

A D E L A I D E F E S T I V A L 2 0 2 6



Image credit: Kurt Van der Elst

AF26 DIGITAL DAYBILL

Works and Days

Toneelhuis | FC Bergman

Dates: Thu 5 Mar – Sun 8 Mar

Venue: Dunstan Playhouse

Duration: 1hr 10mins, no interval

Generously supported by the Adelaide Festival Contemporary.

Credits

Direction, scenario, scenography Stef Aerts, Joé Agemans, Thomas Verstraeten, Marie Vinck
Performers Stef Aerts, Maryam Sserwamukoko, Yorrih De Bakker, Marie Vinck, Gudrun Ghesquiere, Fumiyo Ikeda, Geert Goossens, Gloria Aerts
Musical composition and live performance Joachim Badenhorst, Sean Carpio
Costume design An D'Huys
Light design Stef Aerts, Joé Agemans, Ken Hioco
Production manager Kristien Borgers
Technical production manager Diederik Suykens
Production Toneelhuis | FC Bergman
Coproduction Piccolo Teatro di Milano - Teatro d'Europa, Les Théâtres de la Ville de Luxembourg with the support of the tax shelter measure of the Belgian federal government via Gallop Tax Shelter
Images Kurt Van de Elst

About The Show

This remarkable theatrical event from Belgium's FC Bergman (*The Sheep Song*, 2023) unfolds like a living painting, its pastoral imagery evoking the rhythms and battles of nature and the arc of human progress.

Inspired by the ancient Greek poet Hesiod's original verse *Works and Days*, eight highly physical performers embody the rituals of toil, tradition and transformation, without a single word spoken.

FC Bergman plough up the stage itself, dismantling the very ground beneath them to exhume a future. A steam engine descends to become a fiery altar, and the new age of AI stalks the perimeter.

An array of breathtaking images to an ecstatic live music score, *Works and Days* is a physical poem that speaks to collective strength, the complexities of change and the uncontainable force of nature.



Interview with FC Bergman

1. What was the main inspiration behind this show? What did you want to tell or what reflection did you want to stimulate in the viewer?

The biggest inspiration for this performance was a spread we experienced in our own lives and many of the lives we see around us: ever more ambitious, ever more uptempo, often with a destructive effect on people and their surroundings. We came upon this work by Hesiodos rather by chance, through the title, which so beautifully and quietly juxtaposed the two words that too often seem to be fighting with each other these days. That clear juxtaposition inspired the performance. The discrepancy between the retaliating man on the one hand and working and living according to the rhythm of the seasons on the other.

2. How do you think our relationship with the Earth has changed over the centuries? Is there a way, today, in your opinion, to realign ourselves with the cycles of nature? Or is it a utopia?

Whereas we used to live and cultivate the land according to natural cycles, we are now totally disconnected from our relationship with the earth. On a cultural level too: when people still lived according to the seasons, certain (pagan) rituals arose, which are still practised today but have lost their meaning. We still practise them, but have forgotten where they come from and why we do them. Even in our day-to-day life, all contact with the seasons has disappeared: we fly to the sun in winter, eat pineapples in February, go skiing in April,... We have lost all contact with the natural cycles, resulting in a huge ecological catastrophe.

Originally, for humans, community was hugely important. We have broken away from that too: personal happiness comes first. We have really lost touch with community and planet. Man has placed himself completely above nature as if the earth is at our service, while man is just 1 small element of that nature.

I fear it is a utopia to return to natural cycles. We have become so used to our luxuries... There are of course - rather marginal - counter-movements: the movement to eat seasonal produce, the rise of fly-shaming, initiatives like From Farmer to Plate,... These are touching little signs of hope. The performance is not exactly hopeful. In Works and Days, humans also turn out to be cyclical: from emergence to disappearance; humanity lifts itself up. Let's hope we get out of it, but I don't see any signs for now.

3. The work goes through different historical works, from antiquity to the present. How did you structure this journey through time on stage?

We structured the show chronologically. The title refers to antiquity, to the letter Works and Days by the Greek poet Hesiodos (700 BC), a series of written advice on the art of farming. The letter became a farmer's almanac in verse form, which pairs agricultural advice with a manual for life in general. In the first part, the play deals very broadly with pre-industrial times: everything that took place before the invention of the steam engine, with no further real historical sequence. At one point, the steam engine makes its appearance and the show enters a new era.

4. What role does the music, inspired by Vivaldi's Four Seasons (in jazz version!), have in this production and, more generally, in your works? What should it convey?

In this performance, the music provides a kind of dramaturgical framework. elements like time, people, society, nature, the measure of the seasons are represented quite abstractly. The most literal reference to the seasons happens in the music. Hesiodos was just an inspiration for us, just as Vivaldi was 'just' an inspiration for the composers/musicians. They freely went their separate ways with it. In part 1, the music still stays fairly close to Vivaldi, from the introduction of the steam engine in the performance, a different path is taken, the music evolves further away from Vivaldi and a different type of instrumentation is also

used. Music dramaturgy is also contained in the instrumentation; in the first movement, an explicit choice was made for artisanal, almost folkloric instruments. Joachim Badenhorst and Sean Carpio started from old wind and string instruments, which evolve further in the performance.

Music actually always acts as a dramaturgical framework in our work. For instance, in JR we used pop and rock from the 1970s and in Sheepsong medieval-inspired string music. Because we often make wordless performances, the music is always an important intermediary between performance and audience.

5. In your shows without dialogues, it is the power of the images that convey the narration. Is it because they can say more than words?

Indeed. Text inevitably creates a more cerebral way of looking, a rational diversion, so to speak, while images have a more direct impact on your experience. Moreover, we love making open-ended artworks. Works where no one particular narrative or meaning is forced upon you, but where you as a viewer are appealed to actively help generate your own narrative. Not because we want to give the audience a hard time, but because we like the fact that watching a performance is an intimate, hyper-personal experience. The meaning is not something we tell the audience, but something we create together with the viewer. The work we do is trying to create images that are at once open and compelling enough for that, at the same time concrete and universal enough.

6. How does a creative process unfold for you? Are there any constants?

The creative process is different each time, depending on what kind of show we are making, but some constants can be discerned. We always start with a conception phase lasting one to two months. This takes place entirely around the table. While talking, we formulate the basic idea we want to tell, sometimes inspired by a written work, but just as easily the first inspiration can be a painting, a photo, a deleted scene from a previous performance, or a certain place. We feed the conversation with a very elaborate intuitive moodboard of images. Then we construct several scenes that consolidate together into a hyper-detailed scenario. We deliver that scenario to the studios on average six months before rehearsals, so that scenery and costumes can be made by the time we start rehearsing. It is crucial for visual performances like ours that we can rehearse in the final set. In that rehearsal phase, we perform the screenplay as written. Of course, things change here and there, but usually the final result leans very closely to the initial scenario.

7. The "form" of your creations is characterized by large-scale, often overflowing scenographic installations. What role does location play in your creative processes?

Location performances were hugely important in the early years of FC Bergman, also in shaping our artistic identity. Originally, we made monumental performances, exclusively on location. Our tendency to work on a large scale stemmed very much from that. When we later started making performances for classical venues, we did continue to carry that idea of large scale. We try to transport the outside world to classical venues in an almost hyper-realistic way. In recent years, we have increasingly sought our challenge within the boundaries of the stage. The location *an sich* has become somewhat less important, but it does work as a source of inspiration in our images.

8. Your works are always very cinematic. How would you define your relationship with cinema? Where would you place the gap between cinema and theatre?

We often refer to cinema in our work, maybe in Works and Days just a little less. The Sheep Song contains references to David Lynch, 300 EI x 50 EI x 30 EI to Scandinavian cinema like Lars von Trier, JR to American cinema like Wes Anderson and Scorsese, The Land of Nod to nouvelle vague, like Godard,... Our generation has grown up with cinema and we love it.

We find it interesting to refer to media other than theatre in our work: to film and visual art.

The difference between theatre and cinema is in the editing. In classical theatre, you have unity of space, time and action. We break that completely because we make theatre intuitively. We create images, concepts and edit them like you do in film: we sequence fragments, images and short scenes. That way, we try to take the audience with us every time. Moreover, in our performance we often use the camera to play with the idea of a constructed film image in which you can disappear. The camera allows us to go beyond the boundaries of theatre. We want to make images as well as show their construction (e.g. 300el x 50el x 30el, JR, Van den Vos, Ne Mobliez Mie).

We try to unite the best of both worlds (film and theatre). The enormous power of theatre is that it takes place live, here and now, before your eyes and cannot be re-watched in the same way. This gives it a dangerous and performative character.

9. You are a collective of authors, but also of actors. When does your role in a performance become clear? How and when are the roles distributed?

Who plays which role is of fairly minor importance for most of our performances, and we often change roles with each other during rehearsals or even while we are already playing. Of course, there are regularly hyper-specific characters in our work, but then we usually cast them outside our company. On the one hand because our composition is rather homogeneous, three quarters of us are white men in our late thirties, and on the other hand, playing only supporting roles allows us, above all, to stay in control and keep an overview of the performance. You can't play and direct at the same time, or at least a little less incisively.

10. FC Bergman's performances are often interpreted as reflections on social trends or concerns or as political statements. How do your performances relate to current events? Do they have a political function?

Actually, it is the opposite of what we strive for. We try to stay just far away from trends and be timeless. This turns out to be true: some performances have been in the repertoire for ten years and remain relevant. We notice that a performance ten years later and in a different location is interpreted differently by the audience each time. That's nice, though.

In our subjects, we stay away from what can be read in the newspapers here and now, but of course we are not detached from the world we live in. We want to make universal performances that move across time and beyond the delusion of the day.

We also made *The Sheep Song*, in the middle of the corona crisis. That really became a performance about the climate prevailing at the time, with individual rights coming under pressure and social tensions. *Work and Days* is, of course, also a performance about the ecological catastrophe. Let's hope the performance resonates differently in a decade's time. *JR* will then again be really about capitalism and individualism, and *Guernica Guernica*, which we are currently working on, will be a performance about war, and the impossibility of depicting it.

11. What are your next projects or shows that you are working on, and what themes would you like to explore in the future?

We are currently working on *Guernica Guernica*, a performance that will premiere at the Ruhrtriennale in September '25. It will be a meditation on war, on what is hand today. Through Picasso's painting, we ask questions about the perception of war: what can we as artists do? Picasso's work far exceeds the historical. It is such an intense time.... What can and should we do with all the images that come at us unfiltered? The performance looks at it from three perspectives: victim, perpetrator and spectator. It will be a large-scale visual performance with eighty extras.

Interview with the Musicians

Joachim Badenhorst and Sean Carpio's 'The Four Seasons'

Interview: the music in 'Werken en dagen'

12 February 2025

Sean and Joachim, why did you say 'yes' when FC Bergman asked you to be part of Werken en dagen?

Joachim: Because their request was so appealing and challenging: to interpret a famous work for string orchestra with only two musicians while also having to remain mobile and walk around the stage.

Sean: It was also something new for FC Bergman: this was the first time that all of the music in a show of theirs would be performed live. So, it was a step into the unknown for both parties.

The starting point is The Four Seasons by Vivaldi. How did you approach that?

Joachim: Sean and I are jazz musicians, and not very familiar with this type of music. And honestly? In the beginning it seemed impossible to us. I didn't know *The Four Seasons* all that well, and I actually thought it was pretty stale. So, we started out by listening intensively to this cycle of four violin concerts. Gradually, Sean and I discovered that it is fantastic music! But we still had no idea of how to go about it, because there only two of us, whereas this music was written for a string orchestra with 20 musicians or more. And our main instruments are clarinet and drums.

Sean: And because the nature of the show is that we are mobile and I couldn't take a drum set around the stage with me, I was immediately looking to other types of instruments, not just percussive but also pitch instruments that I could carry. Not just for me, but also for Joachim, in addition to the clarinet and saxophone. Once that choice was made, we looked at which of those potential instruments would fit with which seasons. So, it was a lot of practicalities that ultimately inspired us. Then for each instrument we started looking at which pieces of Vivaldi's music we could link it to.

How much is left of Vivaldi in your interpretation?

Joachim: Quite a lot, actually. Sometimes snatches, sometimes whole melodies. But to our surprise, most people don't recognize them, perhaps because our instrumentation is so different and so far removed from the original string orchestration. We start the performance with our own sounds and music, but then Sean plays what is surely the most famous theme from the first concerto, 'Spring'. He does this on two flutes, very slowly, as a kind of drone sound, so that is almost unrecognizable. Immediately after that, all of us fairly literally sing the melody from the second movement of 'Spring'. In the 'Summer' scene, I play a clarinet solo that starts out being very close to Vivaldi and then evolves further away from it. From 'Autumn' onward, and certainly 'Winter', our interpretation becomes more abstract, although it still includes some literal quotes from Vivaldi.

The music feels very original and contemporary. How did you go about interpreting Vivaldi's composition?

Joachim: In 2012, I made the album *The jungle he told me*. I was starting to perform solo concerts for the first time, and was faced with the challenge of creating a feeling of harmony while soloing with a melodic instrument. How can you play chords on a clarinet? I began to experiment with circular breathing – where you don't have to stop take a breath and can create a fuller sound – and I added arpeggios, so-called broken chords where you play the tones after each other instead of simultaneously.

That's what I also tried to do in my interpretation of *The Four Seasons*, particularly in my solo in the 'Summer' scene. So, how does one play a solo version of the orchestra? I explore the different lines of the orchestra through arpeggios, while simultaneously singing the high notes in my clarinet. I jump back and forth from the melody line to the orchestral harmony. From there I vary to other chords.

As the tour of *Werken en dagen* progresses, our interpretation also evolves, and Sean and I sometimes become even freer with the chords and additions of colour, but we also always go back to Vivaldi. The original music was and is still our reference point and guideline. Then when people do not hear that it is Vivaldi but think it's our own music, that is really a gift. Because although it may sound simple, it's not so easy to do. So, we're very gratified by that.

How does the music relate to what is happening on stage?

Sean: We realized early on that there are two main ways that the music can attach itself to the scenes. One is to be very representative of the actions that are taking place – so that would be functional music. At first, we would be very much part of the community and a lot of the sounds you hear are acoustic sounds created on stage, both by the cast and us. Later in the show we begin to separate ourselves and amplify our music to create a larger score, which becomes more of an abstraction of the action on stage. As we move through the seasons our distance from the group becomes greater and greater until at the end we are really amplified and provide the scoring for a musical finale.

Joachim: I think our music adds an emotional layer to the performance. In *Werken en dagen*, the acting is atypical. The actors aren't really acting but mostly carrying out actions, like workers in a field. The music imparts feeling to the different scenes and seasons.

What sort of instruments do you use in the show?

Sean: We wanted our instrumentation to follow the narrative line of the show, which starts with the birth of a community, goes through some evolutions and ends up in modern times. By way of analogy, we start with simple flutes to imitate bird sounds. Then we play on two flutes that we stuck together with tape, so that we can play chords and have the beginning of a harmony. We continue with bells, which are tuned and at the same time have a percussive character, which introduces rhythm. Next come the reed instruments: clarinets and saxophones. Then a stringed instrument: the table harp, by means of which we can create a richer harmony and a whole other world on stage. And not to be forgotten, the voice. When the steam engine is introduced in the performance, we play a harmonium – an instrument from the same period in the history of industrialization.

You mentioned flutes taped together. But there are also other self-made instruments in the show.

Sean: One instrument that we specifically made for this production consists of six Tibetan bells that we fused together into one instrument. The bells are usually played separately, so we had to come up with new techniques. I start out by playing it with a bow, to generate the effect of a string instrument and then transition to playing it with a mallet, which makes it sound kind of like gamelan music. The instrument has an otherworldly sound. We use it in the 'Summer' scene, when we step away from the group for the first time and begin to create a more atmospheric world.

Joachim: In the beginning of that same scene, I play my interpretation of Vivaldi's 'Summer' on clarinet. I only play the melody, not the harmony, and improvise from there. We are walking around while the actors build the house. When Sean switches from the bow to the mallet to produce the gamelan sound, I remove the mouthpiece from my clarinet and play it sideways like a flute. The combination of that with the bells creates a dreamy atmosphere on stage.

Sean: Later on in the performance, Joachim creates the opposite effect. He uses only the mouthpiece of his bass clarinet, which he attaches to a piece of piping from a do-it-yourself store.

Joachim: Yes, it's like a long rubber tube. This is in the scene where the steam engine is introduced. Now the sound becomes bigger and we are less visible. I am offstage; Sean is sitting to one side with the harmonium. At that point in the performance, we don't have to walk around anymore, so it's easier to be amplified. From the wings, I play my bass clarinet with the rubber tube. When I swing the tube around while blowing or singing into the mouthpiece, it creates a very strange, mermaid-like sound. Meanwhile, Sean is playing the harmonium, and he also has a small contact microphone in his mouth to amplify his voice. It sounds like whales. So, all these effects are created live. Our background as improvisers or jazz musicians also plays a role in this. Sean and I like to work with sound: besides the 'regular' sound of an instrument we try to see what else can be done with it. What other sounds can you get out of a symbol or a reed instrument? It's fun and surprising to extend the vocabulary of an instrument.

Speaking of improvising, was there room for that? FC Bergman's performances are always precisely timed and also technically planned in detail.

Joachim: There absolutely was room for that. The two of us created the music and we deliberately kept our composition organic and open, precisely because we like to make variations or improvise. For some scenes, a particular atmosphere or tone colour is all that we agreed upon beforehand. We know where we begin and end, and the rest we colour in, a little differently each time. It's great to have that possibility in theatre, where everything is often predetermined. That's what makes this liberating and fascinating to perform so many times.

Ellen Stynen
29 January 2025



Image credit: Kurt Van der Elst



Image credit: Tiny Geeroms

FC Bergman

Four artists make up the FC Bergman theatre collective: Stef Aerts, Joé Agemans, Thomas Verstraeten and Marie Vinck. With their sensational site-specific productions, they made a splash the moment the company was founded back in 2008 (then still with Bart Hollanders and Matteo Simoni). In 2013 FC Bergman came under the wing of Toneelhuis.

The thread running through FC Bergman's work is the tragedy of the little guy struggling to branch out and broaden his horizons. This is often reflected in enormous stage sets and installations to which the actors endeavour to measure up. The scenography is the 'beast that has to be tamed', the show a composition of images.

After scooping up the Young Theatre Prize for their exuberant adaptation of *The Homecoming* at Theater aan Zee (TAZ) in 2009, the following year they stunned the Dutch-language theatre world with their masterly *Walking along the Champs Elysées with a tortoise so as to have a better look at the world, but it is difficult to drink tea on an ice floe if everyone is drunk*. Premiered in the Old Exchange in Antwerp, the show's total abandon, baroque poetry and sheer scale could not fail to attract attention. It was selected for the Nederlands Theater Festival.

In 2011 FC Bergman knocked on Toneelhuis' door for the first time. In the space of just a few weeks, the collective created *300 el x 50 el x 30 el* for the Antwerpse Kleppers. Though it had seemed an impossible challenge, the collective managed to get the entire Bourlaschouwborg team on board and together they built a complete village on the stage. A tracking camera covering the whole village projected onto a large screen what was happening inside the houses, allowing the audience to peer into the rooms occupied by a number of prominent guest actors and eighty extras. *300 el x 50 el x 30 el* is still on the repertoire today (with a run in New York in autumn 2022).

Made outdoors in the port of Antwerp, the wordless and poetic *Terminator Trilogy* (2012) toured internationally. With the music theatre show *Of the Fox* (2013) - the collective's first creation as permanent Toneelhuis-makers - FC Bergman came back indoors and paid tribute to the Bourlaschouwborg, turning the stalls into a swimming pool. The show was selected for the TheaterFestival 2014. This was followed by another scriptless site-specific show, *The Land of Nod* (2015). The production made it to the Festival d'Avignon and was performed at the Biennale di Venezia in the summer of 2023.

JR (2018), a radical adaptation of William Gaddis' eponymous cult novel, was also staged outside the theatre walls. FC Bergman constructed a gigantic, four-storey-high tower; the audience sat on all four sides of it and followed the simultaneous narratives direct and via a camera. This production also centred on the lonely struggle between man and his fate.

The Sheep Song (2021) was a game-changer: for the first time FC Bergman used the theatre as it is intended, i.e. without radically altering it. *The Sheep Song* is a wordless production about a creature no longer satisfied with its lot. The production was selected for the TheaterFestival 2022, and travelled in 2023 to the Adelaide Festival in Australia. In the fall of 2024, *The Sheep Song* played in Taiwan.

In the summer of 2023 FC Bergman presented an exhibition in Gaasbeek Castle along with a series of short films starring Marie Vinck, inspired by photographic portraits of the last owner of the castle cross-dressed as a medieval page. At the end of 2023, these same film vignettes were the inspiration and backbone for the performance *Ne Mobliez Mie*, a theatrical cinema evening on the marvellous but sometimes destructive power of the imagination.

In September 2024, the stage production *Werken en dagen (Works and days)* came out, a reflection on living in the country and working with the land, and an ode to the unstoppable power of the group and the boundless power of nature.

The members of FC Bergman also participate individually in other theatre productions, television projects, films and exhibitions, working independently of the collective and of Toneelhuis.

In 2023 FC Bergman was awarded the prestigious Silver Lion for Theatre at the Biennale di Venezia in recognition of its entire body of work: "FC Bergman flirts with the limits of the feasible, creating apocalyptic modern tales, often without words but with a surprising plastic force and evocative power, thus homing in on Man torn between his existential desire to go beyond his limits and the fear of change."

At the moment, FC Bergman is working on *Guernica Guernica*, a large-scale site-specific project about war and its conceptualization, premiering in September 2025 at the Ruhrtriennale.

In May 2022 FC Bergman assumed the artistic direction of Toneelhuis, together with Olympique Dramatique, Lisboa Houbrechts, Gorges Ocloo and Benjamin Abel Meirhaeghe.