

# Choreographer tests the ability of survivors to unite

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## Summary

Flemish dancer Seppe Baeyens reflects on the redemptive power of catastrophe in his choreography debut *Tornar*

## Cast of pros and amateurs

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Will these people – a mix of ages, sexes and cultures, strangers to each other until that very moment – be able to come together as a community?

That's the central question Seppe Baeyens asks in his first full dance production, *Tornar*. After a career as a dancer that saw him perform with numerous local theatre and dance companies like Fabuleus, Kopergieterij and Kabinet K, Baeyens has now taken the choreographer's seat.

The 34-year-old spent a lot of time selecting the right mix of people for *Tornar*. He organised workshops and meetings until he felt his group of dancers was diverse enough to represent society at large. He ultimately settled on four children, two teenagers, three professional dancers, a pensioner and a musician.

“Working with a cross-section of society makes it easier to reach an intergenerational audience as

well,” he says during a break from rehearsals.

We're at the [Ultima Vez](#) dance studios in the Brussels commune of Sint-Jans-Molenbeek, where Baeyens is producing *Tornar* under the artistic supervision of acclaimed Flemish choreographer Wim Vandekeybus and with the support of the European network Life Long Burning, which supports young dancers and performers.

“Wim is an icon, but passing on his expertise to the younger generation is essential to him,” Baeyens says. This kind of knowledge-sharing makes even more sense when veteran artist and protégé share similar ideas about educational goals and working with local partners and different age groups, like Baeyens and Vandekeybus do.

## **Crumbling walls**

Tornadoes typically destroy everything in their path, but in Baeyens' choreography they represent a new beginning. “Some people are lost,” he explains. “The ones who stay behind have to reorient themselves, and then you get what you often notice in our society: You need a disaster to strengthen solidarity between neighbours.”

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- Choreographer Seppe Baeyens

When do you really get to know these people? he asks. “When there's flooding in the street. We need a disaster or an external enemy to bring down the walls between us and start building a community again.”

The Flemish choreographer took this “get to know thy neighbours” motto pretty literally. Leon Gyselynck, who plays the nonagenarian, lives just opposite the Ultima Vez workshop in Molenbeek. If you had told him a few months ago that he'd soon be making his debut as a dancer, he would have laughed in your face, Baeyens says.

But from the moment he met the retired butcher, Baeyens thought he might make an interesting cast member. So he asked him to attend a workshop he organised as part of an intergenerational research project at Ultima Vez last year.

“On the first day, he stayed for an hour before he left,” Baeyens says. “On the second day, he hung around for almost three hours, and on the third day he wore his jogging suit and said: ‘I'm in.’ He must have felt at ease, surrounded by a lot of other non-professionals. We never gave him the impression he had to play someone else.”

## **An unexpected discovery**

Because every single dancer can add his or her own colour, they seem to all feel connected on stage. In the aftermath of the storm, 18-year-old non-professional dancer Bassam Nakhel, for instance, protects and assumes responsibility for two children, while professional Mike van Alfen takes the helm with his natural, mature presence as he circles the stage.

As Baeyens interact with the dancers, it becomes obvious that he's trying to build a sense of community that extends beyond the stage. “People warned me before I started working with children and youth: ‘You have to take care of them.’ But I always believed that ultimately they will take care of each other, as long as you don't give them too many rules.”

Baeyens' own experiences with hierarchical power structures are a case in point. As a teenager, he got himself expelled from the Sint-Jozefs College in Aarschot, Flemish Brabant. Fortunately, one of his teachers had already introduced the young Baeyens to the world of dance when he invited Leuven

choreographer Karlon Fonteyn into the classroom for a special project.

“At first, I was only interested in it because it got you out of class,” he says, “but I soon discovered a language in which I could express myself.”

The episode helped Baeyens realise that traditional hierarchical student-teacher relationships weren't for him. “Up to this day, I believe that there is something very precious in the frankness of children and that we can learn something from them.”

## A constant struggle

Aside from a couple of workshops he took with star choreographer Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui and Ultima Vez, Baeyens never followed formal dance classes. He developed his skills on the job, and looking to professionals and non-professionals has been a through line in his career. “I'm an autodidact, and I consider that my biggest strength. It forces me to keep things open – to trust my gut feeling rather than the technical background I lack.”

It's a constant struggle between keeping doors open and providing structure

- Seppe Baeyens

Baeyens recognises the same uninterrupted mind-set in children and non-professional dancers. “Their spontaneity and energy makes up for any formal dance education,” he says. “Just like I was introduced to dance accidentally, I want to engage people who are not familiar with it. Look at Leon and how he developed. He would have never auditioned; it was only by being in a performance that he acquired a taste for it.”

One of the biggest challenges for the choreographer has been to keep this spontaneity going throughout the creation process. “I need all the differences that are within my cast, all their typical characteristics,” he says. “But now that the premiere is nearing, especially the younger kids are getting a bit more nervous, and it's a constant struggle between keeping doors open and providing a structure they can hold on to. It's always a risk, but I like to jump.”

17-18 April at [BRONKS](#), Varkensmarkt 15-17, Brussels

Photo by Danny Willems

## More performance this month

### Last Call

#### Braakland/ZheBilding HETPALEIS

First, there was *Dansen Drinken Betalen* (Dancing Drinking Paying), a play about a young girl wandering through the city streets directed by Adriaan Van Aken from the Leuven theatre company [Braakland/ZheBilding](#). Then there was *Dansen Drinken Betalen – (Almost) The Movie*, the adaptation of the same story into a graphic novel by Antwerp artist Philip Paquet. Projected on to a big screen with live music and storytelling, these performances are the last leg of this fine collaboration. And there's an English-language version, dubbed *Last Call*. 28 April (in English), 29 April to 3 May (in Dutch) at OPEK, Vaartkom 4, Leuven

**WIN TICKETS TO LAST CALL! To win a pair of tickets to see the English-language *Last Call* on 28 April in Leuven, send an email by 19 April to [editorial@flanderstoday.eu](mailto:editorial@flanderstoday.eu) with "Last Call" in the subject line. Winners will be notified the next day**

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#### Tristero & Transquinquennial

In this [collaborative effort](#) between Brussels theatre companies Tristero and Transquinquennial, questions are raised about the battlefield at micro and macro levels, and this without temporal or spatial limitations. The urge to always be strongest, to overcome, to write and rewrite history for