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# Theatre at the coast launches young artists into fame



by *Georgio Valentino*,

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## SUMMARY

*The 20th anniversary of Ostend's summer arts festival puts the spotlight on contemporary theatre and promising Flemish artists*

### Stage your own kind of theatre

Ostend's Theater Aan Zee summer arts festival has come a long way since its inaugural edition in 1997. The event was conceived as a modest five-day showcase for young Flemish artists. Organised in the off-season and hosted by a coastal resort city whose Belle Epoque glory days were a distant memory, expectations were low. Despite everything, however, it worked.



Ostend has since experienced a renaissance, thanks in part to the festival. For its part, [TAZ](#) has grown into a cultural powerhouse whose reputation extends into the Flemish hinterland. It now boasts established and up-and-coming talent from across the region and attracts more than 100,000 visitors a year.

This 20th anniversary edition packs nearly 150 events into 10 (hopefully) sunny days of artistic bliss. Though the focus rests squarely on

contemporary theatre, there's plenty else besides. The programme includes music, film, visual arts, literature and poetry as well as a family park with non-stop puppet shows, craft workshops and other kid-friendly events.

While the festival entertains audiences and enriches its host city's cultural landscape, its most profound contribution is to the young artists for whom the TAZ Jongtheaterprijs (Young Theatre Prize) is both incubator and launchpad.

Leentje Vandenbussche is one of many Flemish theatre makers who got their start at TAZ. The Bruges native, now based in Ghent, was fresh out of art school when she took part in the festival for the first time a decade ago.

## Waiting for Godot

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The piece she presented at TAZ#2006, called *Beckett in his Place*, had been staged months earlier as her graduation project at Ghent arts academy KASK, where she studied 3D design. Inspired by Samuel Beckett's ground-breaking mid-century play *Waiting for Godot*, the site-specific performance featured amateur performers standing and waiting (*pictured below*). It premiered in Ghent's Korenmarkt on what would have been the Irish playwright and Nobel laureate's 100th birthday.

"To my own surprise it was a great success," Vandenbussche says. It wasn't long, she adds, before the then TAZ theatre co-ordinator, Steven Heene, invited her to take the performance to TAZ.

“*Everyone was so supportive before, during and after the festival. It was a new home, a new family*

- LEENTJE VANDENBUSSCHE

The [young artist](#) embraced the opportunity and arrived weeks early to begin scouting performers by open call and chance encounter.

"I'd never been to the festival before, so I had no idea what to expect," she says. "But being on my own for those weeks, I was overwhelmed by the heart-warming environment. Everyone was so supportive before, during and after the festival. It was a new home, a new family."

*Beckett in his Place* won Vandenbussche an honourable mention at TAZ#2006. She returned in 2008 as part of theatre collective Zie!duif, who won that year's Jongtheaterprijs for the performance *Stockholm*. It was the start of a rollercoaster ride for the eight young artists of Zie!duif.



# Prize, what prize?



“We were proud to be among the laureates, but the atmosphere was tense,” Vandenbussche recalls. “Some people loved *Stockholm*; others hated it. The next thing we knew we were runners-up at Fringe Amsterdam. In total I think we staged *Stockholm* over 60 times. TAZ opened a lot of doors for us and provided material support for our next production.”

Zie!duif were invited back to TAZ in 2009, but couldn’t recapture the magic of *Stockholm*. The company split up the following year.

“It wasn’t easy to work in a group of eight strong-willed women,” Vandenbussche says, “but we had fun and shared many great experiences on tour.”

Vandenbussche has forged ahead with her own vision. This year she returns to Ostend to celebrate not just the 20th anniversary of the festival but the 10th anniversary of her TAZ debut and big career break. Naturally she’s staging a new version of *Beckett in his Place*, which marks the end of one artistic cycle and the start of another.

Miet Warlop is another young artist whose career was jump-started by an early appearance at TAZ. Like Vandenbussche, Warlop was a recent KASK graduate when she was tapped for TAZ in 2004. She went along for the ride but hardly suspected what was in store.

“I didn’t even realise there was a prize,” Warlop says. “It was a heavy year. I had lost my brother and I was feeling miserable. When they announced that I was a winner, I was at the bar ordering 10 beers. I didn’t hear it.”

## Coping with loss

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Her prize-winning *Huilend Hert* caused controversy for its fusion of installation and contemporary performance art.

“Even as I collected the award,” she remembers, “there were some people telling me that the piece wasn’t theatre. It was the first time I’d had to defend my art and I found I enjoyed it. The whole experience left me wanting to do more of what they said wasn’t theatre.”

“*There were people telling me the piece wasn’t theatre. It was the first time I’d had to defend my art and I enjoyed it*

- MIET WARLOP

The follow-up, *Sportband*, allowed Warlop to do just that. Premiering at TAZ#2005, the production was a raucous, music-filled requiem for her late brother.

“I brought all my friends on stage to play music and work out against the clock,” she says. “After all the darkness of grief, the artistic process was a beacon of light for me.”

[Warlop](#) went from strength to strength after her TAZ debut. She has since staged several high-profile contemporary theatre productions across Europe. Earlier this year she was announced as recipient of a €99,000, five-year grant by Flemish culture minister Sven Gatz. In an age of budget austerity, this is no small feat.



## A big break

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“It’s satisfying to be rewarded after 12 years of hard work,” Warlop says. “It’s not a crazy grant but it’ll help me start to build my future.”

She’s celebrating this summer by coming home to TAZ – in more ways than one – with a new production, *Dragging the Bone* (pictured top).

“I think *Dragging the Bone* is closer to *Huilend Hert* than the other pieces I’ve made in between,” Warlop says. “I made all the tableaux myself and the flow of the action forms a unified image at the end. It’s also more vital. It involves a lot of sculptures and has a bigger message to the world, our world, the world of woman, the world of art, the world of heart.”

Like Vandenbussche, Warlop cites TAZ as a crucial break in her fledgling career. “TAZ contributed by making me visible among a large group of talented young artists,” she says. “From there I built solid relationships with artists and venues across the region. I’m grateful to all of them.”

This year’s anniversary edition features a host of newcomers who may likewise remember their first TAZ as a seminal career moment. Jongtheaterprijs winners are to be announced at a ceremony at De Grote Post on 6 August. The grand prize is worth €10,000 and grants access to an international network of cultural institutions.

*28 July-8 August, across Ostend*

*Photo top: Reinout Hiel*

*Photo bottom: Marianne Hommersom*