

Theatre

Ontroerend Goed: redefining the boundaries of interactive theatre

As the Belgian company returns to the Edinburgh Fringe, Matt Trueman assesses its impact



Ontroerend Goed's 'Once And For All We're Going To Tell You Who We Are So Shut Up And Listen' © Phile Deprez

JULY 28, 2017 by: Matt Trueman

It's August 2007, and I'm sitting in a wheelchair, wrists bound together, blindfold on; my senses as active as I am passive. Birds tweet, crickets chirrup, a watch ticks. Hands take mine, stand me up, then shove me against a wall, hard. Perfume floods my nose. Whispers tickle my ears. A camera flashes and whirrs. It feels intimate, generous even, but as I'm wheeled backwards with my blindfold off, a wall of Polaroids comes into view. Then other people in wheelchairs, all bound and blindfolded. A tape player chirrups and tweets. Everything that felt so personal is, it dawns on us, a production line. *The Smile Off Your Face* had introduced us to immersive theatre with a startling rug-pull.

Ontroerend Goed theatre company, the creator of the piece, was whizzing audiences around in wheelchairs long before the cult hit *[You Me Bum Bum Train](#)*, and letting teenagers loose on stage years before the kids of Company Three took their show *Brainstorm* to London's

National Theatre.

Based in Ghent, Belgium, Ontroerend Goed has been one of the most influential forces on British theatre. Its inter-active shows triggered a burst of one-on-one theatre across the UK. And *Once And For All We're Going To Tell You Who We Are So Shut Up And Listen*, with its snogging and swearsy youngsters, transformed the country's perception of youth theatre. Now, 10 years after its first Edinburgh Fringe show, Ontroerend Goed is taking on the financial system in a new interactive piece *£¥€\$ (LIES)*, which follows its festival run with an international tour.

In those 10 years, Alexander Devriendt's company has created some of the most singular shows at the [Edinburgh Fringe](#). Ontroerend Goed (the name translates as "feel estate", a property pun) seduced and betrayed its audiences in *Internal* (2009) and manipulated them into a mob in *Audience* (2011). *Fight Night* (2013) turned democratic politics into a popularity contest, asking audiences to vote actors offstage, and *World Without Us* (2016) imagined what would happen were humanity to end.

While not every show entirely worked, each was genuinely daring. "When they're on form, their work is simply the most thrilling and transformative I've seen in a theatre," says David Jubb, artistic director of Battersea Arts Centre in London. "They provoke, titillate and challenge like no other company."



The group's new interactive piece '£¥€\$ (LIES)', which takes on the financial system © Thomas Dhanens

That first Fringe was a gamble. After early acclaim at home, Ontroerend Goed had come unstuck trying to make a subversive soap opera for the stage. Devriendt tells me, via Skype,

that they “forgot what was fun in that”. Belgium, too, had started to feel small, with the company’s touring circuit limited to a few cities. “We always try to make theatre for as many people as possible without changing what we do or dumbing it down,” the director says. Edinburgh offered a city full of theatre nuts, and a “portal to the rest of the world”, but the financial risk was huge. “People told us we were crazy.”

On arrival in 2007, they were inclined to agree. Its venue was in effect a building site in the city’s Old Town: “a cellar with no electricity”. No audiences either. “The first day, two people came, then two people we’d met on the street,” he remembers. “The next day, four, then suddenly it was sold out.” So the Fringe goes: word of mouth can catch like tinder, hidden gems can spark a rush. Ontroerend Goed walked away with the festival’s two biggest awards.

“Edinburgh was a turning point,” says Devriendt. “It was the moment that defined us as an international company.” They’ve been back almost every year since, with shows springing on to world tours thereafter. “It became part of our DNA. It affects the sort of shows we make and how we think about them.”

Provocation is a part of that. At a festival as crowded as the Fringe, sharing a bill with literally thousands of other shows, it helps to stand out, and the Belgians have a fine line in Fringe furores. *Audience*, an exercise in crowd manipulation, singled out one female theatregoer for verbal abuse each night, promising to stop on condition that she “spread her legs” for a video camera. The first performance caused such outrage — one-star reviews all round — that the company installed a plant thereafter. *Internal* coaxed confessions from individual audience members, then simply shared them with the group. *Teenage Riot* raised questions about exploitation and manipulation.

Devriendt, however, is adamant that the shows never set out to court controversy. “If art isn’t challenging, why bother?” he asks aloud. “I really believe that.” But pushing boundaries inevitably means pushing buttons. “Controversy exists in the eye of the beholder. I can’t control who sees something as taboo. It’s different with everybody.

“Shocking an audience is easy,” the director continues. “I don’t ever want to do that because it blocks any form of communication. It shuts people out and it closes art down.”



'Sirens' © Stine Sampers

For Devriendt, challenging theatre starts with form; new configurations ask new questions of audiences. "That feels essential," he says. "Theatre is only very slowly redefining itself in

relation to movies and television. Why do something that works perfectly well on screen in a theatre? It has to be 3D, a live, collective experience between audience and performers.” The point, he says, is that anything is possible. “You’ve got this black box and you can do whatever you want in there.”

So what exactly does Ontroerend Goed want to do? After 16 years making theatre — the company started as a poetry collective — Devriendt “feels like [the company has] just hit adolescence”. It is, in other words, growing up. The shocks have slowed down, the shows have settled; more poetic, less provocative. *Sirens* (2014) had five women in ball gowns lay out what feminism meant to them, and earlier this year the company structured a whole play like a palindrome: *Are We Not Drawn Onward To New Era*. “There came a point where I realised we could make theatre. The question became, ‘What will we do with it?’ Good speakers don’t try to prove they’re good speakers. They say something.”

£¥€\$ (LIES) is part of that. It drops audience members into a mock financial system, seating them at six casino tables to trade fake stocks and bonds. Early audiences have left boasting of newfound billions.

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ALEXANDER DEVRIENDT

“Everybody was affected by the financial crisis and everyone, including me, was like, ‘F*** these bankers. F*** this system.’” Devriendt wanted to address that blame. “If you’re in their position, do you look at it differently? There’s a visceral side to trading.”

He is fascinated that the financial system has largely survived, as the public’s gaze shifts to other concerns such as Brexit, Trump and the refugee crisis. “We’re not questioning that system any more,” he says. In that, he agrees with the economist Thomas Piketty: reform will take a couple of crises. Could *£¥€\$ (LIES)* get things going? In Belgium, audiences have been surprising. “A lot of bankers have come.”

But Devriendt worries about the ramifications of Brexit on Edinburgh Fringe shows like his, with regard to artists’ visas and production costs. “I’m not looking forward to it finally

happening,” he says, pointing to the effort it takes to tour to countries like Canada and Australia. Given its impact in the UK, Ontroerend Goed would be a big loss.

‘£Y€\$ (LIES)’, Summerhall, Edinburgh, August 4-27, ontroerendgoed.be

Photographs: Phile Deprez; Thomas Dhanens; Stine Sampers

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