PREY is a new music theatre production by Kris Verdonck / A Two Dogs Company, in co-production with Muziektheater Transparant and in collaboration with ICTUS Ensemble.

“We are food” (Val Plumwood)

### **A new humility**

How can we change the way we view being human from a radical ecological perspective? What stories help us to better understand the disruptions caused by the climate crisis? These questions are at the heart of PREY. And perhaps our own mortality and vulnerability provide a good starting point for the search for an answer.

PREY will consist of three solos by three generations of women. Each has its own focus: text/language, song/music and dance/performance. With every solo, the tension between the human and the landscape, performer and scenography, becomes more intense and intimate. The essence of PREY is finding solace in the frightening fact that we too are food, that we too belong to an ecological cycle of life and death.

Kris Verdonck has gathered an extraordinary group of people around him for this performance: composer Annelies Van Parys, the ICTUS Ensemble, actress Katelijne Damen, singer Anna Clare Hauf and dancer Mooni Van Tichel. Verdonck is responsible for the scenography, a multimedia landscape in which the performers increasingly disappear and are swallowed up.

The premiere is scheduled for March 2023 at the Kaaitheater as part of the Klara Festival in Brussels.

-----------------------------------------------

### **Body and Mind**

It continues to be puzzling how we in the West just can't seem to stop our ecological destructiveness. Even though we know what is being lost and what we need to do about it, we seem to be incapable to act accordingly. This irrational behavior has to have a deep cultural cause.

The alienation of humankind from its environment runs parallel to the alienation of humankind from its own body. We already don't know how we are doing - we use apps and trackers to do that - let alone how our planet is doing. The roots of our ecological maladjustment thus lie in the age-old separation between body and mind. Our body, our flesh and blood, is the most natural thing we have and so it can be a bridge to the wider world. The split between subject and object lies not only between man and thing, animal or nature, but especially in ourselves: between mind and body.

That same body ages, weakens, becomes ill and dies. This is perhaps one of the reasons why we often prefer to ignore it: it confronts us with our finiteness and death. When we are buried it is left to the worms, and our flesh becomes their food. Even when alive, our blood is food for mosquitoes and ticks, and bacterial feasts take place on and in our bodies. The fact that we will die precisely places us in an ecological system. No life without death. The question then, in a culture that has so repressed both the body and death, is how intense the encounter with one's own mortality has to be for that to sink in. Do we have to experience it in person or is there another option, through stories and performance?

### **Val Plumwood**

The starting point for this performance was the life and work of Australian ecofeminist Val Plumwood (1938-2008). In 1985, while on a canoe trip in Kakadu National Park, in Northern Australia, Plumwood was attacked by a crocodile. It bit and dragged her underwater, three times. Plumwood survived this deadly attack, and this event would fundamentally change her view of life, death, and humans. She had already been a key figure in the development of a radical eco-philosophy since the 1970s, and with the crocodile's attack came a focus on the fragility of human beings and a search for humility and connection. Plumwood was an " eco-thinker " avant la lettre, an important and yet often unheard reference for contemporary writers like Donna Haraway.

PREY starts from this unimaginable crocodile story and builds on two core ideas from Plumwood's oeuvre. First, there is the statement, ''We are food.'' Her encounter with the crocodile was a clear reminder that humans are a species that is also part of the food chain. Indeed, it is the dynamic of eating and being eaten that can reconnect us Westerners to our environment. Ecology, for her, is one big feast, to live is to be prey: a powerful antidote to fantasies of immortality and exclusivity.

For Plumwood, the idea of an immortal human who is free to kill and extract his environment was a consequence of a Western, rational, masculine worldview. In this view, body and mind, nature and culture are separated. Her feminism consisted mainly of a search for other narratives to connect people with their environment, and a plea for embodied experience. To be prey, after all, also means to be "body," "flesh." This is the second idea that PREY is inspired by: the bankruptcy of the classical Western narrative as a meaningful way to relate to the world. Plumwood found alternatives in the stories of Aboriginal people, but at the same time she did not deny that as a white intellectual she was always just a visitor in their world.

In PREY we see a friction between figures who cannot help but consider themselves the center, and an environment that drives them away from that center. It is the paradox of the geological age of the Anthropocene, and perhaps this is where the performance will find its tragedy. The characters on stage, like Plumwood during the life-and-death struggle with the crocodile, have gone down the rabbit hole like some kind of 'Alice in wonderland' and there they have glimpsed a different vision. Since then they continue to look for other ways to access that other universe, for ways to be prey and thus be connected to their environment. PREY is an attempt to give form to a traumatic event in which comfort and horror converge.

### **Noh-Theater**

Following Plumwood's plea for an alternative to the classical narrative, PREY draws on Japanese traditional Noh theater. In Noh, the main character is usually the ghost of someone - or something - who died a traumatic death. These ghost stories are always intertwined with the landscapes in which they take place. It is as if the landscapes "contain" these stories, evoke them.

A Noh piece usually has three parts. The story does not proceed in a linear fashion but is repeated three times. First it is told with more distance, then it is retold from the perspective of a witness, and finally it is brought again, but as in a dream. Each repetition is more intimate, more intense and the structure leads to a surreal finale, as in a hallucination: a possible entrance into another reality.

### **Three solos - three generations**

PREY, like a Noh piece, also consists of three movements. Each part is conceived as a solo for an actress, singer and dancer, respectively. Three generations of women take the stage, telling something about how ecology is also about passing from generation to generation. The first solo focuses on text and narrative and is played by **Katelijne Damen**, an actress with a long career in which she developed a precise and intriguing use of voice. In the second solo, a singer **Anna Clare Hauf** combines a low operatic voice with a rawer use of voice in a hard clash between harmony and more industrial vocals. Dancer and choreographer **Mooni Van Tichel** just graduated from P.A.R.T.S. and she will co-create and perform the third solo: a translation in dance of the fragility and violence in Plumwood's work.

**Kris Verdonck** creates the scenography for these solos. For this he continues in the same vein as for END, Conversations (at the end of the world) and Something (out of nothing), creating impressive stage environments with machines, projections and performative objects. For PREY, Verdonck is creating a multimedia tree landscape made up of textiles and projections. In this forest, the performers disappear into nothingness. Throughout the performance this landscape transforms to become increasingly focused on the base of a single tree. Gradually, the performers merge into their surroundings: from a small person in a large environment, to an interwovenness with a larger whole.

For PREY, **Annelies Van Parys** is writing a new composition for the renowned**ICTUS Ensemble**. Noh's three-part model, in which a different perspective is taken on the same theme three times, is gefundenes Fressen for her spectral music. The sound can be approached three times in completely different ways. It will become a game of recognition and alienation in relation to the Eastern canon. Such a dialogue with a specific canon is characteristic of Van Parys' oeuvre, but for this project she really wants to immerse herself in the genre. She composes for an unusual line-up: electric guitar (Tom Pauwels), flute (Michael Schmidt), percussion (Gerrit Nulens) and viola (Aurélie Entringer).

Kris Verdonck and Kristof van Baarle will compose the text, starting from Plumwood's oeuvre. It is not the intention to write a biography, but to find a theatrical form for her stories.

### **Consolation**

With PREY, Kris Verdonck continues his trajectory concerning a world in which humans are disappearing into the background. As the ecology debate these days demonstrates, this does not happen without a struggle. Denial or solutions that make use of even more technology - the same ones that got us into this mess - do not bode well. But even for the growing group of people who do want to change something, the process of repositioning is accompanied by existential questions, farewells and mourning. On the way to a renewed connection with our mortality, consolation is an important need. We will go onwards in a different mode of humanity, or not at all (Val Plumwood – The Eye of the Crocodile).