

Rieks Swarte got his residency at de Theaterschool off to a start by working with students on building Cabano, a spatial installation that he describes as a 'self-portrait in architecture'. Here Swarte discusses his approach to his own work.

It's all about transfer

Marijke Hoogenboom in conversation with Rieks Swarte

Did you know from an early age what you wanted to do?

Rieks Swarte (RS): I wanted to become a puppeteer from the moment as a boy when I made a puppet theatre in the attic with my cousin. I'd seen a puppet show on television called *Dappere Dodo*, but I didn't think it was good enough. There was one programme I did like though called *Coco en de vliegende knorrepot*, made by Feike Boschma. I was totally captivated by how he could create other worlds with just a piece of cloth on a string, and some violin music.

But when I looked into the directory of professions, I discovered there was no such thing as a professional puppeteer. So I phoned Feike Boschma and asked if I could get lessons anywhere. He said I could come to him if I wanted. I was just 14 and I went on two Saturdays in a row to his house in Amsterdam. But the third time I went, his wife was at the top of the stairs telling me, 'If you want to stay poor then just keep on taking lessons from Fieke. I've divorced him. He's not here. Just go away.'

I decided I wanted to do something with props and sets. There were no really good courses in this subject, so that's

why I combined my studies at the Vrije Academie in The Hague with the directing course in Amsterdam – it had just been set up by Jan Kassies.

You have a very identifiable artistic language, whether you're making a play, an exhibition or a film. Is it possible for you to describe how you arrived at it?

RS: Nowadays, we hardly ever use the term 'toy play' [from Swarte's own Dutch word *speelgoedvoorstellingen*], but it does describe perfectly doing something to scale that if it were full size would be too big to fit in a theatre, or which wouldn't work in original size. Childlike pleasure is something I never want to lose. That's a core mentality for me.

It took ten years before I really found my feet when it came to combining my various interests. I kept thinking that I had to make a choice – was I director, a designer or a performer? The answer only came in 1987 when I made *Cabinet der natuur en kunst* (Cabinet of nature and art) for the 200th anniversary of Felix Meritis. Felix Meritis was originally an artistic and scientific society, so we built a museum in what used to be the Shaffy theatre in Felix Meritis. We got it back into its original state, opened the windows,

let in the daylight and then started carrying out scientific experiments from the Enlightenment period.

The theatre company Maatschappij Discordia was still working in the attic at Felix Meritis at the time, and they were a huge influence. And so were fellow theatre group Onafhankelijk Toneel, with Gerrit Timmers. Together with Annet Kouwenhoven I made a play based on the German children's book *Emil and the Detectives*, in which we used video along with loads of little objects and bric-a-brac. Toneelschuur theatre in Haarlem were giving me unconditional support in that period. It was there that I was able to further develop my thinking and approach until I set up my own company De Firma.

You allow the audience to see exactly how your theatre is made – do you see this as a political statement?

RS: The way I see it, theatre is all about transfer and communication – direct communication with an audience whom you fully respect. So instead of camouflaging, give the audience the ingredients so they can finish the story themselves and then you've got an exchange going on. It's a game, so you're part of it and not someone who just performs and then leaves. Theatre mustn't be authoritarian. Take Robert Wilson, for example. However clever I may think his work is, I also see it as authoritarian. I once saw an exhibition of his work in Boijmans museum. He'd created a forest out of cabinets and stage sets, and right in the middle was a real artwork, perfectly lit, totally perfect. It annoyed the hell out of me because it was forcing me to look the way he wanted me to look. I want to decide for myself how I look at things.

'Childlike pleasure is something I never want to lose'

History and memory seem to play an important part in your work.

RS: I've made many stage productions and exhibitions in which specific memories and memory as a whole play a crucial role. There was *Museum van het toeval* (Museum of coincidence, 1992) at the Theatre Institute in Amsterdam, *Het theater van het geheugen* (The theatre of memory, 1993), *Oom Toon-Waar gebeurd* (Uncle Toon – a true story, 2007), and now the Cabanon. They were all adventures, journeys of discovery, and it ultimately didn't matter which medium I was using to tell my story. As far as I'm concerned, history's the best thing there is.

Even before *Museum van het toeval* at the Theatre Institute I was invited by former director Dragan Klaić to apply my own vision to the collection. I went browsing through the storage spaces – you come across the most amazing collections that never see the light of day. Like there were charred fragments of the old wooden theatre on Leidseplein in Amsterdam, which burned down 200 years ago. It's an amazing thought that at the end of the 18th century, someone went along to pick these things up in a handcart or something and that's how they ended up being kept at the Theatre Institute. It's fantastic, don't you think, that somebody took the trouble to do it? I definitely wasn't planning on presenting theatre history as a closed narrative. On the contrary, I wanted to showcase a few things that you'd never get to see otherwise, to make you look in a different way at them and complete the history for yourself.



How does your approach work in practice? Is there a standard sequence in your artistic process?

RS: Of course I do think about what I want to make beforehand, whether it's a play or book or film or story. And then I start looking for the best way of communicating it to the audience. The process usually starts with an image. That image sets off the practical and artistic 'traffic', all the things that are involved in the production – literally, the mise-en-scène. The directing starts after that. And that requires actors who are willing and able to work in this way. If you're occupied with your own 'autobiography' as I was with the Cabanon, it can get a bit tricky of course, because it's so personal. Lots of things came together that I wanted to show, like prints of lovers and things like that. A house is also a theatre in which the play of life takes place. In the end I hung my 'mood board' on the wall and the only images that got put into the installation were of my husband Javier and my mother. You have to think really deeply about the choices you're making, but it's your intuition that counts first. You won't get anywhere without your intuition.

'I want to have as much fun with technicians as possible'

How do you balance intellect and the intuition?

RS: You can be all intellectual about it and come up with theories, but that won't get the job done. First off, you just have to do what you think needs doing. After that, take another look and see if it's turned out the way you wanted it to – only then can you start theorising. It's like with drawing: there are methods for learning to draw, but after that you have to do it yourself. And, most importantly, you have to learn to shut down your own commentary, because if you don't you'll not be able to draw. Use your intuition till it's

done, and only then you should take a breath and ask yourself, 'Is this right?' I'm experiencing this period as a troublesome point in my career. When you start off you've got a mountain of ideas you want to do. But at a certain point you've worked your way through them, and then you have to start looking for the mountain again. It's a pretty laborious process. You have to work the other way round, as it were. You have to go looking for what you want to make. And along the way you're confronted with your own routines in all kinds of areas. It's fine if that routine just feeds into your experience – something that you can base yourself on and use to develop new things – but you mustn't repeat yourself.

So, what is your strategy for avoiding repeating yourself?

RS: What I do is, once every two or three years, I do a project with someone from outside my own company. Like with Sjoerd Wagenaar from PeerGroup. We agree that we're just doing it for our own pleasure, and then we sit down together and start cooking things up, without any pressure for production, without having to submit a budget eighteen months in advance or come up with a poster with titles and everything. I mean, come on, that's simply not how it works. De Firma got funding in the latest round I still think it's a lousy time for the arts. Onafhankelijk Toneel has had to close down, Discordia's in a really tight spot. Unforgivable. If I was in cultural politics, I'd give some people a lifetime achievement award so they can work on till they die. I'd put Jan Joris Lamers at number one on that list. He started off the whole second theatre circuit.

As a set designer, what sort of relationship do you try to develop with directors and technicians?

RS: Some directors have got shopping lists of everything they want from me, but I always think, hang on a minute, a true master knows that less is more. I love working with Liesbeth Colthof. Together we come up with the practical and artistic 'traffic' and a direction concept comes out from that. She gets down to her directing, and I come up with all

kinds of things, and that's how everything comes together. For De Storm (The storm) we were working on getting the drawings right all the way up till the premiere. It's just got to be good, you know?

When it comes to technicians, I just want to have as much fun with them as possible. I want a good working relationship. Something else I always find very important is that everything is visible including the lighting. That classic puppet lighting with a spotlight here and there is just awful. And keep things simple: if you want to get to the essence of something, then you had to strip it back until it's exactly what you want and nothing else. Of course I use video and new technologies when I'm making new work for the stage, but it's used in a pretty haphazard way. I find it slightly problematic even to record something beforehand and then use it during the performance. I think it's too easy. I always want to show that it's happening here and now. You're communicating live. If the performers and technicians can work hand-in-hand, something really beautiful can come out of it.

Do you have any advice for theatre technicians entering professional life

RS: If you're a young theatre technician, you shouldn't just be focusing on technical issues; you should be focusing more on people and the secrets of theatre. If you want to understand what people are wanting to achieve within their own field in theatre you need to not only get to know about the different ways of working, but also get to know the people themselves. If you're a technician, it's important that you don't stand still and you're always renewing yourself. That's why it's ideal if you can work as a touring technician.

'Use your intuition till it's done'

I'd say it's best for technicians if first and foremost they have plenty of fun. You should start making friends right from the moment you enter the theatre. And work together on developing something. In my experience, this approach is unrelated to scale. I've had huge fun at a big theatre like Rotterdam Schouwburg and they're proud of what they make there – though my true love still lies with the little ones.

