

BARBARA RAES CREATES RITUALS OF FAREWELL

‘You don’t need to put your pain
behind you to be happy’

Barbara Raes spent fifteen years in charge of major arts centres. Now she is building her own small workshop in the port village of Lillo, where she creates rituals for people who want to hold space for their loss. ‘Solidarity needs time. It takes more than just saying: let me know if there’s anything I can do.’

Dorien Knockaert, De Standaard, 2018

The village beside the docks in Antwerp has a café, a polder museum and a shabby old yacht club by the water. Soon it will also have a ‘workshop for unacknowledged loss’. Barbara Raes shows us round the site: a broad-fronted terrace house that used to be a book-swap library and the place where the village held its New Year’s reception. ‘We’re cutting a passage through to the back of the house, so that people can come in from the street and leave along the water.’

The ‘people’ in question are those who come to Raes for a ritual. She worked as an arts programmer for many years, at Buda in Kortrijk and Vooruit in Ghent, where she became the artistic director. Then she suffered a burnout and started again from scratch. She went to work at KASK School of Arts in Ghent, conducting research into rituals of farewell. At the same time, she built up an organisation of her own, Beyond the Spoken.

Beyond the Spoken designs rituals of farewell and transition for people who need them: often people who have lost something, but whose loss is not the type for which a tradition already exists. We rarely gather our loved ones together for a hard-hitting dismissal, an unfulfilled desire for children or a painful divorce. Barbara Raes does, and she does it for other people if they ask her to. She calls on artists whose imaginations help her turn her rituals into meaningful occasions.

‘Now I work in the zone where art, care and rituals coincide, which is relatively uncharted territory. Over the past three years, I’ve done about one ritual a month, and it has never been about the same thing twice. Sometimes these are needs I had never considered myself. Someone whose foster children suddenly disappeared from her life. Someone who had to go back to work after maternity leave and experienced that as a brutal transition. Someone who had breast cancer and had to have her breasts removed but didn’t feel ready for the operation. In such cases, the hospital’s attitude is: we’ll operate on her, and if she struggles with it afterwards, she can see a psychologist. We turned it around: let’s reflect on the loss first, and the right time for the operation will be afterwards.’

A ritual to say goodbye to your breasts: what does that involve?

'Maja, the woman who was due to have the operation a few days later, had chosen to perform the ritual with eight other women she knew. A musician accompanied it on the hurdy-gurdy. An artist had written a short, powerful text for Maja and embroidered it on a sash, the kind of sash women wear in beauty pageants, which we draped over her chest for the ritual. Later, in hospital, she placed the sash on her bedside table, rolled up like a bandage, almost as a symbol of her wounded body. Ultimately, she hung it on the wall at home, as a work of art. The meaning of the sash transformed with her.'

'The operation took fourteen hours and I had delegated fourteen people close to her who would each devote one hour to Maja, being with her in their thoughts. After the operation, she was given fourteen photos of what each of those people had done for her during the operation. Every single one of those photos said: I was with you. They were like a protective blanket.'

Now you're creating a ritual for Theater Aan Zee, where you are the guest curator this year. Isn't it impossible to do something that intimate and personal there?

'Actually, it isn't. You could sum up the central production at Theater Aan Zee as a ritual for one child, far out at sea, with no audience. Although obviously I really hope the public picks up on the story, feels involved and helps carry and support the ritual.'

'We're going to do the ritual every day, for ten days in a row, each time with a different child who has suffered a great loss, such as the death of a parent. The child goes 'to sleep on a boat' in the evening, with a parent or companion. What they don't know is that the Sun Queen will be travelling with them – a role that Karlijn Sileghem will assume – and that she has chosen that child specifically to sing the sunrise the next morning.'

'Inspiration for the project came from a children's book by David Grossman. If no one sings the sunrise, the sun won't rise, and the day can't begin. So it's a celebration for the light! The captain of the boat reveals themselves to be a cellist who accompanies the sunrise song, which the child has already learned at school. Great care is taken throughout the process, before and afterwards.'

'Then the boat returns to Ostend, where a surprise welcoming committee of family and friends are waiting to have breakfast with the child. The public will be able to read in the daily newspaper who went to sing the sun up out of the sea that day. And the public can wave to the boat from the promenade. That's as close as they get, and yet I do believe that one child singing the sunrise has as much impact as a performance for an audience of five hundred people.'

'The ritual will continue after Theater Aan Zee, in partnership with De Grote Post in Ostend and Het Paleis in Antwerp. If you know a child who has suffered loss, and you want to give them a ritual that brings light and resilience, you will be able to arrange it through those organisations. You can also request a ritual for a child you don't know who needs one. Imagine that, what a gift.'

Is a ritual the best therapy?

'A ritual has a therapeutic effect, but it can't replace therapy. It doesn't solve the problem, but it does help people to move on. It's a very welcoming, safe platform for making the invisible visible and holding space for it. It gives permission for those things to exist, and that is what helps you keep going.'

'But rituals like these do demand an attitude of great vulnerability. You need to be able to do that. It's probably no coincidence that I only get requests from women. Men still tend to confuse vulnerability with weakness. Maybe the word 'ritual' scares them off more, as well. It sounds so stuffy. Sometimes I need a new language for what I do.'

Don't people try too hard when they are the focal point of their own ritual? Don't they start performing their catharsis?

'Usually they have no idea at all what to expect, so there isn't much they can do except submit to what is happening. We have a long conversation beforehand, but we don't talk about the form the ritual will take. We do choose the other people we want to invite, though. Then I explain the ritual to those people and make sure they arrive a few hours before it starts to prepare for what is going to happen and what their role will be.'

'People who come to me are often alarmed when I suggest involving their loved ones in the ritual. They are sometimes hesitant to select friends: oh, but they'd have to come all the way to Belgium, just for me. We have ended up with a highly privatised idea of how to solve problems: you assume that you have to process things on your own, or perhaps with the help of a paid expert. It doesn't occur to us that we can also create a community around problems like these.'

'Often fifteen to twenty people end up coming together for our rituals, and they're not all people who know each other. They form a temporary community. They make time for it, to show they're there for you. But a ritual like this is a gift to them, too; it releases things for them as well. Dealing with loss individually isn't the best way to do it, that's clear by now.'

The average baby shower is also an occasion for the family to show that they're there for the baby and its parents. So why doesn't that feel like a ritual?

'Because it *isn't* a ritual. It's just a day focused on eating, drinking and gifts. As I see it, ideal celebrations are ones where we can embrace loss. Occasions where everything is perfect feel like very lonely gatherings to me. It's not because you do something special at a special place that it necessarily works as a ritual. A healing ritual always has a three-part structure. In the first phase, the energy is very low, and you raise it by creating a lively image of what you are saying goodbye to. The second phase is when you actually say goodbye: it's the saddest and hardest phase, and the energy drops to a very low level. The third phase needs to get the energy back up, higher than it was at the beginning. You do that with words and images of comfort, strength, hope. Then the situation becomes lighter and more manageable. As a facilitator, I see it as my main responsibility to ensure that every farewell ritual progresses clearly through those three phases and to guide the participants through them.'

Rituals like these that you create specifically for one person, with the help of professional artists, must be prohibitively expensive.

'They do take a lot of work. Over the past three years, I have asked people to pay what they felt the ritual was worth. That approach was part of my research into the importance of rituals today. I gave them a summary of the time and materials we had put into the ritual, and then they could decide what to pay me based on their own micro-economic circumstances. It was quite a shock at first: were people really only willing to give so little to find meaning? But ultimately it all balances out. People who can afford more help pay for rituals for people who don't have as much money.'

'I could afford that uncertainty because I was working part-time at the school of arts. But that project will soon be over, so I'll have to think about the next step in the development of my financial plan.'

Are people today looking for new rituals because we have lost our old rituals? Or because we need healing rituals more than we used to?

'Both. The reasons why rituals have disappeared from society are exactly the reasons why we experience a greater need for them today. We have let go of church rituals, but we still need things like comfort, forgiveness and grief, because coming out from under the shadow of the church tower has left us feeling more and more pressure about everything that is wrong with the world. We're constantly aware of all kinds of crises. That has left us with an ever-increasing need for a safe context for our emotions.'

'A second reason is that the pendulum always swings back the other way, from strong individualisation to a greater form of togetherness. The community-forming aspect of rituals is really important. In the old days, the baker would ask how you were, and if you had just buried your husband, you were free to have a good cry. It takes a village to raise a child, absolutely, but some people need a whole village to be able to say goodbye to someone too.'

'The fact that we've lost touch with our rituals is also because the rhythm of a ritual doesn't fit into our hyperactive 21st-century lives. But even that is gradually shifting: I have noticed a new attention to slowing down and stillness emerging.'

You went looking for new mental and physical spaces for farewell rituals with the students at KASK. What might that kind of new space be?

'I was particularly fascinated by intermediary spaces: waiting rooms, corridors. In a hospital, for example, the most important conversations are often held in the corridor, and that is the place where people find comfort in each other or have the time to contemplate their loss. There is very little consideration of that when such buildings are designed. But these are big issues: people go to hospital to be cured. Other people lose their loved ones there. Then they go outside and find a big, concrete car park waiting for them. It could happen in a completely different way.'

Sooner or later, everyone is confronted with loss that is difficult to share. So you would expect the problem to solve itself: that we would share each other's pain out of solidarity.

'But solidarity needs time. And we've organised our lives in such a way – working a lot, at high speed, trying to achieve a high standard of living – that we don't make time for solidarity anymore. We go to a funeral and when it's over, we say: let me know if there's anything I can do. That puts the ball in the bereaved person's court, and we're free to go our own way.

'There's an alternative funeral company in the Netherlands, De Ode, that hands out cards after the funeral with a whole list of suggestions for other things you can do for the bereaved person. Cook them dinner, invite them out to the cinema or write down the date of their loved one's death in your diary, so you can send a message next year to say I'm thinking of you, because today can't be easy for you.'

What made you decide to leave your job as the artistic director of Vooruit and focus on farewell rituals?

'While I was artistic director, I got ill because the gulf between my own values and standards and my daily practice was too great. I had the feeling that there was something deeper at the root of it and gave myself a year to rethink my life, reformat it, until I was back in tune with myself. I wanted to study something completely unfamiliar to me in that year. So I ended up training as a funeral director in Totnes in the UK. Having to be involved with death every day was simultaneously an ode to life. But it was very intense, too.

'One exercise appealed to me in particular: one partner in a gay couple was in palliative care. The couple wanted to marry, but gay marriage wasn't legal in the UK at that time. The man who was ill passed away, and a year later gay marriage was legalised. The exercise was to design a farewell ritual for the man who had died, in which the dead man would be married to the surviving man, with his new partner in attendance.

'That exercise – the situation was fictional – made me realise that I wanted to devote myself to this: not to funerals after death, but to the minor funerals in life. I suddenly saw all those smaller times of transition and loss that people accumulate and carry with them, things that go unacknowledged. I think that's often why people crash at a certain point. The weight they are carrying gets too heavy.'

You've temporarily resumed your role as an artistic leader, for Theater Aan Zee. Are you gradually returning to the major stages?

'Ostend is where I was born, a good place to return to after I have spent three years focusing on farewells, to hold a festival with themes that include healing.'

'I want to carry on working with arts organisations all my life; we can inspire each other. The difference now mainly has to do with my ambitions. Back then, I wanted to conquer the big, wide world. Now I think: let me try and change the little things. And if we talk to each other about them, and you talk about them to other people in turn, they might grow; our norms might shift slightly.'

'The big, wide world will only change if we make structural changes to the way we think about labour, time and resources. I can't do that all on my own.' (*laughs*).

The opening production at Theater Aan Zee will be a court case against death: does death need to be condemned?

'That question will only be answered then: it's not a theatre production with a script, it's a genuine court case with real lawyers, a real judge and witnesses who will plead for or against death. I have no idea what the outcome will be. The process will be live-streamed, and you'll be able to choose your side in the street by wearing a badge: for life or for death.'

Are you for or against death?

(thinks about it) 'I'm for life, but for life *with* death. I don't believe you need to put your pain behind you to be happy. If you embrace your pain, you'll be happier.'