

Staging Migration in the Theater

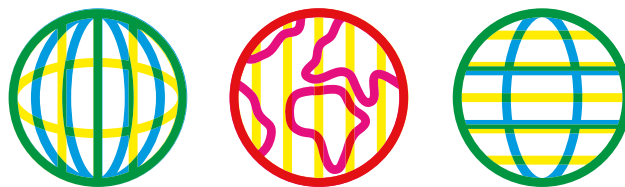
Michael De Cock in Conversation
with Carolin Gebauer

Michael De Cock (KVS Brussels) and
Carolin Gebauer (University of Wuppertal)



opportunities

for a fair narrative on migration



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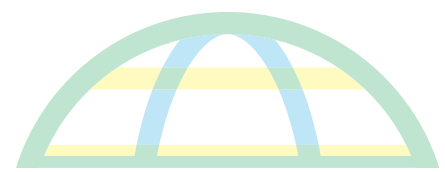
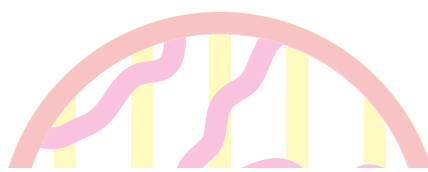
Introduction

It's time to let imagination take the lead and tackle reality through art: the Royal Flemish Theater (Koninklijke Vlaamse Schouwburg, KVS) in Brussels has been the creative core of OPPORTUNITIES. The result of this 4-year-collaboration is *Hannibal*, an inspiring performance with a large international cast, a collaboration between KVS and Théâtre de Liège, Teatre Nacional de Catalunya (Barcelona), Théâtre National Daniel Sorano (Dakar), and Festival O (Rotterdam). Following its world premiere in Brussels, *Hannibal*, directed by Junior Mthombeni and Michael De Cock, travelled to five cities in Senegal, Valchiusella, Rotterdam, and Paris. There, the original KVS production, a unique synergy between opera and slam, contemporary dance and acting, contemporary video and projection techniques, as well as traditional live painting, was performed and re-imagined with local dancers, actors, and musicians, creating level telling fields on stage.

Hannibal weaves together the opera *Dido and Aeneas* by baroque composer Henry Purcell (1659–1695), reinterpreted by classical musicians, opera singers, rappers and EDM artists, the story of Hannibal, and the Punic wars, to celebrate the birth of Europe. *Hannibal* offers a lens through which we can explore the confrontation between old and new. In the third century B.C., the Carthaginian commander Hannibal Barca started his vertiginous journey: He led his troops through Spain and France, and, after crossing the Alps, deep into Italy, in a quest that shook the Roman empire's very foundations.

In contemporary migration discourses, the idea that barbarians are at the gates, ready to erase our European history – however absurd – rears its head once again. *Hannibal* offers a window through which to view the past, present and future of Europe, using the opera *Dido and Aeneas* to remind us of the mythical origins of the conflict between Rome and Carthage, Europe, and North Africa. According to legend, Dido was the founder of Carthage in today's Tunisia. Having fled from Tyre, she was received condescendingly near the lake of Tunis by male local rulers who granted her as much land “as an oxhide can encompass.” But Dido was clever. Throughout the night, she cut the hide into nearly invisible strips, which she then sewed together. In this way, she patiently and persistently wove the boundary of her city Qart-ḥadašt or Carthage (= New City). Carthage quickly acquired an important position as a trading post.

Although this legend attributes a significant role to her in the founding of Carthage, there is little historical evidence to confirm her existence. Many historians consider her story a myth, likely embellished by later writers to dramatize Carthage's history and its rivalry with Rome. The myth is further expanded in Virgil's epic *Aeneid*, in which Dido falls in love with the Trojan Aeneas. Aeneas, a heroic refugee from destroyed Troy, escapes the total destruction of his city and arrives in Carthage after a long and perilous journey. When Aeneas leaves Carthage to fulfill his divine mission and found Rome, Dido is so heartbroken that she takes her own life. The queen curses Aeneas and prophesies that his descendants will fight wars with Carthage for years. This myth was used to explain the enmity between Carthage and Rome and served as a literary justification for Roman dominance over Carthage. Dido's broken heart foretells the Punic Wars between Carthage and Rome and thus the arrival of... Hannibal.



Interview

Carolyn Gebauer: You have translated the results and findings of the OPPORTUNITIES project into a theater production. Could you tell us a bit more about *Hannibal*?

Michael De Cock: Yes, we tried to create an intense, new theater experience with a multidisciplinary approach on stage, including a wide variety of influences, from opera to slam and pop music, from techno to harp. Video projection is also important. And in the end, we even bring the city on the stage... or the stage to the city: the doors behind the stage open, and a large campfire outside invites the crowd to gather and dance with the performers to the beats of a DJ.

Our goal was to create an experience in which artists of different disciplines would come together. All that is as much for dramaturgical reasons as for the audience's experience, which we wanted to be different. It was important for us to involve the audience, as an active contributor, in accordance with the Cross-Talk approach developed by OPPORTUNITIES. Like in an arena, the spectators are situated around the stage, 360 degrees, so everybody sees a slightly different show. You experience the show as you experience a concert. You have to be active, you stand, you can dance, and you have to choose where to look. Actually, it's all in the spirit of the OPPORTUNITIES project that creates level telling fields to bring different people, experiences, and memories together on an equal footing.

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Figures 1 and 2: Pictures from the performance of *Hannibal* in KVS Brussels | © KVS / Stef Stessel

Carolyn Gebauer: Your play not only stages multiperspectivity – i.e., it presents various perspectives on the topic of migration – but it also plays with different generic conventions and modes of representation. To what extent were questions of form relevant in the process? To what degree are your aesthetic decisions influenced by a politics of form?

Michael De Cock: Form is very relevant and important for the play. It's not frontal and classical; instead, people and players mix in a way that shares space differently. The play has two important layers. On the one hand, it creates a new, more 'equal' relationship with the public. There is a feeling of equality. So in a way, we might say, the form reflects the whole idea of the project: equality between newcomers and the Old Continent. But also, on stage, between the genres, and, even more, between spectators and performers. And there is not one discourse or one vision, but many. It gives many perspectives on the topic of migration, not only in a dramaturgical way, but also imprinted in the geography of the space



and the bodies. That's very important. But it also plays with, or refers to, contemporary events or shows. It's a bit like the music industry or a techno festival. By changing the form, we also address a new kind of public, and different ways of relating. There, too, we aim for equality. We didn't want experienced theatre audiences to be ahead of other spectators who are less familiar with theatrical performances.

Carolyn Gebauer: Your production puts into practice the theoretical notion of vicarious storytelling developed in the project – i.e., the act of telling a story on behalf of others. What challenges did you face?

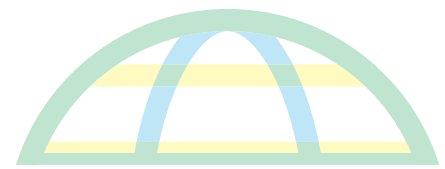
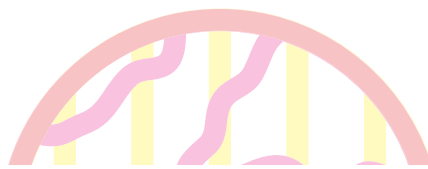
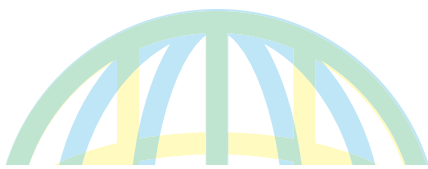
Michael De Cock: Actually that's the essence of theater and of many other artforms: you use stories and the words of others and bring them to this symbolic place, the stage. It's important. It's the place where people – the audience – come and witness how we canonize and create a (common) narrative to relate to. Of course, these days many things are changing and shifting. Twenty years ago, I made a play on migration. I crossed Europe, interviewed people, and produced a play, based on the interviews, which I performed in the back of a truck. So, for me, talking to people has often been a way of making plays. It's the same for my co-director Junior Mthombeni, by the way. During our trip to Senegal last year, we went to talk to people who tried to get to Europe, and we also took the time to discuss with the actors to see how we could talk about it, and if what we did was okay with them. Of course, we cannot do it today as we would have twenty years ago. Today, we think a lot about how to tell a story and who is entitled to do so. How do you represent, in this case, a 'migrant.' These are very interesting and challenging issues. You still can tell everything, but you must carefully consider how to do it. This year, when we were touring in Senegal, I also took the time to talk to many people and to try to find out how the topic of migration was touching their lives. I also published an article about it in a Belgian newspaper. It's my strong conviction that theater doesn't stop on the stage, but that there are many other ways theater has an impact, in the public domain. They complete each other. Art, media, academic research, we all have a mission there.



Figures 3 and 4: Pictures from the performance of Hannibal in Senegal | © KVS / Stef Stessel

Carolyn Gebauer: You work with actors who have a migration background themselves. In the touring production, amateurs will be involved. Are these choices important for the play?

Michael De Cock: Yes, they are. You cannot tell a story about the world today without involving that world. You cannot tell an important story like that from just one point of view. There are so many blind spots to cover. On the other hand, there would be a democratic deficit if the representation is not as it should be, and it simply wouldn't be as good if you involved professional actors who lack real-life experiences of the events they are supposed to act out on stage. In the heart of Europe today, there is



no other way to do this. Brussels is a majority-minority city. If, as a cultural actor, you don't want to become a kind of 'gated community' of the privileged, you must look for new, shared, common narratives. Doing it differently would be a statement... and a strange one. For our theater and our audience, this is a very natural choice.

Carolyn Gebauer: You decided to turn *Hannibal* into an interactive play which actively engages the audience in the performance. What effects of this interactive dimension are created with regard to the theater experience that would otherwise have been lost?

Michael De Cock: Well, Junior Mthombeni and I believe strongly that this is a crucial part of the play. The audience is not just in the dark, in a nice seat, leaning back... but is actively involved in the play, puts on a mask in the beginning, is invited to dance, and near the end, when the choir of citizens sings along, the 'performance space' and 'public space' become one. Performers and audience mix. We make the performance space a public space, and by opening the doors to the city and continuing outside, around a campfire, we make the public space a performance space. That's why the play starts as a rave, and the public is invited to join, and that's why we also dance together in the end. It's also a proof of the resilience of all these people. We didn't want to tell a larmoyant story.

Carolyn Gebauer: What challenges do theater directors and theater companies face when engaging in transdisciplinary work?

Michael De Cock: In a way, theater is always transdisciplinary. It's an art form where many semiotic languages come together. But of course, we pushed it a little further. A play like this, with 30 artists, a choir, a video artist, a visual artist, two producers, etc., requires a lot of preparation. You cannot simply come together with the whole group and start working. You need to prepare months in advance, work in small groups, shoot footage, watch the images, make choices... so we did a lot of bootcamps and workshops to prepare, and we mixed, I would say, opera strategies with theater strategies, because lots of things were created on the spot as well; I guess it's a mix of both. And you need, of course, to have the project at heart, and you need artists who have the same sensibilities. Otherwise, you are lost. This is not 'just' a job or 'just' a play. It's so much more. It asks for broad human empathy, maybe not even in a political, but definitely in a human sense. A vision and a mindset which can relate to this openness and to this new global community. I think art – at least the kind I make – should avoid to judge but should try to open corridors in the mind.

Carolyn Gebauer: The OPPORTUNITIES project had consortium meetings with partners in Dakar and Accra. Do you find inspirations for your work in collaborations with African partners, and in what ways is the African perspective relevant for *Hannibal*?

Michael De Cock: Oh yes, to be honest, they were quite essential. I had worked many times in Senegal before, so it's not that the country was new to me... but the consortium meetings and discussions with these experts, who approach the topic of migration from another angle certainly broadened our perspective. That's also why we co-produced with a Senegalese theater – Théâtre Daniel Sorano – and held a workshop there a year before the premiere. We also wanted to understand, for example, how they felt they wanted to talk about migration, from a Senegalese point of view. We learned so much there. And now we've already had a tour in Senegal, with half a team from Europe and half a team from the theater there. We played in five cities: Dagana, Louga, Toubacouta, Dakar, and Rufisque. Being on tour there, traveling the country, performing with these incredible artists, and meeting the public was beyond everything and a truly lifechanging experience for us.

Carolyn Gebauer: How exactly has the experience of touring through an African country changed your view on migration and related topics?

Michael De Cock: Oh a lot, but it's not the first time I went to Africa. Europe and lots of opinion-makers in Europe are so Eurocentric. It's frightening. They don't have a clue. You can't talk about migration without taking multiperspectivity into account. It's simply not sufficient. It's easy maybe. But it's also ridiculous. I have no other words for it.



Carolyn Gebauer: The OPPORTUNITIES project has a focus on the narrative dynamics of migration. Which narratives (and counter-narratives) on migration does the play draw on? And what is your view on the question whether art and theater can change narratives?

Michael De Cock: Well, I wrote a book on that topic a year ago. The title is *Only Imagination Can Save Us*. In that book I try to develop or question the relationship between art and democracy. How both are related and can't succeed without the other. Critical art is necessary in a well-functioning democracy. But we must be realistic, naïve, and resilient to tackle these kinds of questions. Art or theatre cannot stop certain things in this world, but it can indeed change and influence a narrative, connecting with many other ways of thinking. There are the dossiers you write, the articles about the play that reach thousands of people, and the academics studying it. There is the public. You're using taxpayer money and a public space with a lot of history to tell a story, to create a narrative. That is so important. We are writing – especially in the majority-minority context we live in – a new story for a shared future. And beyond that, of course, there is the micro-impact: the effect on the house, the performers, and the audience, that are moved by the experience and carry it with them as they return to the city.

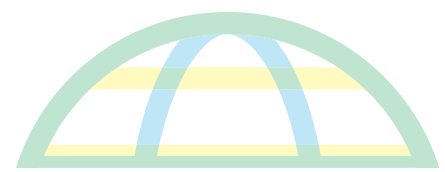
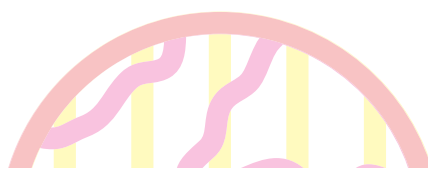
Carolyn Gebauer: Why should literature, theater, and the arts be included in public debates and research projects on migration? What are the benefits of reading literature on migration, watching movies on migration, or going to the theater? What can art do that political discourse cannot achieve?

Michael De Cock: I also write on this topic in my book. It's essential for me. We live in times where we want to measure and analyze everything. Data is like the holy grail in public debate. But what about feeling? It's not knowledge alone that makes us change our behaviour; we need much more than that. Art, fiction, and theater can give us that. In my book, I call this the "Bambi-paradox." All these data and numbers on the news, all these statistics – they make us numb. We don't cry when we see people die in wars or in small boats on the Mediterranean, but we cry when we see Bambi's mother being shot in a movie. We cry when a character dies in a film.

On the other hand, we live in a very individualistic world. I believe that a shared experience, like going to the theatre, is a good way to create community. In that way, I do think theater is a very relevant art form today, if not the art form of the future. We need to stay in community, and we need to have rituals that make us feel and think as one.

Carolyn Gebauer: Do you have any suggestions for other artists who would also like to engage transdisciplinary projects?

Michael De Cock: I think, it can never be an aim as such. I think, it's smart to always keep thinking from the soul of the project – from the heart. And from that heart, ask yourself what you need to tell the story. You can put as many art forms together as you like, but when there is no heart, there is nothing. Therefore, I think, it is so necessary to create community with other important fields in society. Like the ones I had the chance to meet in this OPPORTUNITIES project. It's by opening our minds and views that we become richer and wiser. So maybe that would be my main advice to artists: listen to your heart, and the hearts of others. Not in a corny way, but in a fully engaged, human, true way. From that starting point, the most beautiful things can happen.



An abstract graphic design featuring a white background with several overlapping geometric elements. On the left and right sides, there are stylized globes or spheres composed of intersecting green, blue, and yellow lines. In the center, there are vertical yellow bars and a red circular outline. A pink, wavy, ribbon-like shape winds through the lower half of the image, passing behind the red circle and the central text. The overall composition is modern and colorful.

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