

For children, Dutroux is a grizzly fairy tale

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Twenty years on from the Dutroux affair, the Swiss director Milo Rau is bringing one of the blackest chapters in Belgian history to the stage. Despite his controversial decision to use children in the performance, it is not designed to provoke.

'I would like to change a few things, but that's impossible, because it all actually happened.' Rachel (8) reads the line from her script with a casualness that is both genuine and acquired.

It is disconcerting to see her sitting there, picking at her hair, in a minutely recreated living room setting that hardly leads you to suspect that it harbours the spirit of one of Belgium's most hated child murderers.

You are looking at a child who is playing the role of a child in a theatre performance about Dutroux, but who is still a child herself. Does this small, blonde girl fully understand how sobering her words are, regardless of how many times the director and child psychologist may have explained things to her? Can a child ever preach about the bankruptcy of innocence? *Five Easy Pieces* is theatre for adults, not children.

We've known for some time now that the Swiss documentary theatre-maker Milo Rau – let's just call him the most exciting European artist of the moment – is unafraid of taboos. The Rwandan genocide, the trial of Ceausescu and the Yugoslavian civil war are just a few of the subjects to have undergone his razor-sharp analysis with his company International Institute of Political Murder. And now comes a piece about Dutroux, in which, at the request of the Campo Arts Centre, he is working with children for the first time.

'Dutroux cropped up during the preparations for *The Civil Wars* (2013)', Rau explains. 'In rehearsals, I asked the actors to name those iconic moments when they had felt truly Belgian. The White March in 1996 was the only thing they all agreed on.'

'When you look closely at the case, you see that a number of sociological fault lines converge in Dutroux: Belgium's colonial past (he grew up in the Congo); the demise of the mining industry in Charleroi, where he committed his first crimes; police and judicial reform; and national paranoia. You can use Dutroux to map out Belgian history. In this sense, *Five Easy Pieces* is less about the horror that Dutroux has caused, and more about how he has changed the world in which children grow up today.'

Despair and doubt

Five Easy Pieces is the title of the piano handbook that the composer Stravinsky wrote for his children a hundred years ago. Rau's production can be read not only as a horror story, but also as a '*Lehrstück*', like those performed by Bertolt Brecht in the 1930s.

'A didactic piece teaches through being acted, not through being seen', Brecht wrote, and here this is literally the case. Despite their deeply distressing content, the five scenes resemble exercises in which the children are initiated, if not drilled, into what it

means to be an adult. What do death, loss, grief and submission mean? Can children without any sort of life experience imagine it?

While on a film screen the actors Ans van den Eede and Hendrik van Doorn take on the role of the Lejeune parents, who are waiting for a phone call from the examining magistrate, Polly (10) and Pepijn (13) are doing exactly the same thing on stage. They are trying to mime the despair and doubt that the parents of the murdered Julie must have felt, that evening in 1995 when their daughter did not come home after an afternoon spent playing with her friend Mélissa. Uneasily, the two children press their foreheads together and give one another an adolescent kiss on the cheek in anticipation of the approaching storm, which may never again die down.

Beneath the raw monologues is a strong ethical reflection on what it means to make theatre with children and the power structures that are at play when doing this. It is no coincidence that Rau is simultaneously engaged with this project and with a staging of Pasolini's *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom*.

Tear stick

Peter Seynaeve, who was originally appointed as the children's coach, also appears on stage with them in the role of the authoritarian director. 'Try to cry, Pepijn, think of something sad', Seynaeve prompts the boy when, his face projected in close-up on the big screen, he talks about the day on which the bodies of Julie and Melissa were found.

When Pepijn is unable to cry, Seynaeve arrogantly throws him a 'tear stick'. Here, theatre and reality disconcertingly spill over into one another. Acting out this manipulative situation also means actually experiencing it, both for the children and for the audience.

'At the start, it was a really difficult balance to strike', Seynaeve explains. 'I play their coach on stage, but offstage that is what I really am.' When we think that Dutroux employed the same strategy when he abducted Sabine Dardenne – he pretended to be a 'rescuer' who had to protect her from a criminal network – we are left with an even bitterer aftertaste. Rau concludes: 'Yes, we are fictionalising the Dutroux affair, but hopefully in order to recount something that transcends it.'

Open-minded

Anyone who makes theatre with children inevitably looks to the future. The image of the future that Rau outlines here is bitter about the fatalistic impasse it implies. At the same time, there is also something emancipatory about his re-enactment. The children may play puppets, but they also insist upon autonomy. For example, a little later on they practice a scene in which they talk about their perfect time to die, playfully aware of the taboo that they are breaking for all the 'scared' adults in the theatre. 'I'd like to fall off my bike and break my neck. Painless, over in an instant,' Maurice (13) rehearses. Isn't he afraid of his own words? Not really, and the other children agree with this. Their parents seem to be equally open-minded.

'We were well supported by a psychologist and the people at Campo. We were given a lot of freedom to bring material on board ourselves. Milo talked about the case with us for a long time, about what character we wanted to play, but also about our birth and how we want to die. This means that we can play ourselves too,' explains Maurice.

Rau adds: 'The children were familiar with the name 'Dutrux', but for them he was more of a character from a grizzly fairytale. We used the children's naive questions and imagination to create scenes that were as simple as possible. People assume that young people are automatically authentic on stage, but it is actually a very artificial situation. If you serve up children as the side dish to a piece, they are sincere. But if the entire menu is made up of children, then as a theatre-maker you suddenly have to give it everything you've got (*laughs*). I don't normally direct, but usually set out a framework within which actors can do their thing. In this case, I had to know exactly what they had to act and why they had to act it at every single moment. It was intellectually challenging, but it taught me to be very focused.'

'*Five easy pieces*' by Campo and the International Institute of Political Murder (IIPM) will be performed from 14 to 22 May at KunstenfestivaldesArts in Brussels. Next season, it will be on tour in Gent, Aalst, Turnhout, Genk, Ostend and Roeselare.