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Drama in the Netherlands

HANS VAN DEN BERGH

The situation of theatre in the Netherlands about 1960 was paradoxical: dramatic productions blossomed, but virtually no plays of any importance were being written in the Dutch language. There were approximately a dozen repertory companies in the country, mostly in the more densely populated Western region, the provinces of North and South Holland. These companies annually staged between sixty and eighty new productions with which they toured all the theatres in the country. So even in the most remote towns, people had the opportunity of seeing some of the new productions in the local theatre during the season, sometimes even twice a week. This system enabled a small circle of people to keep abreast of developments in classic, semi-classic and contemporary drama written by all the leading international playwrights past and present, often in competent professional performances in Dutch translations. But original Dutch plays, whether classic or modern, were exceptional.

What makes this situation seem even odder is that in those days – in the Netherlands still a period virtually free of television – roughly three thousand amateur drama companies were flourishing all over the country, and they drew on a fairly extensive repertoire of farce and light comedies written by Dutch authors[1] who were treated as non-existent in the official circles of literature and professional theatre. This is a problem that has plagued the Dutch literary world since the Renaissance: there has always been a plentiful supply of realistic narrative work and lyrical poetry, but interesting and performable drama has very rarely been written. Significantly, in this connection, a book about the situation of Dutch drama that was commissioned by the Ministry of Culture in 1973 bore the subtitle: "An attempt to explain a lack."[2] The author, Ben Stroman, explained this lack of high-quality Dutch-language plays in terms of several historical developments: first, the Calvinist form of Protestantism that predominated in the Netherlands since the sixteenth century was averse to anything to do with "idle ostentation," or "vanity"; second, the Dutch character

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was uninclined towards artificiality, frivolity, and exaggeration, three qualities that were associated with stage-acting; and third, the country was not ruled by a monarch from the creation of the Dutch Republic (c.1580), so there was no royal court, notably in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, to stimulate the theatre (as in Versailles, London, Vienna or Weimar). When the monarchy was founded in the nineteenth century, the situation did not improve.

Probably a combination of these factors is to blame for the absence of ambition among writers to create for the theatre. In any case, there is little dramatic talent to be found in Dutch literature between the Middle Ages and the end of the nineteenth century. Although Vondel's baroque drama in verse (seventeenth century) is generally praised for its poetry and lyricism, his plays can hardly be called exciting or full of dramatic action. The same is true of tte other more important classic authors such as Hooft, Bredero, Huygens and Langendijk. It was not until the beginning of this century that new life was breathed into play-writing by the realistic, socially committed and performable plays written by Heijermans (1864–1924). Heijermans's theatrical knowledge and insight owed a great deal to his experience as a theatre director, but even his plays could not fill the vacuum in the theatre of the post-war period.

Consequently, theatre in the Netherlands in the early sixties produced a stream of foreign productions in translation and virtually no original Dutch drama. It is obvious that such a situation, for more than one reason, is extremely unfavourable for the development of a truly national theatre. Although the public was confronted with dramatic events on stage, it seldom had the chance to identify itself with the characters in a play or to recognize in their backgrounds its own experiences of reality. For the actors, too, these circumstances were far from ideal. While they had ample opportunity to exhibit their skills and versatility in portraying French lovers, English butlers and American travelling salesmen, they seldom had the chance to grip the public's imagination with these characters and situations foreign to the audience. How disastrous these effects were became all too clear when attempts were made at last to redress the balance.

The government's subsidization policy after the war certainly aimed at creating opportunities for the development of Dutch-language drama. One of the conditions upon which subsidies were granted, therefore, was that each company should stage two Dutch plays per year. But this rule was not always obeyed, the excuse being that "there simply are not any performable Dutch-language plays." When it was obeyed, it often resulted in the same old evergreens, year in year out, such as the famous fifteenth-century *Elckerlijc*, and Vondel's historical drama about a war that was waged against Amsterdam in the thirteenth century. Vondel's play, *Gijsbrecht van Aemstel*, was written in 1637, and it was regarded as a "must" (especially for parties of schoolchildren who had no choice); but it could hardly inspire love and enthusiasm for original Dutch drama. However, the Rotterdam Theatre did discover one Dutch-

language dramatic talent, the Belgian Hugo Claus; his play *Een bruid in de morgen* (*A Bride in the Morning*), written in 1953, was successfully staged two years later. From then on, director Ton Lutz worked closely with the young playwright, and several more remarkably successful plays followed: *Suiker* (*Sugar*; 1958), *De dans van de reiger* (*The Dance of the Heron*; 1962), and *Vrijdag* (*Friday*; 1969). In these plays – his best – Claus avoided the banal portrayal of reality by giving his characters explicit symbolic import. The language they speak is concise and charged with meaning. The subjects of these plays are related to those of his neo-expressionist poems, written since 1948, and to the theme of his first, impressive novel, *De Metsiers* (*The Metsier Family*), of 1951.

In all these works, Claus portrays, with a mixture of horror and sympathy, his childhood experiences in the narrow-minded peasant atmosphere of the Flemish countryside. This milieu was dominated by a strong and rigid Catholic Church that burdened its members with an oppressive sense of sin and repressed sexuality. As a playwright, Claus raises this complex of emotions to a more universally human level; he contrasts the prejudiced characters with figures who try to escape, drawing on the reserves of their emotions in their pursuit of freedom.

At a later stage of Claus's dramatic career, he established a link with "panic" theatre, a form of drama advocated by Fernando Arrabal in the sixties. With origins in Artaud's well-known ideas, "panic" drama aims to shock the public with powerful emotions and to present the horrors of reality in an enlarged, non-realistic, ritual form that can refer to hidden metaphysical values in human existence. Acting on this principle, Claus made several modern adaptations of classical Greek and Roman tragedies; he was inspired largely by the pathos and violence of Seneca, and adapted *Thyestes* (1964) and *Oedipus* (1970).

In the course of the sixties, Holland also felt the after-effects of the wave of absurdism that had given drama in England and France such a strong impulse; it was especially influenced by the plays of Pinter, Ionesco and Beckett. Two Dutch authors, Lodewijk de Boer and Otto Dijk, were particularly receptive to the absurdist trend in the theatre.

Between 1962 and 1967, De Boer, a former Concertgebouw Orchestra violinist, wrote four plays in which vague threats are exchanged among figures in a not entirely realistic situation. Two of his plays in particular, *De kaalkop luistert* (*The Bald Man Listens*; 1962) and *De Verhuizing* (*Moving House*; 1964), contain echoes of Pinter's early work, e.g., *The Room* and *The Caretaker*. *Borak valt*, which he wrote in 1967 (commissioned by the Municipality of Amsterdam), has a strong affinity with Ionesco's *Le roi se meurt*. *Darts* (1967) at last brought De Boer acclaim in the press, because the play gave expression to human tensions in an exciting and concise form; the staging of the piece was experimental, since the conventional narrative stream had been replaced by a moving, highly physical form of expression. De Boer himself

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directed the play, a factor which certainly contributed to its success. Still, the public was not overly enthusiastic, perhaps because this genre was unfamiliar. A few years later (about 1972), De Boer switched to a totally different kind of theatre; he wrote four plays about the same characters, *The Family I–IV*, which were presented as a serial and gave a vivid picture of life in an underprivileged family. The vitality of his characters – rather than the literariness of his texts – has made a name for De Boer outside the Netherlands in translations of his plays and films of his work.

Between 1962 and 1965, Otto Dijk wrote about ten television plays, some of them performed with success by professional theatre groups. They are all short plays with few characters (two or three people) who represent general truths about human existence in terms of absurd, irrational actions. *De fotograaf* (*The Photographer*) and *De agent* (*The Policeman*), both written in 1974, show particular strength in evoking the atmosphere of suffocation that can arise between ostensibly ordinary characters and in illustrating poor communication and incomprehension. In 1970, like De Boer, Dijk also switched from this absurdist style of theatre to another form. Writing for several educational theatre groups, he produced plays of more direct social commitment.[3] From then on, as public appreciation of his work increased, his plays grew more realistic, but at the same time they declined in dramatic significance.

This transition in the work of both De Boer and Dijk about 1970 is in itself indicative of an important general trend that was to manifest itself in the development of Dutch theatrical life. The year 1968, a period of democratization movements in many sectors of society all over Europe, had not failed to leave its mark on theatre in the Netherlands. Latent discontent about the stagnation of Dutch drama became clear, fairly suddenly, for all to witness. Young, recently graduated drama students were not keen to join the large, established repertory companies. Groups of young theatre enthusiasts, influenced by radical political ideas, started to protest against the selection of plays by the theatre companies. The actors demanded more social commitment and a repertoire attuned to the political situation in the country at that moment. A few months later, the first tomatoes were thrown from the audience at actors performing Shakespeare's *Tempest*. To the audience, this performance illustrated the inadequacy of a drama policy which aimed for pure aestheticism rather than realism.

"Operation Tomato," which has in the meantime become famous, had various, far-reaching consequences – largely favourable ones – for the Dutch theatre. Most of the big repertory companies were disbanded, the members splitting up to form a large number of smaller groups which have more or less specific, self-imposed tasks (e.g., to arouse the interest of a certain sector of the public for the theatre, or to advance a specific type of theatre). As well, a number of "educational" theatre companies were formed; these concern themselves exclusively with particular underprivileged social groups (e.g., young

workers) and present "activating" drama which they write themselves. Finally, several companies, notably the Haarlem group Centrum (later established in Amsterdam), realized that a viable relation with their public could be established only if the theatre confronted the audience with its own reality in dramatic form. To that end, it was imperative that Dutch play-writing be stimulated by all available means. This urgent need to stimulate Dutch drama provoked the most important development in our theatre life. Indeed, Centrum succeeded in "discovering" several new playwrights who have since made important contributions to Dutch-language dramaturgy.

Those new playwrights were recruited from very different fields. Some were already professional writers (Jan Bernlef); others were actors (Herman Lutgerink), or dramaturgists fresh from drama school (Ton Vorstenbosch); some came from the world of journalism (Gerban Hellinga); a number of them had never been involved in either writing or acting (the picture-frame-maker Gerard Lemmens, the municipal gardener Rob Bognar). All of these writers – most volunteered their scripts, others were invited to try their hands at writing – were helped and supported by the dramaturgists and stage directors of the companies concerned. It often happened that entirely new versions of the original concept were written in consultation with the stage directors. In such cases, the definitive text came into being during a process of experimentation and rehearsal lasting several months.

This highly fruitful procedure eliminated a number of problems that had until then been serious obstructions. Someone without experience of the stage is hardly ever capable of producing a technically perfect play that meets a number of basic theatrical requirements. Several interesting scripts were produced as a result of the interaction between prospective playwrights and dramatically researched artistic standards. At any rate, they presented audiences with Dutch people in recognizably Dutch situations. The danger of getting bogged down in banal realism was averted by collaboration with writers who aimed to offer a personal portrayal of the reality around them. Several of Gerard Lemmens's plays, for instance, treat the problem of gentleness and mildness being overwhelmed by sheer force of loud-mouthed argument (*De revolver van Bas* [*Bas's Gun*], 1973, and *Souvenirs*, 1974). The appeal of Gerben Hellinga's plays lies in his approach to popular subjects (e.g., the football mania in *Ajax-Feyenoord*, 1968), in his nostalgic re-enactment of the adventures of a well-known boy's book by Theo Thyssen (*Kees de jongen* [*Kees the Boy*], 1971), and in his portrayal of life in the revues at the turn of the century in Amsterdam (*Mensch, durf te leven* [*Dare to Live*], 1979). But the most successful attempt at combining recognizable Dutch situations with an interesting dramatic form occurs in the plays of Herman Lutgerink, whose *Babyfoon* (*Intercom*, 1974) gives a good example of how he cultivates realism.

The setting of *Intercom* is a birthday party – a typically Dutch, bourgeois, and respectable occasion. Lutgerink, however, manages to present an interest-

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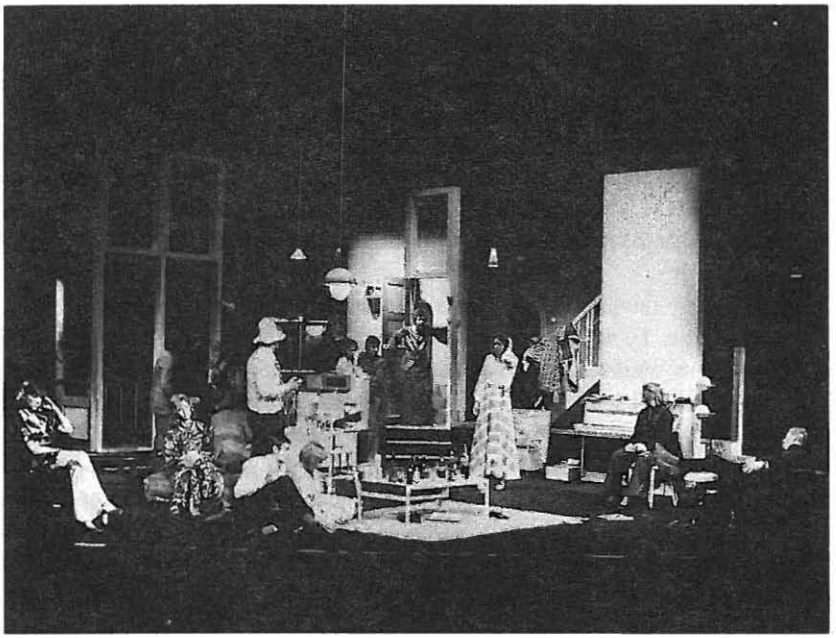

An ensemble scene from Herman Lutgerink's *Babyfoon* (Haarlem, 1974). Copyright Fotostudio Lemaire, Amsterdam.

ing cross-section of present-day Dutch society in the twelve guests he places on the stage. Moreover, their seemingly chaotic conversations are conducted in concise, almost poetic language that both expresses and intensifies the aimless, unthinking way in which people talk. The following excerpt from a monologue by one of the characters, Carla, illustrates the psychological basis of the revealing pseudo-realism of the play.

> He's sure to have his little affairs
> Like all the rest I suppose
> When he's away on a trip
> Surely I say to myself
> Everybody has them
> We never mention the subject
> I wouldn't want to anyway
> Why should I
> I've got everything I want
> Money. A nice home. Two children
> I'm not going to look for trouble
> – especially not *there*.
> He's busy enough as it is.[4]

The virtual absence of punctuation is significant, since it emphasizes the breathless, self-revealing statements of the characters.

After 1969, the educational theatre groups began to write their own plays, often on the basis of improvised group discussions or the results of questionnaires distributed among target groups. Certainly this type of theatre company has done much to stimulate interest in theatre among those sectors of the population that it addresses, but it must be admitted that the artistic level of productions that have originated in this collective manner has not generally been very high.

There is one development, however, that clearly deserves mention in this context. About 1970, a number of young actors joined to form a theatre collective, the Werkteater (Worktheatre), that wished, on principle, to work without individual leadership–everything from management to bookkeeping and selection of new productions was to be a collective responsibility. This set-up resulted in a remarkable and highly cohesive group that has added an exciting, lively kind of drama to the Dutch theatre scene. The most experienced actress in the group is Shireen Strooker, more or less "La Mama" of the Werkteater, but even she has never pushed her way to the foreground as leader or director of the company. The group's working method has remained virtually the same since its formation ten years ago. A theme is chosen – always a topical issue, such as the problems of the old, of homosexuals, of people suffering from "terminal diseases." The next step is gathering background information, by talking to old people in homes, etc. Finally the script is put together by improvising different scenes. Quite often one member of the group acts as the motive force or coordinator during a production, but there is never a single stage director in the formal sense. Another essential feature is that the dialogue is never fixed – there is always room for improvisation. Obviously improvisation has major consequences for the staging of these plays. Actors without fixed roles to memorize must bring their stage personalities to life each day all over again; a detached, studied way of acting is out of the question. The Werkteater actors have concentrated on this improvised acting method. They spend many months preparing each project, and in this way, they achieve a degree of identification with their roles that has led to exceptionally strong and moving portrayals of real problems in contemporary society. In addition, they have achieved important results in the field of children's theatre, notably with comedy. The special working method which involves so much personal engagement not only met the challenge of social commitment and validity, but also enabled the Werkteater to arouse the interest of entirely new sectors of the population in theatre as a serious art-form. The company reached these new audiences by going out to perform in hospitals, schools and training colleges, and by touring the suburbs and countryside with a large circus tent. These performances are usually held in the summer months, the off-season in the theatre. Film versions have been made of several of these highly successful productions.

One of the most hopeful aspects of these new developments in Dutch drama is the fact that the box-office results have proved beyond any doubt that theatre attendance has risen noticeably in the course of the past ten years. Fortunately, we can now say that there is no danger of the theatre in the Netherlands becoming a memory of the past.[5]

NOTES

1 E.g., Henk Bakker, an author with more than 200 titles to his credit!
2 Ben Stroman, *De Nederlandse toneelschrijfkunst: Poging tot verklaring van een gemis* (Amsterdam, 1973), pp. 20–22.
3 Proloog and De Nieuwe Komedie: theatre companies that perform for working-class audiences with a view to stimulating their political consciousness.
4 This play has not been printed. My quotation comes from the mimeographed programme of the production published by Centrum (Amsterdam, 1974), p. 22.
5 This essay has been translated by the Netherlands Theatre Institute.