



Kate Holman – 24 avril 2019

Dreams, people and potatoes: Fritland offers a glimpse of Utopia

Everyone knows Fritland: the number one Fritkot next to the Bourse in the centre of Brussels. But *Fritland* the stage play?

Indeed, the eponymous production opening this week at the Theatre de Poche in the Bois de la Cambre is the unexpected account of one man's journey to explore and come to terms with his background, and in doing so realise his ambition to make theatre.

Fritland was – and is – Zenel Laci's family business. For 18 years – from the age of 14 – he worked there 12 hours a day, sometimes 7 days a week. There's nothing he doesn't know about twice-fried chips, fricadelles and sauce andalouse, about the streets of Brussels late at night and the characters who inhabit them. "I have been wanting to write about it for years," says Laci. Three years ago, he set pen to paper. Now, working with director Denis Laujol he has created and performs a one-man show that captures the humour, drama and pathos of those years.

Laci's father arrived in Belgium in 1963, after fleeing from Albania and living with his family in refugee camps for a decade. He dreamed of America and discouraged his five children from integrating into Belgian society. But instead of crossing the Atlantic, the Laci's father stayed, and ironically established the very symbol of Belgian life, Fritland. The whole extended family was pressed into service, working backbreaking hours to win the security their father coveted.

The play started as "a sort of patchwork", says Laci. But for nearly two years, he and Laujol have worked to select the most interesting anecdotes and create a narrative. It is above all about emancipation. Laci's love of literature and theatre brought him into direct conflict with his family's traditional values, until he finally broke away to take up drama studies. The harsh disapproval of his father meant that he too experienced a form of exile.

"*Fritland* is about becoming an adult," explains Laujol. "Zenel and I are both great dreamers. But there comes a time when you have to act. It's not easy to become an artist."

Not easy indeed for Laci – who never expected to be a performer. But when the Director of the Theatre de Poche saw and liked his script, he imposed just one condition: that Laci should play himself. With a successful career as director already behind him, this will be Laci's first time in front of an audience: a place where he feels "uncomfortable".

Fritland articulates the pleasure in storytelling. Says Laujol: "We play a lot with the expectations of the audience. It's a story about emigration, so there's something tragic, but there is also a lot of humour." The material to draw on was plentiful. Staying open sometimes until 5am, Fritland became a haven for those with nowhere else to go. Laci recalls Joseph *le clochard* (the vagrant), the *drôle d'homme* with his little bonnet who showed up at Fritland at dawn one morning and found Laci behind the counter reading a book.

"He thought that was unusual," admits Laci, who soon discovered that although Joseph lived on the streets, he was a former French teacher. Together they discussed Laci's writing and Joseph edited his texts. "He encouraged me, and was the first person, apart from my sister, who really showed me what literature was about – that it has power."

I wanted to know which writer most influenced Laci. "Dostoyevsky" he replies without hesitation. "He's a genius. He goes to the truth and has something for say at all stages of life. He tackles universal themes." He cites a phrase from *The Brothers Karamazov* which had a profound impact on him: "Every human being has at some time wanted the death of his father". In Dostoyevsky, Laci found insights into his own personal family conflict. Yet despite the bitter struggle between generations, *Fritland* is still a homage to his father, who is "omnipresent" in the text, says Laci. Working with Laujol, he became more aware of how the older man struggled to build his own destiny.

A few years ago, Laci set up his own Fritland Theatre Company, and it was then he decided the story had to be told. More than just a chip shop, the staging recreates a space that stirs the imagination of the audience to soar beyond steaming trays of golden *frites*. "Fritland is what? It's a fritkot, it's people, it's potatoes, it's Belgium. Everything is there," concludes Laci. For at the same time it is a kind of Utopia, an imaginary country: Fritland – Neverland, the culmination of his late father's dreams of America.

The play promises to be a discovery for the audience, with some little surprises added in to recreate the Fritkot atmosphere. It can be seen at the [Theatre de Poche](#) until 18 May.