

N: *Dimitri, a fan of yours advised you to read the Renaat Braem's book, published in 1968. You were immediately captivated by the text. What appealed to you?*

DL: The language is a bit baroque. It feels a bit like a Latin speech. Constructed, yet straightforward. You can feel the anger beneath the words. No matter how rational the construction, you read the emotions. There is also variation in the text. First, Braem takes the reader through the air to view Belgium from above, then lands and takes you through the street canyons to breathe in the smog. Braem was a world improver; he railed against capitalism. Because, in his eyes, capitalism equals egotism. He wanted a social world where living equals sharing space.

N: *Did Braem's text need a lot of editing to adapt it for the stage?*

DL: I did not edit the text. The first parts were integral, when Braem got a bit more technical, I deleted them, nothing more. Of course, by leaving things out, I was able to leave my mark on the text, such as his great love of nature. His concern that we treat trees, parks, and forests far too carelessly.

N: *Braem's book is an indictment of the way people build in Belgium. What exactly was his criticism of the methods used there?*

DL: Lack of coherence, of vision. All building styles are mixed together. Even at the back of the houses, people place constructions next to constructions. I can certainly identify with his criticism. The amalgam that we call Belgium somehow also fits the inhabitants of this country,

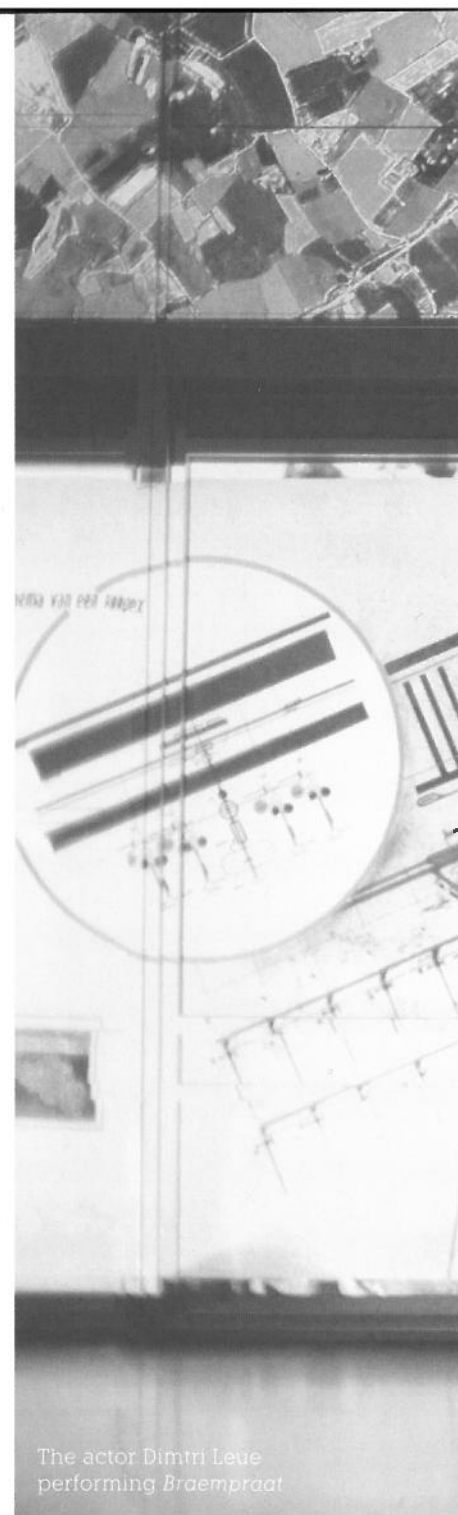
though. Braem was very extreme. He wanted a tabula rasa. Destroy the inner city of Antwerp and start all over again. I do not agree with that. History deserves its place in architecture. We should cherish the fact that, unlike America, we have very old buildings.

N: *As the initiator of the performance, were you also the director of this project?*

DL: Yes, I was director, producer (co-production of De Singel and VAI), and actor. It was a feat. Not only learning the text by heart, but also realising a production about an architect was a labour of love. Our play got a lot of interest from the world of architects. People came from all over Holland and Belgium to see it.

N: *Koen, you are friends with Dimitri and your company has designed several decors for his productions. The decor is a facsimile of a part of the back facade of Braem's own house on the Menegemlei in Deurne. During the performance, photographs made by Filip were projected on this. How did you come up with that idea?*

KB: The decor functions as a backup for Dimitri, as he is standing there completely 'naked' on the stage doing a monologue for one a half hours. When you look at Braem's own house, it is a combination of a steel structure and a brick building which at the time was very much in vogue. I was always intrigued by the back facade of his house. There are small depths in it, like a Japanese folding screen, and he plays with proportions. We made a cast of the facade, inspired by *House*, a temporary public sculpture by the British artist Rachel Whiteread. The



Braemptraat

To bring *Renaat Braem's* notorious essay *Belgium, The Ugliest Country in the World* to the theatrical stage, a unique collaboration was formed in which actor *Dimitri Leue*, architect *Koen van Bockstal* of Bulk architects, architectural photographer *Filip Dujardin*, and composer *Steven Taelman* successfully joined forces. *Nook* spoke with them about how the play came together.



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decor should serve as a canvas for Dimitri to stand in front of, on which Filip's photographs could be projected.

N: *As an architect, what is it like to design a decor for a theatrical production?*

KB: What's nice for me is that you see someone [the actor, *Nook*] in, on, and around your construction. The construction, though, is not an end – it's a means of staging. That is quite rare for me. At Bulk we make public buildings, but as an architect it is quite rare to look at your own work as a spectator. I think it's incredible to see how something you've conceived is used by someone.

N: *Dimitri, how did you get the idea to involve Filip and Steven in the project?*

FD: Filip has his own utopian view of architecture that interests me enormously. I knew Steven from a previous project as someone who can rhyme beats and poetry. I thought it would be great if both magicians could work together. And that turned out to be the case.

N: *Filip, did you submit existing images or did you make new photographs for this project?*

DL: New photos. I drove around West Flandres and took the themes in Braem's book such as, traffic, industry, and infrastructure, as a guide to make the pictures of urban planning phenomena in Belgium. As an alternative for Braem's criticism in the book, I also photographed three of his urban development projects where he shows his vision on how people should live together, such as the Arena quarter in Antwerp or City Modern in Brussels.

N: *What was the role of music in the piece?*

DL: The music was there as a resting point for the *woordenmitraille* [flood of words, *Nook*] Braem wrote. The music was full of winks to 50 years ago. Various themes of songs that were in the top 100 in 1968 passed through vaguely and almost unrecognisably in the music. For example, *Atlantis* by Donovan and a nod to 2001, *A Space Odyssey*, but quite contemporary to indicate that Braem's words are still relevant today.

As an architect it is quite rare to look at your own work as a spectator.

N: *On stage, what's it like seeing scenery, music, and projections combine?*

DL: That is always the miracle of theatre, when all the pieces of the puzzle fit together. But it has to be created anew every time. The pictures and the music had a wonderful symbiosis, which was necessary to process the fierce monologues. It needed some resting points. Being able to sit against the facade of Braem's own house on stage felt right. I was backed up by a great team; add to that the light and we can talk about an artisanal, technical support system.

N: *Was there anything you wanted to say to the audience after seeing the performance?*

DL: That we should create space between the villages and cities. Politicians should have the courage to force people towards the city so that we create more nature around cities. Politicians now often allow themselves to be led by building promoters, real estate agents, and project developers. It should be the other way round. Politics should have a vision and then attract project developers who go along with that vision. To say it quite bluntly. Thanks to very strong Flemish architects, things do change for the better.

N: *What do you consider to be the fun of collaborating?*

KB: To produce something that you can't do on your own otherwise you shouldn't collaborate. It's an opportunity to enjoy each other's disciplines.

DL: It is like acrobatics. You know you can let yourself fall if you trust the others. And with these people, I feel safe. I feel supported by their talents. One plus one is always three in good collaborations.

FD: This is the first time I did something for theatre. It was a captivating experience to see how a play is created and how all the various elements, under high pressure, came together. As an architecture photographer, I am often on the road in Flanders, but what was interesting for me about this project is that I looked very specifically and intently at Flanders in relation to the content of the book.

In a short period of time, I came across things in Flandres I had not seen before and it was an enrichment to what I already knew.

N: *Braem's book appeared in 1968. Have things changed since then in Belgium and is it no longer the ugliest country in the world?*

KB: The book is prophetic in the sense that it is shocking to establish that, ecologically, the country has gone to the dogs over the last 50 years. In an epilogue to later editions of Braem's book, a Flemish Government Architect says that the urgency has only increased. That is Dimitri's drive to perform this play.

FD: Beauty can only be found in ugliness, though. If it is all beautiful, then you no longer see the beautiful. In that respect, for a talented architect it is nice to work in Flanders, because you can make a difference. [TS]



[1] Renaat Braem was a world improver, so a scene was written in which Dimitri Leue is almost standing on the decor, making Braem's house a preaching chair.

[2] Steven Taelman is hidden behind the decor, playing live music. [3] A lectern in the form of a model of Braem's Police Tower in Antwerp was designed to give Leue something to hold onto on stage. All photos by Sara de Graeve.