NO BEAUTY FOR ME THERE WHERE HUMAN LIFE IS RARE

On Jan Lauwers' Theatre Work with Needcompany

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TURNS ON THE NARRATIVE TURN

Showing and Telling in Needcompany's Early Shakespeare Productions and *Isabella's Room*

Felix Sprang

Stephen Chinna has argued that the difference between modern and postmodern theatre, if such a line can be drawn, lies in the fact that the former adheres to the idea of narrative linearity whereas the latter rejects it categorically. "What needs to be untangled are the various ways in which postmodern performance can in turn be categorized — and limited — by particular stylistic and/or epistemological criteria. This can occur, for example, through an accent on the disruption of narrative and the displacement of the authorial text in postmodern performance theories."[1] Classical modern theatre, in other words, is based on a story that implies a beginning, a middle and an end (even if the underlying expectation is frustrated as in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*). Postmodern theatre on the other hand embraces scenic and polyphonic contingency and highlights the fact that narratives are constructed in the process of presentation and perception.

Very few companies and directors have negotiated the aspects of narration as persistently and creatively over the course of the last two decades as Needcompany with their resourceful and innovative performances. As a starting point for examining their negotiations I should like to point to a recorded discussion between Jan Lauwers and the Shakespeare scholar Klaus Reichert dating from 1996. Following a performance of *Needcompany's Macbeth*, Reichert challenged Lauwers on the fragmentation of the text:

> *Reichert*: … I wonder whether anybody who has never seen or read *Macbeth* really does know what is happening on stage. Does he get the story? We are not good witnesses because we know it very well. It strikes me that you direct Shakespeare for people who know Shakespeare, and that cannot be your intention.
> *Lauwers*: But you cannot judge that. Because you know [the play], and only the people who know *Macbeth* say it is quite difficult to follow. The people who do not know *Macbeth* do not care. My father had never read *Macbeth*, but he came and saw it, and loved it. And he did not care if there are three witches or one or if Carlotta Sagna plays a witch or not, or Lady Macbeth. He felt beautiful poetry, he felt its meaning and he was touched by it. And that is more important than the whodunit story or whatever.[2]

1. Stephen Chinna, *Performance. Recasting the Political in Theatre and Beyond*, Oxford, Peter Lang, 2003, p. 135. (*Stage and Screen Studies* 4).
2. Jan Lauwers and Klaus Reichert interviewed by Sabine Pochhammer, "'Fair is foul, and foul is fair'. Shakespeare is a paradox. An interview with Jan Lauwers and Klaus Reichert", *Theaterschrift*, no. 11, February 1997, p. 95.

Lauwers unmistakably rejects the idea of (re-)presenting the whodunit story when directing Shakespeare. This rejection, as will be shown, can also be understood as a turn on the 'narrative turn', i. e. the awareness that we generate meaning and shape our lives by constructing narratives: "stories have come to be viewed as a basic human strategy for coming to terms with time, progress, and change".[3] This 'narrative turn' has also engulfed drama and performance theory despite the notion that, theatre, at least according to Aristotle, is principally showing (*μίμησις*, mimesis) without telling (*διήγησις*, diegesis), i.e. presentation and not narration: "We have laid it down that a tragedy is an imitation of an action that is complete in itself".[4]

Tracing the legacy of Aristotle's conception in the light of the 'narrative turn', the specific issue I am addressing is the intricate relationship between presentation and narration in Needcompany's early Shakespeare productions and their more recent performance *Isabella's Room* (2004). For heuristic purposes the following analysis is divided into three sections: having considered the effect of dramatic reduction on narration, I will turn to the narrative agents in Needcompany's performances. Finally, I will point to the episodic structure of Needcompany's productions and how it affects the concept of narrative linearity. Within the realm of performance, however, these characteristics are all interrelated and result in what I should like to call a critical stance towards narrative — or, in other words, a turn on the 'narrative turn'.

Reduction and Narration

Jan Lauwers points out that Needcompany's Shakespeare adaptations dismantle the whodunit story as it is provided by the dramatic text. Evidently, he and his artistic team focus on particular scenes and their emotional impact. Consequently, characters as well as entire scenes are dropped. Reducing the five acts of *Julius Caesar* to just over 75 minutes, for example, results in a foregrounding of particular scenes and a reduction of others. What is of interest to us here is the reduction of

3. David Herman, Jahn Manfred and Marie-Laure Ryan (eds.), *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, London, Routledge, 2005, p. ix.
4. Aristotle, "De Poetica", in *The Works of Aristotle*, vol. XI, ed. W.D. Ross, trans. Ingram Bywater, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1952, 1450b23.

dramatic action. In its most radical form, reduced scenes take on an aporetic nature in which the dramatic action comes to a complete halt: Caesar's assassination is staged with the actor Mil Seghers standing motionless for three minutes while the conspirators leave the stage one by one. The battle of Philippi between Brutus' and Mark Antony's faction is reduced to a bursting red balloon and two colliding light-bulbs. In *Antonius und Cleopatra* (1992) the battle at sea is a moment of inactivity with a projection of waves rolling against the shore and the actors sitting in a row with their backs to the projection. The murder of Duncan in *Needcompany's Macbeth* (1996) is a prolonged instance of inertia: Duncan rests his head on Banquo's shoulder while the cast sits motionless at a table thus evoking images of the last supper. Macbeth played by Viviane De Muynck sits on a stool during what is the height of the battle in act five and simply walks off stage with the stoically delivered line "I shall not yield". In *Isabella's Room* the frenetic action freezes and the cast remains motionless while the years 1940 to 1945 pass. The dates are projected against the back wall and pronounced by a narrator-character who also imitates the sound of bombs detonating in the distance.

We can certainly discern a pattern here. Generally, Lauwers opts for a reduction when violent acts are to be presented. He grounds the reduction on aesthetic and moral principles: with the overwhelming images of violence in the mass media, he argues, art needs to go in the opposite direction: "I think it is no longer necessary to [show violence directly] — art has to do the opposite: try to find time to reflect. In our *Macbeth* every time somebody dies it is time for reflection".[5] However, I think that we misconstrue Lauwers' intention when we simply think of the depiction of violence in the mass media as the driving force behind Needcompany's contention. When Lauwers points out that "art has to do the opposite" he shares a fundamental conviction with Lessing as it is expressed in his *Laokoon*:

> ... the presentation of extremes to the eye clips the wings of fancy, prevents her from soaring beyond the impression of the senses, and compels her to occupy herself with weaker images; further than these she ventures not, but shrinks from the visible fullness of expression as her limit.[6]

5. Jan Lauwers and Klaus Reichert interviewed by Sabine Pochhammer, *op.cit.*, p. 83.

Lessing argued that the artist should refrain from depicting extreme passions because a violent artistic spectacle will always "clip the wings of fancy". In the case of extreme passions, to put it bluntly, any presentation — no matter how resourceful — will suspend the more powerful imagination. However, imagination is not only preferred because of its emotive and rational power. At the core of Lessing's aesthetics, von Mücke explains, is "the self-reflective pleasure of the imagination, the enjoyment of our ability to distance ourselves from the material involvement in the world and the physical limitations of our bodies".[7] Both Lessing and Lauwers evidently share the conviction that "art is freedom"[8] in the sense that art is a liberating experience that elevates and enraptures the spectator.

Needcompany's reduction of violent scenes thus opens a space for the imagination and a space for reflection. However, there is a marked difference between Lessing's and Needcompany's conception when we consider the treatment of narration. Whereas Lessing argued that the imagination should "soar... beyond the impression of the senses" and thus fill in the gaps in the action, Needcompany opts for a de-escalation and deceleration that also effects the narrative thread. Whereas Lessing endorsed a cathartic experience with the imagination enhancing pity and fear, Needcompany chooses an alienation effect that permits the spectator to "find time to reflect". Consequently, these moments of de-escalation and deceleration are also moments when the narrative pauses and takes a leap.

This is a haunting experience in the theatre because it points to the fact that our expectations as spectators are driven primarily by the plot. In a tragedy like *Macbeth*, it is not Duncan's death that interests us: what is important to us is the planning of the deed and its consequences. Accordingly, in Shakespeare, Duncan is murdered off-stage. The dramatic action in the following scene frenetically revolves around Macbeth's qualms "I am afraid to think what I have done" and reaches its drama-

6. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laokoon and How the Ancients Represented Death*, Whitefish (MT), Kessinger Publishing, 2005, pp. 19–20.
7. Dorothea Von Mücke, "The Powers of Horror and the Magic of Euphemism in Lessing's *Laokoon* and *How the Ancients Represented Death*", in *Body & Text in the Eighteenth Century*, eds. Veronica Kelly and Dorothea von Mücke, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1994, p. 166.
8. Jan Lauwers, *Needcompany Newsletter*, February 2003.

tic climax with the knocking of the porter. In *Needcompany's Macbeth* the ratio is reversed: the murder itself is transposed metaphorically and shown at great length while Viviane De Muynck stoically ogles the audience. The porter scene is cut.

What makes the reductions so innovative is the critical stance towards the economy of storytelling. Needcompany subverts the efficiency principle that is at the centre of chronological storytelling. From a narrative point of view we expect an acceleration of events around cataclysmatic moments like Caesar's assassination, Duncan's murder or Antony's defeat. With Needcompany's adaptations, however, we are confronted with a disruption of the narrative, a gaping temporal void, a residue for the spectator's thoughts and emotions.

Demets and Stalpaert have argued convincingly that the aesthetic transposition of death reflects a peculiar emotional ambivalence: the longing for an eternal life and the wish to die.[9] In fact, with their formalized and aesthetic nature, and with their 'presentness', Needcompany's productions resort to ritual elements and thus negotiate the space of ritual practices in modern societies. "Ritual practices", as Rozik explains, "are usually extremely formalized. They are characterized by colorfulness, solemnity, prescribed behavior, recurrence, and long-term permanence".[10] Although rituals can contain stories or myths, the audience is usually not primarily concerned with the story that is being told:

> The basic relationship between the audience and the fictional world thus ceases to be, as commonly conceived, one of watching a world of others with whom the spectator can identify or not and becomes instead a confrontation with the spectator's own inner being, including conscious and/or unconscious layers, in the shape of a (usually metaphorical) mytho-logical description.[11]

While the ritualistic nature, the "confrontation with the spectator's own inner being" at the expense of the whodunit story, is already fully developed in the staging of Duncan's death, Needcompany has taken this model even further in *Isabella's Room*. Supported by the ethnological artefacts on stage that make for a (post-)colonial setting, the performance constantly

9. Paul Demets, "Werkelijkheid van een andere orde. Het theaterwerk van Jan Lauwers", *Ons erfdeel*, vol. 4, no. 3, 1998, p. 384. Christel Stalpaert, "Schoonheid in *Needcompany's King Lear* als wapen tegen de ondraaglijke wreedheid van het tragische 'zijn'", *Documenta*, vol. 21, no. 3, 2003, p. 165 and Christel Stalpaert, "*Isabella's Room* van Jan Lauwers en Needcompany. Over kunst en leven als omweg naar de dood", *Documenta*, vol. 23, no. 2, 2005, p. 109.
10. Eli Rozik, *The Roots of Theatre. Rethinking Ritual and other Theories of Origin*, Iowa, University of Iowa Press, 2002, p. 8.
11. Eli Rozik, *op.cit.*, p. 312.

verges on a ritual as music, dance, text and images blend to tell the story of Isabella Morandi. Within this highly formalized performance, there are distinct moments of narrative disruption. The most striking are the following: Anna's funeral is rendered like a triumphant procession. Having committed suicide jumping from the lighthouse she is carried on the actors' hands while singing her own requiem. Her husband, Arthur, repeatedly performs his Budhanton dance, a symbiosis of Buddha, the contemplative side, and Mark Antony, the fervent, impassionate side, while the cast is watching or joining in. When Alexander, Isabella's lover, reports with bewilderment that a dog was sent on an orbital flight and envisions a dog walking on the moon, he and the cast start barking and running up and down the stage imitating dogs.

The eruptive spectacles in *Isabella's Room* are not confined to violent scenes, the ritualistic disruption of the otherwise chronological narration includes all kinds of heightened emotional experience. As such they are closer to Aristotle's poetics than Lessing's aesthetics. As D.W. Lucas and others have pointed out, the notion of *mimesis* in Aristotle is far more complex than the simple translation 'imitation' or 'presentation' of dramatic action reveals:

> We encounter greater difficulties when we come to the use of the word [*mimesis*] in connexion with music and dancing. According to Aristotle (47a28), the dance by itself, rhythmic motion of body and limbs, can imitate, or as we should say 'express', character, emotion, and action.[12]

Aristotle's expansive conception of *mimesis* — and the critical responses to such a conception — facilitate understanding Needcompany's performances. The ritualistic disruption does not only open a space for reflection, it also allows for an impassioned expression of character, emotion and action without the chrono-logical constraints of the narrative. These moments of ritualistic expression provide the mental space for the spectator to explore the concept of Budhanton, the character of Anna, and the absurdities of technological progress.

12. D.W. Lucas, (ed.) *Aristotle. Poetics*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, (1968) 1998, p. 261.

Arguably, these ritualistic sequences, from the assassination of Caesar in *Julius Caesar* to the dog impersonation in *Isabella's Room*, are the backbone of Needcompany's performances. The ephemeral nature of these passages is essentially heightened because these passages are enclosed by a structured narrative: the plotline of Shakespeare's tragedies or the chronology of the 20th century as well as Isabella's biography in the case of *Isabella's Room*. Their impact thus derives partly from the contrast between showing and telling. In contrasting these two modes, Needcompany exposes the extent to which we as spectators are prone to rely on narrative structures for making sense of what we see, hear and feel.

Narrative Agents and Presentation

To compensate for the fragmentation of the story, Needcompany habitually resorts to a chorus-like agent, a narrator-character. These narrators do not only tell parts of the story, they constantly remind us that the performance we are witnessing is carefully and deliberately constructed.

Let us briefly recall the nature of these narrator-characters. In *Julius Caesar* the narrator is a woman, usually upstage, who — as a presenter with a microphone — informs the audience about crucial elements of the plot. However, she does not simply play the passive role of an informant and commentator: she rebukes the actors when the scenes turn tumultuous and finally plays Strato's part holding the sword for Brutus to run upon. In *Antonius und Cleopatra*, there are at least two narrator-characters who both cross the line between sheer commentator and interacting character. Grace Ellen Barkey as Charmian, Cleopatra's maid, introduces the characters and comments on the action. Ritsaert ten Cate impersonates "himself and a character built up from various fragments, who is somewhere between a narrator, a messenger, a soothsayer and a *deus ex machina*".[13] This narrator-character plays the part of an advisor to the characters warning Antony, for example, not to fight at sea. At the same time he functions as a messenger who informs the

13. Marianne Van Kerkhoven, "The Elements of Jan Lauwers' Shakespeare Adaptations", *Theaterschrift*, no. 11, 1997, p. 119.

characters (and the audience) of the course of action and finally hands the serpent to Cleopatra. Enobarbus, played by Mil Seghers, serves as yet another narratorial guide. He speaks the opening lines of Needcompany's adaptation, the barge speech that praises Cleopatra's beauty, retells their wooing, and predicts the fall of Antony. Throughout the performance, Enobarbus addresses the audience directly and reflects on the development of his master, strangely aloof and detached from the action on stage.

In *Needcompany's Macbeth* a voiceless narrator frames the performance: when the glaring stage lights directed at the auditorium go out and the spectator's eyes adjust to the relative darkness on stage, a female character standing behind an elevated chalice gradually takes shape. As we listen to Giulio Caccini's *Amarilli* the woman dips her finger in the chalice full of blood, timidly at first, tempted, and finally ecstatic. With this image and the beguiling aria from the early seventeenth century, *Needcompany's Macbeth* establishes a strong narrative:

> Amarilli, mia bella,
> non credi, o del mio cor dolce desio,
> d'esser tu l'amor mio?
> credilo pur: e se timor t'assale,
> prendi questo mio strale,
> aprim'il petto, e vedrai scritto in core:
> Amarilli è 'l mio amore.
>
> Amaryllis my beloved,
> don't you believe
> oh my heart's sweet desire,
> that you are my true love?
> Believe it: and if fear takes hold of you
> take this arrow of mine,
> open my breast and you will see written on my heart:
> Amaryllis is my love.[14]

With the word 'amaryllis', a term of endearment as well as a term denoting a plant family including the narcissus and the belladonna lily, the stage is set for the destructive relationship between Lady Macbeth and Macbeth. "… aprim'il petto, e vedrai scritto in core: / Amarilli è 'l mio amore" foreshadows

14. My translation, F.S. For a thorough discussion of the canzone and the text see Tim Carter, "Giulio Caccini's Amarilli, mia bella: Some Questions (and a Few Answers)", *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, no. 113, 1988, pp. 250–273.

Macbeth's self-destructive nature as he tries to saturate Lady Macbeth's insatiable appetite for power. Ambition and love, the driving forces behind the plot, as well as the most prominent image, blood, are all introduced in this opening scene.

Like a parenthesis, the actress Carlotta Sagna appears again at the end of the performance, this time with blood all over her apparently naked body. Standing on top of a table, swinging a microphone to an increasingly deafening beat of drums, she starts to smile at the audience. "Blood will have blood" is certainly the narrative that is explored so vividly with this adaptation. Although Lauwers does not resort to a character-narrator or to a "teller figure"[15] in order to tell the story, the voiceless female character, the aria, the blood chalices and the deafening beats are all aspects of an "impersonal covert show-er or arranger function"[16] that oversees the action.

With their narratorial agents, Needcompany has dealt with a puzzling aspect as it is addressed in recent theories of narration in theatrical performances. Jan Lauwers seems to play with the theoretical dilemma that the covert narratorial agent is both present and absent. The playful realization of this dilemma is particularly evident in *Isabella's Room*. Needcompany resorts to a host of narrative mediators in this production ranging from overt to covert agents. At the beginning of the performance, Jan Lauwers addresses the audience, bids them welcome, and introduces the cast and the particular character that each actress and actor will play. Finally, he introduces himself as "the man in the white suit" and sits down at the side of the stage. Throughout the play he observes both the actors and the audience. At times, however, he will hand them a stage prop, nod knowingly, smile, clap his hands or move his feet to the rhythm of the beat. For the last song, "We just go on and on", he plays the guitar and sings along. When asked about his performance on stage, Lauwers explains:

> It may seem paradoxical, but it is precisely for this reason that I take part in the performance myself this time. What it means is that I am there onstage but do not have a clear part or place. Not like Tadeusz Kantor, who directed from onstage. You might say that the simple fact that I am there onstage without taking part in the action makes sure that it is no longer about me. I see the stage as a mental space where you can reflect on things.[17]

15. Manfred Jahn, "Narrative Voice and Agency in Drama. Aspects of a Narratology of Drama", *New Literary History*, no. 32, 2001, pp. 670.
16. *ibidem*

Lauwers' paradoxical claim that his presence on stage "makes sure that [*Isabella's Room*] is no longer about [him]" is an attempt to escape a narrow autobiographical reading that might be suggested by the announcement:

> Jan Lauwers' father died at the start of the twenty-first century and left his wife and children a collection of several thousand ethnological and archaeological objects. This was the spark that led Jan Lauwers to tell the story of Isabella Morandi, a woman born at the start of the twentieth century.[18]

Being present on stage, Lauwers subverts his covert role as the author of the script, who is usually absent at the time of performance, and assumes the position of an overseeing "show-er or arranger". By introducing the characters, Lauwers raises the expectation that he will comment continually on the events on stage, not unlike the chorus in Attic tragedy. Throughout the performance, however, he remains a voiceless observer, a superordinate narrative agency embodied in two distinct realms: a "storyrealm consisting of tellings" and a "taleworld" as "a reality inhabited by persons for whom events unfold".[19]

Besides Lauwers, there is a classical narrator-character who announces the particular year and place for each scene and thus establishes the temporal and spatial coordinates. He also summarizes several parts of the story that are not dramatized on stage, for example Isabella's move to Paris, and provides additional information on the characters. However, at times this narrator-character interacts with the characters on stage, he lights Isabella's cigarette, for example, or carries the staff at Anna's funeral procession. Whereas this narrator-character with his overt narratorial function is clearly removed from the characters who constitute the dramatic world proper, these other characters also assume the role of narratorial guides. With Isabella at the centre, they all comment on her actions and thoughts.

17. Jan Lauwers in an interview with Pieter T'Jonck, "Omdat vrouwen ontzettend belangrijk zijn. Jan Lauwers over *Isabella's Room* van Needcompany", *De tijd*, 21 September 2004.
18. Jan Lauwers, *Needcompany Newsletter*, February 2003.
19. Katharine Young, "Frame and Boundary in the Phenomenology of Narrative", in *Narrative across Media. The Languages of Storytelling*, ed. Marie-Laure Ryan, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 2004, p. 77.

The permeable boundary between character and commentator is due to the complicated temporal and narrative structure of the play: Isabella, ninety years old, recounts the story of her life. Arthur, Anna, Alexander and Frank all come to life as Isabella remembers her past. While she reflects on the years she has lived, spanning the years 1910 to 2000 in strict chronological order, the whole cast remains on stage. As episodes from Isabella's life are acted out, the respective characters speak their parts and interact with Isabella. In addition, these characters comment on Isabella's recollection from a position that is clearly extradiegetic, i.e. outside the story-world: even after her suicide, Anna, for example, keeps reproaching Isabella for smoking too much. Arthur and Anna, both dead according to the storyline, argue over their former destructive relationship. Isabella keeps talking to Frank even though Alexander reminds her that her grandson is dead.

What may appear like a 'simple' alienation effect, is a highly creative critique on the assumption that "the general concept of story subdivides into external and internal stories, and that this is a distinction before any additional distinctions come into play".[20] This distinction can be drawn in theory but, as Jahn rightly points out, "[e]xternal and internal stories, in particular, are highly indeterminate when viewed in isolation and prone to shift status erratically as soon as contextual factors come into play".[21] It is precisely this indetermination that the story of Isabella Morandi accentuates. Needcompany's performance brings "this internal-external dynamic of all storytelling" vividly to light.[22] Particularly fascinating in this respect are the three voiceless characters on stage: the left hemisphere of Isabella's brain, her right hemisphere and the object of her yearning, Felix, the 'Desert Prince'. As corporeal actors and dancers, they externalize and 'narrate' the unvoiced unconscious of Isabella's internal story.

The manifold narrative agents that contribute to the process of externalizing Isabella's story fabricate a complex web. This web allows for a reappraisal of narration and presentation. The notion of an unambiguous dividing line between

20. Manfred Jahn, "'Awake! Open your eyes!' The Cognitive Logic of External and Internal Stories", in *Narrative Theory and the Cognitive Sciences*, ed. David Herman, Stanford, Center for the Study of Language and Information, 2003, p. 199.
21. Manfred Jahn (2003), *op.cit.*, p. 200.
22. Manfred Jahn (2003), *op.cit.*, p. 212.

telling and showing becomes increasingly problematic when a story is 'told' by a host of agents employing different means from dance to overt commentary. With this spectrum, the opposition of telling and showing is undermined. What transpires is their mutuality and interdependence in the act of performing and perceiving.

Episodic Structure and Consequentiality

Let us, once again, reconsider Needcompany's dismantling of the whodunit story. This time, however, we shall focus neither on the reductions or disruptions of the narrative nor on the manifold narratorial agents but rather on what is left of the plot-line in Needcompany's storytelling. As a starting point for the investigation let us also return to Aristotle. He acknowledges that "the first essential, the life and soul, so to speak, of Tragedy is the Plot".[23]

> The reason that Aristotle makes the tragic plot the *raison d'être* of the poet's art is that he is making a case, contra Plato, for the cognitive value of poetry, and he finds it in the causal logic that makes poetry "a more philosophical and more serious thing than history: poetry tends to speak to universals, history of particulars" (1451b6).[24]

Leaving aside, for the moment, whether *Isabella's Room* meets the generic criteria for a tragedy, we can confirm that Needcompany's early Shakespeare adaptations as well as their latest performances are driven by a story despite the opposition to the whodunit approach. Arguably, Needcompany deconstructs the Aristotelian notion that the causal logic of a tragic plot elevates drama to the realm of philosophy. Whereas Aristotle argues that the chrono-logical plot-line of a tragedy reveals the truth behind the often chaotic and arbitrary impressions of our everyday lives, Needcompany challenges this conviction. The creative subversion of that causal logic accounts for what I believe is the most innovative contribution to performances of Shakespeare in the last two decades.

In order to elucidate Needcompany's opposition to causal logic, and in particular to a teleological narrative, let us consider yet again Aristotle's case for a causal and chronological plot. He supports his conviction by raging against episodic plots and

23. Aristotle, *op.cit.*, 1450a38.
24. Roger Seamon, "The Price of the Plot in Aristotle's *Poetics*", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 64, no. 2, 2006, pp. 253–254.

paints them in an extremely negative light: "Of simple Plots and actions the episodic are the worst. I call a Plot episodic when there is neither probability nor necessity in the sequence of its episodes".[25] When developing the idea of catharsis in the next passage, Aristotle continues: "Tragedy, however is an imitation not only of a complete action, but also of incidents arousing pity and fear. Such incidents have the greatest effect on the mind when they occur unexpectedly and at the same time in consequence of one another".[26] There seems to be a startling opposition here: Aristotle proposes a thin line between an episodic plot and a plot consisting of incidents that occur unexpectedly and yet as a consequence of each other. It is exactly this thin line that Needcompany has explored in its early Shakespeare productions.

In *Julius Caesar*, for example, the quasi-causal plot remains. Caesar's ambition and/or the conspirators' envy result in Caesar's assassination. Caesar's assassination in turn leads to civil war and the death of the conspirators. All these events and their consequences are anticipated because the narrator-character informs the audience in due time of what will ensue. As a result, the incidents do not "occur unexpectedly" as required by Aristotle. At the same time they do not seem to follow 'naturally' in the sense of causal consequences, they are, after all, exposed to be elements of a constructed story-line. The same disillusion is employed in *Antonius und Cleopatra* when Ritsaert ten Cate explains what will happen next, points at the actor Jens Reichardt, for example, and insists that he should play the part of Lepidus — against his will — and serve as a laughing-stock. In *Needcompany's Macbeth*, the unexpected is cleared out by the fatalistic and consequential "blood will have blood". This fatalistic logic is certainly inscribed in Shakespeare's text but by rendering the two antagonistic characters, Lady Macbeth and Macbeth, as one, Needcompany has done away with the disputes over equivocations and the glimmer of hope that the bloodshed will cease.

25. Aristotle, *op.cit.*, 1451b33–34.
26. Aristotle, *op.cit.*, 1452a1–3.

Needcompany's early Shakespeare adaptations clearly disregard Aristotle's conviction that "incidents have the greatest effect on the mind when they occur unexpectedly and at the same time in consequence of one another". What is more, they also happily embrace the concept of an episodic plot. Pointing to the numerous disruptions and reductions that punctuate the plot-line, I have already hinted at the episodic nature of Needcompany's narrative. Episodic according to Aristotle's poetics, however, does not only refer to the disparate nature of scattered sequences from the plot-line.

> The episodic plot, then, is one in which the episodes are irrelevant or inorganic (*μετ' ἀλληλα οὐτ' εἰχος οὐτ' ἀνάγχη εἰναι*) and outgrow their proper size: they are too numerous or too long in proportion to the rest of the play. In short, we can define an episodic play as one in which *the episodes overshadow the plot*.[27]

Caesar's assassination, the sea battle of Actium, Duncan's death and Anna's funeral all "outgrow their proper size… and overshadow the plot". These episodes, as I have argued, open a space for reflection as the narrative comes to a halt. However, these episodes also prompt an act of generating micro-narratives. Needcompany plays with the idea that the audience will read causality into these inorganic episodes. The fragmentation and the resulting episodic impressions, in other words, encourage and inspire the spectator to reconstruct, or rather "superimpose causal and temporal relationships".[28] Before we turn to the implications of that construction, one should address an apparent but nevertheless decisive difference between the early Shakespeare productions and *Isabella's Room*. In the case of a play from the canon, the spectator's (re-)construction is likely to be informed by a familiarity with the story if not with the text. Hence, audiences view the performance with a particular narrative in mind and are thus caught in presuppositions.

Needcompany has escaped "the grip of the rhetoric of theatrical naturalism" despite working with plays from the repertoire. The innovative adaptations of *Julius Caesar, Antonius und Cleopatra* and *Macbeth* unfold a creative conception of narration that fore-

27. Gerald Else, *Aristotle's Poetics. The Argument*, Leiden, Brill, 1957, p. 325, emphasis in the original.
28. David Herman, "Stories as a Tool for Thinking", in *Narrative Theory and the Cognitive Sciences*, ed. David Herman, Stanford, Center for the Study of Language and Information, 2003, p. 176.

grounds the "processes that produce meaning in the theatre". With the fragmentation of the plotline and the excision of episodes, Needcompany has "defamiliarized" its audiences with these canonical tragedies and invited them to reconsider their underlying causal and chrono-logical conventions.

By fragmenting the story and by foregrounding particular aspects, Needcompany generally draw attention to the very process of selection. According to Chinna, this selective approach is at the core of political performances: "The role of postmodern political performance is, in part, continually to remind the spectator that there is a distinct and subjective rationale that decides the selection and presentation of representations".[29] The process of selection and presentation is particularly evident with the adaptation of canonical texts.

When we turn to *Isabella's Room* the case is somewhat different. We can assume that the audience is not familiar with the script and knows very little about the plot-line. Hence, there are certainly no precise expectations or presuppositions on the audience's part. Accordingly, 'defamiliarization' is not an issue. As the performance begins, the audience becomes aware of two powerful meta-narratives that provide the backdrop for the series of episodes: the history of the twentieth century and the biography of the fictional character Isabella Morandi born in the year 1910. Both narratives imply a chronological and, perhaps less so, a teleological structure. With the year 2000 as the temporal setting, the audience will expect, more or less, a chronological development from 1910 to 2000. *Isabella's Room* thus provides an object lesson for Paul Ricoeurs concept of narrative time poignantly rephrased by Katharine Young. "The appearance of consequentiality in narrative is produced by counting the last event taken from the taleworld [as] an end and then constructing the story backward to include whatever is necessary to account for it, thus arriving at the beginning."[30]

Since the story is told from Isabella's perspective at the age of ninety, the audience expects the narrative to end in the year 2000 and organizes the episodes performed on stage accordingly.

29. Stephen Chinna, *op.cit.*, p. 185.
30. Katharine Young, *op.cit.*, p. 82.

Nonetheless, the episodes (and this has already been pointed out with regard to the narratorial agents) will not always easily fit into a slot on a chronological timeline. Quite often, the living and the dead converse, internal and external stories overlap and thus contravene the chronological and causal order. Anna's triumphant funeral, the dance of the 'Desert Prince', the dog impersonation and the Budhanton dance are all episodic elements that resist a complete integration into the two meta-narratives. Their aesthetic features as well as their episodic nature suggest a new theatrical semiotic code:

> When placing the performances [at the Avignon festival 2004] side by side, it transpires that political theatre has run out of words, signs and imagery … *Isabella's Room* by Jan Lauwers, subtly reconstructing the history of the 20th century by focusing on the archaeological objects in a Parisian flat belonging to a blind aged woman, offers first signs of a new language by making use of text and dance.[31]

The episodes with their new language are certainly at odds with the rather conventional plot-line. Whereas the ritualistic episodes subvert our notions of causality, consequentiality and linearity, the two meta-narratives appear to confirm a chrono-logical stance. This dichotomy is not coincidental. Lauwers carefully constructed this opposition to "give the audience a 'false' sense of security":

> I am convinced that the rapid changes in our moral codes have overtaken the artistic avant-garde. There is a great urge for security. The success of *Isabella's Room* is mainly because of that: the accessible openness of the performers, the music and the linear story give the audience a 'false' sense of security. And yet I know that this play is necessary. I am more than ever aware that it is becoming increasingly difficult for art to find the right function or redefinition. For me the keyword is 'humanity'. And this humanity is too often confused with accessibility.[32]

Tongue in cheek, Lauwers uses inverted commas when he speaks of a 'false' sense of security. In *Isabella's Room* the narrative dilemma — that we need stories to attain a sense of security and that we are, at the same time, are 'written' by these narrative scripts — is negotiated on stage. The performance confronts us with the "automatic tendency to superimpose causal and temporal relationships"[33] but it does not stop there.

31. Joseph Hanimann, "Theater ohne Sprache ist unpolitisch. Verlorene Illusionen in Avignon: Das deutsche Schreien, Lallen und Stampfen infiziert Europa", FAZ, 19 July 2004, p. 29, my translation, F.S.
32. Jan Lauwers, *Needcompany Newsletter*, September 2005.
33. David Herman (2003), *op.cit.*, p. 176.

It reminds us that art, theatre and performance art in particular, is the privileged realm for coming to terms with our mental and psychological constraints. Without diminishing its entertaining and recreational merit, *Isabella's Room* forces us to re-evaluate the course of the twentieth century. With the colonial past, two atrocious wars, the bombing of Hiroshima and the scale of human suffering in the year 2000, we hardly see a chrono-logical progress, let alone a teleological improvement towards an appreciation of 'humanity'. Approaching ninety years of age, loosing her sight and without hope of ever meeting her 'Desert Prince', Isabella recapitulates her life. Her disheartened condemnation may equally serve as a comment on the prevailing narratives: F.E.L.I.X. And that means 'happiness' in a dead language. Sham and illusion".

With their critical stance towards narrative structures and constraints, Needcompany's productions can be understood as a turn on the 'narrative turn'. This 'narrative turn', that has marked all of the social sciences in the last two decades and has changed our perception of history as a narrative construction, is radically applied to performance art and theatre by Needcompany. In revealing the narrative channels, the audience is made aware that what they are witnessing is a story constructed by several covert and overt agents: the author, the director, the cast, the characters, character-narrators, music and sound. Essentially their performances reveal — and this is where Needcompany has superseded political epic theatre with its alienation effect — that the foremost agent in this construction process is the spectator. Challenging our sense of security and making us aware of our narrative patterns of thought, Needcompany playfully projects the narrative dilemma that we need stories to make sense of our lives and that we are, at the same time, 'written' by narrative scripts that already exist. *Narrare humanum est.*

Needcompany's Macbeth, 1996
From left to right: Carlotta Sagna, Johan Heestermans, Ina Geerts, Mil Seghers, Simon Versnel, Dominique Van Steerthem, Viviane De Muynck
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2
STORIES

THEATRE POINTERS

1981 Reeds gewond en het is niet eens oorlog / Already Hurt and Not Yet War
1983 dE demonstratie
De Struiskogel / Bulletbird
1984 De Achtergrond van een Verhaal / Background of a Story
1985 Incident
1987 Need to Know
1989 ça va
1990 Julius Caesar
1991 Invictos
1992 Antonius und Cleopatra
SCHADE/schade
1993 Orfeo
1994 The Snakesong Trilogy — Snakesong/Le Voyeur, part one
1995 The Snakesong Trilogy — Snakesong/Le Pouvoir, (Léda), part two
1996 Needcompany's Macbeth
The Snakesong Trilogy — Snakesong/Le Désir, part three
1997 Caligula, No beauty for me there where human life is rare, part one
1998 The Snakesong Trilogy
1999 Morning Song, No beauty for me there where human life is rare, part two
2000 Needcompany's King Lear
DeaDDogsDon'tDance/DjamesDjoyceDeaD
2001 Ein Sturm
2002 Images of Affection
2003 No Comment
2004 Isabella's Room
2006 All is Vanity
The Lobster Shop

CONTENTS