

ADOLESCENTS DO EXIST – AND ONCE AND FOR ALL THEY’RE GONNA TELL YOU WHO THEY ARE

An interview with Alexander Devriendt by Urszula Dawkins

As a teenager performing with Ghent-based youth theatre company, Kopergieterij, Alexander Devriendt always felt that what he was asked to do on stage was never what he really wanted to do. At 32, Devriendt is director of **Once and for all....**, a co-production between Kopergieterij and Ontroerend Goed, the theatre performance company he helped found eight years ago, also in Ghent, Belgium. Its teenage cast of 13 worked with Devriendt to create a performance in which free rein and a surprising sophistication combine to convey the destructive and revolutionary energy of youth.

Ontroerend Goed was formed in 2001 with the aim of exploring the live element of theatre; what Devriendt calls “the here and now experience of theatre that is unique to it”. At the core of each of the company’s productions, he says, is a determination to explore the boundaries of the theatre form. He cites the company’s ‘The Smile Off Your Face’, which played at both the 2008 Adelaide Fringe and at this year’s Sydney Festival. Audience members were placed in wheelchairs, blindfolded and bound in order to experience the 25-minute show.

“You can’t do that in any other medium than theatre,” says Devriendt, “and the same goes for all the other shows we do.”

“When you don’t know the rules of a medium” – none of Ontroerend Goed’s members come from a theatre background – “you tend to be free with that. You don’t realise that you’re breaking rules, you just do what you think is possible. I always saw it as a benefit.”

Devriendt views the opportunity to work with a teenage cast in the same light. “I didn’t know what you’re supposed to do with teenagers; I just followed my gut and followed my own desires of what I wanted to see on the stage.”

Once and for all...., according to Devriendt, “a celebration of the destructive force of teenagedom”.

“When you put a couple of teenagers inside a room,” he says, “in no time they’re messing around, they’re snogging each other, they’re hurting each other and all that, and that’s what you see on the stage.”

“But from that point on, I use that [interaction] as a sort of mother scene on which I give many variations...and in that way you travel through teenagedom.”
“When you’re a teenager and you’re becoming an adult, you don’t want to do the same things as everybody before you. You want to be special, and I wanted to find a solution for that: how to become an adult without losing that fight to be unique, to do things differently.”

Development of **Once and for all....** began slowly, with the cast meeting every Saturday for a couple of months before the performance took shape.

“I just created a space, I sat in this rehearsal room and said ‘between these four walls anything is possible, you can do whatever you want to do, whatever you are not allowed to do anywhere else, what you want to do on stage or always dreamt of doing with somebody. And on the first day, nothing happened of course, they were like: ‘yeh, but, whatever.’”

“And after two months I saw them behaving like teenagers on the stage; they began to act very freely. I made only one rule: you don’t hurt anybody that doesn’t want to be hurt.”

Despite over a hundred performances since the work’s premiere, it retains a freshness and energy that Devriendt puts down to the cast’s own investment in the work.

“I waited long enough before structuring [the play], so they really grasped what they were doing. And everything they do on the stage, they created themselves, they conceived it with me, or in improvisation – everything they do is from them.”

Music is an important element in **Once and for all....** Devriendt believes music is critical in the teenage years in every era, and wanted the show to be driven by a soundtrack that would be significant for audience members regardless of their age.

“I wanted to create something for the teenager inside everyone. So I really wanted to have music that referred to each different age that I know. For instance, my father’s teenage years were the Velvet Underground. My grandmother, the rebellious song in her age was Peggy Lee’s ‘Is that all there is?’ I always tried to use rebellious songs from the different age periods. I didn’t just want to make something that was about teenagedom now – because I think it’s bigger than that.”

Cast members describe the show in terms of having permission as actors to ‘go too far’ or to ‘be really wrong’. One (Febe De Geest) sees the piece as ‘some kind of intense trip’. Another (Barbara Lefebure) is happy that it’s ‘not artistically beautiful’. “I prefer to destroy things,” she says.

Devriendt aims to shed light on this perceived ‘destructiveness’ of teenagers, viewing it as a potent and positive force.

“A lot of people are afraid of teenagers,” he says, “because they’re too intense – the energy is sometimes frightening. But the energy that teenagers have is very powerful and it can change a lot of things. I think many revolutions are started with teenagers, because they just destroy things, but in that way make new things possible.”

As traditional theatre would have it, an actor’s task is to perform on the stage, apparently unselfconscious, while constantly being looked at. There are certainly strong parallels with the way Devriendt sees ‘teenagedom’.

“In the play, they’re very free and they behave like they don’t give a damn. But at the same time you remember that as a teenager, you pretty well know that someone is looking. You’re not a child anymore who just plays and doesn’t care about their surroundings; you really know what’s going on. And that paradoxical freedom is something I wanted to show in the play too.”

One of his schoolteachers once summed up the teenage years to a youthful Devriendt: ‘You can say whatever is wrong and you can say that you disagree and you don’t have to come up with an alternative yet’.

“That’s the freedom of teenagedom,” says Devriendt. “Your gut says it’s wrong, you don’t know how it’s supposed to work, but you have to have that freedom.”

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ONTROREREND GOED, KOPERGIETERY AND RICHARD JORDAN PRODUCTIONS LTD ONCE AND FOR ALL WE’RE GONNA TELL YOU WHO WE ARE SO SHUT UP AND LISTEN

Arts House, Meat Market
Thursday 6 – Tuesday 11 August 2009

‘It’s a radical idea expressed in the simplest terms, making the show not just an infectious enjoyable performance but one that affects our view of every teenager we meet from now on.’
- Variety ★★★★★





ONCE AND FOR ALL WE'RE GONNA TELL YOU WHO WE ARE SO SHUT UP AND LISTEN

Once and for all we're gonna tell you who we are so shut up and listen is the first coproduction of the Belgian theatre performance group **Ontroerend Goed** with the Ghent-based youth theatre house **Kopergietery** and at the same time the first full-fledged juvenile production of **Ontroerend Goed**.

Director Alexander Devriendt and writer Joeri Smet acquired a taste for it by working with secondary school kids in the frame of a series of school plays. Refusing to work on the basis of existing plays, they took the challenge to start a creative process in which the personal experience of the youngsters and the artistic vision of **Ontroerend Goed** could fuse. The raw energy and unique theatrical power of the teenagers urged the makers to create a professional performance that could only be played by adolescents. Because of its professional experience with youngsters, **Kopergietery** is the perfect partner to realise this project.

As a teenager, Alexander Devriendt himself performed in several productions for and by adolescents. In his memory, he always had more fun off stage than onstage. **Once and for all...** probes the possibility to have it the other way around. The performance wants to go against the idea that adolescents lose their rebellious spirit once they're performing. The rawness, directness and uncontrolled outbursts that define this age need to be visible and tangible on stage.

On stage are 13 teenagers aged between 14 and 18. In this way, the different phases between childhood and young adulthood are represented.

The performance shows the paradox of puberty: it's the period of freedom, more than anyone will ever have. You can become anything, everything is still possible and you don't have the responsibilities of adult life. But on the other hand your self-consciousness grows, every move you make is observed, everybody is watching you and you try to break free from the systems that determine you.

In **Once and for all...**, the untamed energy of adolescents is not presented as a destructive force, but as the pleasure to pass limits, to explore your own boundaries, without anyone telling you how or why.

CAST AND CREATIVE TEAM

Director: Alexander Devriendt

Performers: Aaron De Keyzer, Barbara Lefebure, Charlotte De Bruyne, Jorge De Geest, Dina Dooreman, Edith De Bruyne, Edouard Devriendt, Elies Van Renterghem, Febe De Geest, Fée Roels, Ian Ghysels, Koba Ryckewaert, Nathalie Verbeke and Verona Verbakel

Text: Joeri Smet and Alexander Devriendt

Scenography and Costumes: Sophie De Somere

Dramaturgy: Mieke Versyp

Music: Stijn Degezelle

Technician: Geert Willems

Production Manager: Eva ven den Hove

Guardian: Monique Leys

Images: Phile Deprez

Created under the supervision of **Ontroerend Goed**, **Kopergietery** and **Richard Jordan Productions Ltd** with the support of the Flemish Government, the Province of East-Flanders and the City of Ghent.

55 minutes no interval

Warning: frequent coarse language, loud music, haze effects and violence

www.ontroerendgoed.be

NOTES FROM THE CAST

AARON, 19

Alexander often talks about what he did when he was an adolescent, and I think that now, he wants to show how adolescents feel. The performance shows how we need to experiment in our own environment, without anyone telling us what to do. We have to define our own limits. We have to create ourselves.

BARBARA, 18

What I like about this performance is that it's not 'artistically beautiful', because I don't feel familiar with that. I prefer to destroy things. The performance is about the clichés surrounding adolescents. I think that we confirm those clichés, but at the same time we don't. My father sometimes calls me that, but I don't consider myself an adolescent. Not anymore. I'm very curious about what people will say about this performance. I think lots of people will say: I want to do it too!

CHARLOTTE, 18

The performance does something to us: everybody is sillier, more intense, more extreme. That makes the show so special. It's great to be so unrestrained. Within this production, I'm a complete adolescent. I can be shamelessly arrogant, and I don't need to care about anybody. I think that three fourths of the audience will find it brilliant what we convey, those who will gladly be flashed back to their own adolescence. And one fourth will feel like it's not for them. As for me: they can't take away the experience of the past few months. I'm really in love with this show.

EDITH, 15

Here, I can do what I like. For instance, I can beat Ian. Or throw eggs.

The performance is about this: that they shouldn't always get at adolescents. That we might go too far, but that everybody has done that some time in their lives. If I'm still an adolescent? Pfff... I don't know. I became so well-behaved. Really, before, I used to climb on roofs all the time. Or I slapped a teacher in the face... I don't do that anymore. But it could also be the fault of my school. Being an adolescent is just a phase in life.

DINA, 18

In the performance, I'm the sex kitten. Somebody who likes to flirt, to be licentious. I think it's a cool part to play. In real life, I don't want to be like that, but here I can allow myself to behave in that way. The performance is about the things that are on an adolescent's mind. About how we are. About the fact that we're not stereotypes. About what we like to do, and that this doesn't necessarily differ from what other people like to do. That we're not a different species.

EDOUARD, 16

The performance is ours. The first scene, for instance: we made it ourselves. That's why it will always be cool to play it, especially the first version, which never gets boring. The performance is constructed in a way that there is always room for different things to happen.

I think I am an adolescent. I want to do things that I've never done before. Also things that are not allowed. It gives me a kick. I want to try all sorts of things. I want to know more about the world. Puberty is a phase in which you're not a big guy yet, but you're not small anymore either. A transition to something else. It's allowed to do all sorts of things. And I use that opportunity.

ELIES, 16

I enjoy being really 'wrong' for once. To be someone else and somewhere else. I'm not the naughtiest in the group, but I think it's cool to bully someone, like in this show. I think I'm an adolescent. At least, that's what my parents tell me when I'm nagging. Or when I do something that they totally don't expect from me. I believe that the image, presented by this performance, is correct: that we break free from time to time, and don't feel like following the rules.

FEBE, 17

The performance is some kind of trip. You're so intensely involved, that you almost forget being on stage. That has a lot to do with the music. And with the 'yeah'-feeling. For me, the performance is also an outlet: I do things onstage that I wouldn't do elsewhere. I've never felt like an adolescent. It does happen to me sometimes that I cry, though. But I'm certainly not the rebellious adolescent who contradicts or always arrives late. For me, being an adolescent is to search. To search for who I can become, later on. Now it's possible, because now I'm in a protected circle. I can afford to fall down.

FÉE, 15

When I play this performance I feel like I'm unassailable. I can do what I want and I can do this without shame. On the stage you're not alone, you feel safe and strong, and you are together with a group of teenagers who do everything, dare everything and never listen. It's a cliché but it becomes true being with this group. I don't totally feel that way, I listen to critique, but I learnt not to let it control my life. Once and for all... just makes me feel better in my skin. I feel like I can't do anything wrong, anything is acceptable.

VERONA, 15

I'm new in the group but when I saw the show I cried and felt energetic at the same time. Until I was in the show I wasn't a rebellious teenager, not even a teenager really, because I was always thinking about the possible consequences and I felt I was missing things. I'm still a shy or quiet girl sometimes but in the performance I can really let myself go and that's the genuinely great thing about it. I can do things I never dare to do in real life. I feel like I'm finally doing things that everybody are obligated to do in a lifetime.

IAN, 16

In the performance, I play a character that is very close to my own: sloppy, lazy and playful. Am I an adolescent? I don't know. What's that, an adolescent? "Adolescent" is more a term of abuse. At least it's a negative word. My father sometimes calls me that, when I do stupid things, or when I'm being rebellious. Or when I ignore him. Which is what I do more and more often. I used to say 'sorry', but now I don't feel like it anymore. I feel like hanging around with friends. Just... to do what I want.

JORGE, 14

I only joined the group since July but before that I saw the performance so many times. I loved the performance so much because it made me think about all the things I wanted to do. I felt the adolescent in me yearning to do the things they were doing on stage. And now that I'm playing in the performance I feel that I'm getting to know myself, surpassing and defining my own limits. Because for me that is what the performance is all about, searching for yourself breaking the rules and creating your own ones.

KOBA, 15

The audience will see adolescents' stuff. Not that it's always apt, mind you. I mean: it's not only because we're adolescents, that we're like that. I am an adolescent, absolutely. Sometimes I feel supergreat, and two seconds later: bad, rotten, insecure, dark thoughts. That's what people say to me when I'm being boring or sad: she's in her puberty again. But it's good like that: I need a period to be allowed to do things without being blamed. It's puberty, they say. That's practical, then they leave me alone.

NATHALIE, 17

Sometimes I feel like an adolescent, sometimes I don't. It depends. But what is that, an adolescent? People often think that adolescents don't know very well what they're doing. They say: these teenagers, well, they're just bungling around. But actually, I think very hard about what I'm doing.

The drug scene is one of the coolest to play. Like I've been really spaced out.

