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***Us/Them* tells children about terrorism**

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Children's cries, a buzz in the air, laughter. In the entrance hall of Namur's Théâtre Royal, impatience and anticipation reign. There's something unreal about it all. Is this really Belgium, today, 24 November 2015, a historic day in more than one sense? The children here today are taking part in the "Turbulences" international youth festival, as if there were nothing out of the ordinary going on. There are about 300 of them, all aged between 10 and 12. They're all talking. The first winter cold has coloured their cheeks red. Their energy snaps us back to everyday life. We are a long way from the climate of fear that has recently gripped Brussels. On the programme this afternoon is *Us/Them*, a performance about... terrorism. The piece is based on the hostage-taking that occurred at a school in Beslan in the Caucasus

on 1 September 2004. On that day, a group of dozens of terrorists took more than 1,100 schoolchildren, parents and teachers hostage. This production by BRONKS, Flanders' largest children's and youth theatre company, directed by Carly Wijs, resolutely looks at events from the children's point of view.

Humorous tone

Gytha Parmentier and Thomas Vantuycum sketch out the outlines of their school on the floor. They describe the individual storeys, the corridors, and the emergency exits in case of fire. But which exits can you use if there is a hostage-taking? The children had never asked themselves that question before. A first dissonant note signals the terrorists' arrival at the school and shatters the humorous tone of the piece. But humour and immediate concerns soon regain the upper hand: the heat, needing to pee, problems with low blood pressure, and so on. Apart from a few moments of tension and silence, the performance is dominated by the fevered scribbling of sums on the board (How many people were killed there? How many were freed?); by humour, with, for example, the music from *Mission: Impossible* used to evoke an imaginary release; and finally by the complicity and innocence of two children. As the story progresses, it spins the threads that link the bombs together. Or the people. Or perhaps the threads which, like that of Ariadne, describe the complexity of life and of the labyrinth in which you will have to grow up.

"I enjoyed the performance because it describes a tragic situation, but in a funny way", a girl tells us at the end, during an improvised discussion. It is indeed a performance in which the audience is often made to laugh. But fear also rises to the surface, albeit in a more discrete way. We are told about this quietly. "Yes, I'm scared. Every morning I think to myself that I could die", Jeanne explains. "I talk about it every day with my mother and she reassures me. But the police are there to protect us." "I wasn't scared during the performance because this tragedy took place in Russia, which is a long way away. It's different to what happened in France. And the play was also funny, which meant that we felt less affected by the terror".

But Marwane does not feel totally at ease: “The man that the police are looking for, I saw him in Namur prison two weeks ago. I recognised him by his nose.”

Open ending

The children who come to the performance are probably more concerned with the Paris attacks than with the events going on in the play. But once everything has had time to sink in, they will undoubtedly come back to it and think about it differently.

In any case, the idea was to leave the ending of the play open. That’s why four hypotheses were chosen. In one of these, the mothers’ forgiveness plays a central role. “You can’t show this kind of play to children if there is no hope offered at the end”, says Veerle Kerckhoven, Artistic Director at Bronks. “The piece was created eighteen months ago and was extremely successful in Flanders. We never imagined that we would be performing it in this context, but it is astonishing to see that the children are reacting in exactly the same way.”

For Carly Wijs, it was children’s reactions to the hostage-taking in the Caucasus that lay behind the decision to write and stage the piece *Us/Them*. Her son’s reaction when he was confronted with this terrible tragedy played a key role. “Children have a different way of looking at the world of adults. We mustn’t project onto them the way that we feel about things. When we watched the documentary about the hostage-taking, we were all surprised by the children’s reaction once the tragedy was over. They didn’t show any emotion. The neutral tone in which they talked about it also surprised us. They even told us about the games they had played while they were being held hostage. “As artists, it is important for us to talk about the terrible things in life, but always from the child’s point of view”, the director explains.

For Sarah Colasse, the director of the *Centre dramatique de Wallonie pour l’enfance et la jeunesse* and the organiser of “Turbulences”, this event is at the present juncture even more worthwhile than it would be otherwise. Unlike its Brussels

equivalent “Météores”, the international festival in Namur has been allowed to go ahead, and it reaches out to thousands of people. “Current events mean that everything is taking on different dimensions, because we are tapping into a theme that is meaningful. The moments of laughter, the moments of humanity, are so important to these children, and we wonder how they will build a future for themselves.”



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<http://www.lalibre.be/culture/scenes/wijzj-parle-de-terrorisme-aux-enfants-56533e213570ca6ff91f7fb2>