

# Grace Ellen Barkey & Needcompany

## The Porcelain Project



Benoît Gob, Maarten Seghers © Needcompany

A Needcompany production

Coproduction: Théâtre Le Quai (Angers),

La Rose des Vents (Scène Nationale de Villeneuve d'Ascq),

PACT Zollverein (Essen), Kaaitheater (Brussel).

With the support of the Flemish authorities.

## THE PORCELAIN PROJECT

By Frederik Le Roy

Watching a performance by Grace Ellen Barkey is like entering an unfamiliar world that derives its coherence only from itself and not from any preset narrative line. The only logic that applies in this fantasy is a poetic one and although various elements (bodies and limbs, contours and lines, images and objects) are reminiscent of a world we know, they are here reconstituted in accordance with playful but barely fathomable associations.

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Porcelain objects and installations made of porcelain occupy a crucial position in the stage setting. Away from the stage, these installations and sculptures, made by Lot Lemm, lead an independent life as art objects. However, none of the objects would be what it is without its interaction with performers and audience. Whereas Grace Ellen Barkey's previous production, *Chunking* (2005), was still exploring the boundaries between theatre, performance and art, in *The Porcelain Project* these boundaries have become completely porous. The common denominator that makes this possible and connects each of these elements together on stage is their *visual intensity*.

However, we should not conclude from the use of installations that this performance has closed the door on theatre and dance and can be put under the heading of 'visual art'. After all, the theatrical conditions are retained. The spectator is still sitting in his familiar place, riveted to his theatre seat with no physical movement. In fact in *The Porcelain Project* it is rather that the spatial mechanism of installation art is turned inside out: the performers manipulate the installations (and vice versa) and thus play a spatial game in which the spectator appears to be the only fixed point. It is no coincidence that a recurring element in Grace Ellen Barkey's pieces is the puppet theatre. Not only is the puppet theatre the most uninhibited and magical form of theatre, but it also exposes the whole fundamental relationship between spectator and stage. In *The Porcelain Project*, where the entire stage seems to have been built like a puppet theatre, this theatrical device is retained and even emphasised (e.g. by the row of small porcelain columns that lines the stage). Although this marks off the distance between the audience and the stage, it also implies an invitation to bridge this distance in space by means of the imagination. This means *The Porcelain Project* is not so much visual art, but the art of the evocative, or perhaps even more appropriately, the art of the imagination. Grace Ellen Barkey makes a theatre of images or an image of theatre.

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There is the porcelain. There is the amalgam of often paradoxical meanings evoked by this material. The porcelain evokes images of affection and intimacy. The Sunday crockery that is only used to mark an important

occasion. Out of the cupboard, on the table and everyone sitting around it: the porcelain indicates that this moment together is a memorable one. When two dancers (Julien Faure and Tijen Lawton), entangled in a duet, manipulate the cups by means of their movements, the up and down movements act as a seismograph of their intimacy. This is porcelain on a human scale, but porcelain can equally evoke a world where power and intrigue, ostentation and the craving for domination hold the reins. The porcelain figurines we now associate with the pleasures of the petty bourgeois living room stem from the table decorations of kings, emperors and admirals. Until the Western world was able to uncover the secret of porcelain, it was a colonial commodity much sought after by European rulers.

But it is too tempting only to *interpret* the porcelain and to let the symbolic connotations inevitably linked to it descend onto the stage, in the material form of the dramaturgy, the movements and the bodies. The dancers are not *like* porcelain, but are an extension of it. In fact the porcelain grafts itself onto their bodies: the dancers wear odd, non-functional and extremely fragile prostheses that impose the characteristic properties of the material on their bodies. The bodies tinkle and shine like mother of pearl, are extremely fragile and yet made of stone. The choreography also takes its lead from the porcelain because, whenever the dancers interact with it, each movement has to be geared to a clear but often invisible parameter: the breaking point of the porcelain object. It requires a precise and precious dance idiom. The awareness of the constant risk of transgressing this physical boundary, and the confrontation with the material nature of the porcelain takes the audience beyond the symbolic interpretation to a tactile perception that elicits a sensory experience rather than a reasoned view.

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*The Porcelain Project* reflects the sensuality to be found in the etymology of the word 'porcelain'. Porcelain is named after a shell called '*porcella*' in Italian and which is as smooth and shiny as the lustrous material to which it gives its name. However, with its thin sides curling in towards each other, forming a cleft with serrated edges, the shape of the *porcella* shell leaves little to the imagination. In iconography, and also in the popular imagination, the *porcella* is a symbol of female voluptuousness. Although we are quick to associate porcelain with purity, its name links it to sensuality – an aspect that is reflected candidly in *The Porcelain Project*. The erotic tension of dancing bodies on a stage is an unmistakable component of Grace Ellen Barkey's work, and in this piece, just as in *Chunking*, its darker sides are also acknowledged. In the deconstructed stage setting of the closing scene, the paradoxical associations of porcelain culminate in the tension between lust and aggression, the magical and the nightmare.

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The music gives structure to the dramaturgy of *The Porcelain Project*. The contemporary classical music of Thomas

Adès occupies a crucial position between the soundscapes by the dancer and composer Maarten Seghers and the violins of Rombout Willems and others. His eclectic composition *Asyla - Opus 17* not only evokes grand narrative ballets, but also refers unashamedly to brass band and even house music. Its bombastic sounds seem to react against the fragility of the porcelain, but they enhance the absurd royal drama the dancers perform. Scraps of spoken word (the speeches of a moonstruck king, intended to be majestic, major-domos tripping over themselves, and the ethereal songs of a fickle princess), inspired directly by the mad King George III, attach themselves to this structure.

However, this fantastic world of burlesque figures, of farcical kings and other creatures, is by no means without consequences, but comes with a sting in the tail. The surreal world Grace Ellen Barkey creates is not intended to offer the spectator a place where he can escape from reality. The creation of a fantasy world is founded on a strategy that has a utopian trait. And just as in Utopia, *The Porcelain Project* creates a world that is 'placeless', a non-place that lies beyond the given order, that which is considered normal and is stuck motionless. But whereas utopias always and inevitably have a totalitarian side because they depict a perfect and pure world which, once achieved, excludes every possibility of change and therefore has no future, the fantasy world in *The Porcelain Project* is intended above all to mobilise the here-and-now into constant change. It is by means of fantasy that Grace Ellen Barkey resists the pessimistic realism all too often displayed in the contemporary arts, in order to express something different that is light and sparkling and not at all concrete. Perhaps it is therefore more correct to refer to a heterotopian rather than a utopian dimension: *The Porcelain Project* is a place for the different in the same, for resistance to the real and thus for the hope that a different world is possible.

The French surrealist Aragon once wrote, 'The thought of all human activity makes me laugh.' It is this attitude that the grotesque figures and absurd images are intended to elicit from the audience. Laughter that can be said to be neither cynical and sarcastic, nor good-natured and genial. It is the laugh that appears on the face at the moment of waking and which we are uncertain is the remnant of a dream or the unconscious response to what already is.

Grace Ellen Barkey about **The Porcelain Project**

Who remembers the flea circuses at the fair? The absurd futility of a carefully constructed world that leads nowhere. The ultimate example of an artificially created world in which theatre and art meet. I always have to think of it when engaged in my work. In *Chunking* (2005), for example, there is no real event to provide the motivation for any purposeful action.

*The Porcelain Project* is actually my own flea circus, one where the spectator himself has to decide the purpose of it all. It contains an autonomous installation, developed together with Lot Lemm, consisting of hundreds of porcelain objects whose movements are manipulated. As if they had a choreography of their own. This white installation, fragile yet solid, and with endless variations, is combined with *The Porcelain Project* to form the new dance performance.

**'Tracks to the World of Grace Ellen Barkey'** is the Maxi 12" of 24 minutes of music that Maarten Seghers wrote for Barkey's last three productions (*[AND]*, *Chunking* and *The Porcelain Project*), plus a contribution by Rombout Willems.

*On sale before and after the performances.*



Julien Faure © Needcompany

## **CREDITS**

### **Concept**

Lemm&Barkey

### **Choreography**

Grace Ellen Barkey

### **Created with & performed by**

Misha Downey, Julien Faure, Benoît Gob, Tijen Lawton, Maarten Seghers, Yumiko Funaya (replaces Taka Shamoto)

### **Porcelain**

Lot Lemm

### **Set & costumes**

Lemm&Barkey

### **Music**

Thomas Adès – *Asyla*, op. 17

Maarten Seghers

Rombout Willems

*et al.*

### **Lighting**

Koen Raes, Ken Hioco

### **Production Manager**

Luc Galle

### **Technician**

Ken Hioco, Frank Van Elsen

### **Sound**

Jitske Vandenbussche / Bart Aga

**Set Construction**

Koen Raes, De Muur

**Assistant director**

Elke Janssens

**Costume and set trainee**

Lise Lendais

**Costume Assistant**

Lieve Meeussen

A Needcompany production

**Coproducers:**

Théâtre Le Quai (Angers), La Rose des Vents (Scène Nationale de Villeneuve d'Ascq), PACT Zollverein (Essen), Kaaithheater (Brussels)

With the support of the Flemish authorities.



Taka Shamoto © Needcompany

## PERFORMANCE CALENDAR 2007-2008 SEASON

### *First night*

Kaaitheater, Brussels	10, 11, 12 October 2007
STUK, Leuven	16, 17 October 2007

### *Dutch opening night*

Rotterdamse Schouwburg	19 October 2007
Stadsschouwburg Amsterdam	30 October 2007

CC Brugge	17 January 2008
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### *German opening night*

PACT Zollverein, Essen	15, 16 February 2008
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### *French opening*

La Rose des Vents, Villeneuve d'Ascq	22, 23, 24 April 2008
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Festival Internacional de las Artes, Salamanca	31 May 2008
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## PERFORMANCE CALENDAR 2008-2009 SEASON

ImPulsTanz, Vienna	8 August 2008
La Batie, Festival de Genève, Divonne	11, 12 September 2008
Tramway, Glasgow	3, 4 October 2008
Théâtre Garonne, Toulouse	16, 17, 18 October 2008
Oficina, Centro Cultural Vila Flor, Guimaraes	25 October 2008
künstlerhaus mousonturm, Frankfurt	14, 15 November 2008
De Velinx, Tongeren	19 November 2008
Schauspielhaus, Schiffbau, Zurich	27, 28 November 2008
Theater de Veste, Delft	13 January 2009
Schouwburg Kunstmin, Dordrecht	23 January 2009
Le Carré de Jalles, St-Médard-en-Jalles	31 January 2009
Vooruit, CAMPO, Ghent	20, 21 February 2009
Dansens Hus, Stockholm	3, 4 March 2009
CC Strombeek	19 March 2009
Theater De NWE Vorst, Tilburg	21 March 2009
deSingel, Antwerp (in collaboration with CC Berchem)	26, 27 March 2009
SPILL Festival, The Barbican, London	14, 15 April 2009
16. Internationales Figurentheater-Festival, Erlangen, Redoutensaal	23 May 2009

## PERFORMANCE CALENDAR 2009-2010 SEASON

TANZtheater INTERNATIONAL, Orangerie Herrenhausen, Hannover	6 September 2009
Theater-in-bewegung, Jena	17, 18 November 2009

[Click here for the latest tour dates](#)

## OVERVIEW OF PERFORMANCES BY GRACE ELLEN BARKEY

- 1992 One**  
first night: 26 November 1992, Theater am Turm Probebühne, Frankfurt
- 1993 Don Quijote**  
first night: 28 October 1993, Theater am Turm, Frankfurt
- 1995 Tres**  
first night: 18 October 1995, De Brakke Grond, Amsterdam
- 1997 Stories (histoires/verhalen)**  
first night: 19 February 1997, Brigittinenkapel, Brussels
- 1998 Rood Red Rouge**  
first night: 5 October 1998, STUK, Leuven
- 1999 The Miraculous Mandarin**  
first night: October 1999, PS 122, New York
- 2000 Few Things**  
first night: 7 October 2000, BIT teatergarasjen, Bergen (Norway)
- 2002 (AND)**  
first night: 23 October 2002, De Brakke Grond, Amsterdam
- 2005 Chunking**  
first night: 12 May 2005, PACT Zollverein, Essen (Germany)
- 2007 The Porcelain Project**  
first night: 10 October 2007, Kaaithheater, Brussels

[Click here for an updated list](#)

## **GRACE ELLEN BARKEY**

Grace Ellen Barkey, born in Surabaya in Indonesia, studied dance expression and modern dance at the theatre school in Amsterdam and afterwards worked as an actress and dancer. Before co-founding Needcompany in 1986 and becoming its full-time choreographer, she had choreographed several other productions. She created the choreography for *Need to Know* (1987), *ça va* (1989), *Julius Caesar* (1990), *Invictos* (1991), *Antonius und Kleopatra* (1992) and *Orfeo* (1993). She also acted in several of these productions, as well as in *The Snakesong Trilogy - Snakesong/Le Voyeur* (1994), *Caligula* (1997), *Needcompany's King Lear* (2000), *Images of Affection* (2002), *No Comment* (2003), *The Lobster Shop* (2006) and *The Deer House* (2008). She was one of the cast of *Goldfish Game* (2002), Jan Lauwers & Needcompany's first full-length film. For *Isabella's Room* (2004) she joined forces with Lot Lemm to create the costumes under the name Lemm&Barkey.

Since 1992 she has been steadily and successfully building an international career with her own stage creations. Her first pieces, *One* (1992), *Don Quijote* (1993) and *Tres* (1995) were coproduced by Theater AmTurm in Frankfurt. These were followed by the Needcompany productions *Stories (Histoires/Verhalen)* (1996), *Rood Red Rouge* (1998) and *Few Things* (2003). *Few Things* was received very enthusiastically both at home and abroad. With *(AND)* (2002) she transcends all the boundaries of theatre, dance and music with an irresistible flair. In 2005 Grace Ellen Barkey presented her new stage show, *Chunking* and was nominated for the Flemish Community Culture Prizes (2005). *The Porcelain Project* (2007) is her latest dance piece, for which she created a porcelain installation together with Lot Lemm.

In 2004 Grace Ellen Barkey & Lot Lemm set up *Lemm&Barkey* to give shape to their close artistic cooperation: they designed the costumes for *Isabella's Room* (2004) and were responsible for the concept, set and costumes for *Chunking* and *The Porcelain Project*. In 2007 they created a porcelain installation for the production *The Porcelain Project*. It has been shown at several museums including BOZAR (Brussels) and the Benaki Museum (Athens). The curator Luk Lambrecht then invited them to take part in the group exhibition *I am your private dancer* (2008) at Strombeek cultural centre, they created works for the group exhibition *Het spel van de waanzin, over gekte in film en theater* (2008) at the Dr Guislain Museum (Ghent) and were invited to take part in the 'contemporary ceramics' section of the *Down to Earth* (2009) exhibition by its curator Hugo Meert.

## **LOT LEMM**

Lot Lemm has worked at Needcompany since 1993. She initially started as costume designer on various productions including *Le Voyeur* (1994), *Le Pouvoir* (1995), *Needcompany's Macbeth* (1996), *Le Désir* (1996), *Caligula* (1997), *The Snakesong Trilogy* (1998), *Morning Song* (1999), *Needcompany's King Lear* (2000), *Images of Affection* (2002), *Goldfish Game* (feature film, 2002), *No Comment* (2003), *Isabella's Room* (2004), *The Lobster Shop* (2006) and *The Deer House* (2008), all by Jan Lauwers, and *All is Vanity* (2006) with Viviane De Muynck. When it comes to Grace Ellen Barkey's productions, her involvement increases with each one. She started as a costume designer on

*Tres* (1995), *Stories* (1997), *Rood Red Rouge* (1998) and *(AND)* (2002). On the productions *Few Things* (2002), *Chunking* (2005) and *The Porcelain Project* (2007) she also defines the stage setting.

In 2004, as a result of their close artistic collaboration, Grace Ellen Barkey & Lot Lemm set up the Lemm&Barkey label.

Click below for the performers' biographies

[Misha Downey](#)

[Julien Faure](#)

[Yumiko Funaya](#)

[Benoît Gob](#)

[Maarten Seghers](#)



Julien Faure, Tijen Lawton © Needcompany

**Needcompany with 'The Porcelain Project': nonsense squared – 12<sup>th</sup> October 2007 - Danielle de Regt**

BRUSSELS: In *The Porcelain Project*, Grace Ellen Barkey serves up a heap of utter nonsense. And gets away with it too!

Fair's fair, it is a gift Grace Ellen Barkey has always had. And she knows how to use it to produce colourful performances whose main attraction is their visual beauty and imagination.

Her previous production, *Chunking*, was at the very least able to stimulate the senses. But at the same time the boundary between grotesque eroticism and vulgar anecdote was as thin as the flowery wallpaper on stage. By contrast, *The Porcelain Project* shows its dancing ability with verve, balancing between form and content. In this piece, nonsense multiplied by nonsense equals a meaningful result.

Hundreds of pieces of crockery dangle on strings. The performance area is lined with irregular vases. There is decadence in the air. This is the perfect setting for a crazy royal drama overflowing with frivolity. We hop at top speed from one colourful masquerade to the next, each one graced by pompous strings and ditto choral dances and duets.

The glorious romantic ballets of yesteryear pale in comparison to this performance. The fairytale picture box Barkey opens up for us screams of exaggerated kitsch, but at the same time whispers to us of a dark allegory on power, lust and desire. Even after a strong dose of pleasure pills, Shakespeare would never have been able to fantasise all this.

The court, fitted out in crinoline and puffed breeches, moves lyrically and poetically. Although it initially all looks highly gracious and natural, the porcelain around them has a huge manipulative power. The stage design dictates the choreography and the figures that perform it. All this nimbleness and transparency is nothing more than an illusion. An illusion that gradually crumbles and deadens the dance.

The king we also see running around on stage undergoes the same process of decay. In his speeches, megalomania transforms into meaningless lunacy.

What makes *The Porcelain Project* so sublime is the integration and complete mastery of all the elements needed to get the performance off the ground. Music, stage setting and performers fuse organically into an energetic all-round experience that penetrates into your very fibres. This production is also a difficult exercise in touching the right chord, which lies hidden somewhere between the more obvious elements: earthy humour, anaemic

sexuality and irony put on with a trowel. However, Barkey knows how to set the right degree of subtlety without detracting from the delightful over-the-top feeling.

A crazy fairytale that effortlessly entices you into ink-black excess: it has rarely looked so credible.

### **BALLET-TANZ – Arnd Wesemann – February 2008**

Some dancers are actors, loudly munching the words “I am the king with one leg on the moon, my other leg is floating towards the planet earth”. The whole audience recalls those opening words an hour later, or so it feels, when Tijen Lawton, a ballerina, performs the vertical splits, stretching one leg heavenwards and seemingly drilling the other deep into the ground, pointing her free finger at her fragile work of pointe art. She reigns over a world full of pointe dancers with porcelain noses, as pointed as word-muncher Benoît Gob’s porcelain penis. The unbelievably elegant Misha Downey delicately dances audacious variations, trying to avoid damaging the porcelain between his legs. That white phallus is an ersatz both for a condom and for Viagra. But still just a wobbly one – and then: smash! Porcelain is like ballet, ever fragile.

At the Kaaithheater in Brussels, the Belgian porcelain artist Lot Lemm has created a jingling world together with the Needcompany’s choreographer Grace Ellen Barkey. On the left we see a table stacked high with cups and periodically rocked by a minor, rattling earthquake. On the right, the vases, which, with all six dancers on stage, dance with them, pirouetting on their turntables. In front, a phalanx of white chess figures – the stolid soldiers. The stage is a dream – of a ballet that could be trampled out of existence by any elephant.

Porcelain, porcelain, porcelain – conjuring up immaculate desire, but needy of dustpan and brush when hard dancing sets in. Barkey rattles off her snow-white ballet to the chords of Thomas Adès’ wheezing ballet music *Asyla*, op. 17, where the sombre melancholy of the violins are not frightened off by jungle drums and elephant trumpets. This is the background for Barkey to parade her ensemble as frogs and birds, or whatever else may emerge from the porcelain knick-knacks: “My kingdom is legs and dancing, my kingdom is birds and singing”.

Tijen Lawton shatters her porcelain limbs into a thousand fragments, sinks in slow-motion to the ground, dissecting every sinew, every muscle, every twitch into its component parts. With bait the size of plates, two fishermen catch the broken body lying on the ground. Then, in reverse and with minute precision, Lawton reassembles her broken porcelain doll outfit, like an archaeologist, sinew for sinew, muscle for muscle, to be reborn so much more graceful than a puppet can ever be. This is the Lawton and Barkey victory over ballet’s puppet show. A true masterpiece.

## **Ballet-Tanz Yearbook 2008**

Thomas Hahn (Paris, ballet-tanz, cassandre, radio Libertaire)

Important collaboration

Lot Lemms porcelain *mobiles* in Grace Ellen Barkeys *The Porcelain Project*

Pieter T'Jonck (Brussels, De Morgen, Etcetera, A+)

Important collaboration

The Porcelain Project

Arnd Wesemann (Berlin, ballet-tanz)

Outstanding Dancer

Misha Downey in *The Porcelain Project*

# NEEDCOMPANY

Hooikaai 35 B-1000 Brussel

tel +32 2 218 40 75

fax +32 2 218 23 17

[www.needcompany.org](http://www.needcompany.org)

## Contact

Artistic director: Jan Lauwers

Artistic coordination: Elke Janssens / [elke@needcompany.org](mailto:elke@needcompany.org)

Executive director: Yannick Roman / [yannick@needcompany.org](mailto:yannick@needcompany.org)

General manager: Eva Blaute / [eva@needcompany.org](mailto:eva@needcompany.org)

Financial director: Sarah Eyckerman / [sarah@needcompany.org](mailto:sarah@needcompany.org)

Production manager: Luc Galle / [luc@needcompany.org](mailto:luc@needcompany.org)

Tour management & communication : Laura Smolders/ [laura@needcompany.org](mailto:laura@needcompany.org)