

# Daring man

Theatre director Jan Decorte on his passion for Shakespeare, Purcell and the importance of intuition

MARIE DUMONT

The Daring Man, a narrow café on Brussels' Vlaanderenstraat, with grimy wood-panelled walls and a hissing espresso machine, stands out like the remnant of some bygone age amid the trendy shops and bars that seem to have taken over the rest of the street.

The place is alive every evening with a bustling, mostly Dutch-speaking crowd of regulars. Rock singer Arno can usually be spotted brooding in a corner. And, come rain or shine, you're likely to find Flemish theatre director Jan Decorte sipping a glass of white wine with Sigrid Vinks, his partner in life and on stage.

Decorte and Vinks are both from Antwerp but live in Brussels – in the posh upper part of town, on Louizalaan. The café, though, is like their second home. "We go there every day," Vinks tells me when I call them up to make an appointment.

## Shakespeare redux

Decorte, 61, is often referred to as "the *enfant terrible* of the Flemish stage" in a pale attempt to capture his huge and manifold talent, which embraces drama as well as cinema, dance and poetry. His plays are rough gems, often spun from old myths and stories, with a raw, elemental energy about them.

The man is not very well known outside Belgium, although he and Vinks did produce a play in French for the Avignon Festival once, with music by Arno and dance by Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker. At home, however, Decorte (pictured) is in constant demand. Right now he's directing two productions at a few days' interval. The first, which premieres this week at Brussels' Kaaithheater before touring Flanders, is called *Niks of niks* (*Nothing or Nothing*), a high-octane reworking in Dutch of Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*. The second, at Antwerp's deSingel, is the repeat of his much-admired

Kunstenfestivaldesarts production from last spring, a pared-down and deeply personal take on the baroque opera *The Indian Queen*.

Of the former, he says: "I read the play in English, understood about one third of it, let it swirl around in my head a bit, then rewrote it my own way." In his more than 30-year career, he has similarly absorbed and regurgitated a great many classics – by Aeschylus, Sophocles, Goethe and Chekhov, among others.

Shakespeare, though, holds a special place in his creative universe. He's done *Macbeth* and *King Lear* and now has his eye on *The Merchant of Venice*. "I love his use of language," says Decorte. "Shakespeare and Marlowe and all; they worked at a time when English wasn't set in stone yet. Everything had to be invented. They could be very creative with language. And Shakespeare was the best in that."

Vinks joins in. "In a way, that's what you do, too: invent your own language. It's not regular Dutch, but something very child-like, archaic and personal. It's an intensified use of language, stripped down to its essence."

To say that our interview went smoothly would be plain lying

Shakespeare may even be the reason why Decorte embraced theatre in the first place. He remembers experiencing a shock when he first read *Macbeth* in a bilingual edition his mother had given him as a birthday present. Feeling the urge to "do something with it but not knowing exactly what," he dropped out of university and signed up to do drama at Brussels' Erasmus University College.



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## Analyse at your own risk

A tall man with long, grey hair and a stern expression, Decorte is guarded but not unfriendly. To say that our interview went smoothly, however, would be plain lying. To an outside viewer, our encounter must have seemed straight out of some absurdist drama as we spectacularly failed to establish a connection, our voices drowned in the mounting din of surrounding conversations. There were long silences, sudden interruptions, rapid-fire questions and evasive answers. Clearly, he and I don't speak the same language.

That's fair enough: Decorte believes that his works are better experienced than analysed. Art should speak to our emotions and have nothing to do with the intellect. "Shakespeare wrote like a 12-year-old, and that's something I try to imitate," he says. "Because it opens up something in people. It makes them ready to receive the soul of the production. All we do is leave images in their eyes."

Adds Vinks: "When we did *The Indian Queen* in May, a lot of people were surprised that they didn't feel the need for an explanation."

*The Indian Queen* is Decorte's second opera. His first was in 2008, when he put up *Dido and Aeneas*, also by the 17th-century English composer Henry Purcell. Both shows, performed in English, are formal, haunting rituals involving the Ghent-based Baroque ensemble B'Rock, whose musicians can be seen on stage, barefoot but otherwise dressed in black.

"Purcell's music is beautiful," Decorte says. "It's clear and open, full of soul. And the great thing about him is that he doesn't care about the plot."

Neither does Decorte: his staging gleefully scraps the play by John Dryden that served as a backbone

for Purcell's music. Gone are the stodgy spoken dialogues and the convoluted intrigue between Aztecs and conquistadores. What's left is attractively opaque, abstract and timeless. One might quibble that he is blatantly misusing his sources, but so did Dryden and Purcell, who knew next to nothing of the Mexico they were describing. Misunderstandings, their opera seems to prove, can sometimes be the stuff of great art.

## Drama queen

Vinks' role in both operas is intriguing: She glides around the stage, diligently setting up props and pushing performers to the right position when it's their turn to sing, enhancing the work's sense of artificiality. "I'm a kind of master of ceremonies, a *metteur en scène* in a very literal way," she suggests. "All the acting is concentrated on me, which is handy: Most opera singers can't act."

I suspect that's close to her real-life role as well: She's the one organising the couple's agenda, answering phone calls, preventing interviews from veering to complete disaster. She and Decorte met, of all places, in a café, when she was still a literature student in Antwerp and he already an established theatremaker. These days their plays are largely

collaborative efforts. Do they sit at home constantly bouncing ideas off each other? "No, we hardly talk at all," says Decorte, ordering himself another glass of wine.

"There is no need to say much," Vinks continues. "It's all intuitive, a matter of trust. It's the same with our actors. We tell them, 'here's your text, do with it what you feel you can do.' It's a big responsibility for them because freedom always comes with responsibility. But it also makes working together pretty stress-free: We rehearse for half an hour, perhaps an hour, then the day is done. We go to the café, and we talk – about everything but work." ♦

### Niks of niks

12-14 January

Kaaithheater

Saintelettesquare 19, Brussels

In Dutch with no surtitles

→ [www.kaaithheater.be](http://www.kaaithheater.be)

### The Indian Queen

18-19 January

deSingel

Desguinlei 25, Antwerp

In English with no surtitles

→ [www.desingel.be](http://www.desingel.be)



Decorte's *Indian Queen* gleefully scraps the play by John Dryden, leaving an abstract interpretation of Purcell's beautiful music

## Decorte in short

### On Shakespeare

"I love his use of language. [He] worked at a time when English wasn't set in stone yet. Everything had to be invented."

### On Purcell

"His music is clear and open, full of soul. And the great thing is that he doesn't care about the plot."

### On working with his partner

"We hardly talk at all."