

## Grandpa Puss ; or how God disappeared Lisaboa Houbrechts | laGeste

*Texts used in the programme booklet VONK/Opera Ballet Vlaanderen*

### On the ruins of a family history

Hildegard De Vuyst

'Houbrechts breathes grand gestures. Not only in the family history she covers, but also in the images she creates and the music she uses to accompany them.'



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I got to know Lisaboa Houbrechts after her Kuiperskaai period. She had formed a collective with Victor and Romy Louise Lauwers, with Pauwel Hertmans and Oscar van der Put that stood out for quite monumental theatre work with a strong visual and physical component. It was named after the Ghent street where the members of the collective shared a loft. They were considered the Needcompany's undisputed heirs because of family ties and stylistic affinity. Then Houbrechts did something extraordinary: she broke away from the succession that seemed to be mapped out, and, supported in this by Toneelhuis' P.U.L.S. programme, she went her own way. That programme was devised to prepare makers for the big stage, with mentors from the generation of theatre makers from the fertile 1980s. This is how Houbrechts ended up for an internship at *Requiem pour I.* by Alain Platel, where our paths first crossed. I was the dramaturge for that work.

At the time, I also coordinated the residency programme at les ballets C de la B, which allowed us to support the creation of *Breugel*, a text of hers that she directed herself. I have always thought that *The Dulle Griet* would be a more appropriate title, because that Griet is the main character, the tomboy, labelled and misunderstood as a brigand, by her creator, the painter Breugel, but also by history. Perhaps this gender undefined creature is saving the furniture in the world in demise

that Breugel paints? With these issues, Houbrechts hooks into contemporary themes that she manipulates in her own unique way.

To make her point, the Dulle Griet travels through the history of images of women: from Pallas Athena, to the Virgin Mary, the Elizabethan era and the struggling Margaret of Parma. I feel that Houbrechts would love to be a time traveller. As a writer, she allows herself to travel through history and glue its fragments together in an almost cubist way. She does the same in *Grandpa Puss ; or how God disappeared*.

While the main character is a bully, we also look at him through the forgiving eyes of the Granddaughter. Not just any granddaughter, but a character larger than life. She travels to *Grandpa Puss*' childhood, his childhood in which he sang as a choirboy and, as an altar boy, had no defence against the priest who used him for his own pleasure. No wonder the rise of Nazism felt like liberation to him. In the eyes of *Grandpa Puss*, the Nazis ended the rule of the parish priests. Jerkily, we leave the grandfather's perspective for that of Moeke Poes, his wife and their only son. We step coarsely through history: from the 1930s over the liberation in '45 to the 1970s, in which the son in turn becomes a victim of abuse by Moeke Poes' brother who has returned heavily damaged from the labour camps. Throughout this multi-perspective of chunks of history, large and small, looms the image of a ramshackle passing on of sexual abuse across generations.

Houbrechts breathes big gestures. Not only in the family history she covers, but also in the images she creates and the music she uses to accompany them. She reaches for Bach in that special combination of vulgar and heavenly, banal and sacred. Combining *Erbarme Dich* with the scene of sexual abuse may be in poor taste for some, I take it at face value that you can never hear it separately again, that this Bach hit is forever tainted with it. Also, the combination between recorded Baroque music (with the Symphony Orchestra of OBV), live singing by soloists associated with the Opera and electronic samples and soundtrack will be a bridge too far for purists. But Houbrechts likes to use all means to create a visceral effect of guilt and recognition as well as shame, empathy *and* horror.



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The black cube on stage is a mystical space, but when it falls open it reveals the entrails of intrafamily violence and emotional destitution. The high priest (Boule Mpanya, who also sings the evangelist's recitatives) represents a spiritual force that eludes the anecdotalism of abuse in the church. Father and son, as victims of religionists and bigots, unleash an iconoclasm directed against the Christ they crucify anew. This Christ takes the form of a rag doll, a black doll made of white newspaper. As in the passion stories of John or Matthew on which Bach bases his music, Jesus must pay for our sins.

Houbrechts does something other than a belated reckoning with God: through Moeke Poes, she also revolts against a certain image of God that is closely related to the image of stereotypical masculinity, of (all)mighty vigour. Together with the Christ, a certain image of masculinity that may be disposed of also disappears. Houbrechts clears the way for the granddaughter. She is allowed to indulge in an embrace of the spiritual and a new (gender) identity that transcends the old contradictions. In this sense, *Grandpa Puss ; or how God disappeared* does not touch so much on the reproduction of sexual abuse across generations as on the rehabilitation of The Feminine, in a kind of mythical connection of history and genetics.



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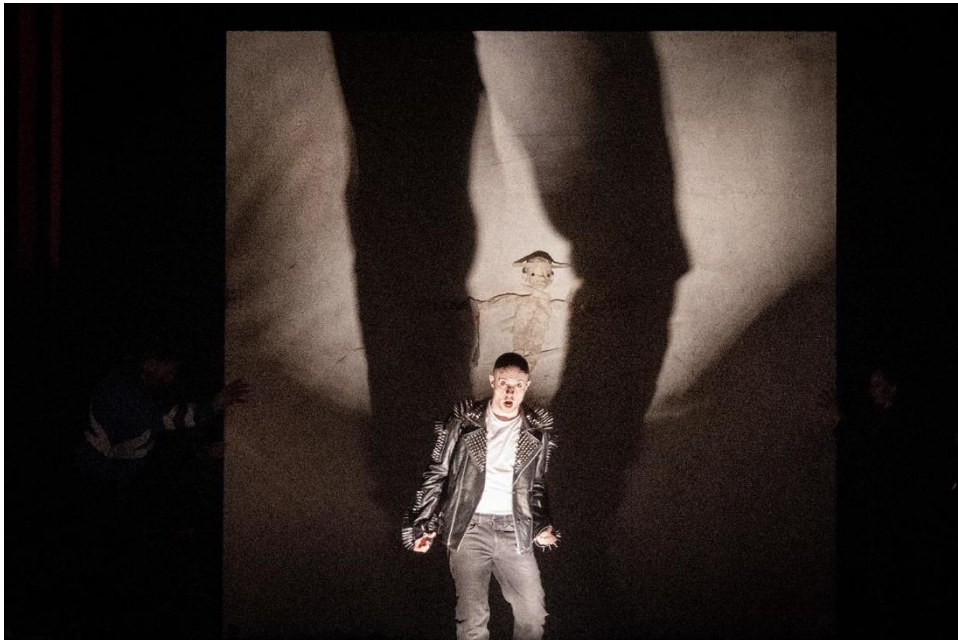
## VENERATION, HUMILIATION, HEALING

On Bach's *St John Passion* in *Grandpa Puss ; or how God disappeared*

Piet De Volder

*O große Lieb, o Lieb ohn alle Maße,  
Die dich gebracht auf diese Marterstraße!  
Ich lebte mit der Welt in Lust und Freuden,  
Und du mußt leiden!*

*Oh great love, oh love beyond measure,  
that brought you to this path of martyrdom!  
I lived with the world in delight and joy,  
and you had to suffer*



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*Herr, unser Herrscher... Lord our Ruler...* The opening chorus of Johann Sebastian Bach's *St John Passion* thunders into the hall at the start *Grandpa Puss, or how God disappeared* by Lisaboa Houbrechts. A whirlwind opener with playing children, brothers, singers, worship and a celebrant performing rituals. The interplay of theatrical action and music tells a lot at once. Sport, camaraderie, religion, ecstasy - it all flows together. A scene that takes us to a Catholic Boys' school in a fictional Flanders in the 1940s. It is a setting that looks familiar yet stripped of anecdotal and realistic details. As ruler, Jesus Christ dominates the lives of the schoolchildren. The friars urge them to persevere in devotion and glorification of Christ/God, commensurate with the physical limits they push in sports. Glorification forms the backbone of Bach's *St John Passion*. Not coincidentally, the very last words of the imposing work are: *Ich will dich preisen ewiglich!* i.e. *I will praise thee eternally!* They resonate perfectly with the 'Ruhm' ('glory') and the 'Verherrlicht' ('glorified') from the opening chorus. John's Gospel emphasises Christ as king, as

God's envoy. His suffering and crucifixion, to which the word 'Niedrigkeit' ('humility') refers in the opening chorus, constitute something like a temporary, human 'passage' back to union/reunion with God the Father in heaven. The musical-dramatic curve of *St John's Passion* is therefore one of ascent - human downfall - divine resurrection. The alternating glorification, humiliation and attack of the Christ figure is also an essential dynamic in Houbrechts' performance, crystallised in the contrasting handling of faith by the protagonists Vake and Moeke Poes. *Grandpa Puss* was indoctrinated with Catholicism as a schoolboy and grew into a rabid hater of anything that smacks of religion. Moeke Poes is an extremely devout woman, shifting between strict, ecclesiastical faith and mysticism, but who prefers to look away from the abuse by the Church of which her husband and son were victims.

### Essential player

Bach's *St John Passion* is not the soundtrack to *Grandpa Puss* but an essential player in the musical theatre that the performance brings. Crucial moments were chosen from Bach's large-scale work that nowhere illustrate the action, let alone comment on it one-on-one. The choruses, chorales and arias often chafe against the scenes. Bach is taken quite out of his comfort zone and reverberates in different ways, alternating between grand and intimate. There is not only the familiar, classical version with voices and orchestra, which is also the subject of worship (by connoisseurs and aficionados alike). Bach's music also resounds most vulnerably and intimately on the accordion of Philippe Thuriot's, who is also on stage. The music permeates *Grandpa Puss* in very different ways and not infrequently gets under the skin, interacting with the scenes evoked. Also striking is the integration of an iconic aria from the *Matthew Passion*, *Erbarme dich*, into a story about many inner hurts, traumas and domestic violence. Houbrechts: 'I am attracted to the way filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky integrates the music of J.S. Bach in films such as *Solaris* and *The Mirror*. He is often about revisiting memories and the past. This is exactly what is going on in *Grandpa Puss* too. Through the Granddaughter of all Granddaughters, we try to access the repressed past of the main character.'

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### Plastic and theatrical

But why the *St John Passion* in particular? Of Bach's two fully surviving Passions, the *St John Passion* is considered the most dramatic and theatrical. Although nuances can be debated, the fact remains that the *St Matthew Passion* is more windy and generally more contemplative and meditative in nature.

Bach's *St John Passion* places us immediately in the act of Christ's suffering and passion. After the glorification of the opening chorus, Christ is immediately captured. There is, unlike the *St Matthew Passion*, no run-up to the tragic events, such as the Last Supper. Not only the immediacy of the dramatic narrative but also its unusually plastic and dynamic character immediately attracted Lisaboa Houbrechts. She recalls being particularly struck by a performance conducted by Nikolaus Harnoncourt in which boys took on solo arias. This choice, which was typical of the pioneering days of historical performance practice, inspired her to attribute a personal connection to Bach's music to the figure of the young *Grandpa Puss*, despite his decidedly anti-religious and anti-clerical attitude to life. Houbrechts: 'In Bach's *Passion*, the story of Jesus' suffering is told in an almost metatheatrical way. There is a narrator or evangelist who tells a story that suddenly comes alive as characters like Christ and Pilate converse with each other. The arias, which can be thought of as monologues of the believing individual, act as poems within the whole. In Greek tragedies,

monologues and dialogues also alternate. The monologues help to delve into a character's inner landscape. So do Bach's arias. And then there are the chorales, which are originally songs of the religious community. I definitely wanted those in there to also show rituals and praying together. The so-called turba choruses, in which the people actively participate, and in which Christ's death sentence and crucifixion are vehemently evoked, complete the picture. The clash between all these layers in Bach's music convinced me to work with the *St John Passion*.'

Houbrechts' theatre text arose in parallel with an increasingly rigorous selection of key musical dramatic moments from Bach's *St John Passion*. Not only does the evocation of Christ's crucifixion resonate with the deep sorrow and resentment of *Grandpa Puss* and his son, who want to crucify Christ again because of the harm done to them by the Church. At the same time, the music has a healing effect for Houbrechts: 'The image of *Grandpa Puss*, who wants to distance himself from God but is moved by the *St John Passion*, while focusing solely on his collection of cats, creates a special friction between the banal and the divine. It also brings air and perspective into the tenebrous and sometimes vulgar narrative. Beneath the anger of *Grandpa Puss* is a deep sadness, which he interprets in an intimate, fragile version of Bach's chorale *Wer hat dich so geschlagen*.'



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### **Mystical power**

The search for healing, rituality and faith is the deeper layer of *Grandpa Puss*, says Houbrechts. 'The beginning of the *St John Passion* touches me deeply,' she says. 'On listening, a whole inner landscape unfolds, in which the search for connection with the divine is central. A search that hurts, as the dissonant-sounding oboes in the instrumental introduction make clear.' Travelling in Greece, she attended a Greek Orthodox service that made her realise the strong effect of rituals, as so many ways of making that connection. 'Between five and six in the morning, you slowly see a community of faith forming. It starts with a cantor, gradually plainclothes brothers enter the church and they start changing behind the iconostasis. They then appear as priests in golden robes. What began informally takes on a solemn and emotional character, also because the church's oldest relic is pretty much brought to life by the impressive chanting. The direction of the whole ritual,

its gradual build-up, that is theatre through and through! In such a moment, I understood the impact of religious imagery on a child. Suddenly I understood what my grandfather, who was to some extent the inspiration for *Grandpa Puss*, must have experienced when he was a chorister. The impact of religion on one's life suddenly became clear.'

Worship, blind faith, violence, repentance, consolation and atonement. It is all contained in the expressively rich score of Bach's *St John Passion*. In the process, the extrovert, grand gesture and the introspective keep each other in balance. This is precisely why Bach's *Passion* is the ideal breeding ground for Houbrechts' performance in which the vulnerable-intimate and the mythical-monumental are intimately interwoven. To the comforting notes of final chorus *Ruht wohl*, the youngest generation in *Grandpa Puss* tries to turn a page and effectively bring about healing and liberation. Houbrechts: 'Today, we see within the younger generation a search for the mystical in a broad sense, as a counter-reaction to the older generations who have sacrificed faith based on the conviction that God does not eliminate suffering. That quest for spirituality takes shape in the Granddaughter of all Granddaughters, who delves into her own body in search of God and the things with which God resonates. She walks a mystical path. That mystical power is enhanced by Bach's music. *Grandpa Puss, or how God disappeared* is therefore, in the words of the passionate theatre-maker, a performance about 'the ambiguity of love. A performance imbued with the need for beauty and grand imagery'.

*Quotes by Lisaboa Houbrechts from an interview with Ilse Degryse and Piet De Volder, 19 September 2022.*