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The performance *Oerknal Variaties* is not a theatrical lecture but a mix of fact and fantasy

When you tell about something, you often understand it better – and so Jan van den Berg is presenting a show with theories and stories about the beginning of everything.

By Martijn van Calmthout, 27 February 2018

Nothing would exist without having begun at one point, and theatremaker Jan van den Berg's new production, *Oerknal Variaties*, began in the summer of 2009 with two interviews he read in the paper. One was about the Bible, the other about cosmology.

One interviewee was the Nijmegen theologian Ellen van Wolde, who had retranslated – and improved, she believed – the first sentence of the Book of Genesis, so that it now read that something already existed before the first moment. God did not create heaven and earth; he separated them from what was already there. The other was the Amsterdam theoretical physicist Erik Verlinde, who in light of his new theory of gravity gave little credence to the Big Bang – which most cosmologists, after all, accept without further ado. 'Since then', says Van den Berg on the eve of the premiere, 'I've been obsessed with thinking about beginnings.'

Theatre duet

In *Oerknal Variaties*, a theatre duet with improvising guitarist and soundscape artist Jacq Palinckx, Van den Berg investigates what science has to say about beginnings, loosely intertwining the story of his own birth with the theories of historical figures like George Lemaître, the Belgian priest who was the first to deduce from Einstein's equations the beginning of the universe (in which some saw the hand of God, but not he). And Darwin's warm pool full of beginning life. The Miller-Urey experiment with primeval soup and lightning, giving rise to the building blocks of life. Genesis.

He very nearly wouldn't have been here at all, says Van den Berg about himself, standing on a rolled-out length of paper. If his father had waited, as the doctor's wife advised, after the waters broke

prematurely. If his father hadn't raced to borrow his father's car, further along in Veldhoven, and driven his mother to the hospital. If. On the other hand, Van den Berg adds, his premature birth isn't all that surprising. 'I still can't wait to be here, there and everywhere.'

Creation story in itself

Van den Berg has made other scientific productions with Theater Adhoc, including one about the discovery of the Higgs particle. While preparing for that show, he became friends with its elderly namesake, Peter Higgs, in Edinburgh. Sitting in the front row tonight in Frascati is Erik Verlinde, the controversial theoretical physicist that Van den Berg interviewed for this production. Verlinde's personal Big Bang, the moment he came up with his theory, is a creation story in itself: his car keys and laptop were stolen while he was vacationing in southern France, which finally give him time to sit down with pen and paper and think.

Verlinde sees himself reflected on stage in the person of Jan van den Berg, who expresses his scepticism about the Big Bang. Just as life on earth may have arisen from an increasingly interconnected swarming of molecules, time and space could also have cropped up spontaneously. And although that may seem exactly like the Big Bang, it's more a question of perspective. The Big Bang may be a good story, but it's not the best of what there is to say about the universe. 'Verlinde literally talks about finding a new story, with new words, which I think is remarkable', says Van den Berg. 'Although I do admit that it gets complicated very quickly, and I say this to the audience during the show: it's difficult to clearly explain in words.'

Like his previous work, *Oerknal Variaties* is a lyrical hybrid of documentary and imagination. Understandably enough, his shows are often announced as theatrical lectures. But of course he is not a scientist, acknowledges Van den Berg. 'Strictly speaking, I'm just a curious, almost journalistic, storyteller. A little in the tradition of Herodotus, who five centuries before Christ told about his travel experiences in theatre first and only wrote them down later. Because often when you tell about something, you understand it better.'

Live Big Bangs

Sharing the stage with actor and author Jan van den Berg in *Oerknal Variaties* is the musician, composer and soundscape artist Jacq Palinckx (b. 1959, Tilburg). Surrounded by guitars, distorters, effect pedals and loopers, he produces an impressive arsenal of sounds ranging from acoustic guitar accompaniment to a massive racket. Occasionally he says a few words. Palinckx also works as a visual artist and plays in various music ensembles.

(Translation Jane Bemont | Elegant English)