Thousands of church occupiers, 160 hunger-strikers

The number of church occupations by asylum-seekers in Belgium is increasing by the day. Several thousand immigrants spread over the whole country are apparently already involved. According to the Association against Deportation and for the Regularisation of Asylum-Seekers (CRER), some 160 asylum-seekers have already begun hunger strikes in 5 places. If they were initially mainly active in Brussels, 32 in Broechem in Flanders and 20 in Liège have now followed their example. The hunger-strikers are serious. ‘We are prepared to die,’ says Etienne Kabongo, a Congolese hunger-striker in Broechem. Home Affairs Minister Patrick Dewael (VLD) says he will not give in to their demand for general regularisation (FF).

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Annick Grobben & Frank Jagers • Het Laatste Nieuws • 5 May

The ‘church occupiers’ and hunger-strikers are receiving support from various corners. Earlier the Antwerp Bishop Paul Van den Berghe called on the government to adopt a more humane asylum policy, and it has now emerged that his Namur colleague, Monsignor André Léonard, has been sheltering immigrants in his Episcopal palace for the past two weeks. The Brussels free-thinkers and the Union of People without Papers are also asking the government for ‘regularisation on the basis of clear and permanent criteria’. Minister Patrick Dewael, who yesterday in Congo again called for a combined effort against illegal immigration, refused all responsibility for any consequences of the current actions of asylum-seekers. Dewael believes that religious, university and other institutions that support asylum-seekers in these actions are adopting a political stance. ‘This undermines the climate in which the bill to amend the asylum law will shortly be debated in the Chamber,’ he says. The Minister also points out that the church occupiers include asylum-seekers who are not eligible for regularisation or who ‘have not even applied for asylum’. According to ethicist Etienne Vermeersch, allowing general regularisation is very dangerous. The world would get the wrong signal that anyone can come to Belgium, he claims. The government, however, have to do something to deal with asylum appeal proceedings in particular more quickly, according to Vermeersch. Meanwhile, he says, every effort must be made to keep the hunger-strikers alive.

INTRODUCTION

In October 2004, after the last traces of asbestos had been removed, the thousands of European civil servants returned to the Berlaymont building on the Schumanplein in Brussels. For thirteen years they had been “temporarily” housed in replacement offices in the vicinity. As a consequence of compensation claims and a legal sparring matches between the parties responsible for removing asbestos and renovating the building, the work was delayed for years. Due to the claims and the fines imposed by the European Commission for the delay, the cost also turned out to be much higher than originally estimated.

The management - or according to Knack the mismanagement - of the work was the task of Berlaymont 2000, a company under public law, which was set up by the Public Buildings Agency (Regie der Gebouwen). As Finance Minister, Didier Reynders (MR) was ultimately responsible for supervising the financial state of affairs. At the end of 2004 he promised in Parliament that the Auditor’s Office would investigate why the renovation had turned out to be so expensive. However, at the time Reynders already knew that the Auditor’s Office is not empowered to carry out such an investigation. If Parliament wants to audit the accounts, it will therefore have to do it itself, says Knack. When CD&V MP Servais Verherstraeten again asked a question about the investigation of the Auditor’s Office this year, Reynders told him that he would have an answer on 22 May. However, the Minister did not say that the company’s Board of Directors intends going into liquidation on 12 May, despite the fact that a number of small pieces of work are still in progress.

In his own words Reynders wants to liquidate quickly because he is hoping that the administrators will be able to pull a number of amicable settlements with contractors out of the fire. Contractors are thought to have submitted compensation claims totalling around 110 million euros against Berlaymont 2000. But in Knack an anonymous witness claim that there are also other reasons why Reynders wants to get the liquidation out of the way quickly. At the very least suspicious is the claim of a group of four Belgian companies (4D), who were supposed to fit the building’s air-conditioning and heating systems. Once it had emerged that they were unable to complete their 50 million euro order, a larger company took part of the job. Although the remaining part of the job was estimated at 31.5 million euros, 4D has now earned 52.5 million euros from it. As if that were not enough, they are also demanding the absurdly high amount of 80 million euros on top. The anonymous witness in Knack finds it strange that Reynders’ office wants to make deals with, among others, 4D, just as they are starting to win the legal proceedings. Could it be by chance that three of the four companies are Walloon and the Wallon Government also has interests in them, he wonders. The Berlaymont building was sold at the fixed price of 552 million euros to the European Community, which will repay the amount over 27 years. It might be interesting to figure out how much the building will end up costing the Belgian State.

Frank Vandeaveeye • editor in chief
Focus on Flanders: 29 April - 5 May 2006 • Number 18

Social Policy and Economy

Integration Policy

Values and standards for those wanting to integrate

Respect, freedom, solidarity, equality and citizenship. According to a Committee of Experts these are the standards and values that shore up a diverse society. The Committee, made up of seven members (natives and foreigners) and headed by Marc Bossuyt, Judge at the Court of Arbitration and Professor of International Law, reached this conclusion after 12 meetings and will present its report to the Flemish Parliament on Thursday. According to Flemish Minister for Integration Mariño Keulen (VLD), these values will become the basis for the Social Orientation course that will have to be taken by all newcomers wanting to integrate into Flemish society. This will also tell them how to claim social housing, which powers come under the Flemish Government and which under the Federal, how they can make use of the services of the Family Aid Organisation ‘Kind en Gezin’. In short, they will be given a compass to find their way around Flemish society, says Keulen. (FF).

INGE GHIJS • DE STANDAARD • 2 MAY

The Committee did not shun a single subject. Homosexuality, religious freedom, abortion, euthanasia, equality of men and women. ‘Foreigners don’t need to applaud. We don’t all have to think the same. Diversity isn’t a problem if we agree on this social base. But they shouldn’t incite people to oppose it either,’ says Keulen.

‘We cannot impose social standards,’ admits Bossuyt. ‘However, we are calling for tolerance and dialogue. Perhaps they could consider whether such standards might also not contain any added value for them. But everyone has to observe legal standards, there’s no getting away from that. You don’t need to support homosexuality, but we can’t discriminate against gays. We have to agree on that.’

The Flemish Minorities Centre will now draft a handbook based on the text by the end of October 2006. This will then be re-submitted to the Committee.

WWW.MARINOEUKULEN.BE

Imigration Policy

Report on Congolese television designed to discourage emigration to Belgium

Zacharie Bababaswe [41], a well-known Congolese artist-journalist, has been given the go-ahead by Home Affairs Minister Patrick Dewael (VLD) to film a report intended to highlight the risks of illegal immigration. Both rejected Congolese asylum-seekers and legal Congolese are interviewed in the report. It also zooms in on conditions in the secure reception centres for rejected asylum-seekers.

The aim is to have the documentary shown in Congo itself. The title of the report, ‘Vanda na Mboka’ (‘Stay in your country’), also leaves little to the imagination. Dewael, who is beginning a tour in Congo, wants this report to discourage Congolese who are planning to emigrate from coming to chance their arm in Belgium. Bababaswe dismisses the criticism of Ecolo, which claims that people are risking their lives by testifying in front of the camera. No one can be identified, he claims in De Morgen (4 May).

Christian Democrats to reverse nuclear power plant closure

According to Christian Democratic party CD&V, the next government should reverse the planned closure of nuclear power plants as of 2015. The government of Liberals, Socialists and Greens agreed on the plans for closure in 2001. CD&V Senator Etienne Schouppe believes Belgium needs a combination of coal-fired, gas-fired, nuclear and green power stations in order to assure energy supply. Consequently the three oldest power stations (Doel I, Doel II and Tihange I) should be modernised to enable them to remain in service for fifteen more years.

According to CD&V, keeping nuclear power stations open is the most appropriate way to boost competition between electricity suppliers in Belgium. Electrabel, by far the largest electricity producer, seems set to agree to sell 2,000 megawatts of capacity to competitors. The Liberal VLD party is prepared to bring up the planned closure for discussion. Socialists are refusing to renegotiate on the subject.

Increase in price of electricity January 2000 - January 2006 in %

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Increase in price of electricity

January 2000 - January 2006 in %

Ireland
Sweden
Netherlands
Luxembourg
Finland
Denmark
Germany
Greece
Portugal
Italy
Spain
France
UK
Belgium

Source: Eurostat

Energy

FF Editor

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Greece
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Italy
Spain
France
UK
Belgium

Source: Eurostat
High Belgian productivity not enough to avoid delocalisation

A study by consultancy firm Price-waterhouse-Coopers reveals that the much-vaunted high productivity of Belgian workers is no longer able to cope with competition from low-wage countries. The same is true of jobs with a high added value.

In *De Standaard* (4 May) PwC points out that the labour market in India is inexhaustible and the quality of ICT staff high. Combined with low wage costs, their efficiency is much higher than that of Belgian staff with the same qualifications. In 2004 European telecommunications companies therefore devoted almost 7% of their total operating costs to outsourcing and offshoring to Eastern Europe and Asia. Nevertheless, Belgian companies and workers still achieve higher productivity than elsewhere in Europe. But our productivity is lower than that of American companies and workers. According to PwC, there is almost no more room in Belgium for increasing productivity, although there is for cutting wage costs or extending working hours (FF).

JOHAN RASKING • HET NIEUWSBLAD • 4 MAY

In Belgium the social balance sheets of 400 large companies were analysed. According to Peter De Bley, HR Services Director for PwC Belgium, the results show that the much-vaunted high productivity of Belgian workers ‘is a fact’. In Belgian companies, turnover and profit per worker is significantly higher than in the rest of Europe.

Compared with the USA, we score less highly. The explanation is simple. With an average working time of 1,550 hours per year, Belgian workers achieve an equivalent or even better figure than their Western European colleagues, but they work considerably fewer hours than American workers (1,619). World-wide South Korea heads the list, with an average of 2,302 working hours per worker per year. But the competitive advantage of this high productivity is largely being nullified by high wage costs in Belgium. On average, an employer’s total wage costs amount to almost 50,000 euros per worker per year. That is around 12,000 euros more than in neighbouring countries and six times more than in Eastern Europe. In Belgium, wage costs account for one fifth of all production costs, but only for one third in the USA.

More bad news: a worker in Belgium is offered on average 30% less training by his employer than his European colleagues. The costs of training in Belgium are also higher than elsewhere in Europe. This high cost may be explained by a lack of size in many Belgian companies. Peter De Bley of PwC warns of a dangerous trend: ‘Everywhere in Europe training appears less popular among managers. In 2004 the time devoted to training was at its lowest level in three years. And yet training is crucial to an innovative economy.’

In our country a full-time worker receives an average of 16.5 hours’ training, compared with 23.9 hours in Europe.

○

Albert Frère gives his vision of Belgian economy

Walloon Albert Frère is the richest Belgian of the moment. He owns 25% in Bertelsmann, 5% in Total and 7.3% in Suez, in addition to numerous other interests. In one of the rare interviews he gave (De Tijd, 2 May) he gives his vision of the economic future of Wallonia.

Frère is known as a Belgianist, but believes some of the views of the Warande group, a club of Flemish entrepreneurs calling for Belgium to be split, contain a grain of truth. At the end of the nineteenth/start of the twentieth century financial transfers ran from South to North. Since then Flanders has developed a chemical and petrochemical industry and attracted a great deal of auto-assembly thanks to its logistical trump cards.

Meanwhile Wallonia continued to focus on traditional products such as steel and coal. It should therefore come as no surprise that the financial transfers now run from North to South, says Frère.

According to Frère, the Wallonos urgently need to regain confidence. He believes Wallonia has to take measures of which the effects are quickly felt, as Ireland did. Government money must be redirected from politicised structures to programmes for the future. He feels the Walloon Marshall Plan, with its lower taxes for businesses and its support for research and innovation, is a step in the right direction.

○

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SOURCE: PRICEWATERHOUSE COOPERS • NB-INFOGRAFIEKDOOR DB

focus on FLANDERS • 29 April - 5 May 2006 • Number 18
1 May addresses: front against employers' demands

For Johan Vande Lanotte it was his first 1 May address as Chairman of the Flemish Socialists. For Xavier Verboven it was his last as boss of the Socialist trade union, the ABVV. Over the past year party and trade union have had an extremely turbulent relationship. This began on 1 May last year when an open discussion began between trade union and party on the General Social Contribution, a wealth tax which for the time being the party does not want but the union does. This was followed by discord over the Generation Pact, which regulates ends of careers and which was defended by the party and hotly contested by the union. This 1 May seemed to be dominated by reconciliation. In Ostend Vande Lanotte and Verboven stood shoulder to shoulder on the podium before their speech. Verboven again sang the old anti-Capitalist tune against exorbitant profits and the top salaries of management. And he was far from being the only one. All the 1 May addresses resounded with opposition to the demands of employers, who want to make businesses more competitive with a series of measures (FF).

DE TIJD • 2 MAY 2006

Verboven looked forward to the discussion later this year between the social partners on improving the competitiveness of businesses. 'Businesses are always calling for wage restraint, flexibility and lower taxes. It's time they made some concrete commitments themselves in terms of jobs, the redistribution of labour, training and investment in research and development.' He wondered whether a discussion on tax cuts was still appropriate in times of rising economic growth.

Verboven also pointed to the contradiction between the high profits of companies and managers' wages on the one hand and the call for wage restraint on the other. 'How can employers call for wage restraint and at the same time pay top salaries for managers that are completely disproportionate to their value to the company? How dare they publish top profits and still claim that it is gradually becoming impossible to invest in this country?' claimed the union man. Just like SPA Chairman Vande Lanotte after him, Verboven also reiterated the Socialist demand for the automatic permanent fixing of welfare payments. Verboven's comments immediately provoked reactions from employers' organisations. VBO Secretary Pieter Timmermans called them 'misplaced and misleading'. Karel Van Eetveld, Managing Director of Unizo, pointed out that most businesses in this country are small- and medium-sized enterprises that do not make any top profits at all.

WWW.ABVV.BE
WWW.SP-A.BE

Army wants to release soldiers to construction sector

FF EDITOR

If it is up to the Building Confederation, the army will soon be called in to build our houses, as 12,000 vacancies remain unfilled in the construction sector. Talks on this plan are already underway between the Confederation and the army, confirms a spokesman of the Confederation in Het Nieuwsblad (3 May). 4,000 soldiers will be redundant by 2015, among them electricians, crane-drivers and digger operators. A special unit of the army is dealing with the redundancies. The outsourcing of soldiers to the police forces of various towns and cities is running less smoothly. As few as 68 soldiers are reported to be working for the police, partly because it is still unclear who will pay their wages in the second year. In the first year it is still the army. In addition, a further 108 soldiers are employed helping local authorities introduce the electronic ID card. As well as letting staff go, the army is also holding sales of its old equipment. Negotiations are currently underway with Jordan over the sale of 14 F16 jets, tanks and artillery, reports Het Nieuwsblad.
Cheapest medication to be reimbursed most

The medicine budget of the health insurance has increased by 25 percent (674 million euros) since 2003

The government is to organise public invitations to tender as from 1 July for pharmaceutical companies selling cholesterol-reducing drugs, reports De Standaard (29 April). The cheapest drug will be reimbursed at a rate of 75 percent, as is currently the case. Other brands will be reimbursed at only 50 percent. The public invitations to tender concern only those cholesterol-reducing drugs for which generic counterparts exist. Minister of Social Affairs Rudy Demotte (PS) expects a decrease in the average price of cholesterol-reducing drugs. The minister chose cholesterol-reducing drugs as the first medication for the issuing of public invitations to tender as they form the largest share of the public medicine budget (10%). The medicine budget of the health insurance has increased by 25 percent (674 million euros) since 2003 (FF).

The Kiwi model represents a small part of the New Zealand health policy that Minister Demotte wants to adopt. New Zealand, which does not have a pharmaceuticals industry of its own, organises calls for tenders for each type of drug. Only the cheapest brand is refunded.

Demotte will first apply the model to one type of cholesterol-lowerer, the simvastatins such as Zocor.

He will refund patients 75% of the brand that emerges as the cheapest, but only 50% of the others. Dirk Van Duppen, the left-wing doctor who launched the Kiwi model in our country, is not happy. The Minister will continue to also refund the more expensive brands, albeit less so. According to Van Duppen he should only refund the cheapest: then doctors and patients will no longer have a choice and will also no longer have to seek out the cheapest.

Van Duppen also regrets that the Minister is only applying the Kiwi model to medicines whose patent has already expired. There are already generic versions of these on the market. These are cheaper anyway and generally also force down the price of the original drug sharply. There is then not much point in inviting tenders.

Thanks to the compromises Demotte had to make to get his model accepted, his Kiwi has become a light version that is also overripe and bruised.

The CD&V is also critical of Demotte’s Kiwi. MP Luc Goutry agrees with Van Duppen on one point: ‘If the Minister decides to invite tenders, he has to be consistent and refund only one drug, the best buy. What he’s doing now is half-hearted. He’s making the whole thing hopelessly confusing for patients and doctors. Who now knows what costs what and how much is refunded? The result will be that many patients will end up paying more because they and their doctors can no longer make head or tail of the complete confusion the Minister is creating.’

SP.A makes high managers’ salaries an election theme

The SP.A has given Bruno Tuybens, State Secretary for Public Enterprises, the task of drafting a proposal to curb excessive salaries and bonuses of senior managers in private and public enterprises. In De Standaard (3 May) SP.A Chairman Vande Lanotte hit out mainly at sky-high dismissal compensations. In the Netherlands these may not exceed one year’s additional salary. In Belgium managers often agree such high dismissal compensations that it becomes almost impossible to dismiss them, Vande Lanotte concludes. At a time when workers are being asked to exercise pay restraint, high managers’ salaries and the enormous profits of the banks are difficult for workers to digest, he feels. He also points out that the Dutch rules for sound administration in the Tabaksblatt Code are also much stricter than those of the Belgian Lippons Code (FF).

Vande Lanotte wants the subject of socially responsible business and sound administration in industry to become the catalyst for genuine political discussion. ‘The impression is being created that there is not enough control, sense of reality and moral authority to keep salaries at the top of business within normal limits. People don’t have a problem with bosses being well paid, but it mustn’t be disproportionate. That gnaws away at the sense of responsibility of ordinary workers more than people might think.’

‘When in the same week on the one hand it became clear how much Jean-Luc Dehaene earned as a director of Inbev (79,000 euros gross in 2005, ed.) and on the other how Inbev would be restructuring and the price of a beer went up, a lot of employees showed their indignation,’ says Vande Lanotte. As well as limited dismissal compensation, the Socialists also want clearer criteria for bonuses. There should also be more transparent standards in this respect in state enterprises. The SP.A Chairman says the ‘fuss’ around the Pi-canol law (the bill that makes it compulsory to publish the salaries of managers and bosses of listed companies, but has not been approved by the Chamber, ed.) ‘does not bear repeating’. The VLD took the initiative itself in the Senate, but then reduced it with all sorts of manoeuvres in the Cham-ber. The whole discussion was then played out on such a basic level that you know you’re burying it.’
**Electrical chain Krëfel puts itself in the shop window**

Krëfel, the second largest chain of household and other electrical goods in the country, is looking for a partner. Despite its German-sounding name the owner is a Flemish family. Founder Marcel Poulet, from Blankenberge, set the company up in 1958 when the optimism of progress with the Brussels Expo was running rampant here. He named it after the German town of Krefeld, where he once worked for a German vacuum cleaner manufacturer. Poulet hoped that the German-sounding name would also give his company a German stamp of solidity and reliability. Krëfel started out as a mail-order firm. Later in 1965 the first store was opened. Today the chain has 66 stores and employs 900 people. In 2005 it recorded sales of 215 million euros. The Poulet family has now asked a commercial bank to examine the offers of interested parties for their ‘added value’. In 1999 Krëfel wanted to float on the stock market, but dropped those plans when the financial markets slumped in 2000. Two groups that are expressing an interest in a partnership are well known. These are the German Media Markt, which is currently a big hit in Belgium, and market leader Euronics, a buying combination of Selexion and Action shop (FF).

BERT BROENS • DE TIJD • 3 MAY

In terms of turnover, Krëfel is the second largest electrical chain in the country after Euronics. Such chains hold a significant share of the Belgian electrical market, but independent shopkeepers still form the biggest party. According to Fedis, the Belgian federation of distributors, the electrical market is worth sales of 1.7 billion euros. Despite falling prices, sales are on the up. Krëfel itself saw another increase in turnover of 17% to 216 million euros and this year is aiming for 250 million euros. Krëfel is also extremely healthy. In the 2004-2005 tax year there was a net surplus of 6.4 million euros. Other players in the sector value the chain as one of the best-performing in the country. There are therefore no financial concerns that forced Krëfel into the shop window. According to Krëfel, a new partner will allow the company to grow more quickly. In recent months, under pressure from Media Markt, among others, Krëfel invested heavily in the construction of large sites. There are now four such megastores. Ultimately there will be ten. The word in the sector is that with these investments the group has almost entirely drained its war chest. That may have influenced the decision to seek a partner.

www.krëfel.be

**Van Quickenborne defends government's decision over more shopping Sundays**

**According to Unizo, only a few megastores are interested.**

According to State Secretary for Administrative Simplification Vincent Van Quickenborne (VLD), who commissioned a poll, 63.2% of Flemings want shops to open more on Sunday. His party has been calling for this for years. Together with the Walloon sister party, the MR, they are convinced that Sunday shopping would not only provide a better service for the consumer, it would also create economic growth. In the Federal Government they agreed with their Socialist coalition partner that the number of shopping Sundays should be increased from three to nine. However, this decision met with strong protests from Unizo (the union of independent entrepreneurs in Flanders), the distributors’ federation Fedis and trade unions. According to Unizo, only a few megastores are interested. On 2 May the organisation presented a petition with 10,000 signatures against Sunday opening to Federal Employment Minister Peter Van Velthoven. It was not by chance that Van Quickenborne published the poll on the day the National Labour Council, on which trade unions and employers sit, published its advice to the government. According to the unions, this advice states that the government would be better off first consulting the social partners before taking such an initiative (FF).

**Opinion**

GAZET VAN ANTWERPEN • 3 MAY

A majority is in favour of expanding to nine Sundays and almost half of Flemings want even more. Van Quickenborne concludes from this that the consumer has sided with the government’s intention. But who is ‘the’ consumer? For various reasons one wants to shop in the morning, the next in the early evening, some almost always shop on Saturdays only and yet others prefer Sunday morning. Plenty of possibilities, then, and on top of that three extra shopping days a year are also possible. According to a study by the OECD, Belgium is the European leader in terms of opening times. On average, both food and non-food businesses open for 67 hours a week. Opponents of a relaxation of opening times see this as evidence that consumers have plenty of opportunities to do their shopping. Nor has it yet been conclusively proven that extra Sundays automatically lead to more sales and more profit. More opening hours means more expenses and requires more income. It is far from certain, even rather doubtful that consumers will increase their weekly budget to be able to spend a bit more on Sunday. If it is simply a matter of a shift in shopping behaviour or of an additional opportunity for a recreational shopping trip, who in the end actually benefits!
BIAC invests 600 million euros in property projects around Zaventem Airport

Over the next 20 years BIAC, the Zaventem airport operator, is to invest around 600 million euros in property projects around the airport. Of this Masterplan 2007-2027, 400 million is earmarked for the office and conference complex Airport Village and 200 million for the further development of Brucargo, Zaventem’s freight airport. The Board of Directors has just given the go-ahead for the start of Airport Village. The first phase of 60,000 m² will get underway at the beginning of next year, and is called Transpolis. BIAC is controlled by the Australian financial group Macquarie (70%). The remaining 30% is in the hands of the Belgian State (FF).

GUIDO MEEUSEN • DE TIJD • 29 APRIL

The first phase of ‘Airport Village’ is known as Transpolis and is a joint-venture between BIAC, a Belgian construction group (Investimmo) and a Dutch project-developer (Wilma). They are to build offices and conference facilities on the site between the airport’s car parks and the viaduct. BIAC also wants to build hangars, storage sites and logistical premises on Brucargo, the freight airport. The airport is currently operating with long-term concessions whereby transport companies invest in their buildings. Capacity is gradually being increased. Within 20 years the airport will then be able to transfer up to 1.5 million tonnes of goods, twice as much as today. According to Wilfried Van Assche, BIAC’s Managing Director, this means freight will remain important even after the departure of courier firm DHL in 2008. Moreover, BIAC is counting on losing only 50% of DHL’s traffic, despite the company relocating its European hub to Leipzig. “We’re growing by 5% annually, so our activities in Zaventem will remain substantial even after 2008,” says Xavier De Buck, spokesman for DHL.

www.biac.be

ELEVENTH EDITION OF KUNSTENFESTIVALDESARTS BEGINS

The Festival brings creations and performances from all corners of the world to the only truly international city in Belgium

The eleventh edition of the KunstenfestivaldesArts begins today in Brussels. For Frie Leysen, the main inspiration behind the Festival, it is the last edition. After Frie Leysen had turned De Singel in Antwerp into the most important arts centre in Flanders thanks to an unrivalled programme of international dance, theatre and music, she suddenly gave up her job as director and took the risk of setting up a completely new festival in Brussels. In Knack and De Standaard she explains how in 1994 she looked into the feasibility of an international Arts Festival with a subsidy from then Home Affairs Minister Louis Tobback. The bilingual Festival has now become a tradition. According to Leysen, it was also a reaction to the political and verbal violence between the communities. Sixteen theatres are ignoring language barriers to get behind a single project. She also claims the public is evenly split between Francophones and Flemings. The Festival brings creations and performances from all corners of the world to the only truly international city in Belgium, says Leysen. The Festival is kicking off with performances by the Ghent company Les Ballets C de la B, the English performance duo Lone Twin and the Argentinian theatre company Sportivo Teatral (FF).

LIV LAVEYNE • KNACK • 3 MAY

Frie Leysen: ‘When I looked from Antwerp to Brussels, I felt that Brussels needed an artistic electric shock. The range of performing arts on offer, both national and international, was not what it should be in a capital and certainly not the capital of Europe. Brussels was not exactly a playground for Belgian artists. The international circuit was also sub-standard. You did have the Kaaitheater and Théâtre 140, but that was it. There were also the socio-political developments. It was the period of rising racism and nationalism across the whole of Europe. I saw how that found a fertile breeding ground in Belgium in the differences between the two communities and asked myself how you could provide an artistic response to this intolerance. I wanted to react against the fear and ignorance of other cultures by presenting other cultures. At the same time it was my intention to create a platform with the Kunstenfestival for a full-on reaction against the political verbal violence between the communities.’ The Kunstenfestival could not flourish in any other city than Brussels, says Leysen. ‘Brussels is the only truly international city in Belgium. I felt the fact that here two communities, one Dutch-speaking and one French-speaking, rub shoulders with each other day in day out, was a trump card no other Belgian city can play, let alone Paris or Amsterdam. The essence of Europe, the cohabitation of communities, already exists de facto in this city and I wanted to exploit that.’

The Kunstenfestival has developed over its eleven editions and the public has evolved with it, concludes Leysen: ‘Now the Kunstenfestival devotes even more time to less well-known artists, there are more creations that we co-produce. Working with non-Western cultures from a contemporary angle has been refined and the arts have extended into film and the plastic arts. In the beginning the Kunstenfestival was called elitist, but in the past year or three all that has changed. Our public is not too lazy to come and see artists they have never heard of before. For that you have to build up a relationship of trust with the public, and that takes a while.’

WWW.KFDA.BE
CULTURE

MUSIC, DANCE, THEATRE

• Until 27 May: KunstenFestivaldesArts with artists from all over the world on 18 spots in Brussels with Christoph Marthaler, Mathias Kneubüel, Romeo Castellucci, Alain Platel, Wang Bing, Marie NDiaye, Chris Kond, Frank Thys and others, Brussels; info: www.kfda.be 070/0222.199
• Until 14 May: Die Lustige Witwe by Franz Lehar, Operetta, directed by Lee Blakeley, Roma, Antwerp; info: www.vlaamseopera.be
• Until 10 May: Zoo/Thomas Haitert, Walking Oscar, dance, Kaaitheater, Brussels; info: www.kkaaitheater.be
• 8 and 9 May: Joss van Immerseel and Anne Galowich both on harpsichord with works by Padre Antonio Soler, François Couperin, and Georg Böhm, Protestant Chapel, Brussels; info: www.bozar.be 02/507.82.00
• 8 May: Orchestre des Champs-Élysées conducted by Philippe Herreweghe with symphonies by WA Mozart, Concertgebouw, Bruges; info: www.concertgebouw.be
• 7 May: Les Pastoureaux, Mozart/ Haydn Messe Nelson, Bozar, Brussels; info: www.bozar.be 02/507.82.00
• 13 May: The Dresden Dolls, concert, AB, Brussels; info: www.abconcerts.be 02/548.24.24
• 14 May: Music of the islands (Sardegna), Paolo Fresu ‘Sonos e Memoria, Flagey, Brussels; info: www.flagey.be
• 15 May: Dmitri Makhlin (violin), Alexander Kuziaev (cello) and Boris Berezovsky (piano) with Ludwig van Beethoven and Sergey Rakhmaninov Conservatory Brussels; info: www.bozar.be 02/507.82.00
• 15 and 17 May: Jan Fabre and Troublyn with The King of the Loss and the King of plagiarism, De Vooruit, Ghent; info: www.vooruit.be 09/267.28.28
• 23 May: The Du Vinci Code, avant-première of the film and opening ceremony of the 59th festival of Cannes will take place simultaneously in Bozar, Brussels; info: www.bozar.be 02/507.82.00
• 17 May: Confessions d’un autre genre, theatre, Bozar, Brussels; info: www.bozar.be 02/507.82.00
• 18 May: Theatre! concert, AB, Brussels; info: www.abconcerts.be 02/548.24.24
• 19 May: Constanza Macnas, Dorky Park o Schaumbühe am Lehniner Platz, Back to the Present, De Singel, Antwerp; info: www.desingel.be
• 18 to 20 May: Yearning for Beauty, The Vienna Werkstätte, exhibition Bozar, Brussels, info: www.bozar.be
• Until 31 May: Antwerp-Frankfurt: Migration and innovation around 1600, exhibition, Hessenhaus, Antwerp; info: http://museum.antwerpen.be/etnografisch_museum
• Until 28 May: Kuthat Ataman (Turkey), De-Regulation, exhibition, Mukha, Antwerp, info: www.mukha.be (013) 260 99 99
• Until 28 May: Kuthat Ataman, Kuba, exhibition, Extra City, Antwerp, info: www.extractocity.org
• 2 April to 28 May: International Festival of Photography, CC Scharpoor, Knokke; info: www.fotofestival.be
• Until 1 October: Beaufort Outside: open air exhibition along the Flemish coast; info: www.2006beaufort.be
• Until 3 September: Beaufort Inside, exhibition, PMMK, Ostend; info: www.2006beaufort.be www.pmmk.be 070/22.50.05