“Watching the news often makes you feel powerless. But every action counts”

**The previous productions, 'Handle with Care' and 'Thanks for Being Here', were warm-hearted tributes to the audience, the true heroes of the theatre where so much is possible. In '**[**SUMMIT**](https://www.ntgent.be/en/productions/summit)**', perhaps the most political production in its rich oeuvre, Ontroerend Goed turns its gaze resolutely towards the outside world. Where the world is suffering from one crisis after another, and powerlessness threatens to overwhelm the human collective.**

*--- interview by Jonas Mayeur*

*Three weeks before the premiere, your most important scenery, the vintage theatre seats on the stage, are up for discussion, I noticed just now during the rehearsal. That takes courage!*

Charlotte De Bruyne: “Three weeks before the premiere, there’s really still time to do anything. Or not to. I think it’s a really fun time. You can still take the production in a different direction, although it is the *last window of opportunity*.”

Alexander Devriendt: “Courage is vintage Ontroerend Goed. We know what we want to say, but we still always question whether it is coming across to the audience. We held try-outs this week and talked to the audience afterwards. Everybody was welcome. I don’t know many theatre makers who do things this way. Sometimes I wonder whether it’s really a good idea. But it’s in our blood: we don’t want to make anything that feels right to us but doesn’t resonate with the audience.”

*'SUMMIT' is far more outward-looking than your previous productions, 'Thanks for Being Here' (2024) and 'Handle with Care' (2025). Why that switch?*

Charlotte: “It doesn’t feel like a switch to us, but like a logical progression. Productions communicate with each other. After the pandemic, we felt the need to create connection: between ourselves and the audience, and between the members of the audience. Clearly, the world was already on fire in 2024, but we wanted to revel in the warm, alternative universe that the theatre can be. Far more reality has seeped into 'SUMMIT'. This time, we’ve allowed emotions like fear into the rehearsal room.”

Alexander: “The world is in a polycrisis. It seems to be worse than ever before, and maybe it really is. It’s all incredibly overwhelming. If you watch the news, it doesn’t take any effort at all to feel completely powerless. That powerlessness was our starting point."

“The original idea of 'SUMMIT' was to allow the audience to participate in a meeting at the highest level of diplomacy. We wanted to start with the question: What would you do differently if you were part of the conversation in Davos or at the UN? In order to move from powerlessness to power. But that soon started to feel like a bit of a con, something utopian. As a citizen, you don’t have the slightest influence on what is decided in Davos.

“'Fight Night' was a production we did in 2014 to get people to feel the power they have as voters. We’d never be able to make that play now. We live in a completely different world. Democracy was still pretty clear back then, Obama was in power in the US, and there was still decency in politics. All that has gone now. The world has become so much more complex.”

*All the same, 'SUMMIT' is anything but a nihilistic play. In fact, it feels like a call for resistance. So, where is the power of ‘ordinary’ citizens?*

Alexander: “Ultimately, you conclude that it’s the power of many small things. The power of citizens is in everything they do, in every act of beauty or connection. In sharing beauty with the world, even in putting your phone aside. If you do that, you see nothing but beautiful things.”

*Isn’t it naive to look away from all the horror and collapse?*

Alexander: “It’s not black and white. It’s not about either living in total denial or letting everything hit you so hard you can no longer move. I’m not saying that nothing bad is happening, but you do have at least two realities. And they need to co-exist. That’s also a battle worth fighting.

“As an artist, you tend to build distance into your subject matter. You need to do that to say something relevant. You can take a similar perspective as a citizen. Try to look at all these disasters a little differently, so you find little moments where you can breathe, where there’s fresh air, where you’re not paralysed: moments where you feel that there’s still space to think differently and take action.”

Charlotte: “The little moments are what make resistance possible.”

Alexander: “We call them ‘pockets of oxygen’, or ‘pockets of resistance’. Art is one such bubble. We don’t come to the theatre to forget the world completely; on the contrary, we come so that we can breathe in it for a while. Together.”

Charlotte: “People sometimes say that those who draw sustenance from art, or work in the arts, are too stuck in their own little bubble. And apparently, there are inherent feelings of guilt linked to that. But what is so negative about being intensely present in the place where you are? Especially if it makes so much possible.”

*Do you personally believe that the world is fucked?*

Alexander: “Yes. And no. You have to believe that to motivate yourself to take action, but if you *really*believe it, there’s no hope left at all.

“Something that is both true and not true at the same time is obviously the perfect playing field for a theatre company. In the theatre, no one *really*believes what is happening on stage, but it does have a real impact.”

*The great thing is that you really leave it up to the audience whether they want to step into your imagination or not. There are no smoke machines in 'SUMMIT', there’s no complex light show, the costumes are plain...*

Alexander: “The best way to show the power of the theatre is to pare it down to its essence. You don’t need much at all to spark a lot of imagination.”

Charlotte: “Alexander says at every rehearsal that we do need a smoke machine. It never turns up, though.”

Alexander: “Low-tech is what I said to the technicians, and I meant it. That gives viewers the chance to experience the fact that, to a great extent, they are making the play themselves.”

Charlotte: “The play begins with one actor and one word. It’s a reminder of how theatre works: simple but powerful. I find great comfort in that, starting at the beginning. Although stating the obvious is also really funny. As an actor, you can put a lot of tension into it.”

*You sense in the play that it’s not just the world that’s under pressure. It’s the theatre itself as well.*

Alexander: “Yes, that’s true. Here in Ghent as well, where the new city council is making big cuts in culture. I sense that people feel a strange sort of resignation about that. It’s the umpteenth round of cost-cutting, we know that, but we also feel it isn’t all that bad. It could have been worse, we think. We realise everyone has to do their bit, etcetera. But sometimes you don’t sense that something is in danger until it’s too late.”

*Is the theatre also threatened because the audience has become oversensitive? ‘Trigger warnings’ to alert viewers to potentially shocking scenes or images are becoming more and more important, to the dismay of some theatre makers.*

Alexander: “The times have changed, and the great thing about the theatre is that it moves with the times. Theatre is very close to the pulse of society. Ontroerend Goed has been known as a provocative group for a long time, but in the British journal *The Stage*, we were recently mentioned as an example of how to care for your audience. Does that make us oversensitive? I don’t think so. We pay more attention to the diversity of our audience.

“Incidentally, *trigger warnings* are important, but they don’t relieve creators of their responsibility towards the audience. It’s not that simple. You can’t use it as an excuse to do absolutely anything on stage.”

Charlotte: “Some of the responsibility lies with the maker, but some with the spectator as well. As an audience, what do you go to see? What don’t you go to see? To what extent are you responsible for your own emotions? Whose fault is it if you get offended? That’s an interesting debate.”

*Where do you think Ontroerend Goed will be in five years?*

Charlotte: “As an artist, you can never really answer that question. The core of an artistic practice is precisely that you think about how something feels *now* and turn that into art. So you’re actually asking us how we’re going to feel five years from now. Although the world is changing faster than ever.”

Alexander: “If Kamala Harris had been elected instead of Trump in 2024, we’d be living in a completely different world now. And it all came down to 50,000 votes in a couple of states. Which all goes to show: every action matters.”