



CREATION

ZINC

DAVID VAN REYBROUCK / DEAD CENTRE

Production
Théâtre de Liège

**CREATION
THÉÂTRE DE LIÈGE
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This is the story of something that came into existence by accident, was found to be malleable and easily exploited, was extracted from its place of origin and sent to far off places. Something that was used in a variety of ways, for a variety of causes.

That something was a man called Joseph Rixen.

This is also the story of Zinc.

The story begins in 2025 in a theatre in Liège, with an audience sitting in a room watching a play. The audience are all united by something.

Inside the bodies of every single person in that audience is a large repository of a trace metal: zinc. Zinc is used in the body to help the immune system fight off invading viruses. If called upon, it is ready to fight.

The story also begins in the 16th Century, when Paracelsus noticed something strange in a furnace and realised that there were not, in fact 7 metals, but eight.

And the story also begins in Neutral-Moresnet in 1903, with the birth of Joseph Rixen, whose life spans a volatile and shifting period in European history as national borders were continuously mapped and re-mapped, and territories continually contested. Nowhere was this more true than in the territory of Neutral-Moresnet, the site of the only Zinc mine in mainland Europe, and the reason why this territory came to be: neither the United Kingdom of the Netherlands nor Prussia were prepared to lose it.

The final act of the Congress of Vienna was therefore not conclusive: the compromise was that there was no compromise. It became neutral territory. It was not Dutch, it was not Prussian. It was nowhere. It became something unique: an unclaimed territory, with a population of stateless people.

Without ever moving, over the course of his life Joseph Rixen was a Neutral, a citizen of the German Empire, a resident of the Kingdom of Belgium and a citizen within the Third Reich.

He did not cross any borders, the borders crossed him.

Dead Centre's adaptation of David van Reybrouck's masterful *Zinc* will explore the way the human body becomes a map - a contested site where the struggles of politics and history determine who we are. What does history do to a human life? It will ask the question posed so provocatively by the book: are our allegiances and our identities based on anything more than the accidents of history and the whims of the powerful?

Like much of Dead Centre's work, *Zinc* starts in the theatre. We take the elements of the room - the theatrical contract between the stage and audience - as the starting point for an inquiry into history and identity. The Zinc-rich human body, and the "neutral" space of the stage, offer points of intersection between the theatre event and the story of Joseph Rixen and Neutral-Moresnet.

Starting with the empty stage, an "undecided space" we begin to tell the story of Neutral-Moresnet, another "undecided space". We imagine a dynamic design that reflects this story of contested territory, aiming to have a set that keeps the audience second guessing where they are and who is represented on stage.

Joseph Rixen was born Neutral, his identity a state of flux, a question mark, a contested battleground. Neutrality places upon him a paradoxical identity: "I am not". Throughout the performance, a series of actors will attempt to understand this paradoxical state, by standing on stage and declaring: "I am not Joseph Rixen." In this mode of non-being, by performing negativity, we will try to understand the state of statelessness that lies at the heart of the story of *Zinc*.

The work will make another stand for the dream of what Neutral Moresnet could have become: it will attempt to create a truly neutral space in the theatre, no governance, no allegiance, no history.

Stage and Casting

The stage concept is based on the idea of the empty stage as a place of pure possibility - an “undecided territory” waiting to be claimed. Throughout the performance various proposals will be made, each one presented as “stage design for adaptation of Zinc by David van Reybrouck”.

Each design will appear, be tested, be contested, and then be scrapped as too unrealistic, too expensive, or too impractical. Just like the competing claims on Neutral-Moresnet, the stage will be a zone of competing claims for what the design should be.

The versatile staging will be predominantly achieved through video-mapping, using blank “neutral” surfaces to map video and test the various design proposals. We also plan to visit the Zinc mine in Kelmis and map the real geographical space onto the imagined space of the stage.

Throughout the performance we will also be creating a screen made from Zinc Sulphide - the chemical compound used to create “glow in the dark” phosphorescent effect. At the end of the evening, the screen is raised, the performers stand in front of it, and a UV light is turned on. When the light turns off, the actors leave the stage and the room is in darkness except for the glowing traces where the actors were standing, the empty space marking the trace of Joseph Rixen, a figure from the past, fading slowly, a trace in the zinc.

With a cast of 5 actors - to correspond to the 5 nationalities of Joseph Rixen - the actors will all play Rixen at various times throughout his life (as well as other people in his story). This cast will itself be a mix of nationalities, ages and genders, and the piece – as well as telling the story of Rixen – will engage with the performers’ heritage and nationality..

Sample intro text

An actor sits on the stage, at a table or desk.

Female. She is one of the people over the course of the evening who will play Joseph.

Joseph.

Good evening.

Thank you for coming.

Now that you're here, we can begin.

What I mean is: you are the first scene of this play.

To be more precise, the story starts with a trace, a small trace of metal which more than anywhere in this room, is found inside the human body: traces of zinc.

Collectively, as an audience, you are a zinc mine.

Zinc is used in the body to help the immune system fight off invading viruses. If called upon, it is ready to fight. It helps us to grow, and also helps to heal our wounds. To try to understand who we are - to understand what makes us who we are - we must look inside ourselves. We need to understand zinc.

Interview with Bush Moukarzel and Ben Kidd

For this production, you are adapting the book by the Flemish Belgian author David Van Reybrouck, *Zinc*. How did this idea come about?

Bush Mouzarkel : We always try to build our projects in relation to the place where we are creating, like a conversation with the community, with the country. For *Zinc*, it was important to have a «Belgian» story. In a way, David Van Reybrouck's book is a Belgian story, at least it is connected to the issues of this part of the world. In discussions with Serge Rangoni (the director of the Théâtre de Liège), we exchanged ideas, and then he eventually suggested we take a look at the book, not just because it is very short (*He laughs*), but because we always enjoy adapting works that, at first glance, do not necessarily seem suited for the stage. With *Zinc*, we have a hybrid book, a socio-historical book, which quickly caught our interest; it is a fascinating book in terms of how the narrative is constructed. It's a mix of all these things that convinced us: having a Belgian story and a text that requires a real intervention, an imaginative approach to turn it into a quality performance.

Ben Kidd : I think Serge is very familiar with our work, and he knows well that we like to start with material that deals as much with ideas as with stories. Sure, the stories are always important, but the ideas and concepts that the book tackles—questions of borders, geography, and national identity—truly caught our interest.

Why is an Irish company interested in Belgian borders? Has Brexit changed your perspective on European borders? Ireland has a complicated history when it comes to borders...

B. M. : We are both British, with an Irish company. I live in Dublin, Ben in London; obviously, under these circumstances, Brexit has particularly affected us, with all the absurdities it brought about. These questions have become more present, and yes, of course, when we talk about Ireland, the conflicts between the North and the South, it's difficult to avoid the question of borders. It comes down to questioning history, its accidents, the contingencies of history, and how simple lines drawn on maps can sometimes lead to devastating outcomes. How do you create a country? Create conditions that allow—or don't allow—people to start a life... There is an undeniable tragic side. *Zinc* is the heightened story of borders. The creation of a territory, where everything revolves around lines and borders.

B. K. : Obviously, it's always a bit cliché to say, but it's certain that these questions resonate even more today. Even though I grew up in the United Kingdom, which has always been skeptical of Europe, I belong to a generation that tried to forget the notions of borders, to imagine a world where they would no longer exist. We could move freely, and that, regardless of what anyone says, created a sense of belonging to Europe, perhaps even more so in Ireland. On the other hand, national identity is something very complex, full of nuances. It's important for many people, and when these same people feel like their national identity is being taken away, for, for example, the sake of larger projects, there can, as we see now, be a backlash. As Bush mentioned, things can sometimes become so strange, absurd, when borders are changed without the input of the people living on these lands. It is as if our identity is being assigned by others, by people who are strangers to us.

B. M. : Yes, it's that tragedy: you stay where you are, you remain motionless in a room, and your identity changes 3, 4, 5 times, because someone has decided so. History happens all around us; it doesn't wait for us; it moves on while we are occupied with other things. It's always important to remember that everything is malleable, that borders are human projects, just like countries and laws are. Is it truly natural to tell someone: "This is where you come from! You can stay here," and then tell someone else, "You must leave!"? Neutral Moresnet is nothing more than an extreme example of how borders are made. The creation of a country, of borders, these are acts of imagination, rather than reflections of an unchanging reality. There is always something utopian about jumping into these stories, reminding ourselves of the fragile and fictional nature of borders.

Isn't this also a story that deals with the differences between culture and identity? For example, the question of borders in Belgium has always been significant; perhaps one day they will be redrawn, and Belgian identity will no longer formally exist as it does today, while its culture might, perhaps, persist?

B. M. : Yes, I suppose we could define identity as a political category and culture as an existential one, something that emerges from a community and that cannot be changed bureaucratically. It's a tension we need to explore, and it lies at the heart of *Zinc*.

B. K. : I myself have trouble understanding what my cultural identity is. It's true that it's an interesting perspective. We could go further and ask if culture is not something we do, rather than something we are. It's connected to rituals, to the way we speak, the way we tell stories. Culture is always linked to action, while national identity is more about assignment, even if, of course, the two are intertwined.

B. M. : I think there's a tension in each of us: we want to be a citizen of somewhere while also being a citizen of the world. To be both universal and specific. Neutral Morsenetsymbolizes this tension. There's something very European in this story, this ideal of a borderless world; a way of thinking of ourselves as citizens of a continent, free in our movements. We are always caught between the desire to recognize where we come from and the wish to overcome the assignment of the place we come from. This is where the metaphor of zinc is interesting: a metal buried in a specific place that is extracted to be spread across the world. Zinc is a metaphor for movement. I think it's an ideal we should pursue, celebrating movement and not regressing, as with Brexit, which is a regression, a step backward.

Do borders sometimes transcend cultural issues? Aren't they also the result of economic decisions?

B. K. : Often, the reason you want to draw a border is because you want to keep something for yourself.

B. M. : For yourself alone.

B. K. : Yes, when you look at the walls in the English countryside, it's fascinating. You want to keep a part of a territory, so you build a wall. These are significant moments in history, where things stop being shared. I need it, to eat, to sell, whatever! but it belongs to me. A border is that. At least, I think so... And that's where the whole paradox of the European Union lies, since the desire to eliminate borders was based on an economic imperative. It was to facilitate trade, to try to allow everyone to prosper. And, the second paradox, once internal borders were abolished, it became necessary to strengthen external borders to protect this place, this suddenly larger space. These are all questions we want to address.

In your statement of intent, you talk about “non-being,” about the negativity of being, which seems to be the opposite of the thought currents in our current society, where affirmation, claiming, and demands are central. It reminds me of the famous phrase of Bartleby the scrivener (a short novel by Herman Melville), in which he always responds to tasks he's asked to do with: “I would prefer not to” ...

B. M. : Neutrality, even more so in the story of Joseph Rixen, is for me a suspension of identity. A pause. When Bartleby decides to step back, he also creates a space to think about the possibility of being something else, to think about utopia, his personal utopia. It doesn't mean you will never be “nothing,” it's simply suspending the frantic pace of things a bit, to think of other possibilities. There's truly something utopian in negativity. And this negativity is a very important engine for us to think about the book and the life of Joseph Rixen. In the case of theater, it's even more striking, since several actors will play Joseph Rixen while clearly not being Joseph Rixen. Theater is a space of possibilities, a playground to meditate on questions like: “What if the world were not as it is?”; “What if history had taken another direction?”

B. K. : I think we love theater so much because it's a space of possibilities. It's a place of non-identity, a place where we play at being someone else, at taking on another identity. It's perhaps the practice that shows us that identity is not fixed, that it doesn't have to be fixed, that you have the freedom to transform yourself, to shed an identity that doesn't suit you. The play will play with these questions; we want to use theater as a neutral space where possibilities are endless. Nothing is ever decided. It reminds me of a play I saw a long time ago. In this play, there was simply a lot of money on a table and the audience had to decide for an hour what to do with that sum. There was almost nothing else in the performance, a few suggestions, but that's all. You could decide to keep it all, to share it, etc. I found their way of using theater very interesting; they used the stage as an indeterminate space to bring new things to light. By starting with the idea of having an ensemble of actors from all origins, genders, and ages play Joseph Rixen, we want to explore identity, its malleability.

Bush, you have already met David Van Reybrouck, did you discuss these questions, the way you were going to collaborate?

B. M. : We didn't go into the details, but we did indeed talk about this idea of theater as a neutral space, as a metaphor for neutrality. A play is also a journey: you enter a theater, you watch a performance, you enter a neutral space, and something happens, feelings emerge, and without moving, you might not be quite the same anymore. That's what happened with *Moresnet-Neutral*, you don't move, things change around you, and you are different. We talked about that, about the strategies that theater offers us and that we should use to explore these social questions, these historical realities. What is very encouraging is that, although he is very busy and will probably not be able to be present with us, he is completely open to discussing with us, to sharing his notes, his early drafts, the material he used to write *Zinc*.

Speaking of the title, I notice that we haven't talked much about zinc itself. What place do you want to give this element in your play?

B. K. : *Zinc remains an important element of the book that we need to address in the play. Its relationship with the Earth, in particular. Today, it has become indispensable, especially for the automotive industry, while being essential for the functioning of our bodies. It's quite intriguing when you think about it.*

B. M. : The presence of zinc in the body is something that immediately struck me. It's a metal that is extracted daily, that is moved, transformed, then I learn that we, humanity, are a zinc mine. It suddenly becomes a metaphor for the human body, human lives that have also been extracted and exploited for economic and political reasons.

B. K. : What I'm going to say might sound a bit silly, but I was with my daughter in the garden, and seeing some bees, I started talking to her about honey. I find it really crazy how bees make honey... What a beautiful life to live in honey (*He laughs*). And then, we came along, and we helped ourselves; we actually steal their honey from them. It's what we do with many things. Humanity has reached such a level of technological advancement... I'm not necessarily saying that it's a bad thing, but it has literally devoured what it found on earth, using it for its own purposes. When you read David Van Reybrouck's book, about the complexity we had to reach in order to extract zinc... It's astonishing... We were clever enough to understand how to extract zinc and how to use it... And on the other hand, we just stole it, and we plunder the Earth. It's a bit like when you watch someone milking a cow, you just want to say: "But give the cow a break!" (*He laughs*). It's complicated because I'm not a technophobe, I love honey and milk (*He laughs*), but it still remains strange. On one side, there's all this human ingenuity, which is undoubtedly brilliant, but on the other side, there's this human belief that everything belongs to us, that we can take whatever we want... It's just as important an element that we want to address in the play.



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