does not incidentally use a shipping metaphor to discuss that.

**Judith:** But no matter how much of a catastrophe and threat the future may sometimes seem, I still don't give up hope. And hope can stand insecurity. Even more so: it is grafted on it. Hope, according to Rebecca Solnit somewhere in *Hope in the dark*, is embracing the unknown and the unknowable. It is an alternative to the security both pessimist and optimists want to provide us with. It is within hope that she says we can find the space to act. I think that's a very beautiful thought. And the right way to cope with all insecurities, including those of our time. (deFENIKS, 23 June 2017, MDC)