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## Memory Construction

A Group Discussion with Tom Struyf and Geert De Vleeschauwer  
on *Vergeetstuk*

Tom Struyf, a Belgian stage director, incidentally comes across a wedding photograph of himself hidden away in a drawer, but can recall neither the event nor the people depicted alongside him. Unnerved by his failing memory, he interviews a neurosurgeon, a Tai-Chi instructor and a psychic medium in the hope of being able to discover the causes for his lapses of memory. Together with his grandmother he sets out to recover his personal memories and those of his grandparents.

Tom Struyf's productions, which he calls ›realitytheatrevideoperformances‹, negotiate the boundaries between Theatre, Lecture Performance and Documentation. *Vergeetstuk (Act to forget)*<sup>1</sup> (2014) was selected to tour Flanders as part of the annual theatre tour Circuit X in 2013, and was also nominated for the deAuteursprijs 2013 by the copyright association SACD.

*Participant:* The storyline delineated above suggests that a photograph served as the starting point of your theatre project. Did you actually create *Vergeetstuk (Act to forget)* based on a photograph?

*Tom Struyf:* It was the other way round. I read a book about neuroscience by the Dutch scientist Douwe Draaisma from which I learnt that because our brain is constantly influenced by our perceptions of the present and imaginings of future events, it never ceases updating and rewriting our memory. Tests have been conducted in which people were asked to relate an event from their past. Then, five, ten or even fifteen years later, they were asked to retell their stories. In 100% of the

cases the story had changed completely over time! I was so fascinated by this that I decided to use the topic of delusion and deception as a starting point for a theatrical production.

*Participant:* So there were no biographical references at the outset of the project?

*Tom Struyf:* No, and we didn't have a real storyline either. I talked a lot with our dramaturge Willem De Maeseneer about the narrative elements we might include, and eventually, of the several options we discussed, the story of my grandmother turned out to be the most interesting and touching one. I'd also like to add that the other narrative elements we included weren't fictional but based on reality, though we used them in a documentary way.

*Participant:* Generally speaking, not many performance groups currently seem to be working with clear storylines. More often than not, productions reflect on processes of artistic research rather than follow a coherent plot which develops in a linear way, thus allowing the audience to immerse themselves in the narrative.

*Tom Struyf:* Yes, that's true. And Willem De Maeseneer would, I think, agree with you entirely. In fact, it is his merit that we work the way we do. We feel that we are storytellers first and foremost, and we strive to create intense, enthralling stories.

*Participant:* You don't seem to be scared to move the audience emotionally.

*Tom Struyf:* No, definitely not!

*Participant:* In my opinion, far from merely telling the audience a story, you do so by using different media and incorporating different elements.

*Geert De Vleeschauwer:* That has a lot to do with the research process.

We didn't know at the outset that we would use a screen and all those video recordings of our interviews with the experts. Our initial idea was simply to work on the topic of memory, without any prior conception of how we should realise the project.

*Tom Struyf:* The general idea of interviewing experts on the subject of memory was, for example, there ›before‹ we thought specifically about interviewing my grandmother.

*Participant:* Were you hoping to achieve a humorous effect with the screened interviews?

*Tom Struyf:* The jokes are part of the performance. However, they did trigger a surprising amount of laughs yesterday, definitely more than usual.

*Participant:* Your performance is usually given in Flemish and was especially translated for yesterday's performance. Was the laughter perhaps an effect of the surtitles?

*Tom Struyf:* Because of the surtitles people were able to read my lines before I uttered them. Sometimes I didn't even have to make the joke!

*Participant:* Do you really fear losing your memory or developing Alzheimer's disease?

*Tom Struyf:* Would it make a difference to you if you knew? You see, I dislike answering questions about what's real in the story and what's not because I feel that fiction and reality cannot be clearly distinguished from one another. And this blurry distinction is precisely what is being negotiated in our performance. Theatre is a medium where fiction and reality meet. As an actor I am a professional liar, and the stage is the perfect place to reflect on the unreliable distinction between veracity and deceit, between reality and fiction. We live in a world in which the borders between fiction and reality have become very thin. Think about the news on TV: It is completely scripted,

including the interviews, but journalists pretend as though they are having live conversations. This is a construction we can make transparent in theatre.

**Participant:** In my opinion, the piece is not only about remembering and memory but also about generations.

**Tom Struyf:** Just like I didn't plan on telling a love story, at the beginning of the project I had no idea I would make use of my grandmother's memories. These became important theatrical elements only when the production process was already well underway. So much so, in fact, that we made no reference to these elements in our publicity text which we wrote long before we completed the piece. The publicity text only reveals that the piece is about memory, and little more.

**Participant:** Speaking of texts: How do you generate your performance scripts and put them into writing? Do you base them on improvisations? Do you write down every single word, or just notes and cues for the actors?

**Tom Struyf:** I usually type entire scripts into my computer, but I talk a lot while doing so. The text has to sound natural. Willem De Maeseneer and I often write together. He is very good at seeing and building textual structures that make sense. At one point during the production process of *Vergeetstuk* I had written 40 pages and enthusiastically showed them to him. He read them and said: »Yes, it's very interesting. But it's not a play! You are not going to use that!«

**Participant:** Towards the end of the performance you project a Youtube-clip called *Moonwalking Bear*<sup>2</sup> onto the screen. The clip is an awareness test in disguise: Two basketball teams – one dressed in white, the other in black – can be seen passing two balls between themselves. The audience is asked to count how many passes the team in white makes. Because the audience is so utterly absorbed in this task, they are oblivious to the man dressed in a black bear costume crossing the picture while doing a moonwalk. This scene draws attention to our

blindness for things that are right in front of us. Was this clip intended as a metaphor for how the brain works?

**Tom Struyf:** I don't remember! (laughs) I'm really fascinated by such mental challenges. When I saw the clip, I thought it could be a good element for the performance by which to illustrate the situation of missing the blatantly obvious.

**Participant:** The performance made me ponder whether the process of forgetting makes us happier than does the act of remembering. Then again, remembering allows us to construct our own past and enter into new relations with our own personal histories. What do you think?

**Tom Struyf:** Our piece may have conveyed the impression that the relationship between my grandparents was an ideal romance. But actually, I'm not really sure they had such a great time together. I can't remember them being friendly to one another. But when my grandfather died, my grandmother suddenly fell completely in love with him. In my opinion it was just some sort of illusion ... but she found a way to be happier with a memory that reflected her own fictional reality more than it matched up with her actual past.

### Anmerkungen

- 1 Concept, text and performance by Tom Struyf, with Geert De Vleesschauber as head of camera and editing, and Willem De Maeseneer as dramaturge. The participants in the group discussion attended a performance of *Vergeetstuk (Act to forget)* on May 7<sup>th</sup> 2015, one evening prior to the discussion. The performance was given at the Tojo Theater in Bern as part of the AUAWIRLEBEN Theaterfestival Bern programme.
- 2 The video can be accessed via the following weblink: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ahg6qcgoay4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ahg6qcgoay4) (last accessed on November 12<sup>th</sup> 2015).

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