

Berg, Margijn Bosch, Peter Kolpa and Ingejan Ligthart Schenk) meet in fleeting solidarity: fleeting, because it's a drunkards gang. But with their powerful, uncontrived performances they also turn Checkovs characters into moving contemporaries of ourselves.

Special about the opening night was that the weather exactly corresponded with what Checkov had visualized: 'God sends us a thunderstorm. The wind howls and the rain just keeps pouring down.' But I heard that the show also works very well under blue skies.

the whole stage, the entire hall, by himself. Earlier this season he was Hamlet with De Trust, now he performs this tiny role. And always there is the magic, the excitement of the moment you suddenly realize you're watching something unique.

Checkov by 't Barre Land cuts sharp as a knife, in all weathers  
By Hans Oranje, Trouw, June 13th, 1998

The small theatre company 't Barre Land has been knocking at the door for some years now. This year they are really pounding: no less than two of their productions have been selected for the annual Dutch-Flemish Theatre Festival, coming September, and in this month's Holland Festival they have been invited to perform 'Along the Highway' by Anton Checkov.

Of course one worries whether such a young theatre collective will not be spoilt by all this praise, but that's for later. The show is, in any case, an asset to the current season.

In the first place, because 'Along the Highway' is a virtually unknown piece by the great Russian. It is something in between a one-acter and a dramatical sketch: during five short acts, or rather 'stations', we find ourselves amongst pilgrims and vagabonds in a tavern along the great road. A dreary waterhole, where the travelers try to get some sleep on the wooden benches, but they have to do so sitting up, because the place is overcrowded. Vodka is everywhere, but most of the tramps don't have five kopeks to spare for buying a drink.

You might call the five short acts 'stations', because they are coagulated moments in lives that seem to appear out of nowhere and are going to vanish into thin air. In this sense 'Along the Highway' is true Checkov, and his later great plays are dramaturgical enlargements and deepenings of his method in this play from 1884.

't Barre Land's strength is to convey this dramaturgy sharply, as an image, to the spectator. That's why the audience is involved in the action: the seats are scattered little groups of pubchairs with small tables in between, that are stacked with bottles of vodka and glasses. During the play we are the nameless pilgrims, cattle drivers and travelers in the tavern; in between acts the actors scurry in between us to fill up the glasses. That has a nice double bottom: one sip of this ugly plonk makes you realize that the countless glasses emptied at the long table on stage, unlike ours, must have been watered down endlessly. Otherwise, Jacob Derwig, performing as the tireless talker Koezma, wouldn't be able to get up from the floor, after having collapsed stone-drunk.

Having actors and audience share water and wine, apples and nuts, or vodka, as in this case, is of course a ritual form of 'communion', but above all it is theatre, baring the naked core of landowner Bortsov's destroyed life and searching for hope. Martijn Nieuwerf as the innkeeper Tichon and his guests (Vincent van den

Happiness always hides behind your back,  
by Hein Janssen, Volkskrant June 13th, 1998

“When the curtain opens thunder sounds and through the open door one can see a bolt of lightning”, Checkov wrote in his one-act play. Nature was on 't Barre Land's side this Thursday, the opening night of this play. Thunder sounded, lightning flashed and the torrent that flooded Amsterdam, fitted perfectly with the atmosphere of this small but special night of theatre in the Holland Festival. As a counterpart to the two large German-language Checkov-productions, festival director Ivo van Hove asked 't Barre Land to stage this youth play by Checkov. Well, play might be a grand word for this first attempt at the art of writing a theatreplay.

In the tavern where the action takes place all kinds of characters appear that are interchangeable. There is no sign yet of a dramatical line or psychological depth; what does show is an almost melancholy view on life, as fits a romantic youngster.

In Along the Highway Checkov portrays a group of vagabonds and winos that run into each other in the tavern,. Outside it's dark and a heavy rain falls, inside they are cursing life, women and each other. But the vodka is cold and that's how these fatherless individuals try to find warmth in the booze and with each other. Checkov's father owned a small shop where he sold vodka under the counter to passers-by who could exchange stories from their dull life in the meantime. Young Anton must have listened well, and it didn't provide him with a very bright view on humanity. The men in this farce are all losers. One of them was left by his wife on his weddingday. The medallion with the portrait he sells for a last glass of vodka.

”Happiness always hides behind your back, you never get to see it.” That little sentence, almost casually spoken by one of the characters, is in all its simplicity the overture to all those later plays. The constant attempt to look behind your back and catch a glimpse of that happiness, that's the essence of Checkov and the tragedy of life.

't Barre Land performs Along the Highway in an almost empty space with only one eye-catcher: a long table full of bottles of vodka and glasses. Amongst the audience too, there are small tables with generous amounts of vodka that are actually served in between acts. The play is performed by the light of day, until darkness makes it necessary to turn on the stagelights. In this Discordian (i.e. another Dutch theatre group, maatschappij discordia) atmosphere the actors of 't Barre Land do what they do best: to play with irrepressible pleasure.

The collective is the main character in a style of acting that seems to be happy-go-lucky but actually betrays great technical ability. Only when Jacob Derwig enters the scene as an accidental passer-by, does the collective fall apart, for a minute. Not because of the group, no, because of the boundless talent of Derwig himself. Whenever that kid shows up where some acting has to be done, he fills