

The Body Exposed: An Analysis of the Performative Body in the Work of Jan Fabre

by

Karl Sacca

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Department of Drama
University of Alberta

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ABSTRACT:

Jan Fabre has been and continues to be one of Europe's most controversial theatre directors, who never fails to shock the audience with very powerful yet provocative scenes. He has gained world recognition as a theatre director and visual artist, and his productions have been very successful and appraised. Fabre is always looking to learn something new about the human body and likes to experiment with different approaches every chance he gets.

This thesis provides an in-depth analysis of the performative body on stage by offering a close reading to three of Fabre's productions and one of his projects as a visual artist. The thesis discusses Fabre's experiments with the body, the postdramatic features prevalent in his productions, the use of nudity on stage, and some of Fabre's other provocative strategies. The analysis relies on critical reviews collected from Troubleyn's archive, interviews conducted with Fabre on print or on YouTube, and video recordings of the productions.

This research highlights the powers of the body and digs deeper into the creative mind of this remarkable contemporary director. It also connects all three productions that might seem very different in themes and context but are very similar in terms of its approach to the performance of body, the creation process, and audience and critical reception.

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Introduction

For over forty years, Flemish visual artist and theatre maker Jan Fabre (1958, Antwerp) has been one of the most innovative and important figures on the international contemporary art scene. He has crafted a highly personal universe as a visual artist, stage creator, and storyteller complete with its own characters, symbols, and recurrent themes. He had an early fascination in the world of insects and other creatures thanks to the entomologist Jean-Henri Fabre's (1823–1915) studies. Fabre looked for ways to expand his research into the area of the human body in the late 1970s while attending the Royal Academy of Fine Arts and the Municipal Institute of Decorative Arts and Crafts in Antwerp. From 1976 till the present, his personal activities and performances have been crucial to his artistic development. Fabre uses a range of materials in his language, which is set in his own world with bodies that are balanced between the contrasts that characterise natural existence. Any approach to Fabre's collection of work, in which human and animal life are constantly in interaction, must include the concept of metamorphosis. Through the author's texts and nocturnal notes that were published in the volumes of his *Journal de Nuit*, he reveals his universe.

From 1976 till 1982, "Fabre held numerous performances. One of his first international public performances was *Bill us later* (1979) at the Mott Street Gallery (New York) where Fabre used one-dollar bills coming from the audience to create words, which he burned later on during the performance. *Ilad of the Bic-Art, The Bic-Art Room* (1980) was the performance Fabre held at the Appel (Amsterdam) where he locked himself in a white cube full of objects to draw for three days and three nights with blue Bic ballpoint pens. The next year this performance, *Ilad of the Bic-Art, The Bic-Art Room* was repeated at Salon Odessa" (Fabre press material).

After his eight-hour production *This is theatre like it was to be expected and foreseen* (1982) and his iconic four-hour production *The Power of Theatrical Madness* (1984) he elevated his art to a new level with the extraordinary *Mount Olympus* (2015), a 24-hour performance to exalt the worship of tragedy. With “Tivoli” castle (1990) and permanent public works in historical landmarks like *Heaven of Delight* (2002) at the Royal Palace in Brussels, *The Gaze Within (The Hour Blue)* (2011–2013) in the Royal Staircase of the Museum of Fine Arts in Brussels, and his most recent installation of *The Man Who Bears the Cross* (2015) in the Antwerp Cathedral, Fabre gained the admiration of a more global audience. His solo exhibits include “Homo Faber” (KMSKA, Antwerp, 2006), and “Hortus / Corpus” (Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, 2011). In 2008, his “L'Ange de la metamorphose” show at the Louvre in Paris made him the first living artist to display a significant body of work there.

In September 2018, the Flemish Ministry of Culture initiated an investigation on Fabre and his dance company Troubleyn after a few of his actors accused him of sexual harassment and misconduct (Harris). Following a three-year investigation, Fabre was condemned on basis of a law of well-being of workers, relating to six ex-performers who pressed charges. Some of the charges included a French kiss exchanged with an ex-performer, the bullying of performers by using insulting nicknames, and an attempt to approach a performer during a photoshoot in Fabre's apartment. For all these violations, the tribunal imposed a suspended sentence of 18 months on Fabre. “The judgment also refers to the 169 positive testimonies that were given to the court from people who worked with Jan Fabre over the last 20 years” (Troubleyn press material). Some of Fabre’s performers and ex-performers came together and built a website called “Reframe Platform” in which they share their positive testimonies and refuse any negative

accusations towards Fabre and Troubleyn in general. These performers continue to support Fabre even to this day and consider him as one of the best directors they ever worked with.

The main topic of interest in this thesis is the body on stage and how Fabre experiments with it. Repetition, metamorphosis, and the exhaustion of the body are all important elements of Fabre's productions. In addition to that, Fabre is known for his use of provocative elements such as nudity and sexual practices on stage. The productions chosen for this thesis have a provocative dramaturgy and aesthetic (ex: nudity, use of offensive language), and create a lot of tension for various reasons, such as being seen as taboos. The three chapters are similar in that they study the body on Fabre's stage for different purposes, such as seeing how far the body can go and be pushed, how some postdramatic features relate to the body, and how the naked body can provoke audiences.

The four works of Fabre I chose to discuss for my thesis research are very different, diverse, and chosen for many reasons. The first one, *From the Feet to the Brain* (2009), is a project in which Fabre sheds the light on the importance of all parts of the body: the brain, the heart, the sex, the belly, and the feet. There are lots of details to look at in every part, and there is a lot of meaning behind each. One of the main reasons I chose this project is it speaks to Fabre's passion for and continuous research on the human body. It is also a very theatrical piece. Within the tradition of performance studies, I consider this sculpture as a sort of performance. It is also considered as one of his most successful works by a visual artist and has toured and been reinvented from one country to another. The body parts that Fabre chooses to look at in this piece are all tested in the next part of the chapter: his 24-hour production *Mount Olympus: To Glorify the Cult of Tragedy*. There will also be some focus on some of the most challenging exercises the performers went through over an entire day, and how this long production was received by

audiences from around the world. Audience reception in the Middle East is also an important topic that will be discussed because it very uncommon to have a production like that in that part of the world due to many political and religious issues and beliefs. In this production Fabre pushes his actors to their limits, and the stage body becomes a laboratory. His relentless drive causes it to sweat and become exhausted. Repetition and exhaustion are prevalent in this production, and it has a profound impact on actors and audiences alike.

The third piece I chose is Fabre's breakthrough and one of his most successful productions: *The Power of Theatrical Madness* (2012, re-enactment of the original from 1984). It is generally considered to be among Fabre's best works, and the postdramatic features prevail in it. This is remarkable, since the early 1980s were early days for what much later would be coined the post-dramatic by theatre scholar Hans-Thies Lehmann. I look at some of these features with examples of scenes from Fabre's production, and how these scenes have been received by critics worldwide. I also explore the distinction Fabre creates between the male and female body, the masculine and the feminine.

Last but not least, *Orgy of Tolerance* (2009) is the fourth of Fabre's works that I delve into because it provokes in many other ways than nudity, which is the more common strategy in the other two productions. *Orgy of Tolerance* proves to the audience that even when the body is dressed, the action being done to it can still provoke, shock, and/or offend some audiences. The play is a sardonic critique of consumerist habits in the West. There are many provocations in this play, such as using religion as a commodity, the use of invective on stage, and a long masturbation competition scene that feels like it's never going to end. I explore the impact these scenes have on the audience.

All of these productions are connected in a way: they all go back to a performative exhibition of the human body, dressed or undressed. Fabre does all kinds of experiments on the performative body, and alters these experiments based on what the production is about and what its themes are.

The methodology for this research rests on critical reviews, audience reception, archival research at Troubleyn, and interactions and interviews between Van den Dries and Fabre, Fabre's dramaturg Miet Martens, and Fabre's performers. There is a big chunk of information based on Dr. Luk Van den Dries' research, which was crucial in the construction of my thesis, especially his book *Corpus Jan Fabre*. I also situate my research based on theoretical texts, such as Hans-Thies Lehmann's book *Postdramatic theatre* and Piet Defraeye's dissertation "Shocking the Audience: A Study of Audience Provocation in the Theatre with Special Reference to Arrabal, Handke and Brenton." Furthermore, I conducted a close reading of Fabre's productions, looked at the script and stage directions from the books I received during my visit to Troubleyn, and while at Troubleyn, watched multiple videos with either the audience commenting on how they felt about the play or Fabre being interviewed and answering questions about the play. I gained access to many recorded productions through the Jan Fabre DVD Box Set, which helped me not only see the productions for myself, but also be able to understand the reviews I am reading. I also had interesting conversations with academics who know about Jan Fabre, like Piet Defraeye and gathered as many sources as I could from them. During my visit to Troubleyn, Fabre's campus in Antwerp, I was given the opportunity to access many of Fabre's works and do a tour in his laboratory. I was also lucky enough to watch a recording of *Mount Olympus* that is normally not being shared due to copyright reasons.

The thesis consists of three parts, bookended with a short introduction and conclusion. The first chapter discusses Fabre's interest in the human body in his work as a visual artist and sculptor on the one hand, and theatre maker on the other. In *From the Feet to the Brain*, Fabre dissects each part of the body and reveals its beauty and importance, whereas in *Mount Olympus*, he tests the body's limits on stage for a period of 24 hours. At the end of the chapter, there is a section on Fabre's Teaching Group and some of the exercises he goes through with his actors and students before rehearsing for any upcoming productions.

The first part of Chapter 2 brings forward some of the postdramatic features prevalent in his productions, particularly in *The Power of Theatrical Madness*. Some of these features, such as physicality, relate to the human body in many ways. The second part of the chapter is focused solely on the body on stage as the main topic, with nudity, secretion of body fluids, and the biological distinction Fabre creates between the masculine and the feminine as subtopics. There is also small section at the end on the rehearsal process and the physically-based research the performers undertake in order to understand their character and bodies.

Finally, Chapter 3 examines some of Fabre's more general provocations on stage, such as the use of offensive language, using humor in religion, and quite prominently, masturbation on stage. Some of the scenes explored in *Orgy of Tolerance* turn out to be very intense and provocative. There is also yet another section on nudity towards the end of the chapter. This chapter shows his passion for and interest in biology, particularly the human body. Most of his experiments with the body that are demonstrated on stage will be observed in this chapter.

This analysis of Fabre's productions lays down a framework for better understanding and interpreting the presence of the body on stage and what Fabre intends to do with it. The

postdramatic director's thoughts and interests will be shared and are useful in comprehending Fabre's creative process.

Chapter 1: The Performed Body in Fabre's Work: Between Power and Failure

Belgian artist and theatre maker Jan Fabre was born in Antwerp, Belgium in 1958. He pursued his education in Antwerp in the late seventies at the Municipal Institute of Decorative Arts and Crafts and at Antwerp's Royal Academy of Fine Arts and has ever since found ways to incorporate the human body in his research. Fabre has been interested since the start of his career in the secret of beauty. As Ilaria Bernardi, Professor in Artist Archives at IULM University, Milan reflects,

...he has sought to retrieve the archetypal and primitive knowledge that present-day society has now lost. To do this, he uses a range of media capable of visualizing the ideas behind all of his artistic activity: the centrality of the body in its physiological, intellectual and symbolic aspects; drawing's leading role as the tool to know the body; and the possibility of interchange (or metamorphosis) between art and science, man and animal, life and death.

Fabre's interest in the body and biology in general is prominent in his works as a theatre maker, visual artist, and sculptor. For Fabre, the body is constantly undergoing change or metamorphosis on the stage. Through reflection on the idea of constant change, the overlap between life and death, man and animal, light and shade, dream and nightmare, beauty and ugliness, and other concepts, Fabre has attempted to visualise a continuously changing reality throughout the course of his artistic career. Through empathy, which causes a shift in the spectator's consciousness as well, he alters whatever he touches, rendering everything immaterial. Because of this, some exhibitions make the brain, which is thought to be the sexiest portion of the body, their main focus (Bernardi). This chapter uncovers Fabre's particular interest

in the body on stage through two of his most important and successful pieces of art, a play titled *Mount Olympus: To Glorify the Cult of Tragedy* (2015) in which he does all kinds of experiments to the body for a period of 24 hours, and the famous project titled *From the Feet to the Brain* (2009), in which he dissects the human body and allows people to explore all its parts. The two works of Fabre this chapter addresses speak to Fabre's interest in the body in different ways. In the project, he exposes different parts of the body, whereas in the production, he tests these parts and their limits. Although the presence of the body on stage cannot be ignored and is very exigent in most, if not all, of his productions and works of art, I chose these two works specifically because they both push the limits of the human body to the extreme and are hugely demanding on the actors' bodies. *From the Feet* provides an in-depth examination of all body parts that helps us understand the way the body is used and looked at in Fabre's productions, particularly useful when analyzing *Mount Olympus*. *From the Feet* is also very theatrical and serves as an asset to what I am discussing. I will also focus on audience and critical reception of these works and how different parts of the world have responded to them. *Mount Olympus* for instance, toured in the Middle East, and this kind of work is not very common in that particular area of the world. Finally, I will examine the creation process Fabre goes through with his actors and students to reach the desired outcome. I do so by relying on critical reviews, interviews conducted with Fabre at the time of release of his works, and some documentaries especially on the project *From the Feet* that is part of the Jan Fabre DVD box set. The book *Corpus Jan Fabre*, written by Belgian scholar and Professor of Theatre studies Luk Van den Dries is also an essential tool to my entire research as it explores the entire process of the creation of Fabre's work, provides revealing photographic material, and includes a set of interviews with Fabre and his entire team.

Fabre has always been interested in biology. He has a common interest in the biological foundations of performing and performance processes with practitioners like Vsevolod Meyerhold and Jerzy Grotowski (Van den Dries “Jan Fabre and tg STAN” 427). Van den Dries reflects:

In his productions, he frequently tests the physical foundations of his performers, experimenting, for example, with the effects of exhaustion on the performers’ motor capabilities, exploring the physical heat generated by the actors performing an endlessly repeated scene, or the bodily reactions to extremely loud screaming. Almost taking the role of a scientific researcher, Fabre alters the conditions of the body on the stage, attempting to unearth and display the body’s cultural history (Van den Dries “Jan Fabre and tg STAN” 428).

When asked in an interview with Van den Dries about his interest in the body, Fabre explains that the body is binary, and represents a fundamental binary dynamic on many levels : mobile-immobile / human – divine/ mortal-eternal, etc. He elaborates:

I think man is the representation of two different kinds of cults: the cult of immobility and the cult of movement. I regard the skeleton as a cult of immobility that we carry within ourselves. Apart from that we have the tendons, the fat, the muscles, the flesh, that represent the cult of movement. The flesh has the urge to undertake action and to destroy itself. And at the same time there’s a foundation present in our body, a skeleton, the bone structure, the rock, the calcification that we carry with us. That's the cult of immobility, the cult of death and the cult of retrospection. That's a form of drama as well. A conflict

between skeleton and flesh. I want to show that struggle. From that inner conflict the divine can be generated too. Sometimes, at the height of the conflict, you can feel the struggle coming to an end and a unification of spirit and body emerging. Then a spiritual being originates that converges with mind, matter and action. I think at that moment, something essential is made clear (*Corpus* 322).

One other thing that is a very important constituent in Fabre's oeuvre is the disciplining or choreo-policing of the body. According to Van den Dries, this can be understood within the tradition of French philosopher Michel Foucault's analysis of power. Foucault's theory is that "power mechanisms function in a productive fashion, rather than operating in an explicitly repressive form" (Van den Dries *Corpus* 22). This power, then, makes bodies, while restricted by some fundamental structures, as productive as possible, and transforms them into instruments that themselves incorporate power (Van den Dries *Corpus* 22). I will zoom into this idea in my second chapter when I talk about *The Power of Theatrical Madness* (1984) which involves a great deal of disciplining the bodies.

From the Feet to the Brain:

As a visual artist and sculptor, Fabre worked on many creative and complex projects that made him gain worldwide recognition, such as the sculpture *The Man who Measures the Clouds* (1998) which can be found in many sites including SMAK, Ghent and de Singel, Antwerp to name a few, and *The Man Who Bears the Cross* (2015) in Antwerp. These are just two of his innovative projects. In 2009, Fabre lured multiple artists from all around the world into the city of Venice in Italy so that they could admire one of his most powerful, meaningful, and astonishing projects titled *From the Feet to the Brain*, as part of the Venice Biennale. In this

project, Fabre creates five sculptural tableaux with the purpose of exploring a universe of beauty, horror, and metamorphosis that is somewhat confusing, appealing, and difficult to conceive in conventional artistic terms. It is a universe where dreams and reality are continuously alternated. (“From the Feet to the Brain”) The project was initially shown in Kunsthaus Bregenz, an art museum in Bregenz, Austria, and curated by Eckhard Schneider. Venice provided the ideal context for the project; its water, liquidity, and glass, all relate to Fabre’s work, as explained by Giacinto Di Pietrantonio, Italian curator of the museum Galleria d’Arte Moderna e Contemporanea di Bergamo. What follows is an analysis of Fabre’s project with reliance on the documentary *From the Feet to the Brain* which was filmed by the production company La Compagnie des Indes.



Fig 1: *From the Feet to the Brain*: “The Feet” (Photo: Markus Tretter)



Fig 2: *From the Feet to the Brain*: “The Sex” (Photo: Markus Tretter)



Fig 3: *From the Feet to the Brain*: “The Belly” (Photo: ARTit)



Fig 4: *From the Feet to the Brain*: “The Heart” (Markus Tretter)



Fig 5: *From the Feet to the Brain*: “The Brain” (Markus Tretter)

For the installation, Fabre separates body parts in different rooms and creates a different environment for each room to help us grasp a better understanding of the importance of these parts independently. The first room is a very confined space, with concrete walls and two feet hanging from the ceiling (see fig 1). The feet are made from the same material as the brain as though the entire body is a creation of the brain (*From the Feet* 00:07:33). Di Pietrantonio refers to the common Italian saying that in English means “you’ve got your brain in your feet,” which is used in Italy when people think of someone as stupid (*From the Feet* 00:07:50). While the feet represent our connection as humans to the earth and are used to transport us from one place to another, Lóránd Hegyi, curator of Musée d’art moderne Saint-Étienne (France), asserts that people don’t usually make that connection when they think of feet. In European culture, the feet are a banal part of the body and are undervalued. In Hegyi’s words: “In the European mind, everything that is down is bad, and everything that is up is good.” (*From the Feet* 00:05:49) Fabre therefore praises the feet by hanging them on the ceiling instead of placing them on the floor and gives a certain mythological importance to this so-called banal instrument of the body.

At the core of his work is the darkness and the tightness of the cellar where all his ideas are born. Under the feet and on the floor are seven bathtubs (see fig 1), the number seven being defined as “the majestic number” by Di Pietrantonio. These bathtubs are important for Fabre because they apparently represent the bathtubs Fabre spent hours bathing in wherever he went (home, hotel, etc.) as he drew and came up with new ideas. In a neighboring room lies a mannequin of Jan Fabre on the floor with an erect penis, “The Sex,” ejaculating every four to five minutes (see fig 3). His semen splashes across the tombstones that surround him. One of these tombstones is Fabre’s and the rest have dates carved on them, which serve as references to famous theoreticians and artists whose work Fabre appreciates and looks up to, including Freud,

Picasso, Kandinsky, and many others. The ejaculation over these tombs including his own is a representation of a metamorphosis; as Di Pietrantonio expresses: “the seed fertilizes and regenerates death, transforming it into life” (English subtitles in *From the Feet* 00:09:30). The effect is very performative, and creates an unavoidable dynamic between installation and visitors, as suggested by Hegyi:

I think it’s a very provocative connection, i.e. sexuality with this kind of cemetery which is also a bit like a horror movie in a certain ironical way. Hence, it’s very theatrical, and it involves the public that is around looks down at the piece. This is important because he creates a theatre between the installation and the visitors (*From the Feet* 00:10:30-00:11:30).

Ejaculating on these tombs, especially his own, goes to show that not only is there a transformation of death to life, but also a birth of new creative ideas and readiness to adopt new projects and works of art. Schneider also thinks that this frequent ejaculation shows the young artist’s source of creativity (*From the Feet* 00:09:50). In addition, this statue without a doubt generates humor especially because the body ejaculating has the face of Fabre himself. Any viewer who enters the room will immediately be distracted by the fact that it is Fabre whose semen is coming out. The confrontation is quasi personalized, and this changes the visitors’ perceptions of the entire piece and certainly sticks in their minds. It is quite difficult to take it seriously and allow its full-scope meaning, specifically because Fabre’s work is usually interpreted as complex and thought evoking and no one would expect to see him with an erect penis lying on a set of tombstones.

In another room is a representation of the stomach titled “The Belly” (see fig 3). It is an upside-down version of the ceiling of the Royal Palace in Brussels¹, Belgium. One of the reasons Fabre turns this work upside down is it allows the visitor to get closer. What can be seen resembles the ocean or the earth with the colors being blue and green and is made of the shields of thousands of jewel beetles, from the Buprestidae family, famous for their glistening green/blue color. The chandelier that rises up from the floor (which is the upside-down version of the ceiling) instead of being suspended from the top of the room and the floor are also made of jewel beetle shields. Di Pietrantonio indicates:

Hidden inside this great mosaic of beetle wing shields are numerous objects like fish, human body parts, skulls... These are all themes that refer to the body, to life and death, and they are all motifs that are typical of Jan Fabre's work (*From the Feet* 00:15:20-00:16:20).

Floating on top of the sea is an effigy of a naked Black lying on his stomach, with scars on his body that make it look like he was whipped. This body can symbolize many things. For Di Pietrantonio it represents the liver, as this organ typically bears a black or dark colour. Schneider, on the other hand, suggests a reference to Belgium's “colorful” colonial past in Central Africa (*From the Feet* 00:13:02). The body lying on this beautiful mosaic piece makes it very theatrical. The one we see here looks like it was tortured and killed, so it’s very different than that of Fabre himself that we see in the other room. This contrast and the presence of a naked body gives this piece a remarkable performative quality.

¹ The Royal Palace of Brussels is the King's administrative residence and primary workplace, where he meets daily with his staff. The King welcomes leaders of political organisations, foreign guests (heads of state, ambassadors), and other guests at his office at the palace. ("Royal Palace")

“The Heart” is the most fragile and beautiful piece of the entire project (see fig 4). In this room, there are two altars made of glass bones; multiple skeletons were used in the making of these altars. The glass refers to the city of Venice, according to Di Pietrantonio, but serves also as a reminder of the fragility of human life. These two altars face each other with a significant space in between, and on each of them lie two hearts made of human bones, the bigger heart representing the male heart and the smaller one is the female heart, and which unlike the other one, is open and split in half. Di Pietrantonio suggests that the elements used to create these works are “material but also spiritual constructions of the human body, suggesting its frailty and ultimately death” (English subtitles in *From the Feet* 00:18:00-00:18:42). Hegyi praises this sculpture as the most important element of Fabre’s work and presumes that it speaks to how emotional and fragile Fabre can be. He says: “I can hardly say that I have seen any other director in this époque who is that emotional and fragile [...] This fragility, along with the metaphor of the heart, is evidently the centre of his oeuvre”² (*From the Feet* 00:16:50-00:17:22).

Finally, “The Brain,” Fabre’s “sexiest” part of the body as mentioned earlier in this chapter (see fig 5). In a huge space created to look like a ravaged battlefield lies a large head with another statue of Fabre standing on top of it, digging up the brain. The scorched earth could be that of Flanders during the Great War according to Schneider (English subtitles in *From the Feet* 00:20:53). His interpretation is dramatic:

On the giant brains that have been dug up, Jan is standing, coat flapping, searching for himself, searching for knowledge, for new ideas, for the meaning of life (*From the Feet* 00:21:15).

² Paraphrased as some words are not very clear.

The brain is without a doubt the most sophisticated instrument of the body. Adding to what Schneider said, by digging up the brain, Fabre is not only showing the visitors that he is constantly learning, experimenting, and finding himself as an artist, but that every single person is doing the same. Even though this statue is of Fabre, it is a representation of every other artist who learns, makes mistakes, and takes on risky adventures every day. The only thing that might make it hard to think about this piece that way is that the statue of the guy digging the brain is Fabre himself. Therefore, for visitors, it might be interpreted as Fabre the scientist looking to learn new things rather than a representation of every person searching for themselves.

Hegyí calls the brain the most confusing part of the body. Scientists have been able to find out how most parts of the body work, but the brain remains a mystery (*From the Feet* 00:22:00). It is that mystery that makes the brain “sexy” to Fabre. His admiration to keep learning about things and challenge himself is never-ending.

In conclusion to this project, Fabre as always leaves a lot of room for interpretation and does not answer all the questions that we may have in mind about his work. This according to Schneider is what makes his work beautiful, strong, and intense. The analysis of this project presented in this chapter draws on three European artists who have different views and opinions on each aspect of this project. None of them presented the same ideas, and theirs are few of many that could rise when other artists see this work.

Mount Olympus:

Moving on to his work as a theatre maker, one of Fabre’s major and most successful contributions to theatre is his 24-hour production *Mount Olympus: To Glorify the Cult of Tragedy* (2015), which premiered at Berlin’s international performing arts festival Foreign

Affairs. The play's success and reputation led Fabre and his crew to move on to many other cities on a global scale; they toured in Rome, New York, Jerusalem, Antwerp, Brussels, Amsterdam, and Belgrade, to name a few. The text of the play, heavily inspired by Greek tragedy, is delivered in English, German, Dutch, French, Italian, and Hebrew and has a lot of depth and meaning behind it. The stage is, as described by German critic Simon Strauss, “minimally furnished: eight white covered tables at the sides, and from the ceiling dim-lighted lamps. Even the 30 performers are dressed in simple white clothes, which they can rid themselves of as they like” (9). The durational production manifests a blow against our time management, and certainly a challenge to our circadian rhythm; it is “a provocation against the ‘two-hour performance without pauses’ of the theatre evening we all are accustomed to” (Strauss). Fabre and his crew rehearsed over 9 to 10 months to achieve a beautiful symphony of tragedy portraying different moods. Strauss elaborates:

If you follow it, you become Fabre’s ally against time pressure, against the madness of rationality and parody. At the same time, something will happen to you which Plato emphasised as the original effect of tragedy: it brings you back to yourself or– literally translated– it ‘straightens you up’.

The play consists of 14 chapters, with each chapter exploring one or two Greek myths, such as Eteocles, Hecuba, Odysseus, Oedipus, etc. Each of these 14 acts harbour a wide range of dramaturgy, ranging from strong physical exercises that keep going for a long period of time, over long monologues that speak to the Greek myths and their tragedies, to physical experiments done by the performers on each other's and their own bodies.

The performance was mostly received very well by critics from all around the world, as they were amazed by the actors' abilities and ecstatic state. During the last 30 minutes, the entire cast of all 27 performers engages in a dance while their bodies are covered with a crude mixture of oil, paint, glitter, colors, and sweat, and that led to an overwhelming response from the audience (see fig 6). The first show in Berlin closed to a standing ovation of about half an hour, which, according to critic Margarita Zieda, "may be nothing compared to the 24 hours of intense labor that the performers just put in, but it's still pretty impressive." Belgian journalist Guy Duplat describes the ecstatic nature of the closing scene in detail:

Dimanche 16h, le marathon s'est terminé par une danse d'anthologie. Tous les performeurs peinturlurés des cheveux aux pieds en taches de couleurs vives, comme des tableaux de Pollock, se lancent dans une bacchanale endiablée de 30 minutes, sous une musique techno, comme dopés par un excès d'extasy et d'électrochocs, sous le regard de Dionysos et sa femme. Le public de Berlin, debout, les a ovationnés pendant 40 minutes. Où ont-ils encore trouvé tous cette énergie ! Le public a eu le sentiment de participer pendant 24 h à un rituel envoûtant, un voyage quasi religieux vers d'autres zones de notre monde. Et le public loin de partir, voulait encore rester.



Fig 6: *Mount Olympus*: Ending Scene (Photo: Philippe Couture's review)

Fabre has always been interested in seeing how far the body can go and testing its limits, and a central strategy in his approach is the use of endurance and exhaustion. Early on in the performance, a drill sergeant leads a military style *chain*-skipping sequence (see fig 7) in a question-and-answer workout chant. Critic Ayelet Dekel, founder of the Israeli online magazine *Midnight East*, refers to this scene as one of the “stirring instances of endurance, evoking a strong response from the audience, who clapped, as if to encourage the performers to go on despite their fatigue.” The sentences they keep chanting endlessly include:

What is the pain that hurts the most? The blade of a sword or the words of a ghost. What is the shame you can't deny? The thighs of your mother or your father's eye. What is the fear that haunts the night? The demons of sleep or the dreams that have died. What is the monster that eats the day? Unused talents and hair turning grey.

I agree with critic Darrell Wilkins that the melody and rhythm of the chant sounds familiar and resembles that of boot camps or movies about training camps (99).



Fig 7: *Mount Olympus*: Chain Skipping Scene (Photo: Shutterstock)

The actors skip chains for over 30 minutes, reciting the same chant until they are completely drained, short of breath, their sweat secretion glittering under the spotlights. They relax on stage for a few minutes and have a snack and keep repeating the exercise for another few minutes. Wilkins expresses his reaction towards this scene:

The dancers are skipping rope in time, except that the rope is a heavy chain, whose loud thud striking the stage floor drives home the work they are doing [...] Long after your heart has burst, sitting in the audience, the dancers sit and... eat an ice lolly. For me, watching them eat an ice lolly was as painful as anything else in MO24. My body was screaming out for water – for them. Like children or drug addicts, they instead abandon their bodies and their health to the short-lived pleasure of an ice lolly. And then get up and jump rope for ten more minutes!

This is not the only production in which Fabre pushes the human body's limits; the following chapter will specifically look into *The Power of Theatrical Madness*. It premiered in 1984 and signalled Fabre's launch and break through on the theatrical scene; it is a production in typical Fabre style in which actors, dancers, and singers did not represent characters as much as their performative selves. The performers were on stage for four continuous hours until they were completely drained and exhausted (Zieda). Fabre communicates his interest in the exhaustion of the body through ensuring the audience experiences the realness of what is happening on stage instead of faking it, in a performative re-presentation. The spectators get to see physical challenge, real sweat, pain, and exhaustion. Fabre's 4-hour production of *The Power of Theatrical Madness*, however, was not enough and did not prove to him that his art has found its limits. He went above and beyond this production to create something he has never experienced before: a 24-hour testing of limits (Zieda).

According to Fabre himself, it is not the intellectual experience of the audience he wants to focus on, but the experience of the human body and the effect on the audience's perception while they watch the performers implement multiple stage directions for the longest time they can (Zieda). Bringing the audience's perception to a clutter of real and unreal happens through going back in time to the origins of theatre, or as Zieda defines it, "to the ancient Greek Dionysia – days-long ritual processions with theatrical performances of dramatic tragedies and comedies." In order to unfold these historical motifs in a different time and place, Fabre and his performers travel back in history to a period many centuries before the birth of Christ. They explore ancient Greek mythology and the tragedies and comedies of antiquity.

It is striking that in the chain skipping scene, both female as well as male actors are subjected to the same regime. In traditional representations of these kinds of antiquity-related

ordeals, it is often only the male body that is exploited as it were for physical exhaustion, the female body is more often subjected to an erotic framing. Fabre, however, obviously has a different take on this, which is evident in this chain skipping scene. In an interview with Van den Dries, Fabre states that he had lots of problems with some of Pina Bausch's productions due to the portrayal of the suppression of women and thinks it is old-fashioned to show women in that way. This is why, he says, he never allowed that to happen in his work, and thinks very highly of women, physically and mentally (Van den Dries Corpus 333). I will explore this topic in my second chapter.

Audience Reception in the Middle East:

It is not a secret that Fabre's productions are appreciated and well received by many critics around the world and devalued and criticized by others. However, when his work is introduced to the Middle East, a region that is hardly ever exposed to such physically powerful and overwhelming productions, it can come as a shock to most audiences and be harder to digest. Nudity, one of Fabre's main strategies, the use of strong language, and sexual content in general are frowned upon or plainly forbidden in productions in most countries in the Middle East for political, but more importantly, religious reasons. *The Power of Theatrical Madness* as well as *Mount Olympus* toured in Israel in 1985 and 2016 respectively. Israel faces political and socio-religious turmoil just like any other country in the Middle East and is not used to this kind of art on its stages. However, these shows were positively received by the audience in Israel and left a huge impact on the audience, giving them a lot to think about. Critic Ayelet Dekel was fascinated with *Mount Olympus* and the performers' talent, but found some of its scenes disturbing. She states:

Not every scene aroused my admiration and interest. Ceremonial and meditative, at times the use of repetition felt too tedious, even as a deliberate artistic device. Sometimes, as when Electra played with her pussy, the preoccupation with nudity and sexuality felt redundant on the verge of offensive.

Israeli theatre critic Michael Handelzalts was taken away by the incredible physical acts, and thinks it is impossible to recall everything he witnessed during the performance he saw of *Mount Olympus*. He describes it as “an intense ecstatic experience on the range between disgust and spiritual elevation.” He also comments on the audience's commitment to the performance:

In such dimensions of stage art, anyone who comes in the first place, and especially those who remain until the end (full disclosure: I saw around 14 hours, in two courses), feels a need to justify to themselves their personal investment in the work [...] The audience really goes crazy and applauds time after time. But this audience sat there and broke out in applause time after time all day long. It seems that the performers are going through ecstatic processes while the audience, instead of devoting itself to the ritual as a participant, constantly flees to the comfortable and protected status of a spectator at a play, and rushed to thank the participants who tore their souls and bodies into pieces on the stage as if they were ballet dancers. Maybe this duality of the audience — giving themselves over to the insanity, but also arrogant spectators watching the young men and women playing before them — is intentional. In the end, it seems the most appropriate thing that can be said about this work is what Rossini said about Wagner's operas: “Monsieur Wagner has beautiful moments, but terrible quarters of an hour.” All this joins the 24 hours of sensory overload, at the end of which comes, of course, the inevitable hangover.

As previously stated, for productions like Fabre's, the location in which they are staged plays an important role as societies are built very different, and some are on the verge of not being open at all to watching what Fabre has to offer due to political and/or religious reasons. For instance, the productions that were shown in Israel would never be accepted in Islamic countries like Saudi Arabia where women are not allowed to expose their hair or any of their other body parts from the neck downwards. In most Middle Eastern countries, there is a lot of censoring intervention on plays, movies, and TV shows as it relates to sexually implicit scenes, strong language, and nudity to name a few things.

Fabre's Exercises and Teaching Group:

Fabre follows an interesting process of ensuring his actors and their bodies are well prepared for all kinds of scenes. Nothing happens overnight, and everything is well rehearsed. For any production, the process begins the same. He likes to start with improvisation exercises and invests most of his rehearsal days doing that. He believes that improvisation opens room for the context of investigation and, more importantly, the freedom of imagination. In an interview with Luk Van den Dries, Fabre clarifies:

During the improvisations, mental and physical concentration is sharpened. I'll give an exercise and then I'll see how the actors translate that into mental depth and how the body responds to that. From those exercises I can tell which actors are ready to go on the journey of my performance and which ones aren't. (Van den Dries *Corpus* 314).

By doing these exercises, Fabre allows his actors to not only explore the material but each other as well. He gets a much better understanding of what their personal primary impulses and instinctive capacities are. The actors themselves, however, master the economy of movement:

“they learn how to develop ecstatic calmness and concentrated range.” (Van den Dries *Corpus* 314) Together, Fabre and his actors are able to answer a few research questions after undergoing a few days of research and intense physical exercise:

What happens in and on your body when you have to keep pushing the same boulder up a mountain again and again? What's the effect of exhaustion on your muscles, tendons, skin, concentration? What does the ritual of repetition mean? What does pain do to a body? How do you nevertheless try to keep your balance? (Van den Dries *Corpus* 315)

The answers to these questions can be seen on stage as the actors either undertake an intense physical exercise in *The Power of Theatrical Madness* (1984) that goes on for at least 8 minutes, or, in the same production, when a male performer carries four female performers on his back and loses his balance repeatedly as they keep jumping on him. The audience are able to see for themselves and answer some of these questions by watching the performers go through this long journey.

Van den Dries attended the daily rehearsal process for Fabre's production *Parrots and Guinea Pigs* (2002) and noticed a huge difference between the enormous freedom that existed during the first day and even first hour of the workshop, and extreme specificity at the end of the rehearsal process, where the scenes became more fixed, and the actions are repeated in “an almost maniacal precision” (*Corpus* 319). Fabre thinks it's important to give performers some leeway so they may explore the material on their own and find their own strengths. And at some point, they must consolidate things, set them in a certain structure or a score. Repetition is a crucial tool for achieving the proper syntax and structure. Fabre never stops proving that repetition

is impossible thanks to the fundamental power of change. According to him, this creates a basic connection with theatre: showing transformation through repetition (Van den Dries Corpus 318).

Sometimes, Fabre also uses the exercises that he created for the Jan Fabre Teaching Group, a workshop organized every other month that attracts people from all over the world to learn Fabre's methods and techniques. This 10-day workshop is a combination of improvisations as well as exercises related to specific topics, and all the methods mentioned earlier, particularly the intense physicality and the repetition of certain acts, are fundamental to the completion of the workshop. Fabre has also created a book with all the performative principles and exercises he has been using over the past years, and this book has been translated in many languages, including Greek, Italian, Latvian, and soon in English. The exercises in the book are created to prepare his performers to the essence of their theatrical task: showing themselves in all their possible and impossible human, inhuman, devilish, godly, animalistic, spiritual, material and immaterial states of being. This multiplicity of mankind, the enormous potentiality of man to be or become something else than he already is, is the core of Fabre's poetics. Fabre wants to present the varieties of what it means to be a human being, its mutations as well, and his escape routes (Van den Dries & Fabre 46).

These exercises could take on a transformation from one animal to another, such as from tiger to lizard. An exercise like that one requires different positioning of the neck, hip, torso, and limbs, and an adjusted pattern of movements. The performers are continually forced to reinvent themselves. They have to shrivel and decay from one workout to the next, then be born again and grow into a completely new entity. They undergo the transition cell by cell and fibre by fibre, assimilating a new identity. Their imagination controls their inner and outer transformation process, which at the same time is a physical reality in which the entire body changes. It is a

work of structures and intricacies, but most importantly, it is one of living through the theatrical act itself (Van den Dries & Fabre 59). Not all these exercises are about animals, however, as some of them involve tasks like the “Cleaning” exercise where actors use every inch of their body to ensure that every millimetre of the floor gets cleaned (Van den Dries & Fabre 68), or “Articulation, reflex, and text,” an exercise that helps the performers become more aware of their natural reflexes and teaches them how to trust the instincts of their bodies and follow what it tells them (Van den Dries & Fabre 82).

All in all, Fabre’s interest in the body has led him to explore physicality in many ways either on stage or off. He keeps bringing us new ways to learn more about physical experience and its abilities and pushes its limits to the extreme. *From the Feet to the Brain*, among many other projects he has worked on, examines the functions of every part of the body in a beautiful, persuasive, and artistic way. *Mount Olympus* challenges the body nonstop for a duration of 24 hours. Most of the experiments that Fabre has tried on the human body are applied in this production. As he is always in search for answers, Fabre clearly does not hesitate to share his knowledge and confusion, and always leaves plenty of room for interpretation.

Chapter 2: *The Power of Theatrical Madness*: Fabre's (Post)dramatic Breakthrough on Stage

In 1984, Fabre dominated international stages with *The Power of Theatrical Madness*. Twenty-eight years later, in 2012, he reconstructed every scene of the 4.5-hour production with a younger generation in order to celebrate the anniversary of what had been for him his breakthrough production (“Jan Fabre/Troubleyn: *The Power of Theatrical Madness*”). The play, regarded by audiences as provocative and aggravating, consists of a series of scenes with a fascinating blend of control, power, eroticism, and humanistic insight (Rockwell 11). Fabre staged his play in front of projections of classical paintings and masterpieces by artists like Michaelangelo and Raphael and accompanied these pieces with thunderclaps of opera from Richard Wagner and Richard Strauss. The production raises the question of the function of theatre. To Fabre, it could be a means of digging into the collective subconscious through resonant images, whereas to other people like critic Michael Billington from *The Guardian*, “it is primarily a means of explaining and interpreting life.” These resonant images are often bizarre and hypnotic, and according to Billington, are not connected to buried memories and do not explore our social behaviors. The production focuses on a wide range of issues and emotions, such as cruelty, classism, eroticism, alienation, and the history of the avant garde (“Love nil”). It does not follow a narrative, but consists of intense, disturbing, and dream-like sketches. Critic Ros Asquith from *Theatre News & Reviews* thinks there is nothing else like it, and here’s why: “Because it takes place in real time, creating an intensified ‘reality’ that makes ordinary acting seem a bit like children’s charades.” The performance involves all sixteen performers in enactments, re-enactments, and repetition of a series of movements that are alternately gruelling, infuriating, and according to Asquith, “hypnotic.” Critic John Howell from *Art Forum* argues

that Fabre might have been “trying to place both *The Power of Theatrical Madness* in the historical continuum of these power-mongering blasts from the past and at the same time annex their assumed intrinsic “masterpiece” force by appropriating and recontextualizing their content” (Howell). Every scene is chaotic, confusing, and irritating in a way. The first part of this chapter will focus on Fabre as a postdramatic director by zooming into some of the postdramatic features and how they come to be in this production, such as physicality, dream images, concrete theatre, etc. The second part covers his rehearsal approach and the thought process that leads up to these scenes. Finally, and most importantly, the third part is an observation on nudity, body secretions on stage, and the distinction between the masculine and the feminine in Fabre’s creations. My methodology here will rely on a detailed description of relevant scenes and their *mise en scène*, upon which I will apply a performance analysis highlighting their provocative dynamics and affect. I rely on the recording of the reenactment of the original production that took place as part of the Avignon Festival in France in 2013. In my analysis and appraisal, I will apply a reception analysis of sorts by relying on critical reviews, interviews held between scholars like Luk Van den Dries and the artist, and critics’ observations of audience perceptions and responses. In the second half of this chapter, in my focus on Fabre’s use of the body on stage, I have a particular interest in how nudity functions in his work and how it is perceived by audiences and critics.

Fabre as a Postdramatic Director:

Postdramatic theatre, a notion coined by German author and Professor of Theatre Studies Hans-Thies Lehmann, has its unique features that can't be experienced in any other type of theatre. Lehmann explores the new forms and aesthetics that evolved since the 1960s and that are independent from the dramatic text (Lehmann i). This type of theatre is recognized for having lots of symbols and signs that the audience struggles to associate meaning with or find an answer

to, and this is what makes it so unusual and exceptional. It is however, rising and becoming more crucial nowadays as it aims to produce an effect on the audience rather than just presenting a pre-written text; it gives the spectators a theatrical performance that is not limited to or restricted by character and plot (Ascah). In addition, it is a “reflection of the dissatisfaction of the representation of the external world and the structuring of time” (Ascah). David Barnett reflects on postdramatic theatre:

The stage becomes the generator of shared experiences rather than knowledge, and spectators are confronted with the question of how they deal with such phenomena (Ascah).

Postdramatic theatre challenges the audience and steers away from the norm of what is considered to be *normal*. As we get used to a certain type of theatre, some people don't like to get out of their comfort zones, and thus, Fabre's work is not meant to be seen by all audiences.

During the opening scene of *The Power of Theatrical Madness*, an actress stands right in front of the audience and struggles to climb up on the stage as she is continuously pushed away by another actor. She yells, cries, lures and kisses the actor, yet he still treats her like an animal and throws her off the stage. As this scene goes on for about 15 minutes, the frustration builds up until she finally gives him an answer to his question “1876?” that he kept uttering. He finally lets her in onto the stage when she yells “The Ring,” implying that 1876 is the premiere date of Wagner's *The Ring of Nibelung*. In his review on this production, Luk Van den Dries, professor of Theatre Studies at the University of Antwerp, Belgium, refers to this scene in particular,

As a key moment in the history of theatrical illusion, Fabre chooses Wagner's impressive creation, *The Ring of the Nibelung*. Wagner not only raises the opera

genre to the status of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, but he is also the first composer and theatre maker to have the lights in the theatre dimmed, thus emancipating a popular medium and turning it into an autonomous aesthetic product. *The Power of Theatrical Madness* quotes this emancipatory moment in an extremely long and painful scene, in which an actress is forcefully denied access to the stage. She scratches, she bites, she seduces, she curses and shouts, but the actor who is controlling the entrance to the stage drags her back to square one in an increasingly violent manner. (“Jan Fabre: The Power,” 66).

The scenes that follow are even more intense and challenging to watch. In one of the scenes, two blindfolded actors stand at the edge of the stage, one of them wielding his knife and pouncing wildly at the other while chanting Wagner’s “Liebestod” from *Tristan and Isolde* (Wesemann 42). I will delve into this scene among others that also had a strong impact on the spectator later on in the chapter.

Laurens De Vos describes Jan Fabre’s worlds as “devoid of all sense of realism; his performances are situated in some dream-world, a twilight zone which we can never fully grasp and explain... A helpful way to “read” and interpret Fabre’s performances is to view his images the way Freud wished to interpret dreams, i.e., by thinking of them as hieroglyphs, or- in linguistic terms- as metaphors” (67). “Devoid of all sense of realism” is however only partially true. The body on stage, its secretions, and the sweat are hyper realistic. The plot however, is not very realistic. This is what makes most of his scenes ludicrous and surreal, but also fascinating. Lehmann coined the term “Dream Images” and it is a perfect example of the world Fabre takes us to in his performances. All of the theatrical registers of the stage mingle, shifting the focus between them in ways that construct a dreamy world. For example, at the beginning of the

production, as the actress struggles to climb the stage and is being pushed away by a man, the other actors are standing in the back facing the screen at the back of the stage and turning their backs to the audience. They are not truly part of the scene until the actress makes it to the stage, and all actors begin the following sequence together and are finally real characters on stage. They have all the necessary theatrical properties for their transformations, such as costumes and different objects (crown, plates, etc.) that are taken up at different moments in the production. Most importantly, there are no clear beginnings or endings, apart from the performers' actions (Ozkaya 62). Fabre's work represents the dream world and imagination of its inventor. This world is characterized by the non-hierarchy of images, movements, and words, all typical of the postdramatic paradigm (Lehmann 84). What the spectators encounter are fragments and a collage of images rather than a logical structure of events. In *The Power of Theatrical Madness*, the actors shift from one scene to another, and the apposition of these scenes makes it surreal and more challenging to understand what is going on. A spectator would not come in and expect to see the scene with the blindfolded actors wrestling with a knife, followed by another scene with two knights undressed and dancing, while other performers surrounding them bounce and mimic the movements of frogs. Spectators can feel the tension while watching the blindfolded actor wielding a knife towards the other's throat at a minimal distance (see fig 8). This scene, according to Van den Dries, involves a theatrical trick that makes it impossible for the actors to touch each other ("Corpus Jan Fabre" 18), but Fabre certainly doesn't want the audience to know

that.



Fig 8: *The Power of Theatrical Madness*: Knife Scene (Photo: Troubleyn)

After having conversations with spectators who witnessed this scene live, I was informed that the two performers knew when to stop marching towards each other as soon as they stepped on a tiny bump on the floor that is hardly seen. Fabre's aim is to abolish reality and maintain the essence of theatricality, which Van den Dries describes as "the beautiful lie of theater" and he elaborates using and contradicting Brecht's famous cloakroom commentary:

For Fabre, it is a powerful metaphor for the 'suspension of disbelief' that rules the world of theater. At the cloakroom of the theatre, we get rid of superfluous clothes and embrace, in that same moment, the illusion of reality that will be offered to us. It is this other time that Fabre wants to stage. He surrenders to the power of theatrical imagination. Do we

want to believe that the tango-dancing emperors on stage are not naked? Do we want to believe that the frogs that feet have squashed are not really dead? Do we want to believe that the frighteningly wielded knife is a real danger? Theater is playing its tricks on us (*Corpus Jan Fabre* 18-19).

The argument I made above brings me to another feature that Lehmann calls “Concrete Theatre.” With everything being not so realistically representational, the prevalence of formal structures, as Lehmann states, is “so radical that a reference to reality can be hardly spotted as such anymore” (98). What might be perceived as preposterous or extreme by the audience is what replaces the dramatic centre in postdramatic theatre (Lehmann 99). In a frame of meaning that has become porous, “the concrete, sensuously intensified perceptibility comes to the fore. This term, ‘perceptibility’, captures the virtual and incompletable nature of the theatrical perception that is produced or at least intended here” (Lehmann 99).

Another one of the most powerful aspects of Fabre’s plays that stir up mixed emotions and reactions from the audience is the power of repetition and exhaustion of the body. Fabre’s interest that turned into an obsession with biology and scientific observation led to his years of research into several aspects of pain. This focus, which comes to the fore in *The Power of Theatrical Madness* is what Lehmann defines as the liminal pain zone. When explaining physicality, Lehmann talks about the presence of the deviant body, which through illness, disability, or deformation, generates ‘amoral’ fascination, unease, and fear (95). Lehmann states,

Possibilities of existence that are generally repressed and excluded come to prominence in the highly physical forms of postdramatic theatre and repudiate all perception that has established itself in the world at the expense of knowing how narrow the sphere is in

which life can happen in some ‘normality’. Postdramatic theatre again and again transgresses the pain threshold in order to revoke the separation of the body from language and to reintroduce into the realm of spirit– voice and language– the painful and pleasurable physicality that Julia Kristeva has called the semiotic within the signifying process (96).

The body, in this case, becomes the only thing that matters to the eye of the spectator, and is hence, as Lehmann states, “absolutized” as Fabre’s production steers away from a mental, lucid structure towards the exhibition of intense, even extreme physicality (96).

In a breathtaking, eye-appealing scene in *The Power of Theatrical Madness*, the actors take off their suits and perform a draining endurance exercise à la Grotowski (see fig 9) while reciting the same names of cities (Milan, Amsterdam) over and over again as they are given a date and the

name of the production (Lehmann 100). They guess where that production was performed. After frontally jumping/jogging for about 20 minutes nonstop, repeating the same names,



Fig 9: *The Power of Theatrical Madness*: Physical Exercise (Photo: Troubleyn)

the actors are out of breath and decide to take a smoke break while staring at the audience. At some point in the scene, no one is listening to the words they are uttering. The words become useless to the spectator; they only support a certain rhythm and cadence, while our main focus becomes the pain these actors are enduring and most importantly, their body that sweats and

keeps going. This scene and many others, reduces the actors to raw physicality, or in De Vos' words, this approach "turns the actors into symbols or icons rather than psychological characters. These symbols conceal the emptiness behind the play, but Fabre reveals the act of concealing by means of the ongoing repetitions of the same act" (67).

Towards the end of the production, an actress lays naked over the knees of an actor who perpetually recites a riddle "1982?" and slaps the actress's bare butt cheeks until she can no longer handle the pain and screams the answer to his riddle. "This is theatre like it was expected to be foreseen," says the woman with the red buttocks. The audience falls tensely silent not only because of the presence of a naked body on stage, but also due to the apparent unbearable pain the actress goes through and the way she shivers and struggles to keep herself from falling and surrendering. As the slapping goes on and on, Fabre clearly tests the boundaries of his performers with the aim to rediscover the human body via a constant metamorphosis on stage. The ecstatic state of the body, whether in this scene or the scene with the actors jumping until they're out of breath, frames the body in an expository way while exploring the limits of physical exertion. Nadine Grinberg, graduate alumnus at Utrecht University, elaborates on that and asserts:

In order to apprehend this abnormal body, the spectator is communicated new vocabularies through movement, excess, fatigue— a new language of the body, which amounts to a new understanding of its potential through experiencing its intensity from a perspective on its endurance and witnessing its transformation into something beyond the physicality of the body. Fabre's performance is exemplar of the paradoxical nature of the body's metamorphosis as repetition affords this transformation through reiteration of an

exhausted state, which should lead to nothing else than more exhaustion and ultimately total collapse (19).

Physicality dominates the theatrical image in another prominent scene. Near the end of the 2013 performance, or at the beginning of the 1984 performance (depending on which version of the play is being watched), eight performers, four men and four women, are lined up at the back of the stage (see fig 10).



Fig 10: *The Power of Theatrical Madness: Knights and Princesses* (Photo: Paperblog)

The women are wearing white shirts and black pants, whereas the men are wearing only white briefs. Every man holds a woman in his arms. The scene addresses a stereotype where women, representing the princesses and deceased lovers, look very frail and the men, representing knights, look strong and powerful (Roussel et al. 46). The men march from the back of the stage, bring the women to the front and put them to rest on the apron of the stage then walk to the back. The initial theatrical image that is represented to the spectator, i.e. the strong,

dominant man/knight vs. the fragile, weak woman/princess, is a common one that is “deeply engraved into the cultural canon” (Roussel et al. 46). However, as soon as the men return to the back, the women wake up, run to the back, and jump into the men's arms to die once again. The scene starts again and is repeated for a long period of time until the tables turn, and the men's bodies begin to shiver and tremble from muscular exertion: they are barely capable of pulling themselves together and holding the women any longer. There is nothing but the actors on stage, and the purpose of that is to shift the audience's entire focus to the actions happening. As Nathalie Roussel states,

The heroes and princesses are reduced to perspiration and weight, thanks to endless repetitions and exciting acceleration... The performer's body begins to refuse to perform its role and becomes ever more present: muscles begin to contract, sweat appears and soon drips from the performer's face, and— finally— the body begins to refuse to perform the tasks. The image is no longer perfect— no longer a cliché— but has become ‘embodied’ by imperfect bodies. At the same time, however, this decomposed image— and this is the crux of Fabre's performative language— remains an image, for it takes place within the frame of the theatrical space (46).

This scene is reminiscent of one in Pina Bausch's *Café Müller* (1978). In her production, a woman hugs a man who then holds her in his arms and drops her right after. She stands up immediately after being dropped on the floor, jumps back into the man's arms, and the same scenario repeats itself. A 1986 review in *The New York Times* suggests that Fabre might be an amalgam of Pina Bausch, Laurie Anderson, Peter Brook, and Robert Wilson— but also that his shows are “numbing, often punishing” (“Juggling Or Sodomy?”). Fabre may well have been influenced by Bausch's technique of exhausting the body through repetition.

Repetition is an element of not just this performance, but also Fabre's plays as a postdramatic director, as it invites the spectator to go beyond first impressions, foregrounds the exertion of the body, and tests the audience's tolerance. Details that the audience misses the first time watching a scene are noticed and gain in importance. With the exhaustion of endless repetition comes different perspectives and ways of looking at a scene or character. Van den Dries explains: "The exhaustion conjures up its own time dimension, you start to see things in a different way, another level of perception comes into being. A kind of intoxicated watching is initiated. But not only the body and the act of watching grow tired, the meaning gets diluted as well" (*Corpus Jan Fabre* 20).

Another example which serves my argument on repetition is a scene with two performers, a man and a woman wearing *avant garde* uniforms (black pants, white shirt, and black blazer on top); they take off their blazers and kneel on the ground facing each other. A group of actors stand up-stage and watch. The actress starts chanting a verse from the song "L'amour est un oiseau rebelle" by Georges Bizet and gets slapped in the face by the man just a few seconds later (see fig 11). In the video recording, a few giggles here and there are heard from the audience, but she continues to sing and slaps his cheek in return. As soon as she finishes the verse, she repeats it and both actors continue slapping each other. The slapping goes on for about 8 very intense minutes as she repeats that verse, raises her voice, and gets extremely frustrated. Both look very exasperated and tired towards the end, and the actress sheds a few tears, as she reaches a limit. Suddenly, they are done; they get up holding hands, take their jackets, and leave the stage.



Fig 11: *The Power of Theatrical Madness: L'amour est un Oiseau Rebelle* (Photo: Troubleyn)

To begin with, there certainly is some kind of meaning behind their stripping off the jackets at the beginning of the scene. The blazer might be what protects them from exposing the weaknesses and/or flaws in their relationship as a couple. When they are by themselves, however, it becomes safer to take off that heavy weight, mask or shield, i.e. the jacket, that they wear all the time when they are surrounded by people and face their problems. What I want to focus on, however, is the effect that its repetition has on the spectators who went from laughing to gasping to falling intensely silent towards the end. The endless repetition of the mutual slapping clearly draws the audience in, forcing them to watch the scene over and over again, and subsequently make them rethink the whole process, the characters, and the plot. It also confronts the audience with the question whether or not this scene is supposed to be funny at all. Critic Michael Coveney comments on this scene in the *Financial Times* newspaper:

“Si je t’aime, prends garde a toi” warns Carmen, and the singing the “Habanera” is intercut with face slaps and severe looks. The cruel insouciance of Ingres’s reclining nude odalisque is again a dominant image [...] the extraordinary thing is the extent to which they succeed, for Fabre’s brilliant spatial and rigorously detailed choreography is, in the end, joyously celebratory of the human form. (18)

Rehearsals and Creation Process:

Having talked about the way Fabre envisions the body and what he does with it, it is also important to look at the creation process behind the final result. Van den Dries attended the workshops and rehearsals that took place in Troubleyn every day for the production of *Parrots and Guinea Pigs* (2002) and reflects on what he experienced. He also states that the process is almost the same for all other productions, including *The Power of Theatrical Madness*. Fabre starts the day with a warm-up exercise that is led by his assistant director and dancer/choreographer Renée Copraij. These exercises, according to Fabre, are crucial for the performers’ bodies and should be done before anything else (Van den Dries *Corpus Jan Fabre* 51). After that, Fabre separates his performers into groups and asks them questions or throws in prompts that they will have to discuss on their own. The performers, given enough time, will then improvise a scene or reflect on what they discussed based on their understanding of the prompt. In this way, Fabre is considered by Van den Dries as the “master of hiding his own strategy” (*Corpus Jan Fabre* 71) because he tries to be as invisible as possible and gives his performers the freedom to explore all possible options. However, this does not in any way mean that Fabre is not prepared for these sessions, as he constantly researches and asks his performers as well to research how to represent a knight, princess, pig, parrot, and so on dramaturgically (Van den Dries *Corpus Jan Fabre* 51).

Fabre does the research and exercises not only to let the actors get a sense of freedom and explore all possibilities, but also to make them more physiologically aware and prepare them for what is coming next, or simply, what would be required from them later, when they work more in detail on the *mise en scène* (Roussel 47). In a study on the biomedical aspect in Jan Fabre's methods and teachings, Roussel reflects:

Through this set of exercises, performers learn to understand their physical impulses and how to manage them. The performers challenge their physical and mental concentration, pushing the limits of exhaustion, pain and dizziness, so as to learn how to control them. Through this set of exercises they also learn to explore this physical state of being, to recognize what is happening in their bodies and to test and explore them so as to transform them, to use the physical condition of their bodies at different moments. They switch from act to acting and back again, always commencing from the physical act and how it affects the body on its physiological level. The performers begin acting by playing with this physical state, by pulling it from its context, by enlarging all of it or just certain aspects. (47)

These exercises progressively became what Van den Dries calls the "guiding line" that communicates the performative language of Jan Fabre to his performers (Roussel 47).

Nudity, Body Fluids, and The Masculine/Feminine:

In the next part of the essay, we will investigate another essential feature of these productions: nudity and naked bodies on stage. Nudity is a very important aspect in Fabre's work and is a favorite tool for creating Fabrian corporeal imagery on stage. In one of his productions called *The Crying Body* (2004), Fabre introduces the weeping body on stage.



Fig 12: *The Crying Body*: Performers Urinating (Photo: Maarten Vanden Abeele)

In this scene, three women, wearing black tank tops and black skirts with no underwear, lift their right leg 90 degrees upwards and urinate a strong jet (see fig 12), creating a very intimate moment for the spectators to witness (Van den Dries, "The Pleasure," 120). By showing the body's secretions, Fabre is trying to expose the audience to more than what is normatively visible. Critic Anna Piccoli explains how Fabre's performers use their bodies to express emotions:

Actors, actresses, and dancers are prompted to use their bodies as a vehicle to express thoughts and feelings, to challenge the cultural determination society imposes on their bodies. They embody the tension between the static nature of the skeleton and the lively movements of muscles, tendons, flesh and secretions. Their skin is shield and filter at the same time. While blood is the ultimate element in *Je suis sang*, urine, sperm, and tears come to the fore in other pieces, such as *The Crying Body*. In the latter, nine actors dance, fight, laugh, cry, pee, while a woman in black collects their tears and sweat and urine in a

bag. The body “cries” due to biological reactions such as in the act of urinating, making love, making an effort, peeling an onion, but also because of psychological inputs related to sadness, joy, and fear. Dirt, fluids, animality, nakedness – they all pertain to the (visceral) body and as such we should not be ashamed or offended when confronted with them.

Even though spectators may be shocked or repelled by this scene, Fabre, shows a fully functioning body on stage, where what is normally considered abject is now fully exposed. In the words of Van den Dries, he manages to “catch a corporeal quality in the act: he puts this juicy body on the stage as an anachronism of our time, which is under threat from draught, the denial of nature, and excessive reason and control” (“The Pleasure,” 120). *The Crying Body*, according to Van den Dries, is a celebration of the liquid body, which frequently transforms itself and therefore withdraws from the petrifying glance (“The Pleasure,” 120). What Fabre wants the audience to understand is the beauty and importance of the function of the fluids in a human body. Van den Dries elaborates:

The body’s instincts are triumphant in these secretions: urine as a warm shower, sweat which tingles, tears which weaken. These jets of urine, the pearling perspiration, the bath full of tears inform us that the inside of this body is humid. A body full of repositories of snot and slime. Without these sacred corporeal oils in the various nooks and crannies of our body, it would become stiff and even rigid. (“The Pleasure,” 120)

Before I delve into Fabre’s use of nudity on stage, I will go over the effects nudity has had over the last few years and the controversies it created. In his study of provocation, Piet Defraeye writes: “Even to this day, the presence of nudity in representation, whether it is in

pictorial art, theatre, film or TV, is a sensitive issue, especially in the popular media” (79). This remains partially true as nudity is becoming more widely accepted nowadays whether on TV and in movies. It still creates tension though, and I am not reducing the impact or affect it creates even on screen, depending on what the viewer watches and is expecting or not expecting to see. It also of course depends on the level of exposure an audience is habituated to. However, it still never fails to create tension in the theatre because no matter what, it cannot escape the taboos and suppressions that we associate through social forces (Defraeye 80). This, along with the immediacy of the body on stage are reasons why nudity is considered provocative in the theatre and has a stronger effect than when experienced on screen (Defraeye 88). The use of the naked body on the contemporary stage and the liveness of it are, as Van den Dries states, “filled with the condition of Bertolt Brecht’s half-curtain: it is aware of the spectator’s glance, it toys with his viewing behaviour and continuously questions the nature and consequence of this act of looking. At the same time a ‘violent’ component is also involved, which ignores the act of merely taking pleasure in this conscious interaction of glances, which one might define as a ‘vexed glance’” (“The Pleasure,” 116).

Defraeye also reflects on why it is unclear what kind of effect nudity might create:

It is often difficult to predict the effect theatrical nudity will have on a certain audience. The reason for this lies in what Wladimir Kryszynski calls “the epiphanic function of the body” (“Semiotic” 142); the body on the stage is seen as a complex referent that refers both to itself and to things outside itself. This is particularly so for the naked body: the disclosure of the body not only works as a revelation of meaning within the structures of the play, but also as an invasion of privacy, in this case the actor's privacy (88).

Fabre has been using naked bodies on stage ever since he started his theatre career (Van den Dries, “The Pleasure,” 116). At the very start, he was sued for obscenity (Van den Dries, “The Pleasure,” 116) during one of his performances in Milwaukee of the production *Theatre with a K is a Tomcat* (1980), but this clearly did not stop him from what he believed in. He made frequent use of naked bodies in many of his productions that followed, such as *This is Theatre like it Was to be Expected and Foreseen* (1982), which became another breakthrough for Fabre and in which the actors perform certain rituals while being undressed. These rituals go on for hours and are frequently repeated (Van den Dries, “The Pleasure,” 117). In *Parrots and Guinea Pigs* (2002), however, Fabre addresses nudity in a different way and with an entirely different purpose. He explores the relationship between animals and humans, unlike *This is Theatre* in which the purpose is for the actors to “resist being looked at as nude” and just show who they are (Van den Dries, “The Pleasure,” 117). The purpose of the latter is to provide a sense of shame through nudity of the actors, with a reference to the story of Adam and Eve who both sinned and were exposed as sinners without clothes, their nudity being a symbol of their sin (Van den Dries “The Pleasure” 118). The sin situated itself in sexual transgression, and thus their genitalia had to be covered— out of shame— with a fig leaf. The Garden of Eden was now no longer a real Eden. Fabre as it were, constantly revisits this loss of innocence. Van den Dries elaborates on Fabre’s use of nudity in his productions:

[...] Nudity is an important ingredient in Fabre’s work. It is an evident tool to produce Fabrian corporeal images. And Fabre is, of course, well aware of the always double nature of nudity in art, [...] In so doing, Fabre also revisits iconographic tradition, which he quotes and which he incorporates into his own visual language. In traditional painting and sculpture the (nude) model plays a very important role (“The Pleasure,” 118).

Some of his works even use the relationship between the artist and the model as a theme, such as *Vervalsing zoals ze is, onvervalst* (1992), *Elle était et elle est, même* (2004), and *Etant donnés* (2004) (Van den Dries “The Pleasure” 126).

Moreover, In *The Power of Theatrical Madness* as well as most of his other productions, Fabre foregrounds the biological and physiological distinction between man and woman. The masculine and feminine binary play a big role in his work. What Fabre finds essential, as mentioned earlier, is going back to the biological state of the body. To him, the bones that constitute human bodies cannot lie, and that’s why he is very captivated by physiognomy, an area he studied for a while. Fabre is less interested in the somatic body (inward movement), and instead, more interested in the physiological revelation of the body itself (outward movement). He was mainly influenced by the pioneer of physiognomy, the Swiss philosopher Kaspar Lavater (1741-1801), who taught him how to envision the face as a landscape and physical features as a space (Van den Dries *Corpus Jan Fabre* 333). Fabre looks at the male and the female from that perspective as well and differentiates women from men.

Fabre also considers a lot of factors when comparing women to men, including the fact that women have a better memory, and that their body temperature is very different than that of men. Women’s warmth is very distinct as it carries the womb within. These features help Fabre indicate whether a performance is going well. He can feel the desire that some men feel towards certain women, and how these women, with a different temperature, respond (Van den Dries *Corpus Jan Fabre* 335). He also makes a very salient point that we sometimes want to discover the other side and says that all men want to be women, and some women would also like to be men. He always notices that in his actors (Van den Dries *Corpus Jan Fabre* 335). He elaborates on that, declaring “I’m always looking for very feminine women who have an amazing male

power. And I also search for very masculine men, who have a very good sense for women and can use their femininity at the right moment to deal with those strong women” (qtd. in Van den Dries *Corpus Jan Fabre* 335). To look at this topic from a woman’s point of view, Van den Dries also interviewed Miet Martens, Fabre’s artistic coordinator and dramaturg, and asked her how she felt about Fabre’s masculine ideas about women. Martens doesn’t always agree with Fabre and counters his ideas when need be. According to her, the women actors chosen by Fabre have very strong personalities and they are the ones who have become increasingly feminine in the performances rather than the performances themselves being feminine (Van den Dries *Corpus Jan Fabre* 381). As mentioned in the first chapter, Fabre, in his own words, thinks highly of women and would never belittle or undermine their powers as compared to those of men. He actually thinks that “men will fold under torture much sooner than women” (Van den Dries *Corpus* 332). It is quite striking in this production that many scenes happen in duets, usually a man and woman. Fabre seems to suggest that a man’s body is also fragile and can surrender to exhaustion and torture just like a woman’s body does. Going back to the scene that begins with the men, or knights, carry the women, or princesses, the men are drained of energy at the end and have no power. They are at the same state as the women, who are barely conscious and don’t have the energy to stand. Another example would be the slapping scene between the couple. Both get frustrated and emotional when getting slapped in the face and stop together as they reach the limit. Fabre could be opposing the mentality of our toxic society that thinks of men being masculine, strong, emotionless, and objectifies women and looks at them as fragile, weak, and emotional. He also might be showing that even though men are fighting back women while trying to maintain their status, women will overcome. An example of this is the man slapping the woman on her butt cheeks, and in the opening scene, the woman trying her best to get up on

stage but is constantly being pushed away by the man. Another scene that comes to mind is the two emperors dancing together; this is one of the most beautiful, powerful and important scenes.



Fig 13: *The Power of Theatrical Madness: The Emperors' Dance* (Photo: Troubleyn)

Two male performers, naked with nothing on but crowns on their heads, hold each other's hands and dance together. The scene is very intimate, and their bodies touch. As they dance, one of them rest on the other's shoulder. This scene might mean many things. To some people, it might

mean that Fabre is queering power. To me, the resting on the other emperor's shoulder shows that even kings and emperors can be vulnerable. I think Fabre put two men together to show that just like women, men can express weakness.

Fabre's work is not for everybody. A lot of spectators simply misinterpret the questions he poses as "fashionable provocation" (Van den Dries *Corpus Jan Fabre* 5) or choose to deliberately avoid them. Van den Dries situates Fabre's dramaturgy as one that doesn't eschew an animalistic abject world that has strong historical cultural roots:

And those deaf to the echo of greater traditions- early rituals, antique theater, tragedies, dramas and farces from the Middle Ages, the Renaissance and the Baroque periods- which link Fabre's work to the depths of theater history, are beyond help. Their mouths will only ever taste filth in their thirst for purity and form which in theater can only stem from the reality of the mortal, impure, animal-like, vulnerable body (*Corpus Jan Fabre* 5).

With its very distinct and unique features, his theatre creates a very visceral experience for the spectator and is thus not necessarily appreciated by all audiences. Some of its features creating provocative and/or shocking effects that leave audiences questioning their understanding of what is being delivered, and so the anger of not knowing the meaning or reasoning behind what they witness builds up. *The Power of Theatrical Madness* remains one of Fabre's most successful works in that it leaves plenty of room for interpretation with its use of classical paintings, symbolism, nudity, and most importantly, repetition. In the next chapter, I will focus on *Orgy of Tolerance*, a controversial play that contains some very strong scenes that have met a very mixed reception by various audiences.

Chapter 3: *Orgy of Tolerance*: Taboos Unhinged

Pleasure and consumerism are some of the most prominent topics tackled in Fabre's production *Orgy of Tolerance* (2009). This play premiered at the theatre festival of Santiago de Chile on January 14, 2009, and remained on tour until August 2009 in North America as well as in many European countries. In this work, Fabre conveys a message to all materialistic people in the Western world (De Vos 66). Mirroring a contemporary society facing a financial crisis, this production focuses on the fetishization of products and excess of consumerism by commodity-ridden consumers with an 'anything goes' mentality and which considers any and all behavior as normal. In the Western world, we are bombarded with an excess of everything, excess of food, sex, images, misery and emotions. As described by La Compagnie des Indes, the production company that filmed this production at the Avignon Festival in France as well as many of Fabre's other productions "Jan Fabre wanted to place himself exactly where it all overflows, gathering excesses to make them into shapes themselves excessive." Using humor as one of the elements of the play, Fabre creates a series of outrageous sketches with the purpose of making his audience question if anything at all nowadays can still come as a shock, and if they are ready to accept everything. This play highlights Fabre's love for farce and shows another side of him (Wehle 17). For Flemish theatre critic Wouter Hillaert, Fabre tries to show throughout the performance that the cigars smoked, cocaine snorted, whiskey drunk, and shopping carts filled as part of an orgy, and a metaphor for life as it is: vulgar and fast, pure consumerism. The production shows a "new" and "truly fascinating and political" side of Fabre that is not very common in the rest of his plays, as stated by multiple critics. For Hillaert, the production meant a significant change in Fabre's typical motifs:

His 2009 *Orgy of Tolerance* at last offered a truly fascinating ‘Fabre’ again. This production refrained from Jan Fabre’s usual mystic-artistic research about our carnal bodily fluids or his artistic response to them (432).

In fact, when the show was touring, the production homepage of Troubleyn’s website had the slogan ‘The body of the world is ill, deadly ill,’ and this speaks to what Fabre wants to portray (Hillaert 432). There are many more controversial and provocative elements than nudity and the naked body on stage in Fabre’s work, and this production is an example of the different kinds of provocations Fabre uses in his work. In this chapter, I will zoom into a selection of some of the very strong and intense scenes of the play and talk about their reception by critics from all over the world as well as the audience’s response. One of these scenes I will delve into involves masturbation in front of the audience, and so I will take a closer look at how authentic it is, what it did to the audience at the time, and the reason Fabre decided to stage it. The chapter also provides an in-depth analysis of the use of emphatic language on stage, the naked body on stage, and the correlation Fabre creates between consumerism on the one hand and sex and religion on the other. As in previous chapters, this analysis relies on a significant amount of reviews collected through the archives of Troubleyn, interviews, and a production recording of the play when it was performed in 2009 at the Avignon Festival, an annual festival that takes place in the city of Avignon, France.

In *Orgy of Tolerance* his performers take on many shapes, easily switching from a group of people masturbating over a group of high-class members of a hunting party to a scene dealing with the Abu Ghraib³ victims then into women giving birth on shopping carts. Fabre shares his

³ Abu Ghraib was a prison complex in Iraq known for the torture and horrible living conditions that its inmates had to experience during the US-led invasion of Iraq. It was opened in the 1950s under King Faisal II and expanded

thoughts on these transitions of the body from one scene to another: “He believes that we can create our own body, free from the constrictions of the laws that control it” (Van den Dries, “Jan Fabre and tg STAN” 430). The production does not follow a certain narrative but consists of separate scenes that critique Western consumerist habits and situations in a ludic and often sarcastic way.

Flemish theatre critic and professor of Theatre Studies at the University of Amsterdam, Laurens De Vos, compares the opening scene of the play to George Bataille’s notion of excess. In his book *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy* (1949), the French sociologist argues: “Man is the most suited of all living beings to consume intensely, sumptuously, the excess energy offered up by the pressure of life to conflagrations” (37). Sean Connolly, Professor of Humanities at Bluefield State College, states that the prodigal waste of one's own excess energy and resources “finds its natural conclusion in the expenditure of life in the assent to exceed even life itself, above all, in death” (108). Sacrifice, for Bataille, is a representation of the quintessence of life that is being consumed unproductively, precisely in the manner of gifts, products, and luxuries (Connolly 108). As Connolly adds on:

Having been delivered from what he terms a “restricted economy” of conservation, exchange, growth, and accumulation, luxury represents a form of expenditure that occupies what he terms a “general economy” of gifts, prodigality, expenditure, and excess (109).

under Hussein’s regime. In 2009, the year the production was created, Saleh et al v. Titan Corporation et al, a federal class action lawsuit alleging abuse at Abu Ghraib by civilian contractors from CACI International is dismissed by a US federal appeals court. The prison closed in 2014 due to security concerns (“Iraqi”).

The production opens with a couple of men and women warming up. Later on, they start a masturbating competition and are joined by their coaches who keep motivating them by saying phrases like “think Georges Clooney” and “You can do it!” and forcing them to start over and over again until they lose it from exhaustion and start crying. Their goal is to achieve the most orgasms in the shortest time. The competition lasts for about eight minutes on stage. De Vos reflects:

What Fabre stages here is the representation of Bataille’s excess. In late-capitalist society, man is forced to enjoy. He should, moreover, enjoy so much that he ultimately tires of it. An abundance of energy only serves its dissipation. The adage is to consume, whether it is Gucci, Louis Vuitton, or sex. In the meantime, humanity has forgotten that the core of it all is empty, that these commodities only serve to cover up a blank (66).

Fabre tries to make the emptiness De Vos talks about very obvious, and manages to create a world lacking realism throughout the entire play as it doesn’t involve any context stranded in the everyday realistic world that people live in. As we have seen, Fabre’s work, and especially *Orgy of Tolerance*, lends itself to multiple interpretations. The lack of realism turns the actors into symbolic figures instead of psychological characters. The scenes make it difficult for spectators to grip the reality behind the symbols and signs, and this, according to De Vos, is Fabre’s trick in the opening scene where ‘reaching a climax is not enough, as the athletes are forced to bring themselves to an orgasm over and over again to exhaustion’ (69). This also brings to mind Bataille’s notion of homogeneity. Masturbation here is presented as a competitive sports endeavour – sex Olympics – in parallel to consumerism, which is always about measurability and commensurability. Bataille speaks of the notion of a homogeneous structure of behavior that is devoid of any kind of moral dilemma as it is structured and forced upon the society. The

heterogeneous, on the other hand, poses a threat to the balance and organization of the homogeneous whole and is transformative and disruptive (Defraeye “Above Mere Men” 81). The heterogeneous in this case is the actors encouraging the other competing actors to jerk off until they reach a climax, break the norm, and get out of their comfort zone. It is a scene that greatly affects the audience, between making them extremely uncomfortable or humoring them with some outrageous pseudo-sportsex.

What Fabre does through this scene and many others is underline “the point that when all is permitted, no one is truly free; that the dream of consequence-free indulgence leads, every time, to sadism and torture” (Jennings).

This opening scene has received mixed reviews and has been received differently by critics. A theatre student at Boston University who goes by the name “danadric” in her blog page wrote:

When a play opens with an eight-minute-long masturbation competition, I can safely say no matter what else, my interest will be piqued. But with *Orgy of Tolerance*, Jan Fabre managed to take me on an emotional journey, where other artists may have just instilled their audience with shock. I was dazed for maybe a minute where my mind had to realign to understand the world I was entering, but after that I was laughing my ass off, then almost brought to tears. This just from eight minutes. This just from masturbation.

French critic and professor Philippa Wehle also considers this scene to not only be outrageous, but extremely funny (17). According to her, the spectators may sympathize with the actors who feel exhausted but cannot ignore the power of that scene that exposes in a very sexually explicit way the ‘absurdity for our quest for endless moments of self-gratification’ (18). She states:

We are used to nudity on our stages, of course, but this is no peep show. It is in your face and relentless to a degree that borders on the absurd. But Fabre is saying, this scene is no more absurd than the fake sex we're sold on the phone or on designated TV channels, accepted by a society in which everything is for sale (18).

Fabre calls this society that Wehle talks about “a society that devalues sex and takes the pleasure out of it” (Wehle 18).

Curiously, critic Luke Jennings from *The Guardian*, on the other hand, thinks that Fabre’s attack on consumerism displayed “too little movement and too much masturbation,” and explains his opinion by saying that each tableau is dragged out far beyond “the point at which it ceases to be amusing, and the arguments are wearily familiar.” Of course, it is scenes like this one that Van den Dries refers to when he says that Fabre's theatre is not for everyone, and some critics, including *Star-Ledger*’s Peter Filichia add on to that especially for this performance: “you'll need plenty of tolerance to sit through this show... *Orgy of Tolerance* may not have you coming out singing... but chances are you'll stay awake-- if you stay.” In his review, he assures that the activities Fabre shows us are really not more or less “normal” than what people enjoy doing sexually and that people are not shy or embarrassed “to tend to their most basic bodily needs in front of other people.”

This scene, more than many others in Fabre’s productions can easily stir controversy and generate greater shock from the audience. Masturbation, just like nudity and sexuality, is a subject that is linked to moral, ethical, and often religious issues, and is often characterized by connotations of taboo. Therefore, it is deemed as a provocative subject “par excellence” (Defraeye 24). It is a very sensitive, personal, and above all complicated topic that people tend to

avoid talking about or mentioning, especially in public places as it is often frowned upon. It is complicated because every person relates to it in a different way, has different desires and fetishes, and considers masturbation a very private and individual affair. However, when Fabre points fingers on every person in the audience by showing them something that is taboo or very private, though highly recognizable as a part of common sexual desire, this will definitely shake ethical, moral and/or religious values circulating in the audience. Society has built its traditions a certain way for a very long time, and to challenge the beliefs and try to break taboos will unavoidably cause outrage. Many playwrights way ahead of Fabre's time have tried to defy social norms and values and were canceled or banned, such as French-Spanish writer Fernando Arrabal, whose sexually explicit productions in the 1960s and 1970s often resulted in police interventions and court-imposed bans of the performances (Defraeye 152).

Thinking of how intense this scene as well as several ones that follow are, one might wonder where the inspiration for them came from. As stated by La Compagnie des Indes, Fabre is well aware that everything he puts on stage is eclipsed by real life: “beamed out on TV as “adult entertainment” or noised abroad by neo-Nazi political forces (“Orgy of Tolerance”). Fabre elaborates more on that and says: “it’s ok to be a Neo-Nazi. Where people excuse outrageous behavior with the line that it’s a democracy. It shouldn’t be allowed” (Wehle 22). The purpose of these staged masturbation Olympics is to mirror what angers and shocks Fabre in today's everyday life. Fabre himself provides us with an explanation in an interview with American artistic director Lane Czaplinski, in which he elaborates on the situation in Europe:

I had the idea 3 years ago, from my own Chesterfield, my own sofa, watching the television and seeing all this perversion, violence, and aggression. And you’re sitting with your ass on a luxury chair, and you don’t say anything about it. And also, in Europe

the extreme right is getting so many votes- the abnormal became very normal. The other starting point was in Europe you put on the television at 12 o'clock at night and you always get sex channels. But it's all so fake- you know, we live in this kind of fake orgasm society. A fake orgasm in the political sense, in a social sense, and in a sexual sense. And we start accepting this as a kind of normality. And that for me is the orgy of tolerance. We accept this, we tolerate this. And we don't react to it anymore ("Interview Excerpt").

Philippa Wehle thinks it is very ironic that Fabre, a guy who spent his career offending what Wehle calls "good taste," is now on the attack against a society that excuses outrageous behavior (22). As mentioned earlier, Hillaert observes in his analysis a new side of Fabre that is not focused merely on bodily fluids. Adding to that, we don't see the performers sweating due to the repetition of an exercise that demands physical effort. Repetition is obviously there, but his take on it and on the exhaustion of the body is different in this play, and particularly in this scene. Whether the actors are actually masturbating or faking it, and whether they are actually reaching a climax and shedding tears or not is not the purpose of Fabre here. Fabre does not want the audience to applaud the hard work of the performers as they did after the endurance exercise in *The Power of Theatrical Madness* nor is he testing how far these actors can go. Fabre's purpose is to shake and provoke the audience the same way he was shook by the realization of our level of tolerance of consumerism and materialism and what he sees on the screen. These actors keep their underwear on while jerking off, so it all could have been fake, and the shock of what the audience is experiencing makes it look real and deceives the eye.

In one of the following scenes, an actress licks and strokes a leather purse, calling it her "precious," and starts masturbating while holding on to and staring at it. After this foreplay, she

is joined by two men who keep sliding down a leather sofa on her continuously until they collectively reach a groaning climax (see fig 14).



Fig 14: *Orgy of Tolerance*: Couch Scene (Photo: Troubleyn)

Fabre and the production's lighting designer Anton Devilder work together on immersing the audience in this disturbing yet powerful scene by focussing the lights on the actress herself and leaving the background dark. Even the actors are barely seen because Fabre wants the eye to focus solely on the actress and the actions she is undertaking. As it happens, this dimming of the lights from scene to scene plays a very important role in this production because it helps take us from one unreal moment to another, from one dream as it were to another. The actress is fully dressed while engaging in this activity. For De Vos "shopping and fucking are two sides of the same coin in this performance" (70). The presence of Chesterfield sofas is noticeably predominant in this production, as they are present in many other scenes as well and play an essential role. Wehle comments on the use of these sofas:

The presence on stage of these gorgeous luxury sofas with their classic lines, a status symbol of wealth and luxury, is certainly aesthetically pleasing but it is also a stand in for

all the sofas on which most of us sit and watch the world go by on our TV sets. Where we watch and do nothing about it (21).

This is exactly what Fabre rants about and the main purpose of his play. Luk Van den Dries argues poetically that this couch becomes the “bearer of our secrets,” and that “you can ride it, rub yourself against it, come on it or under it... It soaks up all your dreams and most perfidious fantasies... We love our couch...” (Troubleyn press material).

The sofas are, however, not the only props frequently used. Grocery carts also have a featured role, and one of the strongest and unforgettable scenes of the performance involves four pregnant women climbing onto the rims of these carts, spreading their legs wide and going into labor. The women keep yelling and crying (see fig 15 below) as though they are actually giving birth to humans, but what we see instead is ketchup bottles, soda cans, bags of lettuce and celery, potato chips, and many more items coming out of them. They caress and rock these *newborn* products as though they were newborn babies. Wehle comments:

Consumer goods are all that matter to them. One gets the feeling that they would happily start all over again, as painful as it was, in order to accumulate as many items as possible (21).

Filichia adds for good measure: “If missionary-style sexual intercourse is called “vanilla,” Fabre offers caramel crunch, rainbow sherbet and rocky road. But freewheeling sex does often lead to pregnancies, where wages of sin must be paid.”

The correlation between giving birth and consuming products is striking, yet weird. It’s not something you see in theatres every day. Fabre is not only showing that consumer goods are the only things that matter to these customers, in *Orgy of Tolerance* these goods have become

extremely important to the point where people are willing to go through a process as painful as giving birth, just to satisfy their desires and acquire the products they are longing for.



Fig 15: *Orgy of Tolerance*: Shopping Cart Scene (Photo: Piero Tauro)

Religion as a Commodity:

In *Orgy of Tolerance*, religion itself is turned into a commodity that is up for consumption as well. In a subsequent scene, a gay fashion designer, Jean Pierre, his assistant, and a photographer for a French magazine are in search for a super model. As they are about to lose hope, a Christ-like figure (Cédric Charron) walks in wearing nothing but a loin cloth, holding a cross that seems very heavy and that makes him lose balance a couple of times. The designer finds him fit, in good shape, and charismatic enough to be turned into a superstar. Before he gets the chance to even say anything, they swoop on him, turn him into a sexy Christ figure with the sunglasses and golden chain they make him wear, and persuade him to juggle the cross on the palm of one hand. The superstar is however devoid of, as De Vos describes it, “any transcendentalism” (70) and the cross is no longer a sign of grief and salvation. The actor is seen

balancing the cross on the palm of his hand (see fig 16 below), “like an acrobat in a circus” (De Vos 70). While this Christ figure might seem offensive to Christianity or as though Fabre is mocking religion, the artist assures that this is not his intention:

That image is, I think, a very poetical metaphor for the production... It’s not a ridicule, it’s not trivial [...] This Christ is trying to balance his own cross. In the same way, mankind is on the edge, trying to survive, needing to find a social balance. There is an incredible hunger for material things, for status– for those fake orgasms; from sex or yes, from expensive shoes (Brennan).



Fig 16: *Orgy of Tolerance*: Christ Balancing Cross Scene (Photo: Jean-Pierre Stoop)



Fig 17: *The Man Who Bears the Cross* (Photo: Attilio Maranzano)

What Fabre says is quite ironic, considering he built a bronze statue of himself holding a cross titled *The Man Who Bears the Cross* (2015) for the gothic Cathedral of Our Lady in Antwerp, Belgium (see fig 4 above). The face of the man carrying the cross is a mix of Fabre's face and his late uncle's, Jacques Fabre, who used to be an actor and a poet (Kallini). Bart Paepen, the Parish Priest of the Cathedral, thinks that the statue, which is prominently on display close to the main entrance of the historical church, speaks to his values and beliefs as a priest; to him, this sculpture is a combination of beauty and truth, and Fabre pairs it with the Cathedral's traditional iconographical design, which is the sign of the cross (Kallini). Fabre also comments on the purpose of this sculpture:

I think the sculpture reflects my identity as an artist, as a human, as someone who is searching, doubting, taking risks, choosing to experiment, asking questions [...] When you look at my oeuvre, the cross is always there, and it is very important for different reasons. Don't forget, when you think about visual arts purely, but also socially, you think about the virtual line that runs throughout the human race; people standing up, erect. And of course, you think of the horizontal, the landscape, you could say, the meeting of human and nature, as well as the cross as a kind of vitality: the tree of life (Kallini).

For Fabre, one of the most important reasons behind this statue is to bring contemporary art and religion together; in his mind, people of the church should be open to mixing these two things, especially because there is no power of economics involved (Kallini).

Of course, some critics found this statue of bronze to be problematic and could not get past Fabre's narcissism. Sheridan Voysey, broadcaster on faith and spirituality criticizes Fabre by stating that the artist prefers to play with the cross rather than bear its weight, and that "such presumptuous self-glorification is a sign of the decline of art." Belgian art historian and critic Stefan Beyst shares similar thoughts and has issues with Fabre's statue: "[...] even more than showing off, self-aggrandisement is the absolute negation of the very humility that adorns every worthy mortal. Fabre just cannot stop having himself cast in bronze."

These two crosses—in the production and in the cathedral—are similar in what they present—a literal and figurative balancing act—but are very different in context and in the way they are used. When comparing these two uses of the crucifix, we can think of Fabre as quite contradictory and very controversial. The way the audience will read and react to the cross and

the actor holding it in a play full of strong, intense, and very sexual scenes and activities is completely different from that of people entering the Cathedral and admiring a bronze sculpture of a man holding the beautiful, glowing brass cross which represents the church but cannot be disentangled from its portrayed (controversial) bearer. There is also a clear contradiction in what Fabre says when he talks about what the cross and its use represent in both the church sculpture and the theatre production. The Christ figure holding the cross represents someone on the verge of collapsing amongst the chaotic world they are living in, a world full of corruption, materialism, sex, and excess consumerism. The sculpture, however, wants to bring together arts and religion and represents someone who is walking their own path be it with questions. It is possible that Fabre is showing us that the cross is just a symbol that can be used in different contexts or intends to create chaos and provoke people by creating two similar but contradictory scenarios. Philippa Wehle's thoughts are very different than what Fabre thinks he is showing us: "Nothing is sacred [...] Christ is taken on as a target of ridicule." (19)

Fabre is more often than not criticized for his work, but whether it's his genius mind and work that is not being understood by lots of spectators or his inability to make people understand the point of his work through these very intense and thought-evoking scenes remains a question. Clearly, his theatre and work are not for everyone, but it also raises a question by all critics who are critical of his work whether all this effort he puts into his art is worth it, if only a very small audience will fully understand and enjoy it.

The Use of Offensive Language:

After overwhelming his audience with shocking and overly provocative scenes, Fabre decides to end his play with a different type of provocation that doesn't involve sacrilege, nudity,

masturbation, physical exercise, or even sexual activity. The use of language in this scene is problematic and provoking, and interestingly enough, the audience doesn't seem to mind it. All nine actors come together and lash out at everybody, with an "outrageous litany of epithets that leaves no one and no thing unscathed" (Wehle 22). Screaming out "Fuck You" ("Fuck bisexuals, make up your minds already," "Fuck Germans who say Nein before you even ask them the question," "Fuck Catholic Priests," "Fuck the whole world full of faggots," "Fuck American Fast-Food economy," etc.), these actors seemed to entertain the audience with their anger and offensive language rather than offend or agitate. They even curse themselves as artists and Jan Fabre himself. In the 2009 video recording, the audience can be heard laughing after every line. De Vos expresses his shock not to the language being used, but to the audience's reaction and what he calls their irresponsiveness to this scene:

No one in the audience rises from their seats and makes a scene before leaving the auditorium. The very last scene should be interpreted in this light, where all the actors sit next to each other and start insulting the whole world, not in the least the audience themselves, who are accused of being filthy little pervs coming to the theatre to see some nudity. But everyone can go fuck themselves, including Jews and Arabs, Americans and Europeans, the Eskimos who were not important enough to mention in the performance, and at the end even Jan Fabre himself (72).

This scene is reminiscent of and probably inspired by Peter Handke's *Publikumsbeschimpfung* (1966), one of the most ground-breaking plays of the 20th century. Through his production, Handke suggests "a sense of dissatisfaction with theatrical tradition and a strong desire to break down the hegemony of this tradition, thus challenging the status quo of the theatre" (Defraeye 417). Handke's hassle with tradition becomes even more obvious towards the ending of the

production, through the “undertone of the outpouring invective” (Defraeye 417). Defraeye elaborates:

The irony with which traditional critical jargon is bent back towards the audience is quite blatant. Handke obviously has an axe to grind with traditional theatre, which he postulates as an institutionalised art form (417).

Fabre derives his ending scene from Handke’s thought evoking closing, and creates a similar effect on the audience, who find themselves enjoying the rant and curses the performers throw at them.

Fabre’s closing scene raises some important and interesting questions. What is the meaning or purpose of theatre if people can’t feel things or be provoked anymore? “Have we not become so tolerant towards everything and everyone that we have lost the ability to be outraged, humiliated and shocked?” (De Vos 73). After the play comes to an end, it is evident that Fabre does not provide any answers or propose how we can solve or cure the dumbing down and marketization which he exposes. All that happens is the performers’ rant and the audience gives them their loud applause in return (Hillaert 435).

To take this a bit further and question Fabre’s ending of *Orgy of Tolerance*, using reviews of the production, we will analyze the use of curses and invective on stage and their effect.

Theatre critic Michael Billington from *The Guardian* argues that even though some playwrights think that the use of cuss words might be a reflection of our everyday life, the constant repetition of these words reduces their value and dulls their power: his “objections are not so much moral as aesthetic: the once-taboo ‘f’ and ‘c’ words are gradually losing their power to shock by promiscuous over-use.” He continues his argument by stating that these words were used at a

certain period of time to generate an immediate sense of shock, but the world has changed and swearing in public has become commonplace. He concludes by requesting: “I am not asking for four-letter words to be banned. I am just suggesting that writers are gradually losing the ability to convey anger, violence or emotional intemperance by any other means than having people say “fuck” five times a page.” Critic Peter Libbey from the *New York Times* has a different take on the use of such language in contemporary productions in general and not specifically Fabre’s, and shares some of his interviewees’ thoughts, such as Benjamin Bergen’s, professor of cognitive science at UC Davis, who expresses:

All things being equal, the most physiologically affecting language is profanity... Your heart rate increases, your pupils dilate, you start sweating. We call this a state of emotional arousal.

Libbey agrees with Bergen that the use of curses has a stronger effect than other powerful positive words, but also thinks that these words should be used to serve a specific purpose.

As to the F word, the “fucking!” expletive may have lost its effect on the audience and lost its power to shock. One wonders if Fabre insists on it with the sole purpose to entertain rather than provoke. By doing so, and making the audience laugh, he is proving more and more that people have become so tolerant and provide an answer to De Vos’ critique of our inability to feel humiliated or shocked. Maybe the use of the ‘F’ is not as effective as Bergen suggests, because it is not taboo anymore; it has become a word that we use every day.

Nudity on stage:

Nudity is one of Fabre’s crucial strategies on stage. In *Orgy of Tolerance*, he makes use of it in a very intense scene to emphasize shame. A couple of actors appear on stage barely dressed,

holding whips while chasing after the other actors who are dressed and seated on their leather couches. They strip these actors from their clothes and start scourging and punishing them (see fig 18 below) until they break down and start confessing and apologizing for not buying up to date consumer products: “I’m sorry I don’t have a flat screen TV; my old TV was working fine... I promise I will buy a new one,” “I am sorry I don’t have the latest video games,” etc. (paraphrased). Some of these actors are pulled by their hair across the stage, and others are on a leash. One of the performers who is torturing another male actor grabs him by the groin and whips him several times later in the scene. This scene speaks to a lot of things. First, Fabre is going to the extreme to show us how materialistic and fake Western society has become. More importantly, the scene highlights the pressure that people are constantly under to stay up to date with the latest technologies and brands and satisfy social expectations. No one wants to have a reputation for being “old-fashioned,” and everyone wants to keep their reputation high. The torturers on stage represent media stars, influencers, and marketing people — members of society that we look up to and want to be like. They also are metonyms of our perverse minds messing with us, making us think that nothing is enough, and that we should aim for more so as to maintain good status in today’s society.



Fig 18: *Orgy of Tolerance*: Whipping Scene (Photo: Jean-Pierre)

The nude body in this scene and the context it is placed in may trigger and provoke a large portion of the audience, not only because of the presence of a naked body but also due to the kind of actions on stage. In Piet Defraeye's words,

[...] the actions that are performed in the nude can contribute to the provocativeness of nakedness. Not only is the nudity a form of provocative rebellion, but so are the actions that are performed. Sexual acts, in particular, become part of the provocative cannon (85).

To give an example, in this scene, even while whipping and yelling at the naked actors who are on the floor acting like animals, a male actor who is doing the beating kneels, licks an actress's boobs and plays with them. The way she is taken advantage of and used as an object from the beginning to the end of this scene stirs some raw emotions and is difficult to watch. The

audience's gaze becomes focused on the exposed and vulnerable bodies of the female and male stripped actors; the actors' privacy is on show and invaded. The audience is no longer watching actors who play roles, instead they see the actor's phenomenologically idiosyncratic bodies on stage (Defraeye 88). The immediacy of the live naked body on stage is what differentiates the experience for the spectators to the one they see on the screen. Defraeye elaborates on that:

Unlike film, where the selective focus of the camera and the manipulation of film assemblage can compose and re-compose the body's iconography, the means for doing this in the theatre are extremely limited, especially when dealing with nude bodies. In spite of the enclosure of representation, the emergence of the nude body creates a presence which is not reduced or compounded and is initially and ultimately only itself (89).

What is more, it's not just the actions that offend or provoke, but their authenticity. Defraeye elaborates on that by isolating the re- in *representation*:

The effect of provocative actions on the stage is not particularly dependent on their proximity and visibility, but rather on the authenticity of their enactment. One of the essential characteristics is a deep urge to outflank the representation and make the staged reality into a presentation, and, thus, an authentic reality (94).

The beautiful lie of theatre, as referred to by Van den Dries refers to Fabre's exposure of theatre as a place of appearances and deceit. Van den Dries elaborates: "The entire performance is a disclosure of the fictional boundaries of theater. He does not smuggle any reality onto the stage" (*Corpus* 18). We can hear the sound of the whips as they seemingly touch the actors and be

immersed in the toxic environment the characters take us to even though —we can assume— they are not actually being whipped.

Another important point Defraeye makes is that provocation implicates the audience: they are part and parcel of it (101). Fabre’s rage towards the situation in Europe and how the west thinks nowadays triggers his audience by means of naked bodies on stage being treated in an abject manner, actors masturbating until they can’t take it, and a woman jerking off on and with her Chesterfield sofa. Even though most of Fabre’s audience laughed at these scenes and were amused with some aspects, there were moments of complete silence and intensity as the actress rubs the couch on her vagina. By all means, provocation is a result of an interdependence between production and reception of the audience: “the theatre of provocation can only be provocative within particular concretizations. It is in the concretization of a provoked audience that the provocation finds its legitimacy” (Defraeye102).

“Everything is available if you have a credit card... Everything is a mask, sold to the highest bidder. I detest the charade. I detest this. No wonder I detest this masquerade. Everything is sold....” These lines are taken from scenes in *Orgy of Tolerance* and express Fabre’s “disgust” and “anger” our society’s excessive tolerance and acceptance of anything and everything (Wehle 22). The production is based on two things that struck him. First, everything is tolerated to the point where all must be permitted. In an interview with Seattle-based *The Stranger*, Fabre expresses his dismay that Europeans are expected to tolerate the members of the far right who undermine the values Europeans cherish (“Juggling or Sodomy?”). The second thing that shook him, in the same interview, is that sex has become a commodity. He talks about telephone-sex

lines being fake based on his experience, as he was kept on hold, and they were making money from him. One of the biggest threats to a performance is how easily it can be forgotten, but Fabre's anger made him create a performance that people will talk about for decades. Instead of just using the body as one of the elements on stage, *Orgy of Tolerance* adopts a variety of provocative elements to take the production to the next level and keep its audiences on the edge of their seats.

Conclusion

“Young choreographers’ work cannot compare to Fabre’s epic” says Dutch critic Sander Hiskemuller, and that just about summarizes the impact Fabre has left on contemporary theatre, not just in Europe, but on a more global scale. He has done many works of art that are recognized and appraised from all over the world. His productions have toured around the globe, and that includes the United States, Canada, Japan, Israel, and all over Europe. Most responses to his productions are positive in the United States, especially towards *Mount Olympus* and *The Power of Theatrical Madness* that led him to become very well recognized. In fact, when *The Power* toured in New York in 1986, it was a huge hit. Critic John Rockwell from *The New York Times* comments on the quality of the production, the actors, and Fabre himself:

Jan Fabre was billed by the Kitchen as Belgium's answer to Pina Bausch, Laurie Anderson, Peter Brook and Robert Wilson, and three and a half hours into his four-hour, uninterrupted quasi-operatic theatrical performance piece *The Power of Theatrical Madness* – [. . .] one began finally to believe that might be true [. . .] throughout the long evening, there were wonderful, telling moments, and that climactic scene was truly something special. The company of 14 was something, too. Although it was often difficult to associate communally listed names with specific actions, some stood out: Els Deceukelier, the most overtly erotic of the actresses; Annamirl van der Pluym, a calmly riveting dancer-actress, and Peter Janssens, who has a lovely baritone and a fine ear (his a cappella version of Isolde’s “Love Death” was an early highlight of the night).

To be impressed and keep in mind the name of the performers who stood out means that Fabre did a good job with his performers, and they did a great job embodying their characters. Fabre

and his performers left an impact on Rockwell as well as many other critics in the United States. Critic Rogier van der Meyden, also from *The New York Times*, believes that Fabre, compared to directors like Castellucci and Wilson, defies categorization “having worked in disparate disciplines from opera to video, and experimenting with materials from Bic pens to bones.” Another example of a production that was a success in the country is *Quando l’uomo principale è una Donna* (2004), which was the second production to come to the United States after *The Power* in 1986. The New York Times wrote:

It was a clever choice. *Quando l’uomo* is a solo work that contains the truly surprising provocative imagery and skillful dramatic pacing that are Mr. Fabre's great gifts -- and at a running time of 50 minutes, it comes without the numbing repetition and sometimes gratuitous excesses of his larger-scale works.

This thesis opened my eyes to a lot of things about Fabre. First off, Fabre intentionally does not answer the questions spectators have in mind, and always leaves room for interpretation. Hence, there is no right or wrong when trying to analyze his scenes and what he’s trying to convey. He himself is also still learning every day, exploring new things, may it be about the human body, the connection between humans and animals, or even about himself as a contemporary director who is constantly evolving. Through reflection on the idea of everlasting change, the overlap between life and death, man and animal, light and darkness, dream and nightmare, beauty and ugliness, and other concepts, Fabre has attempted to portray reality’s potential to change throughout the course of his artistic career. His creations constantly represent the moment when reality changes (Bernardi). Second, Fabre is fascinated by the human body, its powers, how far it can go, its metamorphosis, and its limits. This is what I explore in detail in the previous chapters: all kinds of experiments that he has done to the performative body on stage.

He believes in the power of the builder, meaning the power “to push oneself in a certain direction beyond the chemistry of the body, the power to follow mentally and physically, a more autonomous path” (Van den Dries “Jan Fabre and tg STAN” 430). The autonomy of the individual performer is what dominates in Fabre's work, hence the constant metamorphosis of the body. His performers take on many shapes. In the words of Luk Van den Dries, Fabre allows his performers to create their own bodies “free from the constrictions of the laws that control it” (“Jan Fabre and tg STAN” 430). Fabre’s vision is strongly connected to French theatre visionary Antonin Artaud (1896-1948). He is actually inspired by him in most of his work and wants to shake the audience just like Artaud did back in his days. One of the key aspects of Artaud’s body image is that it is subject to heterogeneous forces. More importantly, Van den Dries explains Fabre's intention of some of his texts that are inspired by Artaud:

a plea for the benefits of pain and disease; a plea for the re-creation of man; a quest for freedom, for the liberation of God in the divine; and finally, the desire ‘to explore other sources/ and to enter in contact with/ a new reality/ to allow/ meetings of a more subtle and rare nature.’ It is the same desire for wholeness, for physical and mental re-creation, that permeated Artaud’s work: ‘I now only have one task, to make myself’ (“Jan Fabre and tg STAN” 431).

Repetition and the exhaustion of the body also play an important role in Fabre’s work. Fabre likes to test his performers’ bodies’ motor capabilities and their reactions to exhaustive practices and exercises. He always comes up with new creative ideas to test the body and its limits and never gives up on his research on how the body’s functions perform. He also gives the actors some time to do their own research on who they are and what their body does, and to explore themselves and their characters in a production. During rehearsals, he gives them a

question, and based on that, they get to experiment by themselves and with each other, improvising and creating a scene that he later on sees and helps them turn into an actual scene in his production.

Due to the 18-month conditional statement ruled out by the court in 2022, Fabre lost his subsidy from the government and is forbidden from putting a naked body on stage. His productions are being self-censored nowadays, as he has to be very careful with how he utilizes the body on stage. This means he and his dramaturg Miet Martens must adopt a different kind of dramaturgy and anaesthetic. His latest production *Simona, The Gangster of Art* (2023) features Italian actress Irene Urciuoli and is about a woman who fights for the power of beauty. Another production that is currently showing is *Peak Mytikas: On the Top of Mount Olympus* (2023), an 8-hour performance. It features Greek myths and raises questions related to life and death. Both productions do not include a single naked body or display of genitalia on stage. However, he is still working on productions, and that conviction has not stopped him from pursuing his passion for and research on the human body. The impact of his work is still continuing as he is still doing workshops. The Jan Fabre Teaching Group, the 10-day workshop, is attracting people more than ever, so one can say that his international impact has grown instead of diminished. Even though a lot of Belgian citizens want nothing to do with his theatre or art in general anymore, his work is still highly appreciated and admired by neighboring countries such as Italy, Spain, Germany, and Greece. This also means that scholarly research in Fabre's dramaturgy and theatre aesthetic will continue to explore new avenues and novel approaches.

One of the biggest impacts Fabre has created is the fact that he changed the way artists and spectators in general think and perceive things around them. He has given both his collaborators as well as spectators the chance to experience what a body can do and how much

pressure it can take. Apart from the visual poetry he creates on stage, the most interesting thing about his work is it keeps people thinking of the many meanings behind a scene and exposes them to things they have never experienced or seen before.

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