

## Marginal notes on *Philoktetes-Variations*

*The victory over death is not at all its abstract elimination, it is both its dethronement, its revival and its transformation into joy: "hell" has exploded and has flowed out into a horn of plenty. (M. Bakhtine).*

### 1.

Who is Philoctetes? According to Greek tradition Philoctetes, son of King Poias, inherited from Heracles the bow and poisonous arrows to which that future god owed numerous victories during his mortal existence. It was under highly exceptional circumstances that Heracles handed the fearsome weapon over to Philoctetes. Heracles, racked by terrible pains, had had a funeral pyre of oak and olive branches put up for himself on Mount Oita: it seemed to him that only death would release him from his physical suffering. But when Heracles had been carried to the pyre, none of those there wanted to light the fire, however much he pleaded with them. Finally, at his father's command, Philoctetes fulfilled Heracles' request and the latter gave him his legendary bow and poisonous arrows in gratitude.

Contrary to what one might expect, Heracles' pains were not the consequence of injuries inflicted on him by human opponents: he was brought down accidentally by the poisonous blood of the dead centaur Nemos. Heracles' wife, Deianeira, blinded by love, had played an important part in this accident. She sent Heracles a festive robe she had woven herself, the inside of which she had rubbed in with Nemos' blood. The dying Nemos had told her that if she rubbed the blood flowing from his wound into Heracles' robe, it would fire her husband's passion for her. However, neither the blood nor the robe might be exposed to sunlight or fire. Heracles knew nothing of this warning, and put on the robe he had been sent just before he lit a sacrificial fire in Zeus' honour. The robe of love, rubbed in with Nemos' blood, changed instantly into a death robe: 'Suddenly there resounded a horrendous cry and the startled bystanders saw Heracles pulling desperately at the robe, which appeared to be sticking to his body. People tried to help him but he lashed out on all sides like a madman: the poison from Nemos' blood penetrated his flesh and consumed it like fire. Mad with intolerable pain and howling like a wounded animal he dashed into the mountains and threw himself into a river so as to put out the fire, but this only made the poison burn more fiercely'.

Acting while blinded by love, poisoned blood, 'intolerable pains', death: the topicality of the story about the idiotic, literally unlucky death of Heracles, considered invincible, most likely requires no comment.

### 2.

The play *Philoktetes-Variations* is beyond classification: it doesn't fit into any current performing arts category, and draws back from existing divisions. What it appears to be is

an experimental-looking play in which the director Jan Ritsema stages three modern adaptations of Sophocles' tragedy of Philoctetes neatly the one after the other. In reality, *Philoctetes-Variations* is neither multimedia theatre (there are videos by Leslie Thornton and live music by Henry Threadgill), nor multicultural contrariness (the texts by John Jesurun, Heiner Müller and André Gide are performed in their original languages, though all three actors are far from possessing mastery over American, German and French). Let us simply call this series of modern variations on an ancient tragedy a *funeral play*, a play in which an actor is carried to his grave, while this funeral is at the same time being performed on stage. Ron Vawter embodies the main character in *Philoctetes-Variations* three times in succession, but it is his naked body, shown several times during the play, and covered with purple Kaposi rash, that clearly speaks another, more forceful language than the words spoken by him and his fellow actors (Viviane De Muynck and Dirk Roofthoof). Vawter's body language is unambiguous: 'I am suffering from Aids, I am dying, I am on my way to the grave but am just doing this performance on the way'.

In *Philoctetes-Variations* the simple and unequivocal, and at the same time frightening, language of death announced quickly gains the upper hand over chiselled and polished theatre language, that sounds now profound, dark and ultra-classical (Müller), now clear and moralizing (Gide) but comes across initially as quasi-psychedelic (Jesurun). Unless there is yet a miraculous breakthrough in Aids research, what we see here is a great actor passing visibly through the last days of his life and career. Right now it doesn't really matter whether we as an audience know who Philoctetes actually was, or if Müller's text, for example, from the fifties, was an implicit protest against the Stalinist purges of that period. The significant fact that we may be seeing Ron Vawter for the last time in the flesh on stage is more than enough to keep the attention alive. This dedication of the play, up to now not emphatically part of the subject matter, is made explicit in the brilliant, both comically moving and unpleasant end of *Philoctetes-Variations*, which, by the way, unintentionally reminds us of a classical pietà. At his own request, Viviane De Muynck and Dirk Roofthoof lift up Vawter, who is standing on a chair, with his arms stretched above his head, several times; they are lifting him into the grave, in the direction of Heaven.

*Philoctetes-Variations* as a funeral play: one cannot actually die on stage but one can be visibly suffering, dying a little (and of course that little is always too much). And what comes before the grave? In our society it's not the funeral pyre but the coffin, a tightly-measured habitation that for some time must protect the dead body in the barren earth from all kinds of vermin. In the last part of *Philoctetes-Variations* the three actors take turns in a coffin adorned with white veils; Ron Vawter's turn, it seems almost obvious, is the last. This now lugubrious, even apparently slightly pathological, simulation of a dead body was once all the rage: in Sarah Bernhardt's time it was the done thing in

certain circles to toy with death by, for example, having oneself photographed in a coffin. In accordance with this historical reference, Vawter first takes pictures of his fellow actors posing as dead bodies (they carry on firmly delivering their lines, which results in some burlesque scenes). When it is finally his own turn, the pose changes from a simulation to a hyper-realistic possibility, in a strange sort of virtual reality: 'Ron Vawter may well be lying like this, in a coffin, in the not too distant future'.

3.

Who is Philoctetes? In Sophocles' tragedy of this name - Aeschylus' and Euripides' earlier versions have not been preserved - Philoctetes has been on the deserted island of Lemnos for almost a decade when Odysseus and Neoptolemos, the son of Achilles, who was killed in the Trojan war, come to look for him. Philoctetes was left behind on Lemnos on Odysseus' advice. As the result of a snake bite received while on Chryse he had an incurable wound on his heel which gave off a smell unbearable to the Greek crew. This certainly did the morale of this army, sailing to Troy, no good at all (perhaps it was because the soldiers already got a whiff of their own dead bodies?).

Odysseus' return to Lemnos in the company of the still inexperienced Neoptolemos was undertaken on the advice of Helenus, a captured Trojan prince and seer. He revealed that Troy could only be captured with the help of both Neoptolemos and Philoctetes and his legendary bow. In the name of 'the higher national interest', that well-known *raison d'état*, the cunning Odysseus is able to persuade the innocent young Neoptolemos to trick Philoctetes, with the necessary lies, into handing over his infamous weaponry. But Neoptolemos repents, and gives Philoctetes his bow and arrows back. When they both decide to go back to Greece together, Heracles appears on the scene. He orders Philoctetes, who is understandably not well disposed towards the warring Greeks, to embark with Neoptolemos and his arch enemy Odysseus and sail to Troy.

In spite of the unlikely *deus ex machina* at the end, Sophocles' tragedy deals with a particularly interesting theme. The basis is, after all, highly ambiguous whichever way you look at it, even somewhat enigmatic, you might say: someone who's almost dead is in possession of a deadly weapon that can decide the outcome of the war; a dying man has to help the Greeks to triumph (which will probably lead to even more deaths). As well as this, it is only the apparently strange connection between a suffering old man (Philoctetes) and an ephebe with a body that's still youthful and not yet marked by wounds or disease (Neoptolemos) that makes victory possible. There's something not quite right here, at least not according to the currently reigning cultural logic, in which older and younger people, the sick and the healthy, inhabit sharply different worlds between which any kind of cross-border traffic seems impossible. The world picture conjured up by the Greek myths is indeed one at extreme variance with our culture, however often we may call 'Ancient Greece', as it's

generally called, 'the birthplace of our civilization'.

4.

*Philoktetes-Variations* is a 'bogus' play, a piece in which nothing is what it seems and all the theatrical elements take on a new, different significance. A seam of unbearable reality runs throughout, or rather: with the consciousness of, the knowledge that Ron Vawter is suffering from Aids. This knowledge provided for a continual shifting of the overt textual as well as the explicit scenic meanings. Sentences like, "Does it have anything to do with love?" (spoken by Neoptolemos in the Jesurun section) or, from a strictly textual point of view, functional pronouncements about blood (in Müller's text) automatically sound different in Ron Vawter's presence: they immediately take on a referential value, they change from flowing textual signifiers into directly meaningful indices. The words as spoken constantly interfere with a reality entirely unintended in the text, as do Vawter's body and the disease that has affected it.

Involuntary shifts of meaning also take place on the level of set and staging. This is of course most obvious in the scene with the coffin already mentioned, but often happens in other sections of the performance too. For example, in the second act, based on Müller's text, the three actors stand in a red liquid, clearly symbolic of human blood. The textual context suggests two possible interpretations simultaneously. It may be a depiction of all the blood that has flowed from Philoktetes' heel since Odysseus had this nuisance left behind on Lemnos; or it is a visual reference to the cruel bloodshed in Troy, which Müller more than once implicitly denounces (for example, he puts the words 'slaughter' and 'slaughterer' in Odysseus' mouth several times). Ron Vawter's presence, however, sees to it that another, more radical interpretation imposes itself: 'this is blood poisoned by Aids, this is the blood from his wound'.

In *Philoktetes-Variations* the bodily reality called 'Ron Vawter' is constantly leading the textual or theatrical logic off the track. Text and theatre are ceaselessly losing out here and are repeatedly unmasked as a 'stupid sham': the physical reality triumphs time and again over the proposed reality, the all but inescapable connotations (Aids, dying, death...) disrupt the meaning of what's staged more than once. In this way *Philoktetes-Variations* is one long testimony for the proposition that middle-class theatre can bear only very little, in fact hardly any 'real reality'. A little deathly presence - one single body marked by fatal symptoms - is sufficient to weaken completely all theatrical representations of war, death and so on, to make them entirely implausible. We are familiar with the performance art of the seventies which more than once used drastic means to cross the boundary between illusion and reality that was essential to the modern performing arts. In the end it was always theatre that won. Even when Chris Burden, the performance artist who probably went furthest in the pursuit, at that time, of the 'theatre of reality' (towards Authenticity, towards Reality), had a few small bullets shot into his left arm from a rifle, even the



most moved of spectators knew that it was a rhetorical act, personally wished, a staged event with an eye to a certain effect on the public. On the other hand, the simple presence of Ron Vawter's body, devoured by Aids, is not to be explained away, and cannot possibly be interpreted as a rhetorical act, an allusion to Suffering and Death, staged with avant-garde intent. Vawter did not, just for a time, have himself infected with the HIV virus for *Philoktetes-Variations*, but is simply one of the many victims of a terrible disease. This simple fact introduces a 'logic of reality' into the matter, which differs considerably from the performative playing, in all senses of the word, with a thing like Reality. Because after all, we all know that Ron Vawter's going to die, don't we?

Where does this knowing end, though, with its imaginings always subjectively tinted, its images of suffering, dying and death more or less based on individual experience? And at which point does the reality of Ron Vawter's body really begin to devastate or annihilate the performance? Strangely enough it is precisely this point that is completely impossible to determine: it is the borderlines themselves, between theatre performance, public performances and stage reality that are *Philoktetes-Variations'* actual subject. This play is thoroughly and in all respects *spurious*. It appeals to our imaginings of suffering and death but at the same time plays a perfidious, even demonic game with them. At certain moments this game becomes really devilish. When, for example, Ron Vawter, in the Müller section, speaks his German text, whispered to him by a Dictaphone, with great difficulty, in jerks and jolts, as spectator you immediately fear the worst: 'this is really too much for him, his body can no longer take it' - an instinctive reaction that appears to be confirmed by the tears that run down his face a little later. But Ron Vawter is simply acting the role of Philoctetes! Where does the play end, and the reality of Vawter's body begin? When is Vawter deceiving us, and when is it his body that's speaking? And most importantly: when exactly is our leg being pulled regarding the way we imagine something like a terminally ill body? In the end it's only Ron Vawter that can give a definitive answer to these questions. Meanwhile we, the audience, keep watching, politely sympathetic, and this based on how we imagine the unimaginable to be.

5.  
Who is Philoctetes? Sophocles puts someone useless and unproductive on stage, a body that's entirely unsuited to the battlefield or (death)factory, a dying man who, thanks to the bow and poisonous arrows inherited from Heracles can yet provide the Greeks with final victory. In short, Philoctetes is a liminal character, a 'border being': excluded from membership of the Greek *polis* and at the same time a crucial figure in the fight against Troy, dead and at the same time alive (almost dead...), human, but living on Lemnos like an animal (he eats vulture meat), extremely vulnerable and yet invincible, thanks to Heracles' bow. In contrast to most of the Greek heroes in the myths, tragedies and legends passed down to us, Philoctetes is by no means an aggressor, but

rather a 'transgressor', a hybrid being that disrupts boundaries that appeared completely fixed. It is precisely this uncertain status that enables there to be several interpretations of the Philoctetes character, and therefore several versions of Sophocles' text too.

In *Philoctetes-Variations*, Jan Ritsema works with three modern re-interpretations of Sophocles' tragedy. In his version, written in 1898, André Gide links Philoctetes' position as an outcast to a superior moral awareness. Quite separately from the polis and reasons of state, Gide's Philoctetes discovers on Lemnos a wisdom which is impossible to express in common language and which finds itself to be on the opposite side to all the social virtues. It is precisely for that reason that Philoctetes cannot possibly set off with them for Troy. His virtuousness, after all, differs from that of the Greeks, perhaps it cannot even tolerate the proximity of ordinary people. 'They will not come back; they have no more bows to look for... I am happy', these are the last words spoken by Philoctetes, left behind on Lemnos, in Gide's interpretation, which summons up the picture of an ancient hero of high moral standing but who at the same time is very egotistic. An ethical position worthy of the name, Gide suggests, can only be developed independently of any community or polis (this is, for that matter, a very un-Greek idea).

It is precisely the unavoidable demands of social morality that Heiner Müller emphasizes in his rewriting of Sophocles' tragedy. In fact it is not Philoctetes but Odysseus who is the most important character in Müller's play. Müller has Odysseus deliver several monologues to the still inexperienced Neoptolemos, all of which focus on the national - or perhaps rather, nationalist - necessity for cunning and deception, lies and untruths. Whoever holds Greece and the polis dear, teaches Odysseus, must also foster the lies that propagated for its benefit. For this reason Philoctetes is the anti-Greek, the betrayer of nation and national virtues - in short, an antisocial element (and we know what this expression implied in the former Eastern Bloc: condemnations, detention, long-term imprisonment). It is then no coincidence that in Müller's version Philoctetes is killed by Neoptolemos: the subversive or traitor must die. Is this again the story told by Gide, of the conflict between the individual and the community, between a genuine individual and the masses blinded by social conformism and reasons of state? Perhaps. Müller's Philoctetes also knows, however, that in the long run only death prevails, and *la muerte* pronounces an inexorable final judgement on each individual morality, even the most highly principled: 'I will only see my face before dying / And that no longer than a moment. / I would like to die before that moment / I would like, in order to see myself, a long death'.

In John Jesurun's text, written specially for *Philoctetes-Variations*, death has actually won. In Jesurun's text Philoctetes speaks from a position beyond the border between life and death. 'A talking corpse narrating', 'A dead horse talking': this is how Jesurun himself describes Philoctetes' narrative point of view. This cadaver, often chatting pleasantly, is constantly using a rough, foul language

familiar from New York bars and B-movies: Jesurun's underworld is in all senses symbolic of the underside of American society. 'The underworld is forever empty but orange trees still blossom under the underworld' - it's that sort of ironical slang (it's very funny though, since it's completely absurd; when Odysseus asks what there is under the orange trees growing under the underworld, Neoptolemos answers, 'Nothing. But scrambled eggs and white rice, codfish, bananas and sand').

6.

The director Jan Ritsema says that *Philoktetes-Variations* is 'theatre on the edge of reality'. Ritsema has before now directed several 'theatre' performances in which the tension between physical presence and theatrical representation or, with the actor in mind, between a body actually present and the text and/or character, was subtly driven home. In *The Passing On* he had a group of older youngsters wander silently round the stage: no text, only movements and gestures, and particularly countless meaningful glances exchanged in silence. This physical game was repeatedly summoning up possible words, possible texts, possible characters in the spectator's mind. The scenes were provided with continual subtitles, the incomplete theatrical reality was constantly supplemented, completed with imaginary words.

*Wittgenstein Incorporated*, the solo performance with Johan Leysen, was indeed about an in-corps-orated Wittgenstein - about a man who thought with every part of his body and whose writings always summon up gestures, signs and movements: in short, a particular body. Ritsema reconstructed several gatherings, lectures in fact, in Wittgenstein's study. The scenic result looked very strange. On stage a character called Ludwig Wittgenstein was speaking, but at the same time it was obvious from the start that the sentences he spoke were only given a proper meaning by Johan Leysen's accompanying gestures. Had these been Wittgenstein's actual arm and head movements? Did Wittgenstein really jump to his feet when one of those present asked him a question after one particular exposition on colour? The fact that Leysen also quoted from eyewitness descriptions of Wittgenstein's lecture gestures only increases the ambiguity. Historical reconstruction, scenic theatricality and 'bodily reality' - Leysen's gestures and his singular presence - are in *Wittgenstein Incorporated* constantly getting in each other's way. After the performance it was hard for the spectator to avoid the question of whether Leysen wasn't in fact a reincarnation of Wittgenstein, but then simulating the earlier Ludwig with his characteristic physique. Where character and personification end and personal physicality began - individual tics, Leysen's characteristic melancholy gaze - were impossible to distinguish with any certainty.

It was perhaps in Müller's *De Opdracht*, a farewell performance, directed by Ritsema, that the impression made by the tension he created between text and character on the one hand and the actor's body on the other was strongest. The physical presence of Dries Wieme, who was killed shortly after

*De Opdracht* in a stupid car accident, was and remains unforgettable. Opposite Dirk Roofthoof, who always acts with such spirit - a brilliant but dangerous actor: he has an almost natural tendency towards exuberance, even exhibitionism, which a director has to handle very cautiously, otherwise Roofthoof would make the play implode - so, opposite the young Roofthoof Ritsema set the older Wieme, whom he chained to a chair for most of the play. An incredibly strong image: Wieme as a gentle grandpa, his arms crossed over his stomach, with a relaxed half-smile, a form of amiable presence, of physical 'being there', which impressed so much that it constantly put the staging of the heavyweight Müller text into perspective, put it at risk, on occasion even disrupted it entirely and completely shattered it. 'Oh, they're still young, they're just chattering away', Wieme's half-smiling mouth seemed to say. He didn't quite say it though, and it was just that tiny distance between implicit body language and explicit text that gave *De Opdracht* an incredible tension.

7.

It may be that in *Philoktetes-Variations*, Jan Ritsema is for once not 'on the edge of reality'. This is because the impact of this play does not come straight from meticulous directing, confronting, in a reasoned way, physicality with theatricality, bodily presence with text or staging. Ron Vawter's play on 'being' and 'seeming', reality and illusion, physical presence and role-representation (the character called Philoktetes) is also repeatedly making reference to a reality in which, according to the ideas and norms currently accepted, one cannot, even may not, enjoy oneself. Our culture is opposed to death and, apart from dying and death becoming excessively taboo, this also, and chiefly, means that death has nothing to do with pleasure or enjoyment (in whatever form). That one might, for example, imagine death as a kind of cheerful dance of fools, as represented in the vanished visual tradition of the *danse macabre*; that in the medieval and early modern popular culture and its carnival-like festivities dying (off) and regeneration, death and (re)birth always went together - all that and much more appears to us to be unbearably ambiguous, devilishly equivocal. It is precisely an inconceivable ambivalence of this sort that characterizes *Philoktetes-Variations*. After all, in this play Vawter performs several times with his body, which is condemned to death. In the Müller variation he does that by creating a collection of significant gestures, little coughs, tears, hesitations etc., in which the unreal or acted (the artificial, that which has to be attributed to the character) can no longer be distinguished from a direct, undirected body language (the authentic, the actual, that which has to be attributed to the real body undermined by Aids). In the final part, in which Gide's text is almost grotesquely put through the mangle - Vawter continually gives both his fellow actors stage directions, in the meantime making photos of them in corpse-like poses - Vawter even simulates his own future state of dead body standing as a candidate for a place in heaven.



Within the ideas dominant in our culture, bodily suffering, dying and death form separate areas of reality, divided from the domain of life, pleasure and play by numerous prohibitions. Seen from the point of view of these representations, *Philoktetes-Variations* also contains several situations which, being too hybrid, are entirely impossible. The stage often appears to present a *theatrically obscene* scene: not by showing an intimate reality - sexual organs, copulation - but the fact that with a 'something' (disease, real physical suffering, a death foretold) a play is made that, in our culture, passes for something entirely non-theatrical, providing an obscene effect, for a performance that is unthinkable under prevailing cultural ideas. 'You can't do things like that', is the way the spectator thinks, almost automatically. In the meantime we have become used to (TV) pictures of wounded people, medical operations etc. However, an actor who makes unclear, even totally confuses, the boundaries between real and acted suffering, his own imminent death and the scenic simulation of it, is in our eyes playing an insufferable game. It is not the 'edge of reality' here, but the reigning notion of Reality itself that's at issue.

In *Philoktetes-Variations* Jan Ritsema, together with Ron Vawter, plays with boundaries that are considered absolute in our culture. This play 'hybridizes' distinctions that are considered essential: life as against death, real as against feigned suffering, actual pain as against theatrical signs of pain, ... One doesn't have to be a cultural academic nor to know the work of G. Bataille to realize that letting cardinal boundaries melt into one another, the restoration of continuity where culture introduces fractures and breaks, and postulates the existence of discontinuous areas of reality, is always experienced as threatening. This is again, incidentally, to say that *Philoktetes-Variations* is a piece that primarily plays on the audience's ideas and that the *Philoktetes* presented is actually a border being, a hybrid creature, just like Sophocles' hero. And does it also need to be said that what is threatening is always fascinating, at least when it keeps a safe distance - on a stage, for example?

8.

Who is *Philoktetes*? I walk from the Kaaitheater to the North Station in Brussels. In recent months there have again been numerous houses demolished in the area between the station and the Leopold II Avenue - the former North District. There always used to be women, 'ladies of pleasure', behind the obligatory red neon lights, in the windows of those vanished houses. There will probably soon be office buildings here, built in the now compulsory post-modern style. Mr Progress is in a hurry, and on his way unscrupulously destroys the dwellings of all those towards whom he is not immediately well-disposed, like whores, those on welfare and the elderly. Didn't the solitary *Philoktetes* live here once?

There's an old man - yes, he has grey hair - standing vacantly begging at the entrance to the temporary structure leading from ground level to the North Station booking hall.

He takes hardly any trouble to attract the attention of the few passers-by. He mechanically moves the plastic cup in his right hand; coins make a clinking sound. Is this Philoctetes?

I walk past the man in a hurry - my train arrives soon, and I've got so much to do by tomorrow: I also ride on the Train of Progress. In the dark glass corridor to the booking hall I come across another beggar. Is he Philoctetes? Does he even have a name? We are the seeing blind, since we are blinded by a light of hope - the Career, Love, the Child and so on - that's continuously beckoning to us. But it's still the hopeless ones that form the majority on this earth. One day an unfriendly Philoctetes will smash down the front door of a theatre.

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