

# DE LIVING

EN

ERSAN MONDTAG

Duration of the performance: 1 h 10 min

Language: no problem

Opening night: 15.05.2019 in NTGent Arca

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It is not allowed to make audiovisual recordings

NTGent

*'We can say that it is the nature of the shadow or the reflection to link the subject of the human person to its own image or double. The person who has identified with their shadow and accepted their reflection enters into a process of constant transformation. They project themselves along an irreducible, fugitive line. Situated in the twilight of symbolic efficiency, the part that is shadow constitutes the domain at the threshold of the visible world. [...] We penetrate into the ghostly realm through its border, across the edges. The ghostly sphere is a stage where events unfold constantly but never congeal to the point of becoming history. Life unfolds in the manner of a spectacle where the past is in the future and the future is in an undefined present. There is only life that is fractured and mutilated – a reign of heads without bodies, bodies without heads, dead soldiers awakened once more, their decapitated heads replaced with those of others. The vast operation of substitution is not without its dangers, especially when the head of a ghost is mistakenly put in the place of someone else's head.'*

From *Critique of Black Reason* by Achille Mbembe

# CREDITS

Actors	Doris Bokongo Nkumu Nathalie Bokongo Nkumu
Direction	Ersan Mondtag
Composer	Gerrit Netzlaff
Dramaturgy	Eva-Maria Bertschy
Acting coach	Oscar Van Rompay
Movements coach	Stella Höttler
Scientific consulting	Prof. Benigna Gerisch
Set & costume design	Ersan Mondtag
Directing assistant	Liesbeth Standaert
Production manager	Sebastiaan Peeters
Sound technician	Raf Willems
Light technician	Dennis Diels
Set planning	Tony Morawe
Set	Luc Goedertier Eva Devriendt Kachiri Faes
Dressers	An De Mol Isabelle Stepman Mieke Van der Cruyssen

Production: NTGent

Co-production: Kunstenfestivaldesarts (Brussels),  
La Villette (Paris), HAU Hebbel am Ufer (Berlin),  
Theaterfestival Boulevard ('s Hertogenbosch).

This performance was realised with support of  
the Belgian Tax Shelter.



If you have questions about suicide, call 1318 free and anonymous.

## ERSAN MONDTAG

Ersan Mondtag was born in Berlin in 1987 and works in the grey zone between theatre and music, performance and installation. In 2015 he created *Tyrannis* at the Staatstheater Kassel. The play was selected for the Berliner Theatertreffen 2016. Specialist magazine *Theater Heute* named him in 2016 Young Director of the Year and Stage Designer and Costume Designer of the Year. With his production *Die Vernichtung* (text: Olga Bach), which was produced at Theater Bern, Mondtag was invited to perform there for the second time in a row. *Das Internat* (Schauspiel Dortmund) was also selected for the prestigious theatre festival in Berlin.

## DORIS & NATHALIE BOKONGO NKUMU

Doris Bokongo Nkumu & Nathalie Bokongo Nkumu, also known as *Les Mybalés*, started their dance career in 2010 at the Gare du Luxembourg in Brussels. The twin sisters trained with well-known dancers from the hip-hop scene in Brussels. Looking for experience, they participated in battles. In 2012, Zach Swagga introduced them to the creative sector. From then on, Nathalie and Doris created performances. *À travers l'autre* was their first dance creation. It was performed in KVS amongst others, where they also were artists in residence. They played a role in *Malcolm X*, a cheered production from Junior Mthombeni, Cesar Janssens and Fikry El Azzouzi.

# DE LIVING

The last hour in the life of a human being. The show starts with a woman coming home and ends with her committing suicide. Or is it the other way around? Can this final hour also be told backwards – bringing her back to life again?

Antigone, Ophelia, Hedda Gabler – in theatre history female characters who commit suicide are always rebellious and afflicted at the same time. But the beauty of this attitude can only find expression in their dead bodies. The audience knows from the beginning that the protagonist will die in the last act, but still we go to see the show. Accustomed to the feeling of incapability we watch entranced as death closes in.

By witnessing these scenes over and over again, we experience all facets of political and existential dedication and powerlessness. But is there a way out? Can we escape the fatal sequence of events?

*De Living* depicts the last scene before a woman takes her own life. We see her final gestures, the attempt to maintain normality, a moment of decisiveness, then hesitation, a will to live that must be silenced, and the sudden panic in the face of an uncontrolled death. As opposed to the classical tragedies, the audience witnessing the final scene does not know what drives the woman into suicide. They can only speculate about her past. An unhappy love affair one might expect. Can she perhaps not withstand the enduring pressure of society? Or does the last scene in a woman's life tell less about individual fate than about the tragic experience of humanity in a dystopian yet near future?

Her death would then be a manifestation of a general fatigue, a mass disease, as diagnosed at the beginning of the new millennium by the French sociologist Alain Ehrenberg. But perhaps the causes of her depression lie much further back – in a history that is as painful as it is ignored, as described by the Cameroonian political

scientist Achille Mbembe: At the beginning of the transnational slave trade, when people began treating other people as a commodity and proceeded to build walls to keep a part of humankind from having a share in the wealth of the world. In the near future, the majority of humans will no longer even be needed as slaves. In the final scene before death, we still struggle with an impulsive fear of an external threat yet at the same time we know that with everything we do, we are preparing for a collective suicide by bringing about the climate collapse.

But what we learn in the theatre about today's world, while watching this final scene over and over again, is much more ambiguous. Perhaps the various nightmarish diagnoses of our time are only based on the delusions of a few prophets who spread a media-effective apocalyptic atmosphere. And even if we could turn back time, we probably wouldn't know what we could have done differently. Or was there that one moment in time when we could have averted the suicide? How can we regain the strength to overcome this feeling of powerlessness and paralysis that is increasingly dominating our society?

# IS THERE A WORLD OUTSIDE?

Interview with Ersan Mondtag by Eva-Maria Bertschy

You're probably not meant to ask a director what his play is about. Nonetheless, I'm interested in your answer.

I would start my answer by describing the action: onstage, we see a living room, in duplicate: the two are identical. The play begins with a woman sitting at a table, who will immediately take her own life. Then she lies dead on the floor. That happens on the right-hand side of the stage. After a while, the same woman enters the stage again, on the other side. The scene seems to start again from the beginning. And then, at some point, the woman on the right, who is lying on the floor, starts to act everything out in reverse until the point where the two situations coincide. And then something happens that I wouldn't like to give away yet. That is the basic situation. That is the action of the play. As to what to make of it, for that you need a particular way of looking at the stage, at the stage design. For there are certain indications built into it. It is only through the combination of the action with the space, with the sets, that the content emerges.

However, this scene cannot be situated in a clearly defined reality or a historical moment. The indications are too contradictory and too ambiguous for that. It has, in a sense, fallen out of time.

There are lots of elements that don't define an outside world but that give an idea of what the situation in the outside world might be. For example, the room doesn't have a window, but we can see blossoming branches and birds painted on the wallpaper. Gradually, the spectator notices more and more details. We see a bird in a cage. When the woman on the stage opens the kitchen closet, we see the way the cans are arranged. Why are there cans? Some clothes are hanging in the wardrobe. Is there a world outside?

The world outside is uncertain. True, there is a door, but it's not clear where it leads. The spectator can only speculate about that. We know just as little about the life of the woman who commits suicide, so we're free to wonder about it. In any case, the play begins on the left with a woman coming home from work.

The living room is a place that is supposedly still private. In his book *The Fall of Public Man*, Richard Sennett describes how, in the modern world, the separation between private life and public space has been gradually eliminated, resulting in the disappearance of both private space and public space. Parks became smaller, people no longer met in the streets to exchange information, the streets became places of transition, places you pass through. Around the same time, the theatre auditorium went dark. Spectators were no longer allowed to talk to each other and the stage became a space that the spectator just looked at. On it, a story was told, sealed off, and actors gave expression together to previously private feelings such as jealousy, hate, and lust. Psychology took centre stage, while morality and transcendence lost significance. That's why I find the living room interesting: we get an insight into a supposedly private space. The stage design, however, contains a lot of indications that this space is also a public one.

*De Living* is a kind of chamber play in which a character communicates only with herself, with her mirror image. Her self observation takes place in a private space, but is completely socially defined. There's something disturbing about this. As we have long been forced to realise that individuality is an illusion and that we have all been in some way brought into line. We all would like to escape for a moment from the social determination of our existence. Especially in times when nobody any longer believes in a better future.

I find the inevitability of the terrible deed interesting in this play. The spectator knows right from the beginning that the woman will take her own life at the end. So we are also talking about the

unchangeability of the story, of the course of events, and about acceptance and powerlessness in the face of that. Are things really inevitable? Is there a definite narrative that we must retell again and again? Are certain people really perpetual victims? Or is it possible to break through that? Is it possible to take something that has been handed down as a basis for present-day consideration and just disrupt it, in order to arrive at a completely new outlook on the present?

This is not the first time that the characters on the stage in one of your plays don't speak and are, in a sense, speechless.

That doesn't actually mean that there is no speech in the play in question. Speech also develops in what the beholder thinks about what he or she can see. We think through speech. And it has been my experience that the audience's verbal communication with the work is somehow more focused and freer when nothing is spoken on the stage. Because the spoken word defines: it really ties things down a lot and it is also very specifically restrictive, because it aims to recount or even explain something specific in a very specific way. A lot more is demanded of a spectator who is looking at a scene and has to give his or her own thoughts more scope.

Is it disconcerting when people have to create something out of nothing when rehearsals begin?

On the contrary, it is very satisfying to translate a very simple idea to the stage and then to just concentrate on that process. There are, of course, some films and videos that provided inspiration for the development of the basic situation. Playing something backwards first became possible thanks to filming. To reproduce that in the theatre is actually impossible. People are not really made to do things backwards. It's not something they are capable of, either in thought or in physical or technical terms. The body simply cannot disable laws of gravity; and gravity, for its part, determines movement in a particular direction and a particular bodily rhythm. If someone falls to the ground the movement towards the ground be-

comes faster. Now, if I wanted to act that out backwards, I would have to lie on the ground and then get up, at first very rapidly and then more slowly. That is simply physically impossible.

The action in this play is very limited. A very small number of very simple, everyday things happen on the stage. Is there something liberating about reduction in art?

I usually need a lot of time to get my 'thinking machinery' going in such a way that I no longer categorise information, but start to think with it. There are always two moments: first, I see and hear something. That is the moment when I absorb something, when I acquire information. When tasks are scaled down or slow, that usually means that I start to produce thoughts – that my thoughts about them start to emerge from inside me – much sooner. When something happens quickly, I'm usually preoccupied with trying to hold on to any information at all. But when that's going on, I'm not thinking. And then a whole lot of information escapes me and in the end I'm pretty dissatisfied with the way things have gone. That's why I find slowness more interesting.

Interview: Eva-Maria Bertschy  
Translation: Martin McGarry



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