

Bernard Van Eeghem absent-minded.

bernard van hip hop eeghem kip kop regen flip flop krip krop tip top slik slok krib krab strip strop kan kan kling klang sling slang bim bam boem patat!

This is how Bernard Van Eeghem announced his one-off performance for the 50th anniversary of the Beursschouwburg (Brussels, February 5, 2015). I saw that performance. It was barely 20 minutes long. It was so utterly Bernard.

Great announcement by the way. A poem. Jazzy, like the Dadaist poet Paul Van Ostaijen used to do it. A riff on the piano in the spirit of Thelonius Monk. The happy tune of a folksinger, with an ironic conclusion: 'boem patat!'

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Boem patat!

Bernard enters and positions himself in the centre of the small stage. He looks into the theatre and starts jogging on the spot. It would be difficult to be more on the spot. He takes a long stringy piece of paper from his coat pocket, wraps it around his head, running all the while. He takes it off and holds it up to his face. He starts singing, reading the text off the piece of paper.

He sings *Eleanor Rigby* and *For No One*, two Beatles classics. He sings a cappella, hectic, maybe even a little desperate, *no sign of love behind the tears cried for no one*. He takes off his coat, jogs on the spot again, falls down, and writhes on the floor. Haha. He takes the stringy piece of paper again and reads the back. A poem. In English.

He recites, almost singing, glowing, a bit like Dylan Thomas. *Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night*. But what does he read? It takes me a while to recognize the lyrics: the two Beatles songs, back to front. *Been has wedding a where church the in rice the up picks Rigby Eleanor*. He jogs on the spot again. Done. Exit Bernard. The performance ends where it started. Writing this I suddenly realize: ending at the beginning, it's something that often returns in Bernard's work.

This performance is typical for Bernard's *arte povera*. Poor theatre, no big words or gestures. No so-called virtuosity, no spectacular scenography, and yet you keep looking all the while at that clumsy guy on that small stage. There's only one word for that: charisma.

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Character!

Serendipitously the last issue of *Etcetera* (nr. 139, December 2014) features an article about 'ungraspable charisma'. Charisma, it states, is 'an interplay of contradictory qualities in one and the same body', of divine characteristics (charismata) and traces of vulnerability (stigmata). So says theatre historian Joseph Roach.

I find Bernard Van Eeghem charismatic. Vulnerable and awkward, sure, but also resilient, mysterious, difficult to pin down, witty and smart. He's always veiled in a sense of confusion and alienation.

In everything he does, he drags a whole library along with him, and endless reservoir of everything he's ever seen or heard, listened to or lived through. The fertile soil on which he grows his work. Without pedantic references or intertextual hocus pocus.

Bernard's work is simple. Misleadingly simple.

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Mother!

In his work Bernard often returns to the mother figure. The absent mother. She dominates his biography. She's written into all of his actions.

In *Rari Nantes* (2007) he talks about driving down a street and staying in the car for an hour, keeping an eye out. That house over there, would she live there? Would she be the woman walking down the street. Searching in order not to find.

Bloedsomloopworst (2013) deals with him growing up in Bruges. The warm nest of his adoptive parents. The Procession of the Holy Blood. In this performance he paints what he talks about on a large transparent plastic screen, behind which he has positioned himself. The whole mythology of his early years is given shape through this graffiti-like tableau, which culminates in the figure of a naked woman, lying down, legs apart, and Bernard who in the final scene cuts open the screen and pops out his head through the vagina, coming into the world.

Everyone is a stranger in their own life.

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Father!

You're a stranger to yourself. 'Know thyself' – yeah sure. Whatever. 'Try and win the lottery' – right. Will do.

In his most recent show too, *If* (2015), Bernard digs deep into autobiography. To be clear, you won't find any corny stories about childhood. When he talks about the folkloristic evergreen that is the Procession of the Holy Blood Bernard keeps his distance from any kind of nostalgic ego tripping.

'Far, far away in my past my father enters my room' he writes somewhere about *If*. The father comes bearing a gift for his son: the poem *If* by Rudyard Kipling, in a French translation, framed. Recommendations from a father to his son. How to become a man. No macho talk but wisdom like 'trusting in myself even when other doubt me' or 'being fooled whilst not fooling others' or 'being able to dream without letting my dreams run away with me'. Far out!

'Who am I now and what is the difference with who I thought I was going to become growing up?' is the question Bernard asks himself in the same text. That's what his show *If* is about. In hundreds of ultra short scenes he describes his life, 'from before birth to after the skeleton' he cites the poet Karel Jonckheere. He draws and writes, sings and dances, a stream of consciousness to find out what can't be known.

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Cry from the heart!

Painting and telling stories, writing and playing, building and tearing down. Bernard divides his attention across disciplines. Handyman. Trickster. Chronicler.

A loner. He said once in *De Morgen* 'I work best when I have the freedom to roam the city in a state of confusion, talking to myself, in my own world.'

I don't know anyone who walks through the city so confused yet sees so much. No one who lives in their own world and draws so many people into that world. He makes his world into our world.

That's the making of an artist.

Johan Wambacq