Flemish government must save more, says SERV

On 8 July the Flemish Government approved the multi-year budget for this legislative period. In this it estimates that it has 268 million euros next year for implementing new decisions. To achieve this scope for policy-making, the government is planning to save 75 million euros. It is also assuming that 180 million euros (1% underspend) will not be spent. The Socio-Economic Council of Flanders (SERV), the association of employer and employee organisations that advises the Flemish Government in its socio-economic policy, fears that this 268 million is nowhere near enough to implement all the government’s announced plans. To do so, at least 218 million extra will have to be saved in 2006, SERV claims in its annual budgetary advice (FF).

According to the SERV’s calculations, the Flemish Government has correctly estimated the budget for new policy and the underspend of 1% is normal. However, according to the SERV, the 268 million euros will not be enough to pay for the Flemish Government’s plans for next year. The Collective Labour Agreements for teachers, staff in the welfare sector and the bus drivers of the state bus service De Lijn will together cost 100 million euros extra in 2006. The Council calculated that a further 140 million euros is needed to correctly implement the Innovation Pact. The ruling on Aquafin (the Flemish water treatment company which for years charged the Flemish Government a VAT rate that was too low and now has to pay the overdue VAT to the Federal Government) is good for 21 million euros. The other legal obligations will cost 150 million euros.

The planned savings of 75 million euros will therefore rise to at least 218 million euros. At least, because the Socio-Economic Council is assuming that both the extra measures announced after the BHV crisis in the Flemish Rand and the Limburg Plan will not be implemented this year or next. Nor will there be any money next year for the socio-economic impulse fund announced by Flemish Employment Minister Frank Vandenbergroucke (SPA), says the SERV, unless other savings are made elsewhere. The Flemish Government will draw up the budget for 2006 after the summer.

BART HAECCK • DE TIJD • 14 JULY

INTRODUCTION

At this year’s Flemish Celebration Day there was little reason for overblown statements, says De Tijd (11 July). After all, this past year the Flemings twice had to bite the dust. And that was not a pretty sight. First Flanders had to surrender to the objections of ‘the Brussels city state’ to the night-time noise of additional DHL flights. Afterwards Flanders watched with envy as the courier firm chose not Zaventem but Leipzig for its hub. Secondly Flanders was sent home empty-handed from the negotiation of the Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde constituency. Time and again Flanders came up against an alliance between the Brussels Region and the Walloon Region, placing it unavoidably in a minority position. The fact that despite having one million inhabitants and being the third region Brussels carries almost as much weight as the Flemish and Walloon regions is therefore a thorn in the flesh for De Tijd.

From an entirely different perspective, Brussels Transport Minister Pascal Smet (SPA) provides a clear analysis of the administrative chaos in the Brussels Region in an interview with De Standaard. He dismisses the fact that Brussels would urgently needs a new status. The current patchwork quilt of 19 municipalities whose mayors are mainly involved in administering their own municipality is all right for tackling local problems such as clean streets, but completely unsuitable for such matters as economic policy. Smet feels, in addition, there is hardly any (financial) solidarity between the rich and poor municipalities. The result is that no one feels fully responsible for the entire city. On the other hand the structure of the Brussels region is not suited to the reality of the city that is Brussels. It could be called a region if it also include the rich green ‘Rand’ (outside the ring), but that is not the case. However, the Brussels Region has a disproportionately high number of poor and in particular unemployed, if you think that 40% of children grow up there in a family in which neither parent works. Smet believes this is a time-bomb, not only for Brussels, but also for Flanders. Brussels cannot address this problem alone. Smet therefore wants Flanders and Wallonia to co-finance Brussels projects in exchange for a say in the city. Talks on a thorough change to the structure of the Region and the 19 municipalities are not possible before the local elections of 2006, but could take place afterwards, he expects. According to De Morgen (11 July), Smet is right. The nonsense of the Brussels model could become dramatically clear if a genuine major disaster were to occur. The surreal corner of the city may appear charming and likeable, but that is not unoverenability, the paper concludes.

Frank Vandecaveye | editor in chief

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focus on FLANDERS • 9 July - 15 July 2005 • Number 28
Leterme calls for responsible federalism

In his speech on the occasion of the Flemish Celebration Day on 11 July in Bruges, Minister-President Yves Leterme (CD&V) stressed that we in Belgium have reached the limits of cooperative federalism. That federalism is 25 years old this year, but the failed attempt to site DHL in Zaventem and the failed splitting of Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde exposed these limits. Leterme is therefore calling for a new sort of federalism, a so-called responsible federalism. The federal states must be given more responsibility. In concrete terms that means more powers, but also more responsibility for the consequences of their own choices and decisions. Those who perform well must also be able to be rewarded, Leterme believes. Regions that make an effort must also be able to feel the benefits. He therefore called on his Walloon political friends to take further steps in the process of state reform.(FF).

Those who perform well must also be able to be rewarded, Leterme believes

De Batselier called for a co-ordinated approach to the economic relaunch programmes and the end-of-career debate. On the same day the Chairman of the Flemish Parliament, Norbert De Batselier (SP.A), called for a new state reform in Brussels Town Hall (FF).

De Batselier called for new state reform

At the Flemish Celebration Day Flemish Minister-President Yves Leterme invited the ministers of all governments to lunch. The Flemish Government was joined at the table by the Brussels, Walloon and Federal Governments. Before they could tuck in, they were treated to another speech by Leterme over aperitifs. In it he repeated his call for the federal states to be given more responsibility. Leterme finds, for example, that the Flemish budgetary efforts are insufficiently rewarded. After all, it is the Flemish surpluses that time and again ensure a balanced federal budget. Conversely, Francophone governments are not punished if they fail to fulfill budgetary agreements. The main theme was one of collaboration and concentration of strengths between the communities. Thus, he called for a new sort of federalism, a so-called responsible federalism. The federal states must be given more responsibility. In concrete terms that means more powers, but also more responsibility for the consequences of their own choices and decisions. Those who perform well must also be able to be rewarded, Leterme believes. Regions that make an effort must also be able to feel the benefits. He therefore called on his Walloon political friends to take further steps in the process of state reform.

BART DOBELAERE • DE STANDAARD • 12 JULY

In his 11 July speech in Brussels Town Hall Norbert De Batselier (SP.A) had also called for a new state reform. ‘Through further polishing and refining our federal structure, the regions with new powers must make their employment policy more efficient.’ De Batselier also asked for more instruments on an economic and financial level, including greater financial autonomy for the regions. But aside from that the emphasis of De Batselier’s speech also lay on good neighbourliness and collaboration. ‘Flanders has no interest in a Walloon region with a poor economy.’

Ilse De Vooght • De Tijd • 11 July

Responsible federalism implies that the federal states have to deal with their problems themselves. It implies that those who perform well must be rewarded. And finally, according to the Minister-President it implies that financial solidarity between the federal states - the transfers - must be based on objective criteria. To be able to put that responsible federalism into practice, the federal states must be given greater fiscal and financial autonomy and be given access to more socio-economic levers. ‘Wallonia wants a Marshall Plan. I find it incomprehensible that the Walloon party chairmen do not want to take any further steps in the process of state reform until 2007. Not only is this contrary to the interests of the Flemish Community, it is also at odds with the implementation of their Marshall Plan. I therefore call upon my Walloon colleagues to no longer see a better distribution of powers as taboo.’

Leterme also warned against Flemish complacency. ‘We have used our powers well over the past 25 years. But in many areas we must do so even more effectively.’ He referred to high wages and increased pressure at work, the declining spirit of enterprise, high youth unemployment, long waiting lists in the care sector and the many repeaters and drop-outs in education. ‘And we must not wait for more powers to start doing something about it.’

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Flemish Minister-President Yves Leterme (CD&V) has called on the Francophones to collaborate on state reform in an open forum in a number of Francophone newspapers. At the same time he tried to convince the Francophones that state reform would also benefit them, which was also expressed in the the title of his opinion: ‘Plus est en nous’. Employment, for example, requires a different approach in Wallonia than in Flanders. If the federal states have more power in that area of policy, they can take better decisions. Indeed, Le Soir referred to ‘lovable Leterme’, but La Libre Belgique warns its readers against the affable approach of the ‘crafty old fox’ Leterme. Walloon Minister-President Van Cauwenbergh (PS) is not reacting dismissively out of hand. He invites the Flemings to convince him that they, the Walloons, will also benefit. The previous weekend PS Chairman Elio Di Rupo had created an opening in Het Belang van Limburg when he suddenly called for a cautious opening in Het Belang van Limburg. 'Otherwise the government will have a fundamental problem.'

In Francophone Belgium, the feeling is that Leterme and Di Rupo have executed a well-prepared one-two. Have Leterme and Di Rupo found each other? In Francophone Belgium, meanwhile, the fact that all these statements have been made at pretty much the same time is seen as a little too good to be true. The feeling is that Leterme and Di Rupo have executed a well-prepared one-two. There is considerable speculation about an imminent change of coalition. In particular, the sudden willingness of the PS Chairman to delouse the B-H-V dossier so that it does not mortgage subsequent government negotiations has made an impression in Francophone Belgium. There is talk of preparations for a future Socialist-Christian Democrat alliance. In principle that will not be before 2007, when the next federal elections will take place. But Di Rupo is also leaving another scenario open. When Guy Verhofstadt returns from his holidays in Tuscany a different tune will have to be sung in the Rue de la Loi than is now the case. ‘Otherwise the government will have a fundamental problem.’

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Opinion

PAUL GEUDENS • GAZET VAN ANTWERPEN • 12 JULY

The message of Yves Leterme - ‘the new strong man of Flanders’ - has received considerable attention in the Francophone press. He is being combined with a couple of equally remarkable political statements by Elio Di Rupo. The PS Chairman is speaking in surprisingly calm tones to Flanders. For example, he suddenly appears prepared to listen to the demand for a community dialogue which several weeks ago was still on ice. It is also striking that Di Rupo is rather sceptical towards the Verhofs-tadt II government. After two failures involving DHL and B-H-V, it cannot afford to miss its third major appointment, namely the end-of-career debate. Otherwise, according to a freely translated Di Rupo, it will have lost its raison d’être.

Mayor Janssens hits out at greens in Antwerp

In an interview with Gazet van Antwerpen (9 July) Mayor Patrick Janssens (SP.A) expresses his concern over his Green coalition partner. Sometimes he sees three Green parties in Antwerp: the aldermen, the faction in the City Council and the party executive. For example, the faction occasionally opposed plans that its own alderman had approved. The situation cannot remain like this until the local elections in 2006, says the mayor. In August Janssens wants talks with the bench and faction leaders of the majority on further collaboration. Janssens’ attack was not good for confidence between Groen! and the SP.A, according to reactions in the Green party (FF).

WWW.ANTWERP.BE

‘A mayor who sows discord in a coalition partner and at the same time predicts that this partner will lose the elections: I’ve never seen anything like it,’ snorts Mieke Vogels (Groen!). Vogels does not currently sit on Antwerp’s City Council, but remains a major political player behind the scenes. Also it is no secret that she has set her sights on being the leading Green candidate, and therefore potentially an alderman, for the local elections in 2006. ‘Janssens has shifted to the centre: he has become more right-wing to steal votes off the Vlaams Belang,’ says Vogels. ‘Now, Janssens can do that – I even hope he succeeds – but I won’t allow him to boost his image at the expense of our MPs. We remain true to the coalition agreement, although that’s not always easy with the path being taken by the current bench of aldermen. I expect the same collegiality from the mayor.’

Groen! is not necessarily for the Antwerp majority. Is it not attractive to now leave the bench of aldermen and thus gather one or two left-wing protest votes in 2006? ‘No, because I know our voter,’ says Vogels. ‘He expects us to go the distance.’
Spreading plan for night noise is stumbling block

Of the 64,000 complaints already received this year by the ombudsman of Zaventem airport, 54,000 come from a private noise meter in the Brussels Oostrand. A microphone is hidden in the garden of a retired couple and linked to a digital noise meter, a portable computer with a wireless Internet connection. The noise meter was bought by the municipalities of Kraainem and Wezembeek-Oppem. If the number of decibels appears too high, simply pressing the button sends a standard complaint by e-mail to 5 addresses: the Premier, Minister Landuyt, the ombudsman of Zaventem airport and two action groups. The action group Wakeupkraainem.be set up the system in its fight against the spreading plan of Transport Minister Landuyt (SP.A), which he inherited from his predecessor Bert Anciaux (Spirit). According to Knack, this together with the budget and the end of career is the third dossier that could cause the Federal Government to stumble if no consensus is again reached with the Brussels and Flemish governments (FF).

PATRICK MARTENS • KNACK • 13 JULY

Noise pollution in and around Zaventem has afflicted the political world for six years now. In December 1999 Isabelle Durant (Ecolo) banned night flights. Premier Guy Verhofstadt (VLD) promptly blew the whistle on her, went and spent half a day hanging around Schiphol in Amsterdam and chose ‘swiftly and efficiently’ to concentrate flights over the Brussels Noordrand. Powerful action groups, which in no time at all also had local political support in that area, forced the Purple-Greens to give in before the 2003 elections and switch to a ‘cheap’ spreading of flights over the Noordrand, the Oostrand and Brussels. In 2003 the Purple-Green Government opted for a ‘cheap’ spreading of flights over the Noordrand, the Oostrand and Brussels. Bert Anciaux (Spirit) should have sorted that out. But he too became stuck in this ‘devil dossier’ and passed it on with a sigh of relief to the present Federal Transport Minister Renaat Landuyt (SP.A). Now so many Brussels judges have ruled on the twists and turns in this dossier that from October no more air traffic will actually be possible in Zaventem without a political solution and the airport will be able to close.

Two lines of conflict dominate this question. The one opposes economics and ecology: 50,000 jobs versus the health of people who have lived in and around Brussels through decades of urban-planning chaos. The other is activated by the Brussels Regional Government, which bans any aircraft over the capital with its extremely strict noise standards.

The result is a Gordian knot which more than anything is encouraging surrealism in politics. This ranges from a bubble over a very expensive second airport (MR Finance Minister Didier Reynders), to the ‘joke’ that the trade unions would be best off going to the courts to enforce the right to work (Landuyt). Or from the suggestion that Brussels noise standards cannot do any harm as long as they are not applied (Brussels SPA Minister Pascal Smet), to the noted proposal of CD&V member Etienne Schouppe to close Zaventem airport at night. Shouting ‘ceci n’est pas un avion’ is clearly always an alternative to having to do nothing.

Durant was rewarded with tar and feathers, but her decision to give priority to a quiet night’s sleep had the benefit of clarity. Landuyt, on the other hand, wants to spread air traffic and make health considerations subordinate to jobs. This option is just as clear, but also radically different because there is no middle way. He and the rest of the Purples no longer need to beat about the bush.

One in three deportations of illegal immigrants fails during 2004

The annual report of the P-Committee, which monitors police services, reveals that one in three attempts to deport illegal immigrants fails. In 2004, the number of failed repatriations was the highest in five years. This had to do with the conviction of police officers in 2003 for the forced deportation of the Nigerian Semira Adamu (FF).

FRANS DE SMET • HET NIEUWSBLAD • 13 JULY

Every day last year, there was an average of 30 attempts to deport illegal immigrants. In 2003 that figure was 34 a day. Of last year’s attempts, only two in three were successful, previously it was three in four. This drop has to do with the conviction at the end of 2003 of the policemen who in 1998 strangled Semira Adamu during her forced repatriation. Until June 2004 the officers still refused to use force if an asylum-seeker offered physical resistance. At the start of this year escorted flights were given greater freedom. Thanks to this measure ‘only’ one in five deportations currently fails. In 2004, 24 special secure flights were made, with two to three officers per person to be removed. ‘Occasionally strong resistance was offered: stamping, head-butting and biting,’ notes the P-Committee. That led to 32 ‘labour accidents’.

focus on FLANDERS • 9 July - 15 July 2005 • Number 28
Demotte has plan for alternative financing of social security

Federal Minister for Social Affairs and Health Rudy Demotte (PS) has drawn up a plan for the alternative financing of social security which he has presented to social partners. According to a report by the National Labour Council, 94% of healthcare is currently financed by the social contributions of workers and employers in the private sector.

Demotte is widening the basis to finance these costs. According to De Morgen (14 July), Demotte’s new proposal is aimed at preserving and creating jobs preserving purchasing power. To achieve this the Minister is pushing for significant cuts in social contributions for certain categories of workers: for low wages, for workers over the age of 50 and for workers who work in shifts or at night. According to Demotte, these lower costs can be compensated for by more income tax, because gross wages will be higher.

Demotte also wants to increase tax on profits. Companies with few employees and high profit margins will therefore pay more. The Minister would also work on a form of general social contribution, which would be much higher for higher incomes and would drop for lower wages. In this way the purchasing power of lower wages would rise.

Vegetable growers suffer from extreme weather

The heat wave and water shortages of recent weeks were catastrophic for vegetable growers in West Flanders. The province alone produces 700,000 tonnes of vegetables, intended for the frozen and canned vegetables industry. It therefore produces 23% of all frozen vegetables in the Europe of the 25. But the heat wave alone destroyed 20% of the crop and last week’s floods damaged a further 10%. For vegetable growers, a loss of income is inevitable. This is because they have agreed annual contracts with the frozen-food manufacturers at fixed prices. If vegetable prices rise as a result of the shortage, they will not benefit (FF).

GERDA ACKAERT • DE TIJD • 9 JULY

Thanks to the water misery, activity among vegetable growers was almost at a standstill last week. ‘Many fields were under water, which meant they couldn’t be harvested,’ says Roger Maes, Sales Manager of frozen-vegetables producer Ardo. ‘We are right in the middle of the harvest season for peas and spinach. This means that those fields of peas and spinach that were ready for harvesting last week have been lost for good.’

Several recently sown fields can also be forgotten. ‘The beans that were sown just before the storms have spent several days under water. This means they’ve not received any oxygen and have suffocated. The same is also true of the chicory roots recently planted,’ says Noël Keersebilck, General Manager of the Roeselare public auction (ROE).

Due to the extreme weather, vegetable harvests this year are estimated to be one third lower than last year, says Roger Maes, Sales Manager of frozen-vegetables producer Ardo. Most vegetable growers cannot covert the smaller supply into higher sale prices. ‘The majority of West Flanders market gardeners supply frozen-food producers with whom they have entered into annual contracts with fixed prices. As a result, they cannot skirt round the shortage of their product. They earn exactly the same per kilo. But because they are harvesting less this year, they can sell fewer kilos and therefore earn less,’ says Keersebilck.

Despite the stable price of raw materials, frozen-vegetables producers are not necessarily escaping scot-free. Maes: ‘Because nothing was harvested last week, our factories are pretty much at a standstill. On top of that, we have to compensate for lower supplies from Belgium with costly imports from abroad.’

The next few weeks will show whether frozen-vegetable manufacturers can pass these higher production prices on to their customers, the supermarket chains. ‘We also operate on annual contracts with the supermarket chains that are entered into between May and October. To maintain our profit margins, we will therefore have to negotiate hard to command higher prices,’ forecasts Maes.

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The state subsidy for social security would also be increased. This would have to come from a cut in the government’s administrative costs. However, Demotte’s plan does not include an increase in VAT, the pet subject of Liberal coalition partner the VLD.
The VW plant at Forest is the first being considered for closure, concludes the Financial Times from an interview with the new boss of Volkswagen, Wolfgang Bernhard. The Volkswagen Group (including VW, Audi, Skoda, Seat and other makes) has a production capacity of 6 million cars in 52 sites worldwide, of which it sold only 5 million in 2004. The new crisis manager, who is only responsible for the Volkswagen make, is therefore not precluding plant closures. Bernhard also has the reputation of a tough reorganiser. In his last job for the American Chrysler he scrapped 26,000 jobs. His arrival also coincides with the departure of Personnel Manager Peter Hartz, who resigned following persistent rumours that he turned a blind eye to a corruption scandal within the group in which two of his colleagues were involved. Hartz was the architect of the free social labour market model in the VW Group. Bernhardt will unveil his plan by the end of the year. Among other things, he wants to launch between 5 and 10 new models.

In the VW plant at Forest, which currently employs 5,700 people, 600 jobs were scrapped at the end of last year. However, around 400 found jobs in the plant’s supply park. Today the VW plant at Forest only makes the Golf 5 and the Audi A3. Production of the Lupo was recently stopped. VW Forest, confirms manager Verhofstadt (VLD) therefore announced a reduction in the burden on shift work of 8.5% from 2006. Auto-industry analyst Vic Heylen believes the mood of panic is exaggerated. According to him, the chances of the plant closing are extremely small (FF).

The chances of the Volkswagen assembly plant at Forest closing are extremely small, says Heylen. This is because production would then have to be moved from Forest to another site, and that is extremely difficult. Also, a very important model, the Golf, is produced in our country. ‘Things would currently be extremely difficult for VW without Forest.’

A closure would only be on the cards if Volkswagen completely realigned itself and took the strategic decision to lose a share of the market and produce fewer cars. But as long as VW has the ambition to maintain its market share, there is little risk of a closure, says Heylen.

Just like other plants, the one at Forest has one major advantage: it is already there and is functioning well. After all, it would cost a massive amount of money to close a plant in Belgium and build a new one elsewhere.

But the plant also has several disadvantages. The German sites of the Volkswagen Group have made enormous leaps forward in terms of flexibility in recent years. This is also true of the other German makes of car. And according to Heylen, this flexibility is extremely important. ‘Every car that is produced with overtime is a loss.’

Germany has therefore introduced a sort of annual account, Heylen explains. In a given year, a worker works a certain number of hours, but can do that according to demand. If a large number of cars are ordered, workers can work more, and if demand is less then workers have to work less. It is precisely this flexibility that is under pressure at Forest. The German management is increasingly pressing for the number of shifts to be reduced by abolishing the weekend shift. But that is precisely the instrument with which Forest can cope with peaks and troughs in production, say the trade unions. This flexibility is much more important than wage costs, says Heylen. Wage costs only represent 4 to 5% of the total assembly costs. These wage costs therefore play a far less important role in the decision to close a plant.

Workers at Volkswagen Forest can head off on holiday relieved. Their plant is not being closed. At a meeting of analysts on 13 July, VW boss Wolfang Bernhard guaranteed that there were no plans to close plants in Europe. The group does, however, have to save 10 billion euros by 2008, 7 billion at Volkswagen and 3 billion at the other makes. This is because Volkswagen wants to achieve net profits of 4 billion euros more by 2008. For the time being, mass redundancies are not on the agenda. Bernhard wants to save 3 billion on supplier costs, 2 billion on sales in the distribution network and 1 billion on production costs and a further half a billion on indirect costs and half a billion on vehicle warranties. Trade union representatives at Forest declared themselves satisfied, but realise that savings will also have to be made at Forest. For example, the German management apparently wants to abolish weekend shifts. The trade unions and the management of the Forest plant will negotiate over this after the holidays.
Avignon Festival opens with Fabre

The 59th Avignon Theatre Festival began on Friday 8 July. Alongside the poster of the official festival, the range of films on offer at the Off-Festival is particularly impressive. It will have as many as 700 showings. Every usable hall or location in the city has been turned into a theatre. And then there are street sketches to be seen daily. This year the leading duo of the Festival, Hortense Archambault and Vincent Baudriller, have attracted Flemish visual artist and choreographer Jan Fabre as guest curator for the official festival. By choosing Fabre the organisers are unavoidably asking the question as to what constitutes the limits of theatrical convention. With his productions 'Je suis sang' and 'L’histoire des larmes' on the Cour d’Honneur of the Château des Papes, Fabre is sounding the death knell of the current French theatre model, which is based on text and classical theatre conventions, says De Tijd. Also, his choice of artists who have developed their own visual language such as choreographer Mathilde Monnier or the Italian Romeo Castelucci or the body art performance of Marina Abramovic are this year pushing classical theatre into the background. Big names from the world of French theatre such as Olivier Py or Hubert Colas are ‘relegated’ to secondary roles (FF).

PIETER T’JONCK • DE TIJD • 11 JULY

Fabre has not made it easy for himself, for which he is to be congratulated. His opening piece, ‘L’histoire des larmes’, is a poetical text that appears to be a ‘foreign body’ in his oeuvre. You can reduce the text, in the line of earlier work, to a recitation of (sexual) obsessions with bodily fluids such as mucous, urine or tears, but that would be pointless. Rather this is a lament over the withering and hardening of the world. Fabre attributes that to the loss of the familiar bond between man and his body. Cynicism has thus become man’s fate. Fabre presents this rupture as the rupture between a mediaeval world and the Renaissance (for which read: modernity). The leaps of thought that Fabre makes can be opposed. However, that is not the point. What is important is that Fabre is venturing into unknown territory. This piece is not about the power and terrible beauty of passion, the ‘original state’ of man. The theatre is no longer the condenser, the shoe-box that makes these powers visible. Instead, this piece is about the all too human. About waiting for solace from an inconsolable and unnameable yearning, the fragility of our dreams and metaphors. Not by chance, therefore, is the central metaphor glass. Glass that receives bodily fluid, glass also that must catch the cooling, refreshing rain that refuses to come. The production does not therefore rumble on to its inescapable conclusion like ‘Je suis sang’, but proceeds faltering to a final scene in which plentiful rain falls on François Beukelaers, as the ‘Knight of despair’ unmistakably Fabre’s alter ego.

The vulnerability of this piece was disturbed by an action of the ‘intermittents’. They chanted ‘Donnedieu de Barbès dehors’ for almost half an hour at the start of the play, to the great consternation of the Minister and his guests. Festival Director Baudriller and Fabre tried to calm people’s feelings, but it was the performers who silenced the protest by imperturbably putting on their opening act, in which they portrayed defenceless, inconsolable howling babies. Evidence ‘ex absurdio’ of Fabre’s central belief that defencelessness is an irresistible force.

Another Flemish artist, Jan Decorte, demonstrates this same strength of helplessness in ‘Dieu et les esprits vivants’, a disconcerting portrait of his personal ‘development’. More compact and smaller than ‘L’histoire des larmes’, it may well become a milestone in the history of this festival.

WWW.AVIGNON.FR

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EXTRA FLEMISH BUDGET FOR NEW POLICY (IN MILLION EURO)

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CONSOLIDATED RESULTS OF BELGIAN NEWSPAPER PUBLISHERS IN 2004 (IN MILLION EURO)

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* SINCE 29 APR 2005 SHARED OWNERSHIP DE PERSGROEP/ROSELL
** SHARED OWNERSHIP DE PERSGROEP/ROSELL
*** 73% CONTROLLED BY VUM
**** 51% CONCENTRA/49% ROSELL

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CULTURE
Diary

MUSIC, DANCE, THEATRE

• 15 to 17 July: Belgium Rhythm and Blues Festival Peer with Daniel Lanois, Ian Siegel Band and many others; info: www.briff.be
• 14 to 24 July: Blue Note Festival with Ben Sluyes Quartet, Bert Joris Quartet, Charlie Haden, Jef Neve Trio, Philip Catherine, Solomon Burke, Tony Joe White, Buena Vista Social Club, Jah Wobble, Sisters of Mercy, Cranes, Mercury Rev, Natalie Imbruglia, Patti Smith, Michael Franti & Spearhead and many others; info: www.lokersefeesten.be
• 5 to 7 August: Polé Polé Beach, Duingbergen; info: www.polepole.be
• 11 to 15 August: Jazz Middelheim with Marc Moulin, Toots Thielemans, Wayne Shorter Quartet, Fred Hirsch Trio, David Murray, Park Den Brandt, Antwerp; info: www.jazzmiddelheim.be
• 13 to 15 August: Marktrock Leuven with Texas, Vaya con Dios, Michael Franti; info: www.marktrock.be
• 18 to 20 August: Pukelpop with The Prodigy, Franz Ferdinand, Pixies, Marilyn Manson, Stereos MC’s, Goldfrapp, Nick Cave & The Bad Seeds, Korn, Heather Nova, Morcheeba and many others, Hasselt; info: www.pukelpop.be
• Until 11 September: The summer of Poetry, Watou, Nous le passage, Watou (near French border); info: www.poeczieomerswatou.be

EXPO

• From 5 February onwards: The memory of Congo, the colonial period, exhibition, Museum for Central Africa (Tervuren); info: www.175-25.be
• Until spring 2005: The Memory Of Congo, the colonial period, exhibition, Bozar, Brussels; info: www.bozar.be
• Until 11 September: Christian Dotremont, Museum of Elsene (Ixelles), info: 02/515.64.22
• Until 10 July: Fishes festival: an excursion into world music and enriching cultures with accomodation for all ages, Boeckout, near Antwerp; info: www.sfinks.be
• Until 2008: Between Skin and Organism, exhibition in the halls of the Bellry in Bruges; info: www.corpusbrugge05.be
• Until 18 September: L’Eau et la Nature, Bozar, Brussels; info: www.bozar.be
• Until 28 August: Jazz Middelheim with Texas, Yaya con Dios, Michael Franti; info: www.jazzmiddelheim.be
• Until 23 December: Art and History, Cinquantenaire, Brussels; info: 02 737 78 33
• Until 28 August: Design 1830-1958, Museum of Art and History, Cinquantenaire, Brussels; info: 02/741.72.11 www.kmkbg.be
• Until 7 August: Between Skin and Organism, exhibition in the halls of the Bellry in Bruges; info: www.corpusbrugge05.be
• Until 4 September: Retrospective of portraits by Hans Memling, Groeningemuseum, Bruges; info: www.brugge.be/musea

Focus on Flanders provides a weekly overview of articles from the Flemish press and appears in English, French and German. This newsletter is published by Uitgeverij Lannoo nv, Kasteelstraat 97, 8700 Tielt and can also be obtained by e-mail.