

ITI Theatre Prize

Honouring and supporting the international work of younger artists

LAUDATION FOR JETSE BATELAAN

Jetse Batelaan is the most underrated director in Europe - I have often said that phrase. I have often used the phrase because his plays are among those I particularly like to recount. In my eyes, this is a special quality feature: when you want to recount plays, it's because they gripped you so particularly, amazed you, because something completely unexpected happened. You had a crazy experience that you absolutely want to share. Jetse Batelaan's plays have this effect on me in particular.

I say "plays" and not "productions" because Jetse Batelaan is always also the author of his plays. He never bases himself on well-known titles or material. He invents something completely new every time he stages. He invents a story, a plot and more than that: a new world with completely new rules and laws. Hardly anyone exploits the possibility that basically anything can be in theatre as consistently as he does. He knows that in theatre you see things that are not actually there. And things that are clearly there are not seen. This is the basis for his plays, which are often very funny, but always touching and of great philosophical depth.

The fact that Jetse Batelaan is possibly underestimated could be due to the fact that he mainly makes so-called children's and youth theatre. Despite countless lip service, children's and youth theatre is still not really considered a real art in many places. One has to take this into consideration: To the target group, to teachers, parents, grandparents, you are not really free. Jetse Batelaan, however, has been spurred on by such supposed limitations to produce great work by setting himself interesting tasks. For example, he spent some time thinking about what the age group for which he was planning a new play would probably find most terrifying in theatre. If the 8 to 10 year olds probably find nothing worse than being bored in the theatre, then he set himself the task of developing a play that was as uneventful as possible. This is how the famous "The performance in which hopefully nothing happens" came about. If 10- to 12-year-olds don't want to be lectured in the theatre, then Jetse Batelaan staged just that with "Der erhobene Zeigefinger": a play about morality. And if 14-year-olds and up don't think theatre is cool at all, because they are summoned to the school gymnasium and have to watch people doing embarrassing, incomprehensible things, then that's exactly what Jetse Batelaan stages with "Toneel", in German "Stück". In a school gym. I'll be happy to tell you about the plays in detail afterwards at the champagne reception on the terrace. I'd also be happy to tell you a few others.

Jetse Batelaan's work is radical. He defies classical theatre dramaturgy, which only finds conflict interesting. He transgresses the conventions of theatre seemingly effortlessly and subverts expectations. At the same time, he takes his audience one hundred percent seriously, he doesn't want to sell them anything and doesn't want to foist anything on them: not the 4-year-old, not the 14-year-old and not the 40-year-old either. But he does want people to ask questions. Good questions, such as "What am I looking at?" or "What is this about?"

Another reason why Jetse Batelaan is perhaps underestimated is his socio-political attitude. He does not focus solely on himself and his artistic vision, and he sees no flaw in putting his talent and imagination at the service of a particular task. But not only that: even 15 years ago, he was careful not to take the plane if at all possible. He sticks to a work-life balance because he takes himself seriously not only as an artist but also as a father, even if that means turning down offers, perhaps career-enhancing ones. Many of the things we are still struggling for in the theatre of the 21st century: a sustainable use of resources, working models that are also compatible with a family life, a turning away from the idea of the artist genius for whom no rules apply, Jetse Batelaan has simply implemented for himself. Even if he does not make explicitly political art, he is still a political artist in this sense.

Jetse Batelaan has already won a lot of prizes, all the important ones in the Netherlands, some of them several times, and also the Silver Lion in 2019, the young talent prize at the Venice Biennale. So maybe he's not underestimated as much as I've always claimed, and I'm really happy about that. Tonight's prize also serves to honour and support the international work of younger artists. And even though I personally find it reassuring that someone who is only 8 years younger than me is still considered a younger artist, perhaps it would be time to honour Jetse Batelaan, who has invented his own unique theatre aesthetic and dramaturgy in more than 50 productions, not only in the area of young talent or children's theatre, but really as the visionary, outstanding artist that he is.

On the other hand, the status of the professional youth suits him well. The radical energy that is characteristic of young people when they question everything and don't consider anything logical or given per se, because they know no certainties and consistently try things out, that is also the energy of Jetse Batelaan. It is a constant source of his creativity and imagination. There is the well-known quote by Max Reinhardt, according to which an actor is a person who has succeeded in putting childhood in his pocket and keeping it there until the end of his life. Modifying this quote and looking at Jetse Batelaan, I would therefore say: a director must then be a person who has succeeded in putting his teenage years in his pocket and keeping them in there until the end of his life.

Dear Jetse - congratulations on the ITI Prize!

Anja Dirks, 19.6.2021