

Stage

The lying king

Malcolm Rock talks to the team behind Toneelgroep's trilingual take on Jarry's satirical power play, 'Ubu Roi'

Toneelgroep turns trilingual for its latest premiere. The Amsterdam ensemble has joined forces with English playwright Simon Stephens and actors from Germany's Schauspiel Essen for a polyglot purée of Frenchman Alfred Jarry's 1896 play 'Ubu Roi' ('Ubu the King').

Even Dutch dramaturg Corien Baart – whose job for the past three seasons has been to interpret scripts for the company – admits to being more than a little tongue-twisted.

'We've borrowed from two Dutch and six German translations and it's a little confusing at the moment,' she confesses. 'A single line can include words from Dutch, German and English. Ubu shouts: "Vrienden, Freunde, friends," for example. We're searching for a new language that stands as a metaphor for unity, or disunity, as the case may be.'

Toneelgroep is planning to include English surtitles for many of its upcoming performances, a move which would have made the 'Ubu' language labyrinth more of a straightforward stroll for bilinguals. Perversely, German director Sebastian Nübling has scrapped them for these performances, in the name of subject matter.

'Sebastian wants to show how easily political language becomes meaningless, whatever the dialect,' says Baart, explaining that theatre in the Netherlands is a directors' theatre, so really it's his choice. 'The signature of the director is the most important thing. Maybe it's something to do with our multilingual mindset; we like working with foreign directors with strong concepts.'

Written at the tail end of the 19th century, 'Ubu' is a bloodthirsty burlesque about a war criminal who installs a regime of terror and anarchy. The historically controversial play, which has provoked its fair share of riots, foreshadows many of the atrocities of the 20th century, a quality that startled playwright Stephens (whose previous post was in the literary department of London's Royal Court Theatre):

'I don't think Jarry set out to imagine the 20th century, but it's alarming how many of the phenomena he wrote about were realised over the next hundred years.'

Stephens has tagged an original



JAN VERSWELD

Ubu you think you are? Toneelgroep players are joined by Schauspiel Essen

English epilogue on to Jarry's satire, which he hopes will remind audiences of the crimes world leaders have allowed to happen – and which remain unpunished. He imagines Ubu on trial in the manner of Saddam Hussein or Slobodan Milosevic.

'I read the transcripts of those trials,' explains Stephens, 'but was most fascinated by the trial of [Liberian warlord] Charles Taylor. There was something Ubu-esque in the extremity of the violence of the crimes he was accused of committing and the calmness of the courts.'

He continues: 'In the 19th century, the actions Jarry was imagining were heightened and absurd to the point of being comical. One hundred years later and the notion of mass graves is no longer absurd; it's horrifying. The notion of individuals turning the power of the state towards the manipulation of their own wealth is no longer absurd. Even the extent to which such despots manipulate their own language seems as actual and historical now as it seemed absurd or comical then.'

The Toneelgroep-Schauspiel partnership, which sees 'Ubu' play in

Essen before its Amsterdam premiere, echoes the long struggle for single law and justice in Europe, he says.

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'The ideas behind the European Union are riddled with inconsistencies, injustices and impossibilities,' says Stephens. 'But a continent united rather than divided by centuries of historical attrition is a more dignified continent.'

Baart agrees. She says the most challenging aspect of making 'Ubu' has been reconciling the different theatre idioms brought into the rehearsal room by actors from across borders and a guest director whose take on anarchy is more literal than

some are comfortable with.

'It takes time for them to understand where he's leading them, and sometimes I see them looking for a deeper meaning, thinking, "This is too simple,"' says Baart. 'He's direct and literal and shows anarchy on the stage with people being naked and eating shit. His "Ubu" starts as a party of children playing at revolution and ends in terror.'

The dramaturg is adamant that the production will appeal to more than a few fecophiles, however. (Don't worry: 'Ubu' poo is only pepper cake mixed with water after all.) She says it's the kind of show that leaves you laughing until you arrive home and realise the horror of what you've just seen.

'It's a scream for justice,' Baart declares. 'Dutch theatre has learnt to be open to new ideas, creative collaborations and different theatre languages. In a world where people are afraid of living together, where people feel powerless and overruled by unjust politics, it's important that theatre reaches out to its neighbours.' 'Ubu' is performed at the Stadsschouwburg, 1-8 May, various times; see listings for details.