

On Migration towards Europe. Simple as ABC#3: The Wild Hunt by Thomas Bellinck

 critical-stages.org/21/on-migration-towards-europe-simple-as-abc3-the-wild-hunt-by-thomas-bellinck/

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April 29, 2020

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Abstract

Simple as ABC#3: The Wild Hunt, directed by the Belgian director Thomas Bellinck, evokes illegal migration to Europe, which has been taking place since the so-called Arab Spring of 2011. The show criticizes the attitude of rejection adopted by European countries toward migrants. It presents an imaginary museum of objects symbolizing the violence against foreigners and provides floor to testimonies of migration.

Keywords: migration, Belgian theatre, Thomas Bellinck

Simple as ABC#3: The Wild Hunt, directed by Thomas Bellinck, has been presented at the Kunstenfestivaldesarts (Brussels, Belgium) in May 2019. This production denounces the conditions and the humiliations suffered by illegal migrants coming from the Middle East and Africa to Europe since 2011. Additionally, Bellinck speaks out against the lack of assistance, the cruelty and violence exerted by European countries and their inhabitants towards migrants. The production, created in Belgium, has special resonance in this country. Migration is an important and sensitive theme in Belgian society from a social, cultural and political point of view.

During the twentieth century, Belgium experienced a significant influx of migrants from different countries, especially from Africa. Not all migrants have fully assimilated into the modern life of European countries. For example, the terrorist attacks of November 13, 2015, in Paris were carried out by Islamist terrorists who left Belgium. This traumatic event made the Belgian population even more aware of the self-marginalization of certain groups of migrants coming from the Middle East and Africa, who find in religious and cultural revindications a way to react to what they consider a “strange culture”—although the Belgian state provides migrants with many social and economic advantages compared to other countries.

The marginalization of migrants has been used for political gain by some parties. On December 18, 2018, Charles Michel’s government resigned after members of the Flemish nationalist party N-Va (Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie) abandoned it, a few days after the announcement of the ratification of the UN Global Compact for Migration by Prime Minister Charles Michel. In the elections of May 28, 2019, the far-right party Vlaams Belang became

the third party in the chamber of deputies. One of the main axes of its political program concerns the limitation, or even rejection, of foreign migration. In December 2019, one year after the said resignation, there was still no government in Belgium.

It seems, however, that the majority of the Belgian population is more open-minded and tolerant of the diversity of cultures, and thus it rejects these political provocations. Moreover, Belgian theatre takes a stand against European measures against migration. It has addressed these issues on several occasions, including *Ceux que j'ai rencontré ne m'ont peut-être pas vus* (*Those I Have Crossed May Not Have Seen Me*), a production of the Nimis Groupe, a theatre company created in 2015 to tackle the European Union's migration policies.

In 2018, director Christiane Jatahy presented the project *Ithaque – notre Odyssée I* (*Ithaca—Our Odyssey 1*), which opened at the Théâtre de l'Odéon in Paris. In 2019, she put together its second part, *Notre présent qui déborde – Notre Odyssée 2* (*Our Present that Overflows—Our Odyssey 2*), which played at the Avignon Theatre festival. At the 2019 Kunstenfestivaldesarts (Brussels), this topic occupied an important place, with several performances, theatrical demonstrations and events focusing on how migrants travel and then adapt to the ways of life in their new country, Belgium. The festival also featured the exhibition *Liquid Violence*, created by the Forensic Oceanography Association, which traced illegal migration from the Middle East and North Africa to Europe through the Mediterranean. This astonishing exhibition, composed of videos, maps, drawings and documentation, demonstrated how many Western countries made decisions to either provide help to ships full of migrants adrift in the Mediterranean or prevent them from reaching their shores.

Thomas Bellinck's project *Simple as ABC#3: The Wild Hunt* was another important and memorable festival event dedicated to the topic of migration. In its title *Simple as ABC#3: The Wild Hunt* suggests that it belongs to a series of Bellinck's projects dedicated to critically commenting on how European countries reject and control migration.

Simple as ABC#1: Man vs Machine was presented as part of Jozef Wouters' project *Infini 1-15* at the 2016 Kunstenfestivaldesarts, whereas *Simple as ABC#2: Keep Calm & Validate*, a musical, opened at the 2017 Kunstenfestivaldesarts. The latter presented migration from multiple points of view as a set of musical numbers and commented on the harmful effects of data collection, which provokes the loss of the human dimension of migration.

An example of documentary theatre, *Simple as ABC#3: The Wild Hunt* aims to stress the political and humanitarian predicament of migrants who are silenced by European political powers and to reveal the terrible conditions of their flight. In theatre, often these horrific experiences of migration pose the problem of representation. So, many theatre artists realize that to present migration on stage is to confront the aesthetic limits of theatre. And thus, they

ask: How should the suffering generated by this situation be represented? How should the ruthless character of migration be preserved without diminishing or simplifying it? What theatrical solutions should evoke these terrible conditions without exaggerating them?

Milo Rau, a Swiss director working in Belgium, offered solutions to this problem of representation in his outstanding production *Empire*, presented at the 2017 Kunstenfestivaldesarts. This work outlined the terrible conditions of migration from Africa and the Middle East, mainly from Syria, to Europe. Milo Rau cast actors-refugees who have been involved in these events. They played their characters and, at the same time, testified to their own experiences of border-crossing. Milo Rau amplified the dramatic effect produced by these testimonies by using simultaneous projections of the actors' faces while they talked to the camera.

In *Simple as ABC#3: The Wild Hunt*, Thomas Bellinck continues this tradition. He traveled to the refugee camps and documented the conversations he held with migrants; he interviewed witnesses and recorded their testimonies. *Simple as ABC#3: The Wild Hunt* includes fragments of this material. It also features interviews with journalists and police officers who are directly involved in working with migrants. One of the narrators regrets having had to live "the bitter humiliation of migration," whereas several Greek journalists indicate the limits of the information they can report in their articles and photos about illegal migration. These photos do not always tell the truth because the photographers must choose only those images that are not too harsh or disturbing. They often feel censored by their publication outlets because the latter avoid disclosing extreme situations lived by migrants. One of the journalists featured in this performance is also a migrant. He strongly believes that in his pieces he must get to the bottom of the story and explain it precisely. However, as another journalist explains, the stories of migrants no longer interest the public; therefore, they remain unpublished as they do not bring in any profit.

Thomas Bellinck's staging addresses these limits of representation. It attempts to speak about the urgency of the topic and to the fact that there is also a rejection of it; rejection caused by particularly disturbing images of migration. To re-enforce this paradox, Bellinck gives migrants the floor. He invites them on stage to testify to the horrors of migration both through the interviews he recorded and through the stories they tell. Through this device, he locates the hostility that today's migrants encounter in Western culture's history of violence. He questions the myths and discourses of superiority of the European civilization, which often validates violence to the other, while placing emphasis on the history of colonization.



Scenography. *Simple as ABC#3: The Wild Hunt*. Directed by Thomas Bellinck. May 2019. Kunstenfestivaldesarts 2019, Brussels (Belgium). Photo: Laurant Van Severen

Camille Lemonnier, set designer, helps Bellinck to make this violence visible by creating a kind of museum onstage; a symbolic place of memory and history, a theatrical *lieu de mémoire* (Nora 1989), which keeps and exhibits the objects that constitute the country's official history. But a museum can also be filled with other objects that symbolize other stories:

Thomas Bellinck's imaginary museum contains objects that symbolize the silenced history of violence suffered by migrants. In the middle of the stage, there is a very simple bench on which Bellinck sits with his back to the audience. He serves as the primary or, rather, the original spectator of the play. At the back, there is a screen at half height, where the titles, the place and the date of the recordings appear. The main objects of this museum are the oral testimonies that the audience hears. Bellinck's first action is to place a burgundy-coloured European passport, which all citizens of the European Union have the right to own, on a pedestal to the left of the stage, close to the audience. This document allows its owner to travel freely around Europe. It is the object that migrants desire the most. To the right of the pedestal, there is a sculpture with Aristotle's head on it and, in front of it, a porcelain statue of a large dog symbolizing the guardians of these ideas. On the left, halfway up, there is a reproduction of the painting "Wild Hunt" by Peter Nicolai Arbo from 1877.

Aristotle is one of the fundamental philosophers of Western humanism. Looking at the bust, the director evokes his early interest in Aristotle, the great Greek philosopher who laid the theoretical foundations of storytelling. Aristotle affirms the importance of the stories. Immediately afterwards, the off voices of children read a part of *The Poetics* in Greek, symbolizing the importance of the philosopher in school education since ancient times. The text comments that although reality is terrible, we like to hear it narrated.

Then, the director comments on another writing by Aristotle, in which the philosopher focuses on the difference between men. The children's voices are heard again. Now, the Greek text suggests that war is an art and that some men are born to command war, while others to obey, to be submissive. Later, Bellinck also shows that Aristotle was the first Western thinker to legitimize slavery and colonialism. Specifically, Aristotle related slavery and colonialism to hunting, and he explained that men develop colonialism by hunting other men and making them into slaves.



Scenography. Passport. *Simple as ABC#3: The Wild Hunt*. Directed by Thomas Bellinck. May 2019. Kunstenfestivaldesarts 2019, Brussels (Belgium). Photo: Lauran Van Severen

Pointing at the 1877 painting “Wild Hunting,” Bellinck transforms these ideas into visual metaphors. This mythical account of hunting and human cruelty is popular in Northern Europe, but it is also present in other European countries, such as France. It shows a group of supernatural hunters (elves, fairies, or the dead) carrying out a chase, a hunt. The chief hunter is God Odin. The myth indicates that wild hunting often leads to natural disasters. The director links these images to human cruelty and to the sufferings of today’s migrants.

On stage, Bellinck speaks of how much hunting is admired in Europe, where there are even museums about hunting. The director underlines its attractive character for those who practice it. Several voices comment on what could be exhibited in a hunting museum. Human hunting is associated with war. On several occasions throughout the show, voices evoke the picture of wild hunting by drawing a parallel between the disaster of the migrants’ fate and human cruelty.

After this provocative exposition, the director leaves the stage and the storytelling is replaced by interviews. Stories and anecdotes, narrated in different languages—Arabic, English, Farsi, French and Greek—follow one after the other. A multiplicity of voices projected from different sides of the auditorium produce an enveloping effect. The bodies of these voices are invisible; they are retained elsewhere—in a refugee camp or another country. But their voices continue to be heard by the audience, who do not know if the people who are speaking are still alive. Confronted with (and confronting) the excess of images on migration, the show leaves us in darkness instead of displaying new images. It turns into an auditory performance: the stories detail the circumstances that pushed migrants to undertake the journey from Afghanistan, Libya, Tunisia, Iran, Syria, Greece, or between Albania and Greece.

The production then becomes more repetitive, but the succession of stories and the increase of the horror narrated is carefully elaborated, as terrible images alternate with demonstrations of positive human attitudes. The staging uses different resources to distance the expression of pain. In most cases, the migrants’ voices briefly comment on a photo or a drawing before being replaced by first-person personal narratives. These stories reveal the process of dehumanization as experienced by migrants. During the first few accounts, the backdrop of the stage is illuminated to create the effect of a barren, dry land; then, the lighting changes, it turns blue.



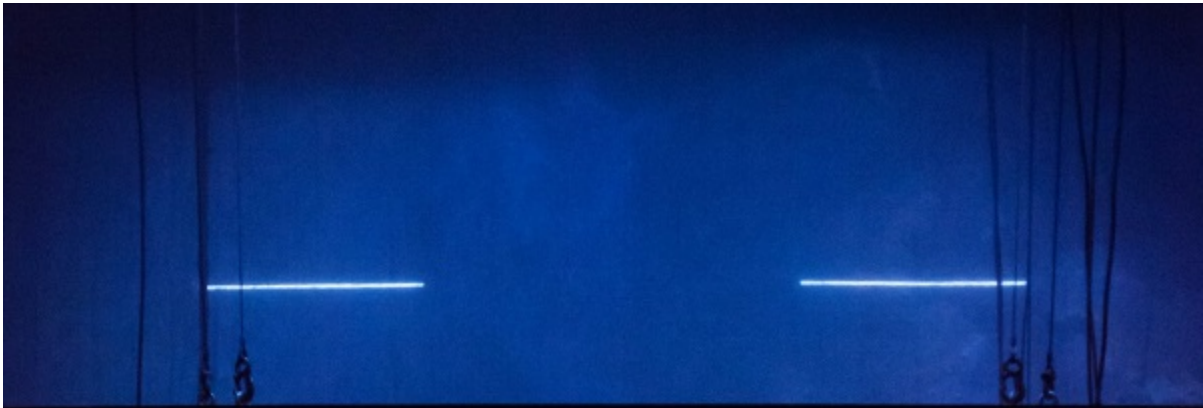
Thomas Bellinck and Aristote. *Simple as ABC#3: The Wild Hunt*. Directed by Thomas Bellinck. May 2019. Kunstenfestivaldesarts 2019, Brussels (Belgium). Photo: Georges Salameh for Onassis Stegi

The first story is told through the photograph of a migrant child waiting at a bus station, who is reported by a ticket seller to the police. Another one talks of a sea crossing, of people who were thrown overboard or sacrificed. The storyteller confesses that they were silent for fear of the other people on the ship; the fear of death during the voyage dehumanized them. “Everyone follows their own voyage,” the storyteller says. Despite the alliances and friendships that the refugees establish within their group, they must (and prefer to) protect themselves. Other stories recall a sea full of corpses. The migrants’ nightmare is drowning. Some black humour accentuates this feeling of horror. “The last suit doesn’t have pockets,” they say, because migrants no longer need pockets to keep their passports or visas in.

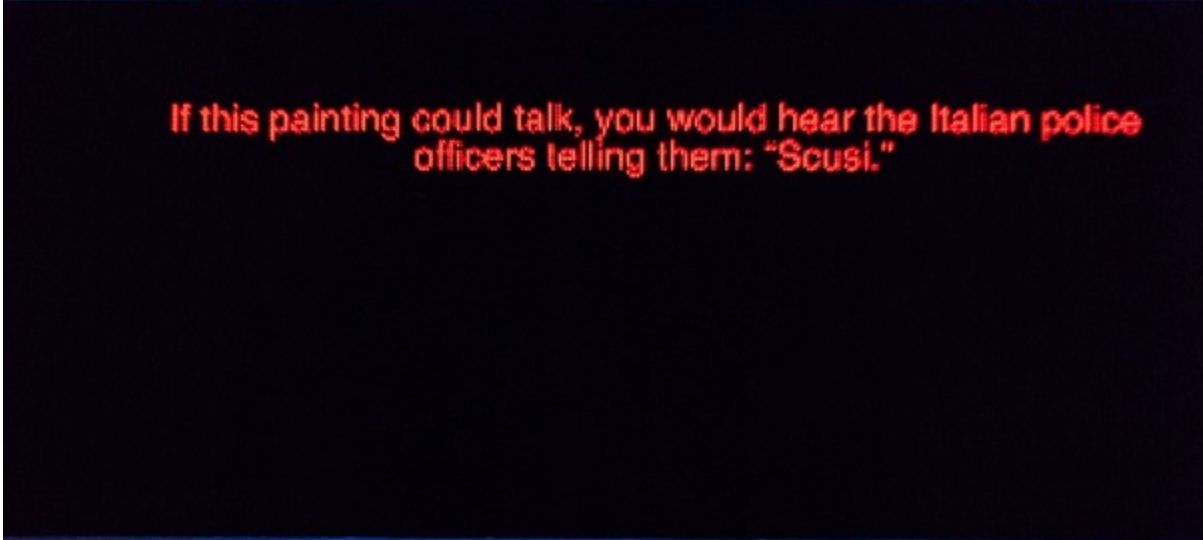
This way, the production states the unavoidable effect of migration: whatever gets left behind cannot be returned. A trafficker from Tunisia, who helped migrants cross the border, tells of the corruption, the need to bribe the police and the politicians, and the risks his work entails. The man shows indifference when a ship sinks: he turns off his phone and disappears to avoid being contacted.

The lighting, designed by Lucas Van Haesbroeck, contributes to the progression of this story. As we hear the stories narrated, the light decreases and the stage falls into darkness. Our attention is directed toward the screen, where we see the sentences projected one after another. Written in red, these letters and phrases represent blood; they gradually melt into a

homogenous background of the same red colour. The projection of French and English subtitles, the translations of the written text, produces an effect of distance and depersonalization: the bodies and their physical presence have disappeared, only voices remain. The use of writing facilitates the disappearance of the actor.



If this painting could talk, you would hear the Italian police officers telling them: "Scusi."



Thomas Bellinck. *Simple as ABC#3: The Wild Hunt*. Directed by Thomas Bellinck. May 2019.
Kunstenfestivaldesarts 2019, Brussels (Belgium). Photo: Laurant Van Severen

In the next section, *Simple as ABC#3: The Wild Hunt* comments on the hostility and humiliation to which migrants are submitted by the locals when they finally reach the European shores. Some stories do speak of generous deeds performed by the migrants' hosts. These deeds nuance the negative attitude of European populations and governments towards migration, although, in the end, all these stories highlight the injustice. For example, there is the story of a Tunisian captain who, between 2009 and 2019, collected corpses found at sea and had them buried in a Muslim cemetery. But, soon, the cemetery was out of space and the question of the religion of those drowned (and who might not be Muslims) was raised. The Captain began to look for a new place to bury the drowned, and, finally, the village granted him an old dunghill. The Captain cleaned the rubble heap and called this "the cemetery of the unknown." When this place was also full, the Captain built another level on top of it, which is also completely full today.

Recorded in Kabul in 2010, the last recording narrates the story of a child who, in order to prevent his trafficker father from being apprehended, accepted to be repeatedly raped by a policeman. Journalists convinced the boy to tell his story and to denounce his abuser. But the policeman threatened the journalists, cited his relations with top U.S. military commanders in NATO and asked them to stop their investigation. The journalists' office was searched, while the journalists themselves were forced to leave together with their families, and thus had to put themselves in the hands of traffickers to cross the border.

The audience, sitting in darkness and often looking only at the red letters of the texts projected for them while listening to the narrations, remains on edge and highly attentive up until the end of the performance. Despite its minimalism, *Simple as ABC#3: The Wild Hunt* turns out to be one of the most striking theatre projects dedicated to denouncing the current conditions of illegal migration to Europe.

***Simple as ABC#3: The Wild Hunt* by Thomas Bellinck**

Production credits:

Text: Said Reza Hosseini Adib, Samaneh Arian, Aristotle, Ghazi Ayari, Thomas Bellinck, Rihab Chaabane, Abir Farhat, Karima Ganji, Parisa Heidari, Chamseddine Marzoug, Vasilis Mathioudakis, Mounir, Fatemeh Mousavi, Mohammad Javad Mousavi, Farouk Quartani, Racist Violence Recording Network, Marwen Sammoud, Ervin Shehu, Yiouli Vitou

Artistic collaborator: Jeroen Van der Ven

Directing: Thomas Bellinck

Dramaturgy: Esther Severi

Interpreting: Said Reza Hosseini Adib, Yasmine Bhar, Hayfa Ghozzi, Rym Haddad, Pafsanias Karathanasis, Amal Rouissi, Georgia Spyropoulou, Aisha Zaied

Lighting design: Lucas Van Haesbroeck

Lighting technician: Marie Vandecasteele

Performance: Said Reza Hosseini Adib, Ghazi Ayari, Thomas Bellinck, Abir Farhat, Karima Ganji, Parisa Heidari, Chamseddine Marzoug, Mounir, Fatemeh Mousavi, Mohammad Javad Mousavi, Farouk Quartani, Nikos Palaiologos, Orestis Seferoglou, Ervin Shehu, The 5th Grade of the 28th Elementary School of Athens, Yiouli Vitou

Production management: Celine van der Poel

Production: Dimitra Dernikou, Yalena Kleidara, Francesca Pinder, Sandra Raes Oklobdzija, Aisha Zaied

Pyrotechnics & set technician: Niels Antonissen

Research & production assistance: Kaat Balfoort, Hayfa Ghazzi, Pafsanias Karathanasis, Bilel Melki, Amal Rouissi, Georgia Spyropoulou, Laurien Versmissen

Scenography: Camille Lemonnier

Set: Niels Antonissen, Guy Cuypers, Daan Roosen, Toneelhuis Decoratelier, Tim Vanhentenryck, Marjan Verachtert

Sound design: Bart Celis

Sound editing: Lars Morren, Emiel Redant, Johannes Ringoot

Sound technician: Arthur De Vuyst

Stagecraft: Mathias Batsleer, Steven Bontinck, Ijf Boulet, Victor Dries, Johannes Rigoot, Diederik Suykens, Bert Van Dijck

Technical production management: Arthur De Vuyst

Transcription: Samia Amami, Sana Chamekh, Farideh Ghalandari, Amira Hamdi, Cyrine Ben Ismail, Yalena Kleidara

Translation & surtitles: Yasmine Akrimi, Amal Boualga, Vassilis Douvitsas, Mahdieh Fahimi, Farbod Fathinejad, Iannis Goerlandt, Welid Hmeissia, Haythem Khamri, Yalena Kleidara, Marwa Manai, Anna Muchin, Eleni Nasiou, Juliane Regler, Mona Silavi

Production: ROBIN

Co-production: Dream City / L'Art Rue (Tunis), De Grote Post (Ostend), Fast Forward Festival / Onassis Cultural Centre (Athens), Kaaitheter (Brussels), Kunstenfestivaldesarts (Brussels)

With the support of: KASK / School of Arts of University College Ghent, LabexMed / Maison Méditerranéenne des Sciences de l'Homme (Marseille), The Flemish Community of Brussels, The Flemish Government

Concept inspired by Grégoire Chamayou's Manhunts: A Philosophical History

Additional research interviews: The Asylum Service, The European Border and Coast Guard Agency, The Hellenic Police

Thanks to: Halima Aissa, Ifigeneia Anastasiadi, Dimitris Angelidis, Anonymous, Katia Arfara, Simon Baetens, Louise Bergez, Marc Bernardot, Moon Blaisse, Hassen Boubakri, Sana Bousbih, Dimitris Christopoulos, Ismael Cissé, Patrick De Coster, Johan Dehollander, Bert De Puydt, Omar Fassatoui, Apostolis Fotiadis, Jan Goossens, Hama Weld Hamida, Louis Janssens, Lobna Jlassi, Ebia Joel, Wafa Kanzari, Khalid Koujili, KVS, Malek Lakhal, Mostfa Lakhder, Lorena Lando, Leon Konda Ler, Mohsen Lihidheb, Mahdi Mabrouk, Jalel

Mahmoudi, Ahmed Mansour, Brigitte Marin, Fatma Mathlouthi, Rosine Mbakam, Yonus Mohamed, Selma Ouissi, Kostis Papaioannou, Lefteris Papagiannakis, Clio Papapantoleon, Stéphanie Poussel, Fanny Robles, Eleni Spathana, Isabel Mohedano Sohm, Imed Soltani, Timo Sterckx, Loes Swaenepoel, Toneelhuis, Carine van Bruggen, Naomi Van Der Horst, An van. Dienderen, Eleonore Van Godtsenhoven et al._

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Critical Stages/Scènes critiques e-ISSN: 2409-7411



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