



A long **Director/choreographer John Yost** musical road

They've starred in 44 bestsellers. They appeared for 45 years in comic strips around the world. And they have a six-metre-tall monument dedicated to them in Rotterdam. With that kind of fame, who needs the footlights? In this case, Olivier B. Bommel and Tom Poes do. So when the legendary Dutch cartoonist Marten Toonder decided to bring his beloved characters to life, where did he turn? Well, to an American, of course.

He didn't actually seek out an American. Together with Dutch theatre company Opus One, Toonder decided it was time to bring his characters, who were ubiquitous in everyday Dutch life, to the stage. He'd seen Opus One's production of *Peter Pan*, complete with little creatures similar to some of Toonder's own creations. The director of that production? John Yost, a New Yorker who, unlike the entire Dutch population, had not grown up with Tom Poes and his cartoon friends.

'I think not knowing the history made it easier,' recalls Yost about working on the 1998 premiere of *de Trullenhoedster*, the Toonder story that eventually made it to the stage. 'I didn't have any preconceived notions about the characters. I read it



fresh and had immediate responses to it. Then I would go into discussions with Marten Toonder and learn the rest of the story. He was very patient with me.'

Like when Yost insisted that Bommel be able to sing and dance, when every Dutch person knows the bumbling bear can't do anything right. 'It's the conceit of the musical that everybody has to sing and dance.'

'I'm a good listener. I listened to everything Marten said about his characters,' explains Yost. The compromise was a comical automobile straight out of the funny pages and a less lyrical speaking voice, not quite a singing bear.

Toonder, who passed away last summer, had a reputation for being a very difficult man, but not towards Yost. 'I heard that it

was because I didn't deify him: I didn't take his book as holy. He was generous, gracious and very honest with his responses.'

The resulting musical, which was revived this spring and continues into the summer, is an entertaining mix of sharp dancing, comic acting and Dutch culture – all with the supernatural twist common to Toonder's tales. True to the cultural iconography, yet produced through fresh eyes and ears.

A fresh look at an old favourite is one thing; a fresh language in which to work is another. Yost has been working in the Netherlands, on and off, for almost 20 years, but like most of the international community here, he struggled with the language at first.

'I'm a very visual person and I can learn to read a language very quickly,' says Yost. 'But I have to be forced to speak it.'

'I resisted learning Dutch for a very long time. When I first started working here with *CATS* in 1987, the producer would make slightly nasty remarks when I'd try to speak Dutch,' he laughs and adds, 'because it came out German, which was then my working language. So I just refused to say anything.'

Even though he'd been involved with the production of *CATS* – everything from dancing to directing – in Vienna, Paris and Zurich, he had to have a word-for-word, literal translation of the Dutch show, in English, in order to be able to work on it.

'I knew the show, but Gillian Lynne's choreography is based very much on the words and what's being said at the time. And in translations, the words are not always in the right place or expressed in the same way. So if you have a gesture to the moon,' Yost lifts his arms to demonstrate, 'but you're no longer talking about the moon, it can become either abstract or it loses its immediacy. So you have to know when the words fall and what they're actually saying at the time.'

Even now, with a fluency in Dutch (to accompany his German and French language skills) Yost hasn't completely weaned himself off of his native English. Nor does he want to.

'I just find it tiring when I'm speaking Dutch all day long, especially when I'm rehearsing. I'm actually creating in my head in English, even if I'm not using words,' he explains. 'And then before I've actually thought it through, I'm explaining it in a foreign language. I find that difficult. After it's all set and I'm just explaining what I've already done, then I'm fine. But when it's forming, that basic act of creation stays in English.'

Strangely enough, language played a role, however minor, in Yost's start in theatre – dancing. A Biology major at City College in New York, he'd always had an interest in theatre. 'I had fallen in love with theatre when I was 14 in a radio dramatics class, where I was much too shy and had a slight stutter. In my third year of university I dared myself to take a beginning acting course. I absolutely loved it.'

That new passion (along with adventurous friends and an uncertain lottery number in the Vietnam draft) led Yost to enter Tufts University's theatre courses in London. 'In London I used everything available. I went to community theatres; I took lighting classes; I had a private coach in mime – and I started dancing. It was a whole new world and I just loved it.'

That's where the 'language thing' first came in. 'Dance gave me an "in" because when I moved to London I had this horrible Brooklyn accent,' he recalls, in a voice that defies its origins. 'So I just shut my mouth until I was ready to adapt my speech. You don't have to talk when you dance.'

'I could always move well. I had done social dancing since I was seven when my sister taught me to dance in front of the television set, but there was no formal training. I was just very musical.'

But after only 10 months of classes in London, Yost found himself on stage. 'For a long time I was working, but I would never call myself a dancer because I was always catching up.' He cites an American dance icon, Martha Graham. 'She was right. It takes 10 years to make a dancer. No matter how you slice it, you need that work behind you; your muscles need to have that depth of work.'

Next thing he knew, he was in Munich,

tapping in 'No, No, Nanette.' He danced his way around Europe, eventually working his way up through the ranks in such productions as *Kiss Me Kate*, *Jumpers*, *Evita* (London and Broadway original casts) and, of course, *CATS*.

He recalls more of his first days with the Dutch version of *CATS*. 'In 1987, we could not find a cast. We took exceptionally young people who were eager, and we worked for almost four months with them. We didn't just teach them a show, we taught them how to sing, to dance and to walk, some of them.'

But times have changed. 'It's not that there wasn't the talent; it was that they weren't being trained for musicals. Since then, just like what happened in Germany and Austria, there are now schools. A production like *CATS* comes along, where you have to be a triple threat – you have to sing, you have to act, you have to dance. That changed the thrust of teaching.'

It was important for the Netherlands to grow its own crop of performers, according to Yost. 'The Dutch are very strict about how they want to hear their language. The number of foreigners in musicals here is very small.'

He has his theories about why this is so. 'I think it's because of the country being a trading country. Their language is the one thing the Dutch can hold onto that's theirs. When I started speaking Dutch, it was like trying to get into a club. You have to have a certain speed in speaking or they'll slip into English. You've really got to hold your own in Dutch.'

This is where Yost's dancer's discipline paid off. 'During the first job I had here doing my own work, when I choreographed *You're The Top*, my understanding of Dutch was very good, but I could not speak it fast enough or well enough. So I asked the cast, "Please do not translate for me. Speak in Dutch. Even if I answer in English, if I don't know what's going on I will ask." That put me in an environment where I was surrounded by Dutch. And because they were actors and spoke so well – not like my neighbours from the Jordaan – I started to hear the language and hear the words in a pure way. That helped me. That was one of those really crucial experiences.'

'I'm lucky that my language skills grew. I had the language skills for the jobs as I needed them.'

Since coming to Amsterdam, Yost's list of choreography, directing and adaptation credits has grown continually: *I Got Lyrics*; *Richard Rodgers Songbook*; *You're the Top*; *Joe, De Musical*; *Heerlijk Duurt het Langst, The Sound of Music* and *Annie*.

Wait a minute, 'Do Re Mi' and Porter and Rodgers in Dutch? I interrupt him to explain.

'Actually, the audience here was familiar with a Flemish version of the *Sound of Music*, not the American version. We wrote something about dominos and bits of chocolate in place of *Do Re Mi*. And with the *Songbook*, that production treated the American music as an art form. So the text was in Dutch and the songs were in English. When you go to hear Cole Porter (*You're the Top*), he's known for his lyrics. They stay in English.'



For *Opus One*, Yost has done two theatre concerts and eight family musicals, including the Dutch versions of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Beauty and the Beast*.

'What makes *Opus One* special to me is that I also did the adaptations of the material, so that was really a challenge and a wonderful learning curve,' he explains. 'It's quite different from directing a piece or choreographing. I actually have to go to source material. Sometimes

it means finding a new way in and convincing myself I want to do it. If I can get enthusiastic, I can make other people enthusiastic.'

He invites the international audience to experience Dutch musical theatre. 'I would rather see Shakespeare in English than in Dutch. But musicals are more accessible because of the musical element of it.'

And really experience it: 'Don't just go see the production. Get that programme. Look at those people's names. Find them on the stage. If there are people you love, find their names and see what they've done, see where they've come from. That's the fun part about going to the theatre.'

So, what's the next addition to Yost's credits?

'I've always had to reinvent myself. I'm on my third theatre career. First I was a performer – dancing is the shortest of the performing careers. Then I was a resident director caretaker, where the only creative work involved is making sure someone else's creative work is performed to the best it can be performed. Now I'm doing my own creative work. That's career number three. And that's just passing its first decade mark.'

'When I was young and I was dancing, the physicality was the most important thing. But actually my strongest asset is my brain. My brain allowed me to dance; it was able to rip my body apart. But now I can use every part of my intelligence – my feel for the music, my feel for the literature. All that brainpower, everything that you've lived and experienced, comes to play when you direct. It just makes it such a more complete feeling.' <

John Yost is a director, choreographer and an adaptor of scripts who works with *Opus One Theatre Productions*. A native New Yorker, Yost grew up in Flatbush, before making his way to Amsterdam via London, Paris and Vienna. Open air performances of *Opus One's Ollie B. Bommel en de Trullenhoedster* (in Dutch) can be seen in Bloemendaal, 22 – 24 June, see www.theatercaperera.nl for details. See the entire *Opus One* schedule at www.opusone.nl. Also in June, Yost's production of *West Side Story* (in English) will be performed in Thessaloniki, Greece.