

In Praise of Fiction

Interview with Diederik Peeters by Mathilde Villeneuve

Interview conducted on September 4, during the two-week residency of Diederik Peeters and his artistic team at kunstencentrum BUDA (Kortrijk, Belgium)

MV: Hello Diederik. You're presenting your new performance, *Confabulations*, during the NEXT Festival. What does the title mean?

DP: It's a scientific term that refers to our brain's ability to invent fictions. For this project, I did a lot of research into the history of psychiatry and into how we understand mental health, into everything considered "outside the norm" in terms of cognitive functioning. But beyond that, the performance is about our relationship to reality in general, and in particular about our capacity to make up stories — something that plays a major role in how we relate to the real.

MV: Could you talk about the creation process? When you began researching this project, your intention was to unfold different forms as it developed.

DP: Yes. We had already experimented with this branching, multi-layered way of working in my previous project, *Apparitions*, and *Confabulations* now appears as its second chapter.

We've already created a radio fiction at Le Quartz in Brest for the festival Longueur d'ondes, a visual performance for the Playground Festival at STUK and Museum M in Leuven, a lecture-performance at 3 bis f in Aix-en-Provence, as well as a series of songs and attempts at role-playing games. Throughout this whole period, we kept feeding the process by researching and speaking with people directly concerned — professionals in psychiatry, neurodivergent people. We created and collected a huge amount of material, but now the time has come to assemble the final performance, and suddenly it feels short!

MV: What motivates your desire to talk about fabulation?

DP: *Apparitions* dealt with the magical gaze we can cast on things, without locking ourselves into a purely Cartesian approach. With *Confabulations*, I wanted to continue that line of research: how can we enrich our relationship to the real?

Through my interest in psychiatry, I quickly came upon the question of the stories we tell ourselves, and how they shape our realities. The narratives fed by the dominant visions and ideologies of Western society have always worked to discredit those who diverted from them. Christianity, for instance, fought against pagan practices. And since the Enlightenment, science has gradually — and partly through its entanglement with capitalist ideology — relied on a heteronormative, productive and reproductive body. In such a world, structured by productivity, all visions or attitudes that do not conform to it are seen as problematic, even as "ill" or "pathological."

Take, for example, a young man who hears voices. Within psychiatry, he was diagnosed with schizophrenia and heavily medicated. But his mother, who practiced as a medium, believed that hearing voices was a gift, not a pathology. Two narratives, then — two different ways of telling and perceiving the same thing.

MV: One could say that a branch of science has been brought to heel by capitalism, but at the same time we experience today a painful lack of reason — especially from those who govern us — who actively contribute to building a world of "post-truth" in which nothing prevails except opinions and feelings. And our planet is dying from the lack of attention given to scientific expertise (particularly in ecology).

DP: Of course, I don't think the whole rational movement should be discredited — the same goes for psychiatry. We can criticize the history of psychiatry in many ways, if only because it was shaped almost exclusively by men for a very long time. We can also criticize excessive medicalisation, especially when it serves the interests of pharmaceutical lobbying. But that doesn't mean we should reject psychiatry altogether — I'm convinced it does a tremendous amount of good. It simply means that other narratives are possible, as complements to the psychiatric one. And there are many interesting initiatives developing along those lines. Places like *L'autre lieu* in Brussels don't position themselves as anti-psychiatry, but as complementary. Highlighting these complementarities is important, especially in an increasingly polarised society.

MV: Perhaps precisely because we're living through a crisis of truth, and a fragmentation of the real (exacerbated by social media), artistic forms are turning towards ways of dismantling dominant opinions, lies, and prejudices head-on, in order to inform the world differently — drawing on testimonies, lived experiences, investigations, documents. This documentary approach is compelling, and it coexists with more fictional forms, which are just as essential, because they allow freer shifts, new perspectives, and the creation of distance (geographical, historical, emotional) necessary to understanding the complexity and heterogeneity of the world.

DP: Yes, and I'm also convinced that fiction can, in return, have agency — a concrete impact on the real. It pushes back against the neoliberal idea that "There is no alternative," which, under the guise of impeccable objectivity, presents reality as dependent on immutable laws, and uses that authority to entrench inequality in favour of the powerful.

We want to propose exercises in science fiction to imagine other worlds, other societies, gentler ways of being together. I think it's crucial to nurture that imagination and those stories. And so the artistic form of our performance goes in that direction: opening up the narrative to new possibilities. We try to do this without being polemical, but through poetry, the senses, and humour.

MV: Humour plays an important role in your work...

DP: Yes, it's true. Humour is many things. It's a way of putting things into perspective, of taking distance from oneself. It makes forms more accessible because it welcomes people in. It opens the door to other ways of thinking.

MV: And perhaps also a way to soften or mask subversive critique? Humour can be a balm for anger at times.

DP: During our research we discovered and learned fascinating things that I wanted to share. The lecture-performance I gave in Aix was born from a deep realisation of how our knowledge — and our narratives — are constructed and cultural. But in the end, it suffered somewhat from that urge to share, and turned out to be too pedagogical. For *Confabulations*, we're looking for a more poetic dynamic, one that leaves room for emptiness.

MV: What do you mean by "emptiness"?

DP: Leaving space for the audience's imagination, both individual and collective. Not being too dense or wordy, not naming everything — allowing things to breathe.

MV: How did the scenographic choices emerge? How do these ideas take visual form on stage?

DP: In the visual performance *Boroboroton*, which we presented at the Playground Festival, we created something fairly abstract, working almost like a Rorschach test. We tapped into that natural tendency to project meaning onto abstract shapes. I learned that this phenomenon has a name: pareidolia — the inclination to recognise a familiar shape in a cloud, in smoke, in an inkblot, and so on. That idea will certainly echo through the performance.

We also felt the ghost of Leopoldo Frégoli haunting us throughout the creation. He was a famous early-20th-century quick-change artist, whose name was later given to a neuropsychiatric disorder. Through him emerged a recurring motif in the performance: transformation. Even for the set, we asked ourselves what it would look like if the space itself began performing a quick-change act.

Beyond that, as in all my performances, I try to make full use of the theatrical machinery — the set, the technical elements.

MV: Does the theatrical machine make it easier for us to access our unconscious?

DP: Yes — or rather, to access our imagination, our collective imagination. Theatre is really the place par excellence where we can project ourselves together into a fiction. And we truly need that!