

PRESS FILE

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# YELLOW – THE SORROWS OF BELGIUM II: REX

LUK PERCEVAL & NTGENT

(premiere 30/09/21)

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NTGent

## ABOUT THE PERFORMANCE

Resident director Luk Perceval tackles the Flemish collaboration during World War II. Following the acclaimed film version, NTGent can now finally present the live premiere of 'Yellow – The Sorrows of Belgium II: Rex'.

In the spring of 2021, Yellow premiered as a [theatre film](#), which landed a four star review in ['The Guardian'](#), much praise for the cast in 'The New York Times' and was selected for [Theaterfestival 2021](#). Thursday 30<sup>th</sup> of September will finally see the live premiere in the NTGent Schouwburg.

1933-1936. A young generation dreams of a new world order. From 1941 onwards, many of them join the Nazi ideology and go to the Eastern Front. **Were they misled? Were they really that naive?** In the trilogy *The Sorrows of Belgium*, Luk Perceval, resident director at NTGent, zooms in on three dark chapters in Belgium's past. In part two, *Yellow*, he looks back on the Flemish collaboration during the Second World War **on the basis of a new play by Peter van Kraaij**, mixed with other texts.

Author and dramatist Peter van Kraaij introduces **a Flemish family**: Staf, a member of the Dietse Militie; his wife Marije; their son Jef, a member of the Flemish Legion on the Eastern Front; their daughter Mie, a member of the Dietse Meisjesscharen; Hubert, Staf's brother and not involved in the collaboration; and uncle Laurens, a priest and Marije's brother.

Their testimonies are combined with other voices. Among them: Channa, a young Jewish woman, and Aloysius, a soldier on the Eastern Front. Present too, are the Belgian **Léon Degrelle**, founder of the fascist movement Rex and active in the Walloon Legion, and **Otto Skorzeny**, an Austrian and decorated officer in the Waffen-SS.

*Yellow* is a **multilingual choir that evokes the grim zeitgeist of the 1930s**, supported live by the music of composer and multi-instrumentalist Sam Gysel.

### CAST:

Peter Seynaeve, Chris Thys, Lien Wildemeersch, Bert Luppés, Oscar Van Rompay, Maria Shulga, Valéry Warnotte, Philip Kelz, Tobias Artner --- ([check the website for full credits](#))

### ABOUT LUK PERCEVAL:

[Luk Perceval](#), founder of the legendary Blauwe Maandag Compagnie, is an internationally acclaimed and awarded director. At NTGent, he is working on a remarkable trilogy, *The Sorrows of Belgium*, about the darkest passages in history of Belgium. Previously, there was *Black*, about the atrocities in Congo. In the spring of 2022 there will be *Red*, about the terrorist attacks in Brussels in 2016.



"THE CAST IS FAULTLESS: LIEN WILDEMEERSCH (AS MIE) AND PETER SEYNAEVE (THE FATHER), ESPECIALLY, HOLD ONE'S ATTENTION IN EVERY SCENE. UNDER THE CIRCUMSTANCES, 'YELLOW' IS A STUNNING ACHIEVEMENT"

--- [THE NEW YORK TIMES](#) ON THE FILM VERSION OF 'YELLOW'

"RARELY SEEN SUCH AN TOUCHING ALLIANCE BETWEEN THEATRE AND CINEMATOGRAPHY"

--- FROM THE JURY REPORT OF [THEATERFESTIVAL 2021](#)

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#### LUK PERCEVAL ON 'YELLOW'

*"Theatre is a ritual of remembrance. We have to keep telling our own history to each other, like a mantra, to remind ourselves of the atrocities we are capable of. That is for me the importance of the trilogy 'The Sorrows of Belgium' and 'Yellow'. Let us not forget the past, and let us remain vigilant. Especially now that all of a sudden, as in the 1930s, people are starting to believe again in cunning leaders with deceptively simple slogans."*

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[→ Watch the trailer here](#)

## TOUR DATES

### @NTGENT (SCHOUWBURG)

30/09 (première)

01, 02 & 03/10

05, 06, 07 & 08/01

### ON TOUR (INT.)

08, 09/10– St. Pölten (Landestheater Niederösterreich)

10 & 11/11 - St. Pölten (Landestheater Niederösterreich)

[Check the website for the latest updates](#)

## INTERVIEW & BACKGROUND



--> [WATCH THE INTERVIEW WITH LUK PERCEVAL ON 'YELLOW'](#)



→ [DURING THE CREATION OF THE PLAY, CAST & CREW HAD AN EXTENSIVE TALK WITH PROFESSOR BRUNO DE WEVER, EXPERT HISTORIAN \(ONLY IN DUTCH\)](#)

# Dramaturgs Steven Heene and Margit Niederhuber wrote each other a letter

## DEAR MARGIT,

Let me start by saying how much I'm looking forward to this project. And how wonderful it is to exchange thoughts and ideas with such a generous and experienced colleague from Austria, a country which – in Belgian eyes – is often mainly associated with its capital, Vienna. And with skiing. How superficial the mind works, if we don't train it to look, or read, a bit longer.

As a reader, I prefer non-fiction to fiction. And now, working with Luk Perceval as a director, we once again get the chance to dive into a turbulent historical chapter that still resonates today – sometimes in subtle ways, sometimes more explicit. Writing this, I'm aware that *Yellow*, part two of the trilogy *The Sorrows of Belgium*, is a rather complex tale to tell, even between historians (which we are not). All the more reason to look back, in an attempt to understand some of the strong convictions and emotions in Belgium and Flanders in the 1930s and 1940s. Convictions and emotions that were clearly linked to political tensions across Europe, also in Italy for example.

At the same time, the Belgian context is a specific one, starting with the bilingual reality – or should I say: trilingual – which lead to a number of frictions. As it still does. Co-housing, we would call it today. In that way, the house called Belgium is a precedent for Europa, as a union. How can people connect and identify with each other, if they don't share the same language? It's a question we want to explore, also as theatre makers. Because, after all, we do have a lot in common, of course. We all want freedom and protection, we share the same economical needs, we all face the same challenges in a world that is rapidly changing, which causes confusion. That's why the interview we organized with Bruno De Wever, a historian and professor at the Ghent University, was so rewarding. He really took his time to explain the state of mind of the Flemish people say a hundred years ago. With nuance, yet critical, he explained an era – the 1930s – in which the frustrations of the first World War, combined with foreign powers, triggered a part of the population to radicalize. **And this is where the paradox of the so-called Collaboration is precisely situated: how is it possible that the dream of a Flemish independence, as a reaction to the French speaking Belgian elite of that time, leads to a joint venture with the Germans**, the same country that occupied our country decades before? Isn't that an obvious contradiction?

The shortest answer to that question is: because the Flemish-nationalists saw an opportunity in the German offensive, plain and simple. The First World War had proven, with the installation of a Flemish speaking university in Ghent in 1916, replacing the French as the standard language, that a German presence in Belgium could be useful indeed, for political reasons (*Flamenpolitik*). And, like professor De Wever said, the context of a war – or the threat of a war – sometimes creates the right circumstances to push the agenda, especially when it became clear that the ambition of Flemish independence didn't have a majority, meaning, in the votes of the people.

At the same time, in the 1930s, there was a major economic crisis, as we know. It started in the United States, with the crash on the stock market in 1929, leading to the Great Depression, which had an impact in Europe too. **By 1932 for example, almost one in three Belgians was unemployed, because of the international recession.** It leads to a series of strikes and protest marches in almost every city that same year. History has shown us many times that a bad economy leads to political radicalization, and this is what happened in Belgium: the so-called traditional political parties, including the socialists (BWP) and the Catholics, were accused of malversations in their banks. These scandals fueled a general outrage and made way for populists like Léon Degrelle, who challenged the 'dirty' politics with his 'pure' movement called Rex.

**The rise and fall of Degrelle, the most well-known Belgian collaborator with the Nazis, is an incredible story, rich enough for a powerful monologue.** His remarkable eloquence, his political opportunism, his clumsy strategical maneuvers (in his attempt to charm the Walloons, the Flemish, the Germans), his outrageous speeches (we included some in *Yellow*, like his explanation why French-speaking Belgians belonged to the German family, improvising a shady rhetorical logic of 'Blood' and 'Soil')...

He was a character larger than life, to say the least. And, even more amazing, he got away with it all, living a comfortable life in Spain after the war. In spite of his adventures on the Eastern Front, helping out the Nazis to fight the Russians. It's something he has in common with Otto Skorzeny, one of the truly fascinating characters from your country, Austria. The audacity of these guys, in the way they justified, or tried to justify, their actions!

**It reminds us that, in this age of fake news and Trumpism (and let's not forget Putin and his propaganda machine, and the way he deals with opposition), history more or less repeats itself.** Meaning that collective emotions can be manipulated and exploited by the art of rhetoric, that politics and identity are a tricky yet effective combination, and that (male) leaders get a lot of credit, as long as they are charismatic and outspoken. Even if their narrative is clearly toxic.

In *Yellow*, which is based on a new text by our dear colleague Peter van Kraaij, we listen to parts of these rhetoric. But we also zoom in on a family, a ménage à trois, with two brothers standing opposite of each other, and a woman-mother in between. And a son. He's encouraged to go to war, by his uncle-priest, of all people. **It raises the question where political conviction starts. In the mind, or in the heart? Is it something we embrace because it was part of our upbringing, or does it only begin when we start to think for ourselves, in reaction to our own background?**

The answers to these questions are layered. And not so black and white as we would like them to be. Looking back at our own paradoxical history, we can only detect a number of shades. Shades of yellow. A fascinating context in which they are all connected: the living room and the kitchen, the bedroom, the confessional in the church, the café and the political forum, the war zone.

## ALLES GUTE, STEVEN

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### LIEBER STEVEN,

Our journey is slowly coming to an end and I am very grateful for your company, suggestions and thoughts. Thank you for sharing your experiences. We have wandered far and tracked down hidden things – it fits our theme. Luk and I have dug up these times before, in the film *The Concealed City*, which dealt with the Nazi past of Linz in Austria. The damp dark cellars and bunkers where we filmed back then become present again now.

Once more, we ask ourselves: how was that possible? **Why did so many people follow these dull slogans? Would a completely different draft of a society, a free, respectful and solidary society, also have been realistic?** Together, we also ask ourselves the question: how strong do these ideas still have an effect today? What can populists and right-wing radicals achieve today? How can they impress? The Führer cult was one of the most salient features. As an Austrian, I must quote Freud: 'Conscience has no application to anything that is done for the benefit of the object; in love-blinding one becomes a criminal without remorse.'

This question arises in Belgium and Austria and many other countries. All the more important is our search for traces, our attempt to investigate motives. The frustration after World War I and the economic crisis of the 1930s were present in both countries... And so were the supposedly strong leaders who shouted out their 'solutions'.

Analysing and coming to terms with fascism has occupied Austria since 1945. The so-called 'Anschluss' in March 1938 was undoubtedly an act of military violence. Of course, this fact cannot hide the reality that there were thousands of Austrians who frenetically welcomed this. They took out their previously illegal swastika ribbons, they mobbed Jewish neighbors. Thousands of Austrians participated in the worst National Socialist crimes. In the days of March 1938, Austria itself was a fascist dictatorship. The belief in the future viability of a democratic and solidary Republic of Austria was not prevalent. In our piece, we speak analogously of the 'operetta state' called Belgium.

Nevertheless, it shouldn't be forgotten that on the evening of the seizure of power, on March 12, 1938, the trains to Pressburg, to the nearest foreign country, were full and 70,000 people were arrested in the first days. On the other hand, the hideous and humiliating so-called 'Reibpartien' showed the extent of Austrian anti-Semitism. Jewish Viennese were forced to use

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lye and brushes to remove symbols and slogans directed against the National Socialists from the walls of houses and sidewalks. **Fascist terror swept the country with the active help of many locals:** arrests and transports to concentration camps, Aryanizations, theft of Jewish property and deportations. In 1942, all 45,000 Jews still living in Vienna were deported to concentration and extermination camps.

When the Allies marched into Austria, many cities were surrendered without a fight. Nevertheless, the liberation of Austria was seen by many as an occupation. Again, Austrians felt victimized: in 1938, Austria was the first country to be occupied by Hitler. During the war they experienced hunger and bombardment and later they did not want to know about concentration camps. Many Austrians settled comfortably into amnesia, but the other countries did not forget.

**The process of coming to terms with Nazi crimes began.** This gesture was political calculation and not remorse of the population, which hardly showed empathy with the victims. As early as April '45, a government declaration announced the punishment of Nazi crimes and a prohibition law against fascist ideology. Allied military courts, people's courts and the Austrian judiciary prosecuted Nazi perpetrators. From 1948 on, various amnesties were carried out, about 90% of all registered Nazis were exonerated. In addition, the world situation was changing. After the beginning of the Cold War, the Western occupying powers had lost their interest in prosecuting Nazi perpetrators; their new enemies were the Communists. Selected Nazi criminals became employees of the CIA, for example Robert Jan Verbelen, who was convicted in Belgium. He got Austrian citizenship in 1958, was acquitted by an Austrian court in 1965. He was one of the stars of the old and new Nazis. A not so great achievement of cooperation between Austria and Belgium.

As early as 1949, a party was founded as a rallying point for old Nazis, with some success. On the other hand, those who had resisted against National Socialism, those who wanted to commemorate the victims after the war, were ostracized and discriminated against. In Austria, the turning point came only in 1986 on the occasion of the election of Kurt Waldheim as Federal President. Waldheim did nothing different "than many other Austrians" – in his words, he had been forced to participate in the war, had known nothing about the crimes of the Wehrmacht. But Waldheim had known so much that he preferred to lie about his war years in the Balkans. Waldheim was narrowly elected in the second round, but these disputes had shaken the victim thesis. **In 1991, Austrian Chancellor Franz Vranitzky redefined Austria's role as complicit in Nazi crimes. Much has been done since then, but... the populist FPÖ grew stronger.** The open borders from 1990 helped it to new heights, a new enemy image was created, the foreigner. Today, refugees are the new enemy image, there is talk of the great replacement, of the destruction of Christian Europe, just like Léon Degrelle in the opening scene of our play.

Our common journey was an exciting one into the shallows of our two countries, it was also a journey in these unspeakable Corona times, times in which embraces are threatening, common celebrations are not announced. What a pity, because that would have been good for our trip too.

We will make up for it when our white, gray, black and yellow theater performance can be experienced again together with the audience. We will then drink a glass of wine to our journey and the theatrical experience it created... And move on.

**ALL THE BEST,  
MARGIT**