

Annexe 2

Entretien avec Benjamin Abel Meirhaeghe

Eloïse Guissart

So my first question would be, how do you define yourself as an artist and how would you define your work? Would you say you are more of an actor, a performer, a singer ? Because I saw a lot of your work and you seems to do a lot of things. And so I wanted to know.

Benjamin Abel Meirhaeghe

Yeah. I would say I'm mainly a director. Sometimes... performing myself in my own pieces but I would never start with I'm a performer but a part of that I'm also like a singer like not even a
10 performer but really a singer with a band. So director and singer.

Eloïse Guissart

Okay and how would you define your work? What do you say to people about what you do ? What kind of theatre do you make ? What kind of performances ?

Benjamin Abel Meirhaeghe

I always say I make theatre for the big stage, so a big gesture. And I combine classical music, like opera, or even older music than opera, with dance and images and stenography. Yeah, so it reflects on the big stage.

Eloïse Guissart

Okay, a big gesture. I like this expression.

20 **Benjamin Abel Meirhaeghe**

Yes.

Eloïse Guissart

Also, concretely, what is your artistic approach? What I mean by that is, what inspires you to create ? How do you come to a kind of debut, like a beginning of a performance, of an idea?

Benjamin Abel Meirhaeghe

Yeah, for me, it's several things. Which is also, I think, the most important thing of my work is the performers I'm working with. So I don't have a fixed ensemble or whatever. It's like always different people. So that makes that I also make different pieces with different focuses. So I think casting and looking for like nice new performers or like is bringing so much ideas. For example, the last piece I did, The Rite of Spring, it's really like it's the performers and then there are some style ideas. So that's one thing. Another thing of a start is like a fascination for music. For example, the Madrigals by Monteverdi or La Folia, the Spanish music team. And a third thing is, I'm... But that's not another start, but it comes like right after. It's like the space, the cinematography, the atmosphere. Yeah, it's very early in making the idea to envision stuff. It's super important.

Eloïse Guissart

You don't have a precise idea of what you are going to do. It games with people, with the place, and the atmosphere. So you don't have like something written, but it games with, it's like improvisation.

40 **Benjamin Abel Meirhaeghe**

Yeah, not fully, but I know a lot of directors that have like a script in the beginning of their rehearsals and I cannot do it. So for me, there is a lot of dramaturgical sources and like text and books and videos and pictures, a lot of pictures hours. and then we gather around that material and of course there are some ideas already like we are going to learn to sing the madrigals we are going to dance but I don't have the piece in my mind before I start.

Eloïse Guissart

Okay it's like more of a stage work okay yeah it's really.

Benjamin Abel Meirhaeghe

Yeah, in that sense, it's like in pro, I have eight weeks to make a new piece, voila.

50 **Eloïse Guissart**

Okay, that's really interesting. Also, in that kind of same question, do you keep a practice journal? Do you note everything you do, even if you will not maybe keep the ID, each ID, do you write it somewhere or it just... keeps going around in the atmosphere.

Benjamin Abel Meirhaeghe

Yeah, it's interesting. I don't write so much. I believe good ideas stick in the mind or something. But of course, I'm very privileged to have a director's assistant that emails me every rehearsal, like all the notes, what's been said. maybe I'm a bit colored like I have the feeling I don't write anything at all actually someone else is fixing it so but me myself I I'm not like I have a little notebook and this is like the start of the year you know okay.

60 **Eloïse Guissart**

Okay from January okay great um okay so my next question would be uh What does research creation mean to you? Do you know what it is? Do you do you? Yeah, because there is definition like in the books, etc. But I did four months in Quebec. And over there, research creation is like a big thing. Like in my in my in my master degree, we have to in Quebec, we have to do a master thesis in research creation. So I don't have to do this for here in Belgium, but so I wanted to, you know, learn more about research creation in Belgium, in Europe, especially Belgium because I'm Belgian. But yeah, so do you know research creation? Do you know what it means or what does it mean to you? Is it clear?

Benjamin Abel Meirhaeghe

70 No, I don't know. But can you say in French the research creation? How do you say it?

Eloïse Guissart

Okay. It's the fact that as an artist, you put yourself in a position of a researcher. And so you will have, you want to work in order to improve your practice as an artist, but with maybe a question research, So you want to improve a part of your work, and so you will ask a question to yourself and make things happen for you to be able to improve that part of your work that you want to improve by reading some books, some articles, making experiences, of course. So if you do not know what is a research question, I have another question that is more precise of what I want to answer. It's like, do you, as an artist, put yourself in the position of researcher in your creative process?

80 **Benjamin Abel Meirhaeghe**

Yeah, definitely. And I think some artists don't do it, and that makes them not so good artists, I think. If you don't have a researcher or something to improve, you repeat the thing you know, And I think knowledge in theatre is sometimes not super interesting. I think it's better to show the unknown or to show the search and then like the answer repeating and repeating and repeating. So yeah, I think I'm a researcher, but not per se like I have the feeling my whole team

research and then because I, for example, I don't really read. It's something I cannot do. I can only read like little texts.

Eloïse Guissart

Yeah.

90 **Benjamin Abel Meirhaeghe**

But that makes it also interesting. I have questions, but yeah, I got answers from the people I work with via their domain where they work in or something, which is nice.

Eloïse Guissart

So how would you define the role of research in your creative process? Is it like something that, you know, starts the process or it comes during the process? Is it the beginning or?

Benjamin Abel Meirhaeghe

100 I think it's both. I think in the beginning, before conceptualizing a new performance, I do a little research. I ask myself what is needed in the world, what is needed for me personally. And sometimes it has to do with form and like set design, where I want to develop myself. But mostly again, it's in like, how can I look for the most intimate form of theatre in the big stage. I think this question is, I repeat myself over and over and it shapes themselves in other questions. So I think this main thing is always there. And then you have questions in terms of virtuosity and music and what if singers or dancers that not perceive sing classical music sing classical music like for me this is our research and so it happens definitely before but yeah definitely also in the performance with the performers.

Eloïse Guissart

So you would say you have like a lack of knowledge to full in with your work at each piece you do?

Benjamin Abel Meirhaeghe

110 Yeah.

Eloïse Guissart

Perfect. And so you are, of course, aware of this role, of the fact that you are a researcher. Do you sometimes define yourself as a researcher?

Benjamin Abel Meirhaeghe

No, I never define myself as a researcher, but I think, like my dramaturg does, sometimes she is there in the credits, like dramaturgy research. But Yeah, it's all a bit abstract, of course, if you're creating because, yeah, like I said, I hope everybody research and search in their practice, otherwise it stands still. But I use a lot the term archaeology, archaeologists in my work. So performers are being archaeologists and me, myself too, like we scrape a little layer from the earth from the past and we find like it's almost we find classical references over and over again like uh or over and over like you know like we dig up an opera piece or a style of dance or and then we do like archaeologists researchers we gather around we yeah we study This artifact.

Eloïse Guissart

Okay.

Benjamin Abel Meirhaeghe

Sorry for this sound.

Eloïse Guissart

My next question. How did... So you kind of say that. Sorry, I just read my question so that I'm sure you didn't answer it yet. Do you say that you wasn't always trying to search an answer to like something that you, was it a before and after? Do you have a moment in mind maybe that you find what was You as an artist, what was your work? Do you understand my question? I'm going to be more specific. So do you have a moment in your career that you said to yourself, okay, that's what I am doing and that's what I have to do as an artist and what define myself?

Benjamin Abel Meirhaeghe

Yes, I had it like after graduating, I had it. Because it's important time to profile yourself. But, that's seven years ago, I think. But, yeah, it's a good question. I think you are, or at least me, I'm confronted every time with that question. Like, Yeah. And that's a bit the burden of being an artist today, I think, because you have to... Or I decide I have to be so loud and so much out there with a vision and with a... And I actually rather like the position of not knowing and just like fooling around as a painter and then... But yeah, so it's confronting. It's confronting every piece with a team in front of you, pretending you know and you own your practice and your research and you know the answer and you're going to lead them through the creation. It's actually something I'm struggling with a lot of the time. Because I feel I have like unfinished

research, maybe like unfinished business. Is it focused only on music? How do I relate to choreography? How political is my work? How sustainable for performers is it? So there are a lot of questions that are unsolved. And sometimes I want them to be answered. But like I say, I love so much the mysteria and the unknown. And so I'm like, I'm like a catch between them two.

Eloïse Guissart

150 Okay. Do you think research, and so research in the way you uses it, you use it in the in the creative process can affect the evolution of Nottist, his works and the arts in general.

Benjamin Abel Meirhaeghe

Yeah, I think.

Eloïse Guissart

And how would you think that maybe research in music and dance, for example, would be able to make the art better than it is now. Like, how do you think it can help to develop the culture and the art with a big A.

Benjamin Abel Meirhaeghe

160 Yeah if I would know that I would I would do it on it. Yeah first of all I think art history is full of people who research like in painting the pointillism, the like other styles that develop it's like that's the research and I have to say Maybe I miss a bit that in the time we live in, especially on the big stage, because it's very much connected to money. Like you have to make pieces that bring up money and audience has to understand. So I miss a bit people who are doing a specific research and bring it out. I think research is mostly there in the underground right now. whether it's time to experiment and stuff. So I'm a bit disappointed in that, in... Yeah, how knowledge is used these days on the stages I work. On the other hand, how I think it goes forward. I think there is exciting stuff happening in terms of crossover, like people with knowledge, for example, in, how do you say in English? For example, I have a friend who is a researcher in plants and in nature, and her research is what happens if humanity goes out of the city, how would the nature take over this city? And I think more and more these practices find a way to art, in combinations. And I think this is super exciting that not all the weight is on the artists and is about the form. Actually, I think in art history until 30 years ago or longer, I think a lot was about the form and the medium, how to change it, like finding another form to paint a rose or to do a text or to move. And I think we have so much forms and in these times you almost

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cannot react anymore on history because it's so much and so dominant. I think in the future it will be more about the content again. Like what do we tell, you know, like who paints a rose these days? How naive is it to paint a rose? And I think in that research or people that have like deeper practices in terms of what they tell will be more important. Or at least that's how I feel, how my nostalgic personality feels.

180 **Eloïse Guissart**

I hope as well it's going to be like this because I love the unsay and it's still said, you know. So I have two questions left. Would you say that your work would allow you to generate knowledge like academically?

Benjamin Abel Meirhaeghe

Say it again.

Eloïse Guissart

Would you, do you think that maybe if you wanted to, your work would allow you to generate knowledge like academically?

Benjamin Abel Meirhaeghe

190 Ah, like that. I was questioning because I was quite interested I thought it was very strict and like... But now you have like this old Flemish director who is amazing, Jan de Korte, and he has a... Yeah, he is now in academic world researching how he will prove that you will become crazy of reading Shakespeare over and over again. That's like really his research. And I found it so nice that this is possible. So yeah, I think if it's not too academic and it's still fun and open, I would do it. But it should be fun. And sometimes with academic stuff, and that's also the reason why I don't read, it gets so serious and so... Like again, like... knowledge. I want something like in between.

Eloïse Guissart

200 So I read in a book that you cannot do research in artistic, in the artistically without doing experiments. So I think you could find a way so that can be fun and academically if you want to.

Benjamin Abel Meirhaeghe

Yeah, true. Yeah, it's about his experiments. That's a nice thing.

Eloïse Guissart

Yeah, because if we do not experiment, we cannot say, yeah, yeah, I know that it is like that to feel the producing. My last question is a question more of on the future. Like, do you think AI is compatible with this way of working? So the fact that working with like your way of working like I want to do something, I will search people, a place, the atmosphere, my ideas, and I will create it. Do you think it is compatible with AI? And if you do, how is it compatible? I don't
210 know if you already maybe work with AI.

Benjamin Abel Meirhaeghe

No, no, I'm pretty against AI. So my answer would be yes, I think it will be perfectly possible to do. And I see already people I work with, they do it and it's stunning. It's giving good options and it can be faster than anybody, translate ideas into plans and realities. And this is stunning, you know, you can make a light design with AI and it's like, whoa, like, but I believe AI can take over the full practice of making, making an evening with human beings moving and dancing. I don't believe in that. But yeah, I'm a bit scared about it, but My answer is that it would be possible, totally.

Eloïse Guissart

220 It could take like the shape of an assistant, maybe.

Benjamin Abel Meirhaeghe

Yeah, but like a very smart assistant, which is not nice. But I used it once and it was to find a title. Because you can put your title and then say, give me 20 other options. Yeah. This is super handy. But, yeah. I hope that it becomes an assistant, but the second assistant.

Eloïse Guissart

Yeah. Okay, so I don't have any questions left