

22–25 March

Rangatira
Q Theatre

Written &
Directed by
Carly Wijs

US/ THEM

BRONKS & RICHARD JORDAN PRODUCTIONS
WITH THEATRE ROYAL PLYMOUTH & BIG IN BELGIUM

In association with Summerhall

March
2018
AUCKLAND
ARTS FESTIVAL



THE SHOW

The story of the play is based on the hostage drama in a school in Beslan that started on 1 September 2004. More than 1,200 people, mainly children and their mothers or grandmothers, were taken hostage. It lasted three days and ended in utter chaos. The whole world was shocked by the fact that the greatest of evils (terrorists) chose the greatest good (a group of children) as their victim.

Us/Them is by no means a straightforward account of this terrible drama, but shows entirely in its own way how children react to extreme situations. Carly Wijs, the director, took inspiration from, among other things, the documentary *Children of Beslan*, which she saw some years ago on the BBC. It gave an account of the drama through the eyes of the children who experienced it. What struck Wijs in their stories was their wisdom, ability to cope and will to live. One boy in the documentary said, "Children understand everything," and this direct and crystal-clear but confrontational statement provides the core of the production.

Wijs was also inspired by conversations with her 9-year-old son and by his way of viewing the world. By talking about elements of current affairs with him, she acquired a highly direct insight into the way a child absorbs certain topics.

In *Us/Them*, the views of a young boy and girl are contrasted with those of adults, in a level-headed yet humorous fashion. The two children are superbly played by the young actress Gytha Parmentier and, alternately, the young dancers Thomas Vantuycom and Roman Van Houtven. By means of a physical approach to storytelling, they show strikingly that in children's eyes, what to adults seems incomprehensible has a logic of its own.

The production had its premiere before terrorist threats and attacks had not yet become an everyday reality in Europe. It is now even more of an occasion for in-depth conversations between parents and children and children and teachers, among children and among adults. In this way, the reality is made into a topic of discussion for everyone, and becomes a little more comprehensible. *Us/Them* was performed at Le Turbulences Festival in Namur just a few days after the attacks in Paris, when the terror threat in Belgium and Luxemburg was at its highest level.

CREATIVE TEAM

**Written &
Directed by**
Carly Wijs

Performed by
Gytha Parmentier &
Roman Van Houtven

Created with
Thomas Vantuycom

Dramaturge
Mieke Versy

Design
Stef Stessel

1hr no interval
PHOTOGRAPHY: FKPH

US/THEM TELLS CHILDREN ABOUT TERRORISM

Children's cries, a buzz in the air, laughter. In the entrance hall of Namur's Théâtre Royal, impatience and anticipation rein. There's something unreal about it all. Is this really Belgium, today, 24 November 2015, a historic day in more than one sense? The children here today are taking part in the 'Turbulences' international youth festival, as if there were nothing out of the ordinary going on. There are about 300 of them, all aged between 10 and 12. They're all talking. The first winter cold has coloured their cheeks red. Their energy snaps us back to everyday life. We are a long way from the climate of fear that has recently gripped Brussels. On the programme this afternoon is *Us/Them*, a performance about... terrorism. The piece is based on the hostage-taking that occurred at a school in Beslan in the Caucasus on 1 September 2004. On that day, a group of dozens of terrorists took more than 1,100 schoolchildren, parents and teachers hostage. This production by BRONKS, Flanders' largest children's and youth theatre company, directed by Carly Wijs, resolutely looks at events from the children's point of view.

HUMOROUS TONE

Gytha Parmentier and Thomas Vantuycom sketch out the outlines of their school on the floor. They describe the individual storeys, the corridors, and the emergency exits in case of fire. But which exits can you use if there is a hostage-taking? The children had never asked themselves that question before. A first dissonant

note signals the terrorists' arrival at the school and shatters the humorous tone of the piece. But humour and immediate concerns soon regain the upper hand: the heat, needing to pee, problems with low blood pressure, and so on. Apart from a few moments of tension and silence, the performance is dominated by the fevered scribbling of sums on the board (How many people were killed there? How many were freed?); by humour, with, for example, the music from *Mission: Impossible* used to evoke an imaginary release; and finally by the complicity and innocence of two children. As the story progresses, it spins the threads that link the bombs together. Or the people. Or perhaps the threads which, like that of Ariadne, describe the complexity of life and of the labyrinth in which you will have to grow up.

"I enjoyed the performance because it describes a tragic situation, but in a funny way," a girl tells us at the end, during an improvised discussion. It is indeed a performance in which the audience is often made to laugh. But fear also rises to the surface, albeit in a more discrete way. We are told about this quietly. "Yes, I'm scared. Every morning I think to myself that I could die," Jeanne explains. "I talk about it every day with my mother and she reassures me. But the police are there to protect us." "I wasn't scared during the performance because this tragedy took place in Russia, which is a long way away. It's different to what happened in France. And the play was also funny, which meant that we felt less affected by the terror."

But Marwane does not feel totally at ease: "The man that the police are looking for, I saw him in Namur prison two weeks ago. I recognised him by his nose."

OPEN ENDING

The children who come to the performance are probably more concerned with the Paris attacks than with the events going on in the play. But once everything has had time to sink in, they will undoubtedly come back to it and think about it differently.

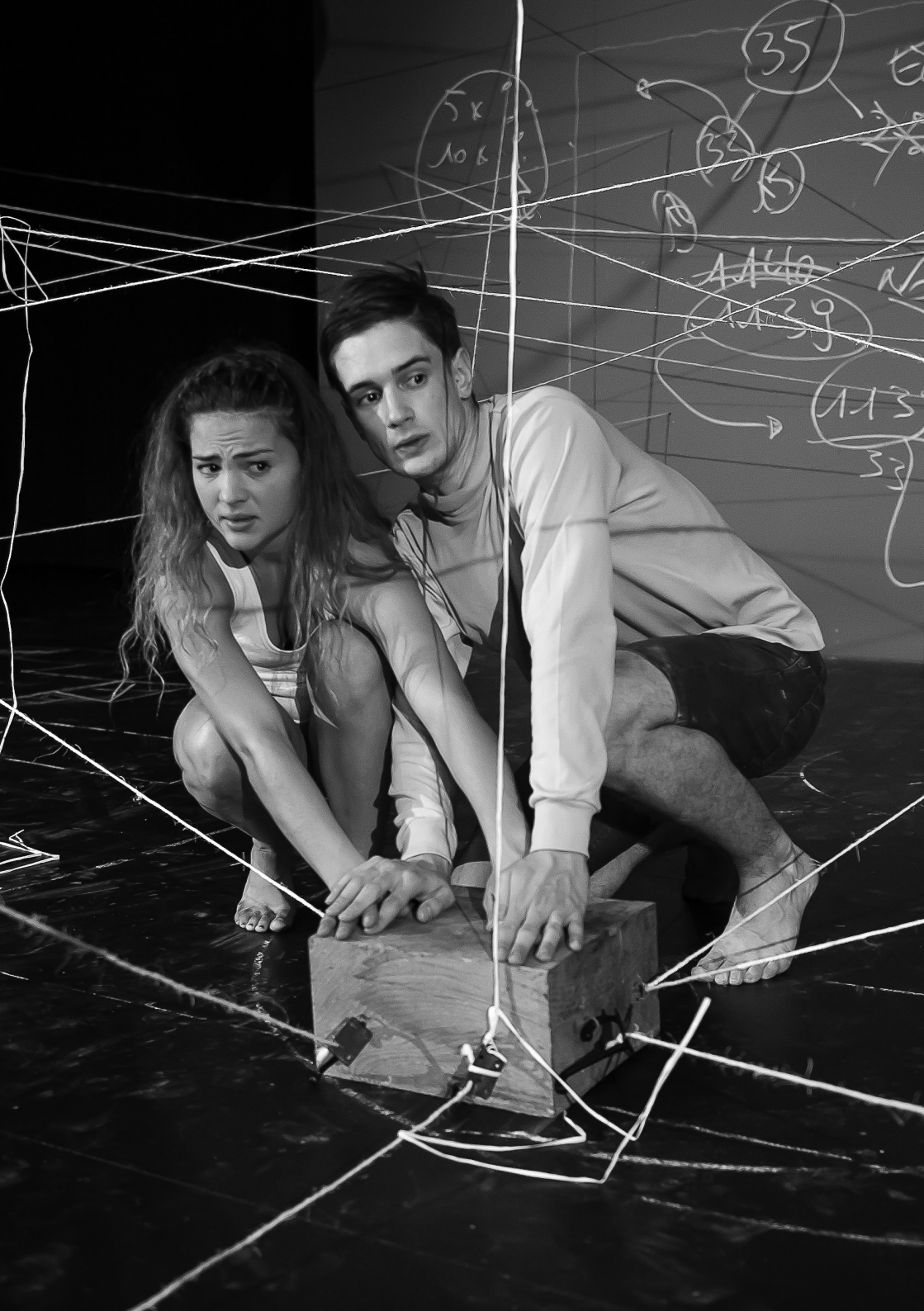
In any case, the idea was to leave the ending of the play open. That's why four hypotheses were chosen. In one of these, the mothers' forgiveness plays a central role. "You can't show this kind of play to children if there is no hope offered at the end," says Veerle Kerckhoven, Artistic Director at BRONKS. "The piece was created 18 months ago and was extremely successful in Flanders. We never imagined that we would be performing it in this context, but it is astonishing to see that the children are reacting in exactly the same way."

For Carly Wijs, it was children's reactions to the hostage-taking in the Caucasus that lay behind the decision to write and stage the piece *Us/Them*. Her son's reaction when he was confronted with this terrible tragedy played a key role. "Children have a different way of looking at the world of adults. We mustn't project onto them the way that we feel about things. When we watched the documentary about the

hostage-taking, we were all surprised by the children's reaction once the tragedy was over. They didn't show any emotion. The neutral tone in which they talked about it also surprised us. They even told us about the games they had played while they were being held hostage. "As artists, it is important for us to talk about the terrible things in life, but always from the child's point of view," the director explains.

For Sarah Colasse, the director of the Centre dramatique de Wallonie pour l'enfance et la jeunesse and the organiser of 'Turbulences', this event is at the present juncture even more worthwhile than it would be otherwise. Unlike its Brussels equivalent 'Météores', the international festival in Namur has been allowed to go ahead, and it reaches out to thousands of people. "Current events mean that everything is taking on different dimensions, because we are tapping into a theme that is meaningful. The moments of laughter, the moments of humanity, are so important to these children, and we wonder how they will build a future for themselves."

Source: *La Libre*, 23 November 2015, Laurence Bertels



BIOGRAPHIES

CARLY WIJS (Writer/Director)

has written and created plays, and has performed as a film and theatre actress with Wim Vandekeybus/Ultima Vez, Guy Cassiers, Josse De Pauw, De Roovers, KOPERGIETERY, Muziektheater Transparant et al. Her productions have toured internationally. She is regularly invited to be a guest lecturer at the RITS and P.A.R.T.S. (both in Brussels). Her first novel *The Doubtexperiment* was published in May 2016 and nominated for the Flemish debut prize, The Bronze Owl. *Us/Them* won her an Edinburgh Fringe First at the 2016 festival. Her new work, *Show*, premiered in January 2017.

GYTHA PARMENTIER (Performer)

recently graduated from the KASK in Ghent and has previously worked as an actress with het KIP, Luxemburg vzw and Alain Platel.

ROMAN VAN HOUTVEN (Performer)

graduated from the P.A.R.T.S. dance school. During and after his studies, he worked on projects with FABULEUS, Impuls Company, Dancingkids (Rosas Education), DE studio, Galacticamendum and Daniel Linehan/Hiatus. In association with BRONKS, De Munt and Q-O2 he choreographed the music theatre production *Frankenstein*.

STEF STESELS (Scenery)

has worked as a designer on several theatre productions by HETPALEIS, de Roovers, Toneelhuis and other companies.

MIKE VERSYP (Dramaturg)

has previously worked with Carly as a dramaturge on the production *De papa, de mam a en de nazi* (KOPERGIETERY), as well as with Studio Orka and Ontroerend Goed. She has also written several children's books (*Linus*, *Soepletters*, et al.).

THEATRE ROYAL PLYMOUTH

is the largest and best attended regional producing theatre in the UK and the leading promoter of theatre in the South West. We produce and present a broad range of theatre in our three distinctive performance spaces – The Lyric, The Drum and The Lab – including classic and contemporary drama, musicals, opera, ballet and dance.

We specialise in the production of new plays and have built a national reputation for the quality and innovation of our programme. Our extensive creative learning work is pioneering and engages young people and communities in Plymouth and beyond. Our award-winning waterfront Production and Learning centre, TR2, is a unique building with unrivalled set, costume, prop-making and rehearsal facilities.

The Theatre Royal Plymouth also collaborates with some of the best artists and theatre makers in the UK and internationally. We have regularly co-produced with regularly with Richard Jordan and Ontroerend Goed (*World Without Us*, *Are we not drawn onward to new erA*, *A History of Everything*, *Sirens and Fight Night*). Paines Plough (*The Angry Brigade* by James Graham; *Love Love Love* by Mike Bartlett), Frantic Assembly (*Othello*, *The Believers* by Bryony Lavery; *Lovesong* by Abi Morgan) and Told By An Idiot (*My Perfect Mind*, *And The Horse You Rode In On*).

We have also co-produced with Complicite (*The Master and Margarita*, *A Disappearing Number*), Hofesh Shechter (*Sun*, *Political Mother*), Graeae (*The Solid Life of Sugar Water*) and David Pugh, Dafydd Rogers and Kneehigh Theatre (*Rebecca*). Alongside our own productions we present a programme of quality and popularity and regularly launch national touring productions including *Swan Lake* and *Edward Scissorhands* (Matthew Bourne), *War Horse* (National Theatre) and most recently *Billy Elliot the Musical*.

SUMMERHALL presents engaging, challenging and exhilarating visual arts, theatre, dance, music, literature and education for people of all ages in the unique buildings of Edinburgh's former Royal (Dick) Veterinary College. We host diverse programmes of visual and performance art throughout the year as well as events, parties, other festivals, workshops – even weddings.

Summerhall provides workspaces for artists, innovators and community organisations as well as encouraging the creation and application of new technologies in our high tech hub – the TechCube. Summerhall is for everyone. Whether you are engaging with our exhibitions, catching the best in avant garde European theatre, grabbing something to drink in the Royal Dick bar or simply soaking up the atmosphere in our buzzy courtyard, there is something for you to explore, discover and most of all, enjoy, this Festival and all year round.

BIG IN BELGIUM Now in its sixth year, Big in Belgium provides a platform for Flemish theatre during the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. Every year a selection of Flemish plays are translated into English and presented, aiming to create a greater visibility for Flemish theatre on the international scene.

BRONKS is a Brussels-based art house with an accent on theatre for a young audience. The artistic guidance is in the hands of Veerle Kerckhoven and Marij De Nys. BRONKS aims with its artistic and art education activities to stimulate children, youth and their environment to discover and explore the possibilities in ourselves and in the world.

Each season, BRONKS invites several artists to make a production for children or youth. This results in three inhouse productions per year, presented not only in the BRONKS theatre, but also on tour. A new theatre text is written for many BRONKS creations. By offering both starting theatre makers and established names and artists from other disciplines the opportunity to create their first performance for children, BRONKS aims to generate enthusiasm for the performing arts for a young audience. In addition to its own work, BRONKS also presents guest productions from beginning and experienced companies and makers from Flanders, the Netherlands and sometimes from other countries. Moreover, BRONKS focuses not only on theatre, but also on music, dance, the visual arts and film.

BRONKS has developed extensive educational activities for schools as well as for children and youth who wish to pursue the performing arts in their free time. Students and teachers can come to BRONKS for school performances, introductions, post-performance discussions, workshops and long-term theatre projects. Via STUDIO BRONKS, the house organises workshops outside school hours in which children and youth can actively explore the theatre medium.

RICHARD JORDAN PRODUCTIONS is an Olivier and TONY Award-winning production company based in London under the artistic leadership of British producer Richard Jordan. Founded in 1998, his company has produced over 205 productions in the UK as well as 26 other countries, including 85 world premieres and 93 European, Australian or US premieres producing and collaborating with many of the world's leading theatres.

He has enjoyed a long relationship with the Auckland Arts Festival where he has previously produced: *en route*; *Othello: the Remix*; *The Great Downhill Journey of Little Tommy*; *BigMouth* and collaborated with the Auckland Festival to produce the New Zealand and Australian seasons of Mark Thomas' *Bravo Figaro!* His other productions in New Zealand include: *MacHomer*; *The Simpsons Do Macbeth*; *Miriam Margolyes Dickens' Women*; and *Once and for All We're Gonna Tell You Who We Are So Shut Up and Listen*.

Described by *The Stage* newspaper as "one of the UK's most prolific theatre producers," Richard Jordan Productions has been at the forefront of developing and/or commissioning works often with a strong social and political agenda. The company has produced and developed a diverse range of established and emerging writers and artists from around the world including: Conor McPherson; Omphile Molusi; Alan Bennett; Cora Bissett; Athol Fugard; David Greig; Martin McDonagh; Alan Ayckbourn; Karla Crome; Valentijn Dhaenens; Charlotte Josephine; Ben Brown; Cristian Ceresoli; Danai Gurira; Nikkole Salter; Tim Crouch; Luke Barnes; Christopher Durang; Nick Steur; Stephen Sondheim;

Robert Farquhar; the Q Brothers; one step at a time like this; Mike Cullen; Charles Hart; Heather Raffo; Stefan Golaszewski and Ontroerend Goed. A new writing specialist, Richard has enjoyed a long association with Belgium, producing and developing the work of some of its country's most exciting new and leading contemporary artists and companies.

Richard's past productions have won over 40 major awards including: the TONY Award for Best Play; Olivier Award for Outstanding Achievement at an Affiliate Theatre; Emmy Award for Best Feature Section; 15 Scotsman Fringe Firsts Awards; 3 Herald Angel Awards; 9 Total Theatre Awards; Amnesty International Freedom of Expression Award; Spirit of the Fringe Award; Off-West End Award for Best Musical; 3 Helen Hayes Awards; Adelaide Festival Award; US Black Alliance Award; Stage Award; Obie Award; John Gassner Award for Best New American Play; Jeff Award; Lucille Lortel Award and the Drama Desk, Drama League, New York Critics and Outer Critic Circle Best New Play Awards. In 1998 he was the first recipient of the TIF/Society of London Theatre Producers Award and in 2010 for his work in U.K. and international theatre he was selected for lifetime inclusion in A & C Black's annual publication *Who's Who*. Most recently in the UK, Richard was awarded the 2017 Award for Outstanding Contribution to the Arts with recognition for his commitment to theatre in the Norfolk and Norwich region where he grew up.

For more information contact:
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Auckland Arts Festival is a place for ambitious ideas by storytellers, provocateurs and creators.

The Festival reflects our contemporary, cosmopolitan city with its many communities. It challenges artists and audiences to be bold and take a risk. Through the work of artists from Aotearoa and across the world, we aim to unify, uplift, enlighten and inspire the people of Tāmaki Makaurau and our many visitors.

Taking place annually in March, 2018 marks the 10th Auckland Arts Festival. This year more than 200,000 people are expected to attend the Festival, which comprises more than 50 events taking place in all corners of the Auckland region and many of which are free.

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