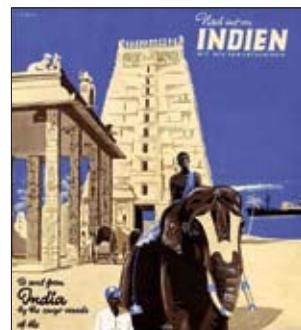


## Everything shipshape ..... 7

Antwerp shipping company Ahlers is celebrating 100 years on the high seas this month. We find out how it all began and where the company is heading.



## Sister act ..... 8

The turbulent life of Belgium's famous singing nun is the subject of a new film. Lisa Bradshaw finds out the tragic story behind the woman known as Sister Smile.



## The lost generation ..... 9

Flemish writer Anne Provoost's grandmother was one of hundreds of children evacuated from Belgium during the First World War. She believes that the whole story has never been told.



# Artquake

## Kunstenfestivaldesarts descends on the capital

SHARON LIGHT

It's Kunstenfestivaldesarts season – the über-contemporary arts festival with the quintessentially Brussels name. Now in its 14th incarnation, Brussels inhabitants are already confronted with an abundance of advertising, and they will soon be tripping over arts installations, not to mention passing at least one of the 315 resident artists in the street.

Visiting the festival's head office, I already had the impression that I was somehow entering a performance art piece – there was a certain amount of guesswork finding my way up to their first-floor space. This feeling was amplified on my way out when the previously vacant entry hall was suddenly littered with bicycles.

An artistic statement on global warming? Nearly. The artists and staff are using bikes and public transport to get around town as one of several "ecocool!" efforts to make the festival environmentally friendly.

In any other setting, this visit would be inconsequential, but the Kunstenfestivaldesarts (KFDA) has me primed to expect the unexpected. Last year I watched pianos move around an empty stage through a rainstorm in Heiner Goebbels' *Stifters Dinge*; Bruno Beltrão's *H3* had underprivileged South American boys breakdancing; and many lucky ticketholders spent an hour talking one-on-one with a telemarketer in Calcutta.

"This is a creation festival," artistic director Christophe Slagmuylder emphasises. And the dedication to new works is not a guarantee of success. "The audience gets that now. We can only say that we know the artists, we have followed them and believe in their creativity. We will help them make something new and see what it will be during the festival."

→ *Continued on page 5*



© Filip Vanzeleghem

## Lego looted

### Models stolen from Toy Museum worth €2,300

Thieves have stolen 11 model cars made of Lego from the Toy Museum in Mechelen. The models, worth about €2,300, were part of an exhibition of 50 years of Lego, which took place last year. They came from the Lego Museum in Denmark, home of the famous plastic building bricks.

This is the first time the Danish museum has agreed to lend pieces from its collection to an exhibition abroad. The cars in question were all produced by Lego in the course of the last 50 years.

"We've always maintained an

excellent relationship with the museum," said Jozef Heylen, director of the Mechelen Toy Museum. "That's how we managed to get their agreement to release a number of pieces. That was an extraordinary privilege because normally they never lend pieces out." The loss was discovered when the pieces were being packed up to be returned to Denmark.

"It's a mystery," said Heylen. "We have guards and security cameras, and all of the display cases are locked. The only possibility is that the models disappeared during the dismantling of the exhibition." ♦

Because of the intricacy of some of the pieces on show, it took more than a month to take down the exhibition, he explained. "But it's impossible to say exactly when they disappeared."

The models appear to have been stolen by someone who knew what they were after. There is a growing market among collectors and, unless the pieces are extremely exclusive, they are almost impossible to trace.

"Our museum has always had an irreproachable reputation," said Heylen. "Let's hope that doesn't change because of this one case." ♦

## Twenty-twenty study target agreed

20% of students to study abroad by 2020

ALAN HOPE

Education ministers from 46 European countries have agreed on a target date of 2020 to see one-fifth of all students in higher education spending a period of study abroad. The agreement was reached last week at a summit held in Leuven and Louvain-la-Neuve, marking 10 years of the Bologna Declaration which set up the European Higher Education Area.

The countries participating in the Bologna process include the 27 EU member states as well as Russia, Albania, Turkey, Switzerland, Serbia, Ukraine and the Holy

See. The Leuven Declaration is the first time in Bologna's 10-year history that a quantifiable goal has been set. Nor is it a token goal: at present the number of students who take time to study abroad barely reaches 11%, with Flanders lagging behind at less than 10%.

The target, however, applies to the 46 countries as a whole and not to individual member states. Anything more binding would have been impossible: offering exchange programmes to students involves subsidies and support

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## Breaking news

Get the news from Flanders online in English and French at [www.flanderstoday.eu](http://www.flanderstoday.eu)



FLANDERS TODAY

MAY 6, 2009

# News in brief

A former bank manager in Bruges has been handed a three-year suspended sentence after being found guilty of **plundering the accounts** of rich customers to finance loans to people considered bad credit risks. Johan Verhaeghe, who managed a branch of Centea, took pity on people whose credit applications were refused by lending from his own pocket. When his secret "clients" defaulted, he was forced to use money from legitimate clients. In all, the would-be Robin Hood used up about €1 million of customer funds.

Five Brussels **bridges need to be demolished** or raised to allow shipping traffic access to the Antwerp-Brussels-Charleroi canal axis, according to new European rules which set minimum height at 5.25 metres. The bridges concerned are at Vlaamse Poort, Klein Kasteeltje, the footbridge to Molenbeek, the bridge at Kuregem and the bridge at Anderlecht lock.

The famous **restaurant Ostend Queen**, which went bankrupt in January, will open again, as a "restaurant serving high-quality meals at democratic prices," according to restaurant entrepreneur Rudi Decoster. Decoster also runs the Fort Napoleon restaurant in Ostend with chef Bert Folens. The Ostend Queen was opened in 2005 with the backing of Pierre Wynants, the Michelin-starred chef of Comme Chez Soi in Brussels. Wynants later withdrew, ownership changed, and the problems became insurmountable.

Four students at a technical college in Mortsel near Antwerp will be prosecuted after they staged a fake **drive-by shooting** last week, firing shots from an unloaded air-pistol at a fellow student and causing panic among others. The youths, aged 19 and 20, were also in possession of brass knuckles, a banned weapon. They could face a prison sentence for carrying weapons and threatening behaviour.

Passengers are **spending more on food** at Brussels Airport, despite the economic crisis, according to figures from Autogrill, the largest food provider at the airport. Spending per passenger rose 13% on average in the first quarter, while the number of passengers using the airport went down by 16.2%.

The number of **cases of parental abduction** involving cross-border travel rose dramatically last year to 145, compared to 107 in 2007 and 100 in 2006, according to the

### Steiner school punishments provoke "media circus", says director

The director of the federation of Steiner schools in Flanders has attacked the "media circus" that surrounded news that a member of his federation in Wijgmaal near Leuven was operating a regime of physical punishments, described by the education ministry and the commissioner for children's rights as unlawful.



Physical or humiliating punishments are no longer legal in schools

The news broke when a parent lodged a complaint after learning about the system from her child. The school responded that the punishments were part of an exercise in which children could decide for themselves whether offences were serious and what sanctions ought to be applied. The punishments they came up with included running up and down stairs 100 times for mocking someone, cleaning the playground for being "annoying", wearing donkey-ears for a week for ostracising someone and having your head dipped in a bucket of cold water for not concentrating.

Corporal punishment is banned in all schools in Belgium, but the school's head pointed out that the punishment regime did not involve blows or violence. The education ministry, nonetheless, considered "bodily punishments" such as being made to kneel with bare knees on a gravel surface to be the equivalent. In other cases, the punishments were humiliating, which the government considers equally unacceptable. The fact that the children were the instigators of the regime was not an excuse, said Ankie Vandekerckhove, Flanders' commissioner for children's rights.

"The requirements of the treaty on children's rights are already an international compromise," she said. "They were watered down to make them as broadly acceptable as possible. They're an absolute minimum, even in exceptional circumstances, or for a temporary project."

Later in the week, Hans Annoot, head of a Steiner school in Antwerp and director of the federation of Steiner schools, attacked the press coverage of the incident, which had led to hate mail. He argued that only one parent had complained, which was insufficient grounds for launching the "media circus" that followed. Although the full facts were not yet known, he said that a teacher, a school and the whole Steiner movement had been "pilloried, judged and punished" by the "modern inquisition" of the media.

"The media is not behaving as an impartial observer whose aim is to correctly inform the public," Annoot said. "They are taking sides, and information is being selected according to their point of view."

The Steiner (also known as Waldorf) school movement was founded in 1919 in Germany, based on the principles of child education contained in a 1907 essay by the philosopher Rudolf Steiner.

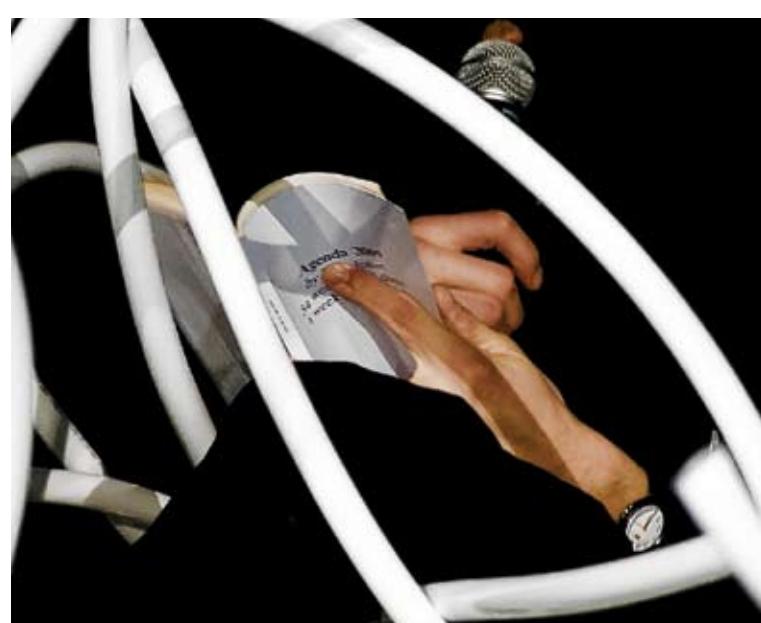
► [www.steinerscholen.be](http://www.steinerscholen.be)

federal agency that collates information on international abductions. The cases involve estranged parents who take their children out of the country without the permission of the other parent or who, having taken the children abroad by arrangement, fail to bring them back. As well as the 145 new cases, there were still a similar number of cases from previous years still open, the agency said. In about 70% of cases, the mother is the abducting parent.

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## FLANDERS TODAY

### Independent Newsweekly



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## Leuven Declaration sets out education aims as students protest at rising costs

Continued from page 1

for students going abroad. Many poorer countries are a long way from reaching the 20% target, and, in the current economic climate, any major increase on a national level would be too much to expect.

Security precautions were tight in the two university towns as students gathered to protest at the summit. Students in Leuven and elsewhere in Europe are concerned at the increase in study costs and claim governments are in the process of turning higher education from a right into a privilege available only to the well-off. An Erasmus grant offered by the EU for study abroad amounts to a maximum of about €200 a month, which is not enough to survive, particularly in Northern Europe.

The agreement adopted by ministers goes some way to meeting these concerns, and student organisations said they were "satisfied" with the result.



Students in Leuven claim that education may soon be the preserve of the rich

The text contains an assurance that "higher education should

reflect the diversity of Europe's populations.... Access into higher education should be widened by fostering the potential of students from under-represented groups and by providing adequate conditions for the completion of their studies. This involves improving the learning environment, removing all

barriers to study and creating the appropriate economic conditions for students to be able to benefit from the study opportunities at all levels."

Ministers also agreed to make an effort to increase spending on higher education by 10% over the same period.

## THE WEEK IN FIGURES

Last week Unizo, the organisation representing the self-employed, published a survey on the problems of combining work and home life, based on interviews with business owners (O) and employees (E). The survey was carried out in conjunction with the family organisation Gezinsbond.



### 39%(O); 58%(E)

"easily" combine work with caring for children or a dependent relative

### 19%(O); 16%(E)

function "less well" at work because of conflicts at home

### 40%(O); 32%(E)

experience conflicts at home because of pressures at work

### 48%(O); 33%(E)

find it difficult to make time for child-rearing tasks such as school meetings because of the demands of work

### 66%(O); 74%(E)

are "happy" fathers or mothers as a result of work

### 33%(O); 44%(E)

find childcare "perfectly" combines with work demands

### 11%(O); 17%(E)

see family time suffering because of commuting times

### 38%(O); 47%(E)

have enough time left over outside work for family relaxation

Possible solutions: business owners would support

### 58.2%

service cheques for employees (to pay for household help)

### 45.2%

better childcare provision

### 21%

Tele-working

## FIFTH COLUMN

ANJA OTTE

### Calimero

The cartoon character Calimero is a hapless chick, fresh out of the egg, whose famous line is: "This is not fair; they are big and I am small." When other parties claim that Jean-Marie Dedecker has a Calimero-complex, this is exactly what they mean. Man-of-the-moment Dedecker likes to present things as if the whole world is against him.

Sometimes, though, Dedecker, like Calimero, is simply unlucky. This was the case when Dirk Vijnck, a member of the federal parliament, slammed the doors on Dedecker's party LDD. Vijnck was a complete unknown, yet Dedecker cannot but regret his departure, as this reduces the number of LDD members of parliament from five to four. It also means that LDD no longer qualifies as a "political group" and thus finds itself robbed of finance and personnel. This is not fair, as Calimero would say.

To prevent exactly this type of situation, the Flemish parliament has a rule. Political groups are recognised soon after the elections. Once a political group is established, defectors have no influence on its financing. Tough luck again for Dedecker, however, as his party has welcomed three newcomers but gets no extra money or staff. What would Calimero say?

Dedecker makes it appear as if the other parties shut him out deliberately. This is not entirely correct. The rules were not created just for this. What is true, though, is that the larger a party, the more it benefits from this system of financing. The disadvantage of being small is something Calimero knows all too well.

Dedecker, a former judo coach, fights back in his own way, with yet another revelation up his sleeve: his former party, the liberal Open VLD, has used some of the means it receives for its political group in the province of Flemish Brabant to finance election propaganda. This practice is not uncommon, but it is against the rules of the Flemish government.

With this new scandal, Dedecker plays on a popular sentiment – namely, that politicians are only out to enrich themselves. A recent study by the Catholic University of Leuven provides some extra ammunition. It shows that political parties receive no less than €50 million in government funding every year. Government financing was introduced in the 1990s, following several cases of corruption involving private financing.

As we went to press, the news broke that Dirk Vijnck had decided not to turn his back on LDD after all. So Dedecker's party gets to keep its financing and staff in the federal chamber.

Now what would Calimero say about that?



Ronald Beerlings

De Putte at all and asked for a charge of serious assault. But the judge refused to alter the indictment, and the jury found Beerlings not guilty. As a result, Beerlings faces no sentence for shooting Van De Putte, and the victim himself will not be eligible for compensation.

On Monday this week, Beerlings was sentenced to two years in prison and fined €1,100. Claes, meanwhile, is paralysed in both legs and one arm as a result of the shooting and is confined to a wheelchair. The public prosecutor told the jury their verdict was "a miscarriage of justice". Lawyer Jef Vermassen, representing Claes, said: "The decision of the jury is incomprehensible. This is not justice."

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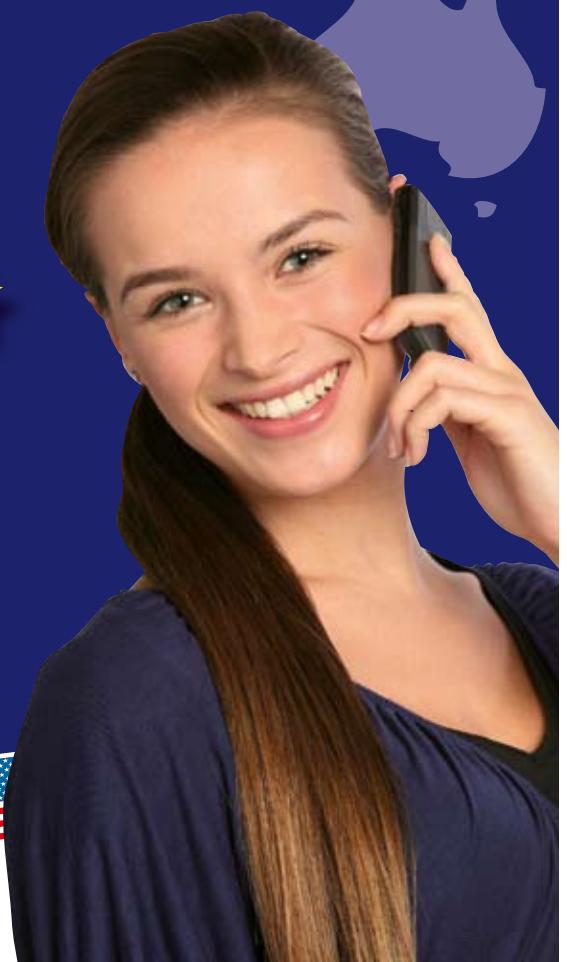


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# Artquake

Festival adds artist talks and kids' activities this year

→ Continued from page 1

But KFDA is more than just new works. They are multidisciplinary and international, even managing to bridge the gap between Flanders and Wallonia. Putting together a programme of 30-plus productions each year is no mean feat. "I always say I'm doing a puzzle. The first pieces are a bit random, and then you have more and more pieces, and you start to see images," says Slagmuylde. "The choices of the last pieces are important to make the picture complete."

Above all, it's a matter of relevance. A show that plays well in a foreign country may lose its impact when incorporated into the KFDA – or, on the contrary, it may take on a whole new meaning.

This year, the festival introduces new activities. A series of talks will be held between and with the artists. And a studio is being set up by the Brussels-based arts education

group ABC (Arts Basics for Children) to give the KFDA's youngest attendees a space for exploring their own artistic reactions to Dante's *The Divine Comedy*.

ABC's studio will be housed in Les Brigitines Contemporary Art Centre, this year's festival centre. "To have a festival, you need a

heart," says Slagmuylde. "It's easy to miss this possibility to exchange with other people. The festival centre is for buying tickets, meeting after the show, having a drink. Sometimes you get a chance to have a beer with William Forsythe and tell him what you thought of his work." ♦



© Paul Grootboom

Bombay artist Nikhil Chopra creates a character who goes from a gentleman to a prisoner to a dandy to a queen (above); Mpumelelo Paul Grootboom transfers the infamous *La Ronde* to South Africa (right)

Front and centre

Les Brigitines is the hub of Kunstenfestivaldesarts, from the opening reception to the closing ball

## Make sense of the madness

Thirty-five projects in 24 days and 22 venues – how to make sense of it all? As of the end of April, 150 brave souls have already bought a Festivalpass, which gets them in to all productions. But for the average viewer who can only handle partial exposure to this much art, we provide some recommendations of how to put together your own festival-within-a-festival. Attend a minimum of four different performances and qualify for a "Festifreak" discount.

### The Spectator Package

This year's festival turns the tables on its audience, focusing the attention back on the viewer. These productions take that concept to a whole new level.

**Domini Pública** Step 1: Arrive at Vossenplein. Step 2: Strap on headphones. Step 3: Listen to the questions and follow the corresponding instructions. Watch as social, economic and cultural dynamics – and even fiction – start to develop.

**Can't Get No / Satisfaction** What happens when stand-up comedy meets dance? I have no idea, but apparently Estonian artist Mart Kangro has some thoughts about it. His performance reacts to the audience response. Funny? Perhaps. Interesting? Undoubtedly.

**Un Spectateur** Reflections on spectating by Parisian artist Jérôme Bel. Watch him talk about what he's watched, how he's watched it and how it has informed his own art.



Schnitzler's treatise on relationships and society in turn-of-the-20th-century Vienna – re-imagined in 21st century South Africa by writer Mpumelelo Paul Grootboom. Apparently some things never change.

**THE SHIPMENT** Cross the Atlantic to explore African-American identity – as conceived by Korean artist Young Jean Lee. Stereotypes are turned on their heads, and the audience feels uncomfortable – but in a good way.

### The Blockbusters Package

Old dogs, new tricks. KFDA isn't all about unknown artists.

**Romeo Castellucci** This world-renowned director joins KFDA with his company, Societas Raffaello Sanzio, to present *Storia Dell'Africa Contemporanea Vol III*. You can also catch the last two parts of his masterpiece trilogy based on Dante's *Divine Comedy*: *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*.

**William Forsythe** The Forsythe Company performs *Heterotopia*, which focuses on (mis)translation and (mis)understanding. Provocative ideas from this American dancer and choreographer who has been working in Europe since the 1970s.

**Talk: Castellucci + Forsythe** A highlight of this year's new series of talks with artists. Castellucci and Forsythe have never met before; what better place to start than in Brussels?



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# A people's story

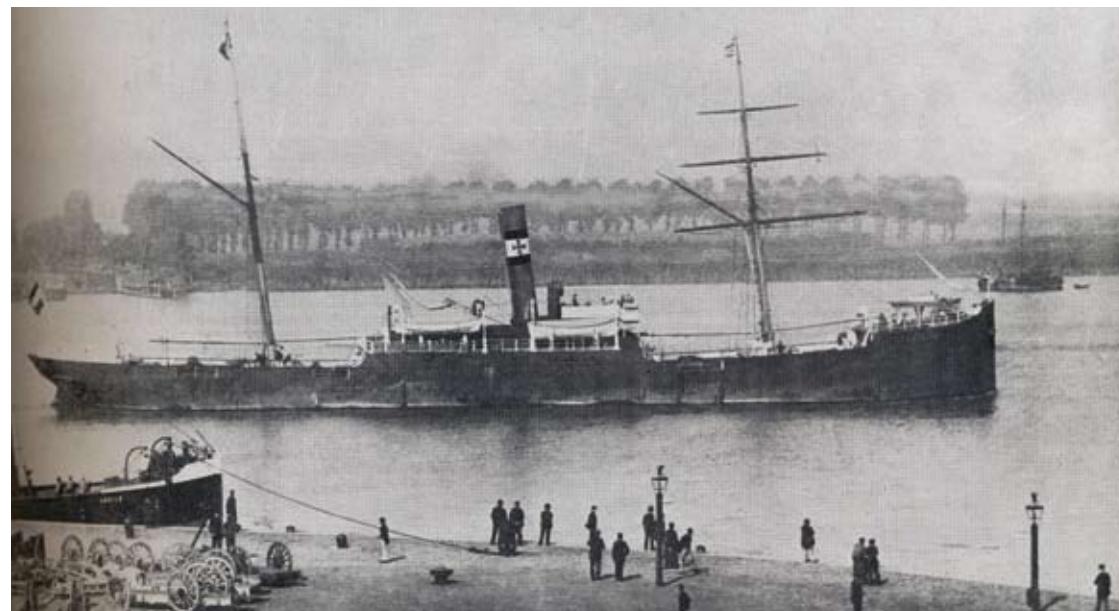
Ahlers celebrates a century of family business

**T**he story of 100 years of Ahlers is pretty much a people's story," says Christian Leysen, executive chairman of Ahlers, the Antwerp-based international logistic and maritime service company that is celebrating a century this year. "But it's also a story of technology, politics and economics," he adds. "And a lesson in entrepreneurship based on the need for a long-term vision."

The story begins in the early years of the 20th century, when several German shipping companies tried to break the supremacy of the British merchant fleet. One of the companies involved was Dampfschiffahrts-Gesellschaft Hansa. "It was Oltmann Ahlers, co-founder and first director of Hansa, who advised his two oldest sons, Heinrich and Herwig, to start up a shipping agency in the port of Antwerp," Leysen explains.

"The port was in full expansion, shipping agencies played a crucial role and the city was historically the home of a large German community," he continues. On 1 May, 1909, Heinrich Ahlers founded a shipping agency, together with William Parry of the London-based JH Wackerbarth & Co, which served as an Antwerp agent for DDG Hansa's liner services to the Middle East and India. The name of the new Antwerp company was SA Bureau Maritime JH Wackerbarth.

As a German citizen living in London in 1914, Herwig Ahlers was interned in a camp on the Isle of Wight. After an escape attempt, he was caught



Then and now: a merchant vessel from the Hansa fleet in 1895 (above); a floating production and offloading vessel currently stationed off of Angola (below)

and sent to a prison where he was interned until 1919. He was accused of cutting barbed wire, which counted as destruction of English property.

Herwig Ahlers (grandfather of Christian Leysen) finally arrived in Antwerp after the First World War, and, in 1925, the two brothers formed a partnership under the name Bureau Maritime HD Ahlers.

Over the past 100 years, Ahlers has gone through the entire gamut of socio-economic events and has been confronted with every sort of crisis: the 1929 crash, two world wars, the Asia crisis and the Ruble crisis, right up to the present-day credit crunch.

"The family-based character of the company allows us to look beyond the short-term situation and prepare ourselves for long-term economic cycles," says Leysen, who took over the company management from his father, André Leysen, 10 years ago.

The evolution of technology and communication has allowed Ahlers to diversify and operate internationally. The company now operates as an independent agency specialised in break bulk cargo and specific niche areas.

In 1994, Ahlers expanded its operations and began operating out of other ports in the Baltic Sea and Asia. The company moved into door-to-door forwarding as well as contract logistics (warehousing and distribution). The ship-owning business in which Ahlers had been active in the 1970s has been replaced by specialised maritime services like crew-management, training and special projects.

"Liner shipping is not only very competitive but very capital hungry and dominated by the big conglomerates," explains Leysen. "It proved more interesting as a business plan to expand our international network and gain a foothold in places where Ahlers has contacts."

Ahlers already had its eye on the Indian market some 15 years ago. The company name in fact strikes a positive chord in India due to its ties with the German shipping line DDG Hansa, which is a well-known brand there.

The breakthrough came in 2004, when Ahlers set up a local team in Chennai. Today, the company is represented in 11 cities across India. "The human resources approach was highly important in opening up

India for us," explains Wim Daems, corporate human resources manager. "We were able to hire an experienced Indian management team from day one, which provided a strong basis for future operations there. People are crucial, and among the first employees we hired locally was an HR manager. It's a people's business we're in, and an international attitude is essential."

Today, Ahlers employs a staff of 1,000, including a marine crew of 300. Some 42% are employed in Asia, 36% in the Baltic region and 22% elsewhere in Europe. They all share the group's business culture of entrepreneurship, team work, respect for other cultures and a strong corporate commitment.

To mark its centenary, the company has published the book *100 jaar Ahlers in Antwerpen*, written by Christian Leysen and historian Olivier Boehme. It is also organising an exhibition in the Ahlers Building. "I like to compare our 100-year history with a car's odometer," says Daems. "We're starting from zero again."

The future, he says, will be challenging "but exciting. Over the past 100 years, we have lived through historical, turbulent times, and we have not been afraid to tackle new challenges. Most people are afraid of change, but life would be extremely boring without it."

**Exhibition 100 jaar Ahlers in Antwerpen, Noorderlaan 139, Antwerp (in the Portview restaurant). The book 100 jaar Ahlers in Antwerpen is published by Antwerp University Press**

→ [www.upa-editions.be](http://www.upa-editions.be)

## THE WEEK IN BUSINESS

### Autos • Opel

The Flemish Region government has offered some €200 million to Opel Antwerp, the assembling facility owned by ailing US-based General Motors, for a sale and lease-back operation of the site's land. The move is part of the authorities' drive to keep the plant open.

### Brewing • AB InBev

Leuven-based AB InBev, the world's largest beer group, has sold a 19.9% stake in the Chinese Tsingtao brewery to Japan's Asahi group for 667 million US dollars. The move is part of AB InBev's worldwide €7 billion sales of assets linked to its costly acquisition of Anheuser Busch last year. The company, which confirmed last week that it would keep its world headquarters in Leuven, is believed to be in final talks to sell its Korean activities to the US-based KKR investment fund.

### Gas • Fluxys

Fluxys, the gas transport and distribution company, and Exmar, the shipping group, have signed a partnership agreement to build a second gas terminal in Zeebrugge. The new facility, said to be a world's first, would allow the berthing of LNG carriers equipped with equipment to speed up offloading of gas and its distribution to the European network.

### Pharma • Omega

Omega Pharma, the over-the-counter pharmaceuticals producer and distributor, has signed a joint venture agreement with Indian group Modi-Mundipharma to launch up to eight products of Omega's range on the Indian market by 2010.

### Plastics • Tessenderloo

Tessenderloo group will close its French Saplast affiliate in Strasbourg, specialised in plastic granulates. The company's management has been at pains to explain that the closing has nothing to do with the economic environment but is linked to the product's obsolescence.

### Restaurant • Belga Queen

The famed Belga Queen restaurant in Ostend, which closed earlier this year, has reopened with new owners.

### Sport • Olympics

Deme Group, specialised in the decontamination of polluted sites, and ALFACAM, the high definition TV company, are two Flemish companies that have already won contracts for the 2012 London Olympics. Up to 25 others that are part of the Belgian Sport Technology Group, created by the Agoria business association and the Olympic Committee, hope to sign contracts.



# Sister Act

The director of *Koko Flanel* and *Daens* tackles the turbulent life of Belgium's singing nun

LISA BRADSHAW

In 1961, a nun in a Wallonia cloister wrote a hit pop song, became world famous and made millions for the Catholic Church. It sounds too incredible to be a true story, but it is, and Stijn Coninx has made a film about it.

It seems like rich ground for movie mining and surprising that scriptwriters haven't already taken advantage of it (aside from the presumptuous, sugar-coated American musical of 1966). But, in fact, the life of Jeannine Deckers – aka Sister Smile – ended very tragically after years spent struggling with drugs, tax debt, humiliating professional failure and a personal love life that became very public.

As Coninx tells me, it's difficult to end a film about that kind of a character on that sort of note.

**Your 1993 film *Daens* and the new film, *Soeur Sourire* (Sister Smile) are based on real Belgians. Do you worry with true-story projects that people will come to them with preconceived ideas and then judge them more harshly?**

I don't worry about it, but of course I think about it. But it's like when a film is based on a novel. When you start reading a novel, you're already making your own film of it in your head. But with these projects, I have my own point of view. In *Daens*, the character of Adolf Daens in the film is not the same as the real Daens. *Soeur Sourire* is not the real *Soeur Sourire*. If I'd made

a documentary, then I would be more worried about authenticity, but these are feature films. One of the lines in the film *Soeur Sourire* is to follow your intuition, and that is what I try to do.

**How do you balance making the story dramatically interesting for the audience while remaining true to the subject's story?**

When someone proposes a story to me, my first reaction is always, why should I do it? I have to find my own point of view. I have to be connected with it emotionally and find some references in it for myself. Sometimes people ask actors how they can play someone who lived in, say, the 16th century. You were not there; you don't know what it was like. Of course, you weren't there, and you don't know. You have to use your imagination. In the end, biopics are never totally correct. You have to have a point of view, a connection. In that way, you can touch people.

**What was it then that drew you to the story of Jeannine Deckers?**

Well, it's a love story. It's a story about a young woman who is searching for love, like anyone else. Some young women went to the convent because they wanted to dedicate their lives to God, but some went because they were lesbians and couldn't talk about it. Even today, in many families, you cannot talk about it; it's still taboo. Most parents are just waiting for their grandchildren. Everyone is

thinking of themselves. That's a very important part of the story – figuring out who you are and how to express yourself. How do you try to be happy? That's the story of *Soeur Sourire*.

So I'm not interested in what the Catholic Church did with the money she made from her song, for instance. That's not why I made the film. The real Jeannine at one point became very boring – that's why no one knows her whole story. It stops at a certain point when there was no more success. That's also why we stop the story at a certain point.

**Speaking of that, in real life Jeannine Deckers and her lesbian partner killed themselves in the 1980s. In the movie, that tragic ending is not at all clear.**

If you have to convince yourself, I a producer, a financer and also an audience – you say yes, I have a great story, and at the end, double suicide! Who wants to see that? It was a question of telling it and not telling it. A lot of people already know what happened, but I don't want to push them because it's not the most important thing in this story. It's of course important in the true story of Jeannine Deckers, so I didn't want to avoid it, but we did choose for an ending with some hope. The problem of rock stars drinking and dying – it exists, and there are other movies where you can see that. It's not necessary to repeat it. It's not a choice I wanted to make.



*Soeur Sourire* director Stijn Coninx with lead actress Cécile de France

**You have made two of Flanders' most beloved films of the last 20 years: *Koko Flanel*, with the comic Urbanus, and *Daens*, about the 19th-century Flemish labour activist. They couldn't be more different! How did you switch from slapstick comedy to gritty historical drama?**

When I was 16, I was in a dance troupe, and we performed in Argentina, and I saw all the misery on the outskirts of Buenos Aires. When they offered me the story of *Daens*, I remembered immediately what I had seen. So my directing

Daens was not so surprising for me as for other people.

I was always interested in comedy. At the end of film school, I did my final project comparing Woody Allen with Charlie Chaplin. Humour is something that is necessary in life to survive. Even if you want to tell a very serious story, you need humour. If you tell it too seriously, it actually doesn't work anymore because everyone has two sides to them. Even in *Daens*, I tried to use as much humour as possible to survive the story. And that's true for *Soeur Sourire* also. ♦

## REVIEW

### Soeur Sourire

When we meet Jeannine Decker, she is pushing people around on a football pitch. She soon arrives at her 1950s suburban Brussels home on the back of her would-be boyfriend's motorbike, and her mother invites the boy over for Sunday dinner. Jeannine sighs. She has plans other than the one her overbearing mother is concocting for her and this nice boy to get married and take over the family bakery. The socially conscious, guitar-playing Jeannine wants to go to art school and travel to Africa.

Then Jeannine's closest female friend (Sandrine Blancke) makes a pass at her. The very next day, Jeannine leaves home to join a convent. Her steely-haired mother knows what kind of women go there. "Women who are afraid of life and afraid of men."

Life for such a headstrong teenager at a convent is not all peaches and cream, but Jeannine eventually finds her niche,

playing her guitar and singing with children. When the church hierarchy hears Jeannine sing her self-penned song "Dominique" in a church-funded documentary, they enter her in a local song contest, and Soeur Sourire, or Sister Smile, is born.

Based on the real story of the young Belgian nun whose 1960s song "Dominique" became a worldwide sensation, Flemish director Stijn Coninx's film, which opens this week, follows the young woman as she leaves the convent to pursue fame and fortune. Her downslide into professional failure and financial ruin is leavened by a beautiful scene when she finally accepts the love of her best friend.

Just as in real life, the film loses its momentum the moment Jeannine steps out of the convent, and it then drags along until an ending that is much too ambiguous. But up to that point, there is much pleasure to be had watching French actress Cécile

de France play Jeannine with every ounce of good-natured personality the real singing nun possessed. The scenes with her

mother, played to pursed-lipped perfection by Jo Deseure, and her weak-kneed father – an always-excellent Jan Decleir – are so

painfully real, you'll begin to remember the endless arguments of your own troubled youth. LB





# The littlest Belgians

**In the First World War, thousands of children were shipped to "children's colonies" across Europe**

LISA BRADSHAW

In 1915, the very first train carrying "The Children of Yser" left West Flanders for Paris. Its passengers ranged in ages from 14 all the way down to five. They arrived in what was known as the first kinderkolonie, or children's colony. Many of them did not see their parents or their homeland again for several years.

One of those children was eight-year-old Anna Vandewalle, and she is now the grandmother of Flemish novelist Anne Provoost. In the next instalment of the Canvas television series *Verloren Land* (Lost Country), Provoost explores the story of her grandmother and the flight of thousands of Belgian children to colonies in France, Switzerland, the Netherlands and Britain when Ypres became the front-line during the First World War.

"She left when she was eight and came back when she was 12 – the years that make up what you remember most from your childhood," says Provoost of her grandmother. "She must not have had childhood memories that didn't go back to the colony. And it really affected her for the rest of her life."

Children began being evacuated from the Ypres area in 1915 after the Germans released chlorine gas, the first-ever instance of chemical warfare in history. Farms emptied as entire communities fled to safety, and the Belgian government began the process of shipping its children

to safety.

The children's colonies became famous, particularly in France, the first country to establish them. The French were extraordinarily grateful for neutral Belgium's resistance to the German offensive, and VIPs would visit the seminaries where hundreds of Belgian children at a time were housed. The American author Edith Wharton, who lived in France, was instrumental in establishing the colonies and rallied the upper-class of France around the cause.

According to official records of the nuns who cared for the children, the French plied the colonies with gifts of food, toys and chocolate. They painted a picture of happy, robust children safe and free from the horrors of the war.

What bothered Provoost was that her grandmother's memories did not click with this picture. She never saw a toy or a piece of chocolate. Her shoes were stolen. Letters home were dictated by the nuns. Most disturbing, she said that she and the other children went hungry. And her sisters, who were also part of the first colony in Paris, confirmed this. "Oh, haven't we been hungry there," the grandchildren would hear them say, even decades later.

Was her grandmother exaggerating or were the children's colonies a pretty face with a dark underbelly?

Verloren Land has Provoost looking



Anna Vandewalle (far left) with her sisters in the Paris child colony

carefully for answers. "If this were a novel, I would try to understand each one of my characters; I would want to see their dilemma," she says. "So I try not to judge any of the parties."

But what you don't see in the documentary's limited 27 minutes is perhaps even more revealing. One of Provoost's grandmother's sisters was slightly mentally retarded and was shipped to a different colony. She somehow went missing, and the family never saw her again.

Does Provoost think that, in the end, the colonies were a good idea? "When my grandmother came back, and they went to see the farm, it was gone. If she hadn't left, she would have been killed." Still, the mother of three admits: "From my current perspective, I cannot understand that you could let yourself be separated from your children in wartime. Because I cannot imagine that anyone else could take as good of care of them as I can. I would give

my life for them; no one else would do that."

*Verloren Land* is a series that looks into a specific history of well-known Flemish people. Last week, actress Katrijne Verbeke went in search of information on her favourite aunt, who is rumoured to have helped girls during the Second World War. Next month, TV personality Steven Van Herreweghe tries to find out why his grandfather travelled all the way to Russia to risk his life fighting Communism.

"They are historic programmes," says Provoost, "but they show the emotion behind history. ♦

**Verloren Land:**  
**Anne Provoost**  
12 May, 21.35, Canvas  
→ [www.canvas.be](http://www.canvas.be)

## CULTURE NEWS

Basschaat resident Luc Doms was greeted by movie stars and champagne when he bought his ticket for the Flemish film *SM Rechter* in Antwerp last week. Doms was the 100,000th person to buy a ticket for the film, and both lead actors, as well as the director, Erik Lamens, were on hand to thank him personally. The popularity of the film, which has been playing in Belgian cinemas since 11 March, is good news for the Flemish director. Not only is it his first feature, he took a chance on the controversial true story of a Mechelen judge who was removed from the bench for practicing sado-masochism with his wife. The movie will release in the Netherlands next month.

The new Flemish literary magazine *nY* premieres this week. Pronounced "nu", the new quarterly is a fusion of *Yang* and *Freespace nieuwzuid*. The first edition contains articles on writer Kristien Hemmerechts and philosopher Baruch Spinoza.

→ [nytijdschrift.blogspot.com](http://nytijdschrift.blogspot.com)

A 12-hour marathon reading of the works of Flemish author **Willem Elsschot** will take place on 7 May in Antwerp's Central Station, on the occasion of the 127th anniversary of his birth. The reading begins at 7.00, with readings by writers such as Tom Naegels and Joke Van Leeuwen, actor and singer David Davidse and city culture alderman Philip Heyens.

→ [www.destadvanelsschot.be](http://www.destadvanelsschot.be)

Members of the public can take a look inside the studios of 100 Brussels artists on May 17, as part of the **VISIT intercultural arts festival**. The artists, both professional and amateur, work in various media and include representatives from a number of nationalities and cultures.

Brussels is spending €2 million to install an **artistic lighting plan** on the buildings of the Kunstberg, public works minister Pascal Smet announced. The plan will be designed by Guillaume Joël, who is responsible for the much-celebrated urban lighting in Ghent.

Singer-songwriter **Suzanne Vega** has been booked to perform at the open-air theatre in Antwerp's Rivierenhof Park in July. Vega will be part of a series of concerts in the park, which includes Bart Peeters, UB40, Sinead O'Connor and the Jef Neve Trio.

Flemish artist **Jan Fabre** was awarded an honorary doctorate by Antwerp University last week for his services to the arts. Fabre who has worked in opera, theatre, painting and film – was described as "an absolutist who only gives up when perfection has been attained".

# books

REBECCA BENOOT  
Wij<sup>2</sup>

Two Flemish authors publish books with the same title

What are the odds that two contemporary Flemish authors publish a book with the same title just weeks apart? That's exactly what happened during this year's *Literaire Lente* (Literary Spring), an annual festival that highlights new Flemish books. Both Elvis Peeters and Jeroen Olyslaegers released a book titled *Wij* (We). But the resemblance ends there.

Georges is the protagonist in Olyslaegers' *Wij*, a disgruntled cartoonist who is vacationing on the Costa Brava with family and friends. He feels suffocated by a lingering "we" sensation. Shared memories and a constant feeling of togetherness seem to have a stranglehold on him. This battle between the individual and being part of society

is painted on a vivid 1970s canvas filled with cynicism, drugs and modern subtexts.

Peeters' *Wij* on the other hand, deals with the exact opposite: a young group of friends who only act as a collective. Spending every waking minute with each other, they explore the boundaries of their bodies and values by conducting numerous experiments. Raw and often shocking, Peeters explores the dormant immorality in all of us and the idea that one can only survive in society by accepting it. The good news is, if you get the two mixed up, you still can't go wrong. *Wij* is the first book in 10 years from novelist and playwright Olyslaegers, and it was worth the wait. Peeters' effort, meanwhile, is ensconced in realism and extraordinarily effective.

**Wij**  
Jeroen Olyslaegers  
roman

Elvis Peeters  
**Wij**  
EXPLICITE

## KIDS FIRST

If you can't make it to Stadskriebels in Brussels, here's a selection of activities for kids taking place in other parts of Flanders over the next couple of weekends.

### Antwerp province

Building camp on the Antwerp quays for children aged 6-12, part of the Kaailand Festival. ABC Bouwcamp, Cockerillkaai, near the MuHKA, every Saturday and Sunday to 24 May from 14.00 to 18.00  
→ [www.kaailand.be](http://www.kaailand.be)

Fairy stories for little ones from one to three. Sprookjes en zo, de Tuin Cultural centre Rataplan, Wijnegemstraat 27, Borgerhout, 17 May at 13.30  
→ [www.sprookjes.be](http://www.sprookjes.be)

A spooky walk through the shadowy backstreets of Antwerp for over 10s. Spookwandeling, Steenplein by the statue of the Lange Wapper, Antwerp. Friday and Saturday to 27 June at 21.30 or 22.00  
→ [www.ghostwalk.be](http://www.ghostwalk.be)

Fairy stories for young and old in the Sprookjeshuis, Rivierenhof, Deurne. Every Sunday from 14.00 to 15.30.  
→ [www.provant.be/sprookjeshuis](http://www.provant.be/sprookjeshuis)

Games and rides, bookstall and café during Open Day, Steiner school Novalis, Poiel 37, Geel. 17 May from 11.00 to 18.00. Free.  
→ [www.steinerschoolnovalis.be](http://www.steinerschoolnovalis.be)



### West Flanders

International Kite Festival, Groot Strand Oostende Zeedijk, Ostend. 9 and 10 May, 10.00 to 18.00; night-kites on 9 May from 22.00  
→ [www.didak.com](http://www.didak.com)

### East Flanders

Open day at an old abbey brewery with poetry, stories, theatre and music. Humanist Centre Geuzenhuis, Kantienberg 9, Ghent. 9 May from 10.00 to 17.00. Free.  
→ [www.geuzenhuis.be](http://www.geuzenhuis.be)

Take part in the creation of an outdoor artistic masterpiece. Details top secret! Kunst(h)art Wolterslaan 16, Sint-Amandsberg (Ghent). 23 May from 14.00 to 16.00. Free.  
→ [www.vfg.be](http://www.vfg.be)

### Limburg

The Ketnet Band have played with the very best: Pete Pirate, Mega Mindy, Bumba! Cultural Centre Achterolmen, Van Eycklaan 72, Maaseik. 9 May at 20.15  
→ [www.achterolmen.be](http://www.achterolmen.be)

### Flemish Brabant

Interactive information on all aspects of space travel for children over six. Flanders Space Days, Brabanthal, Brabantlaan 1, Heverlee (Leuven). 9 and 10 May, 10.00 to 18.00. Free.  
→ [www.vlaamseruimtevaartdagen.be](http://www.vlaamseruimtevaartdagen.be)

Experience the timeless attractions of a genuine Flemish village fair. Zellik Dorfes, Gemeenteplein, Zellik. 15 to 17 May. Friday from 18.00, Saturday and Sunday from 12.00. Sign up in advance for soapbox car race, cage football and kids' run.  
→ [www.zellikaktief.be](http://www.zellikaktief.be)

# Sport in the city

## Stadskriebels gets kids on the street

ALAN HOPE

You don't see kids playing much in the streets any more, except once a year in the very heart of Brussels and, when they do, it's thousands of them at a time. It's called Stadskriebels, and it's nearly that time again.

Stadskriebels (the name means something like "city thrills") is an annual event, now in its 16th edition, organised by the Flemish Community Commission (VGC) together with the regional sports agency Blosio. Every year the streets around the Dansaert quarter (Dansaertstraat itself, Oude and Nieuwegracht and the Moutstraat) are closed off from 11.00 and taken over by sports clubs and associations – some 40 of them this year.

The idea is to bring sport to the city and, in particular, to the young people living in the city centre, where they have little or no opportunity to practice any kind of sport on their own. "There's something for everyone," says Nele Arys, Stadskriebels coordinator for the VGC. "The sports clubs are there for young and old, and there's also music." The biggest group among participants, she points out, is children aged six to 12. About 3,000 people sign up for the day.

The organisations offering a taste of their speciality all (with one exception) operate in Brussels, with activities ranging from trampoline, kayaking, baseball and breakdancing to beer-crate climbing, chess, bodyball and diving in a special portable tank. This year, Arys says, there's a special emphasis on Eastern sports and martial arts which include aikido, wushu, tae kwon do, aiki iai and goshun. Anyone trying out three of those will win an extra gadget.

All participants have to be signed up,



either in advance (for €2.50) or on the day (for €3.50). The kids get a card to be stamped at every stand, which allows them to enter a prize draw later. They also get a gadget of some kind – a pen, key ring or such – with the name and logo of the VGC. Then it's simply a matter of choosing your sport and fighting your way to the front to get a chance to take part.

The most popular stands are usually the bungee-trampoline, the climbing wall and the rope-walking in the treetops. The more dangerous it is, it seems, the more the kids want to do it. But there are also healthy crowds for old-time games, for the skike (a bicycle operated by a sort of skiing motion) and for the toddlers' playground. This year for the first time, there's a diving tank onsite, for which you need your swimming gear. You'd probably be advised to start queuing

for that one at 11.00.

Last year saw a competition between the different municipalities of Brussels in a three-hour walk, but this year that's been cut to two hours, and the competition replaced by a charity element. Each team makes as many circuits of the 400m course as it can in the two hours and, when the whistle blows, the winner is announced. Each team also puts its chosen charity into a hat, and a child will be selected to draw the lucky recipient. Sign up for a team at your local town hall, details on the Stadskriebels website. ♦

**Stadskriebels** is on Sunday 17 May from 11.00 to 17.00, in the Antoine Dansaertstraat area.

→ [www.stadskriebels.be](http://www.stadskriebels.be)



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# Letter from America

## The father of a new country was a son of Flanders

DAVID BAECKELANDT

**A**lthough probably unaware of the fact, the first president of the United States, George Washington, was born with Flemish DNA. His earliest Flemish ancestor was Baldwin "Iron Arm", the first count of Flanders, who was not only father of the Flemings but father of the father of the American people.

Washington's Flemish ancestry passed unbroken through the Counts of Flanders to Mathilda of Bruges, who was apparently dragged by her red hair by William the Conqueror to their wedding ceremony. Despite the rough handling, the marriage was successful. William went on to subdue Anglo-Saxon England – in large part thanks to a contingent of Flemish knights who fought at the Battle of Hastings – and for several centuries his progeny sat on Britain's throne.

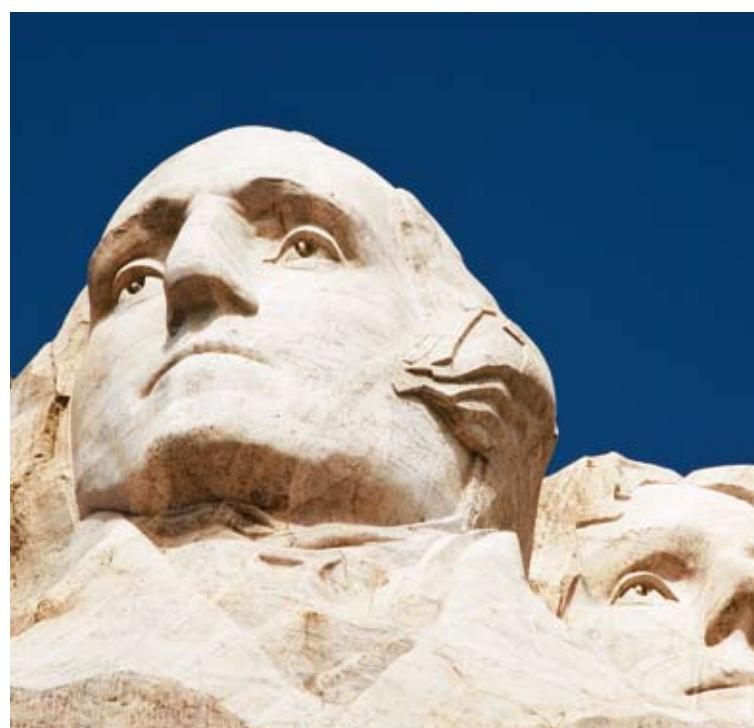
George Washington's royal ancestral line continued for several hundred years after the Conqueror's subjugation of the British Isles. Edward I ("Longshanks") was Washington's last royal antecedent. From that time, Washington's family tree slipped in the social register until stabilising sometime in the late 15th century, just about the time of the English Reformation.

Early on in their time in England, the Wessingtons (as the Washington clan was first known) made their livelihood by raising sheep and trading wool. After several generations, the family changed their Saxon name to Washington, and by the early 1500s the Washingtons were comfortably settled in southeast England, in the town of Maldon.

In the 1560s, Thomas Washington, one of George Washington's ancestors, relocated to Antwerp, where he became head of the largest company of English cloth and wool traders, the Merchant Adventurers (which went on to finance the Pilgrim's settlement at Plymouth).

Thomas Washington eventually moved to England and died in Colchester, a town whose business was closely tied to the Flemish weavers and the wool industries. Later generations of the Washington family remained sturdily woven into the fabric of East Anglia's commercial life. They were also linked to the Flemish Protestant textile workers whose settlement was to have such a large impact on New England.

George Washington's great-grandfather, John Washington, was the first of his surname to make his home and fortune in the New World. In 1656, John Washington



George Washington's face was the first to be carved on Mount Rushmore in 1930s South Dakota

tessential British pastime. Recent research, however, has shown that cricket was actually an import carried by the Flemish weavers who settled in England in the late 16th century. (See the story in Flanders Today, 11 March, 2009).

A number of Washington's friends and advisers also had Flemish heritage, including his close friend and lawyer, John Mercer, a descendant of a Flemish cloth merchant family from Kent.

At the end of all of this, it is unfortunate that there is no hint that George Washington was even dimly aware of his Flemish ancestry. Certainly those around him never remarked or commented about his ancestral ties, and his diary recorded no genealogical passion. This may reflect the traditional Flemish desire to blend in.

In the end, it may well be that this act of assimilation is what marks out George Washington, the father of the American people, as a son of Flanders.

**"Letter from America"**  
is a monthly feature that  
traces the Flemish roots  
of famous Americans

ton left the smuggling coves of Malden in East Anglia – a hotbed of Flemish immigration and religious dissent – as a "mariner" on a trading ship for America. He settled in Virginia, gave up the sea and eventually became a wealthy planter. America's first president was, of course, a complete product of his time. This means that in his youth he considered himself a colonial subject of the British Crown and, of course, a member of the planter aristocracy. Still, when he was not engaged in politics or the plantation, the young, red-haired George Washington had one passion. He played cricket, which, like golf, has long been considered a quin-

# restaurant

DUSTIN BENNER

## Aspendos



**A**lthough today's Flemish cuisine is overwhelmingly French, another foreign influence has come to ingrain itself in the culture as well: Turkish. A delicious example is Ghent eatery Aspendos, nestled into a line of other Turkish restaurants on the edge of the Patershol district, which has managed to distinguish itself and receive good reviews reserved for finer restaurants.

Aspendos is purportedly the oldest Turkish restaurant in Ghent, opening in the 1970s. Previously known as Istanbul, it changed first its name, then its owner, to become the gem it is today. It's located directly across the street from the Flemish writer Herman Brusselmans' apartment, and lucky patrons might have the pleasure of dining with him, as he's known to frequent the place.

With the exception of a few discrete middle eastern elements, the restaurant looks otherwise like any other Flemish establishment. Cushioned wicker seating, heather and burgundy walls, deep blue carpet. The only furniture revealing Turkish influence is the bar in the back, covered with a stencil reminiscent of Arabic calligraphy and backlit with a neon turquoise.

The wine list is, expectedly, a little on the thin side.

However, it does offer the opportunity to taste a couple of decent, reasonably priced Turkish wines. Fruity and palatable for the casual wine drinker, they are a little too shallow and unstructured for connoisseurs. Something lacking in many restaurants, wine by the glass or half-bottle is available in abundance here.

Although the dishes are based on Turkish recipes, they are tweaked to tempt Flemish taste buds. As such, the menu features all the classics of Turkish cuisine as we know it here in Flanders. The recommended house dish is the Herdersspecialiteit (Shepherd's Specialty), a sort of Turkish bolognese, served with a side salad, potato and heavenly, warm Turkish bread. It is mildly spicy and very flavorful, with mushrooms, chili peppers, onions and your meat of choice.

Bring an empty stomach, as the portions are large enough to satisfy serious appetites.

• Oudburg 11, Ghent

• Open: 11:30 to midnight daily except Tuesdays

• Meals: €8-€14

# Cost-cutting panic or investments in human capital?

In times like these, where we have to do more with less, there are two types of managers. **Those who cut costs** across the board, and **those who even now choose to continue to invest** prudently. Which type are you? The financial crisis and the uncertain economic situation are confronting managers with new challenges, but all too often they are also driving them to take decisions that are infused with panic and doom-and-gloom. But the ones who are forward-thinking and keep to their own course don't slam on the brakes – instead, they invest in the future.

## Knowledge determines your competitive power

An organisation that wants to maintain and strengthen its competitive position in the global economy must be powered by a well-oiled knowledge engine. Your workforce is your greatest capital and lifelong learning is an absolute necessity. The acquired knowledge flows back into your company and your knowledge capital grows larger and larger, increasing your competitiveness. This will keep you competitive in the rapidly changing economic context. We call this 'learning with impact'.



## Investing in training: costs versus benefits

Too often, training is still regarded as a cost instead of an investment. However, companies that view their personnel policy from a strategic standpoint continue – even when the economy becomes a serious challenge – to invest in training programmes for their most strategic employees. Investing in talent and training now guarantees you a significant jump on the competition when the economy gets going again.



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# Agenda

## Je Suis Dada

The new exhibition at Design Flanders Gallery in Brussels shows that it's not for nothing that Belgium is known as the land of surrealism  
 → [www.designvlaanderen.be](http://www.designvlaanderen.be)



FLANDERS TODAY  
 MAY 6, 2009



# Someone Who'll Watch Over Me

SHARON LIGHT

**I**t sounds like the setup of a bad joke: "an American, an Englishman and an Irishman..." However, in the upcoming production of Frank McGuinness' *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me*, you finish that sentence with "are locked in a basement cell in Beirut." You might think that's where the humour stops.

That's in fact where the humour begins. And the tragedy, and all the other emotions that get wrapped into this provocative and successful play. Basing it in part on the four-year captivity of teacher Brian Keenan that began in 1986, award-winning Irish playwright McGuinness wrote the play to explore the development and complexities of human relationships in situations of great distress.

The production now comes to Brussels via Accent Productions, the city's only professional Anglophone theatre group. Director Liz Merrill was drawn

to it because "this is a play that everybody can relate to on some level. It examines what it is that stops us as human beings from relating to one another."

In a world of Guantanamo Bays and Abu Ghraibs, Merrill is often asked if *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me* is a political choice. "It's not my first feeling about it – or even my second or third. It's a play about human beings. McGuinness was very even-handed: the guards are not ever disparaged as being inhuman. It has become their job, their culture. Just like the three men in the cell."

Of course finding the right three men to portray the prisoners in this intense and intimate drama is all important. Accent's ambition is to work with international actors, casting against nationality type when possible. The company launched its first production last spring: Edward Albee's *The Goat, or Who Is Sylvia?*, which featured actors from the US, the UK and Belgium. This month's production

features English, Belgian, Dutch and Welsh backgrounds between the three cast members.

The company's future plans include a "big Shakespeare bash". The goal is to produce a Shakespeare play with artists from all 27 EU countries. An ambitious project, it will be preceded by several other smaller-scale projects next year.

In the meantime, this young group is hoping to establish itself in the Brussels scene. Merrill: "We're living in tough financial times, but I think during those times people come back to the theatre."

5-16 May

Facultés Universitaires  
 Saint-Louis  
 Broekstraat 107, Brussels

→ [www.accent-prod.com](http://www.accent-prod.com)



## MORE THEATRE THIS WEEK

STAN in Stukken → Vooruit, Ghent

Romeo Castellucci → deSingel, Antwerp

Guy Cassiers' Atropa → CC Hasselt



MAY 11-16 15.00/20.00 Queen Elisabeth Violin Competition 2009 with the Royal Wallonia Chamber Orchestra conducted by Paul Goodwin: semi-final



**ANTWERP**  
**Vlaamse Opera**  
 Frankrijklei 1; 070.22.02.02, [www.vlaamseopera.be](http://www.vlaamseopera.be)  
**Until MAY 10** 15.00/20.00 Samson and Delilah by Saint-Saëns with the Flanders Opera Symphony Orchestra conducted by Tomás Netopil and choir conducted by Yannis Pouspourikas, staged by Omri Nitzan and Amir Nizar Zuabi

**BRUSSELS**  
**De Munt**  
 Muntplein; 070.23.39.39, [www.demunt.be](http://www.demunt.be)  
**MAY 8-16** 18.00/20.00 House of the Sleeping Beauties, new opera by Kris Defoort, staged by Guy Cassiers, conducted by Patrick Davin with choreography by Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui



**BRUSSELS**  
**Archiduc**  
 Dansaertstraat 6; 02.512.06.52, [www.archiduc.net](http://www.archiduc.net)  
**MAY 9** 17.00 Bai Kamara Jr with Valve  
**MAY 10** 21.00 Lew Tabackin Trio

**Jazz Station**  
 Leuvensesteenweg 193-195; 02.733.13.78  
**MAY 13** 20.30 Stéphane Mercier Quartet

**Sass'n Jazz**  
 Koningsstraat 241; 0475.78.23.78, [www.sazznjazz.be](http://www.sazznjazz.be)  
 Concerts at 20.30:  
**MAY 6** Alegria **MAY 7** Jam Session **MAY 8** Rock Aimé **MAY 9** Time Out **MAY 13** EU

**Sounds Jazz Club**  
 Tulpenstraat 28; 02.512.92.50, [www.soundsjazzclub.be](http://www.soundsjazzclub.be)  
 Concerts at 22.00:  
**MAY 6** Caribe con K - Los Soneros del Barrio **MAY 7** Teun Verbruggen Quartet **MAY 8** Peter Hertmans Quartet **MAY 9** Greg Lamy Quartet **MAY 11** Master Session **MAY 12** Laurent Doumont Soul Band **MAY 13** Chamaquiando, salsa

**The Music Village**  
 Steenstraat 50; 02.513.13.45  
 Concerts at 20.30:  
**MAY 6** Ooh-bop-sh'bam' **MAY 7** Cristina Rosal & Paula Santos, fado **MAY 8** Jean-Paul Estiévenart Quartet **MAY 9** Bruce Adams & Pascal Michaux Trio **MAY 12** Brussels Royal Conservatory Jazz Section Exam Concerts (admission free) **MAY 13** The Brussels Vocal Project

**Vaudeville Theatre**  
 Koninginnegalerij 11; 02.511.23.45  
**MAY 10** 15.00 Tribute to Scott Joplin

**MAASMECHELEN**  
**Kasteel Vilain XIII**  
 Dreef 148; 089.75.57.61  
**MAY 6** 20.00 Muhal Richard Abrams, piano

# • Agenda •



## ANTWERP

### Sportpaleis

Schijnpoortweg 119; 0900.26.060  
MAY 7 20.30 Beyoncé

### Trix

Noorderingel 28; 03.670.09.00,  
www.trixonline.be  
MAY 8 20.00 Black Dice + Orphan  
Fairytale + Twig Harper + AC Slater  
+ High Rankin + Vaillante + Jet  
Eagle + LT M\*A\*S\*H MAY 9 22.30  
Untitled! + Skream + Plastician  
MAY 10 16.00 Hacride + Moker +  
Thurisaz + Crimson Falls + Herfst  
+ Los Bastardos Del Bronco + Dead  
End Path MAY 13 20.00 Ben Kweller  
+ The John Henry Orchestra

## BRUSSELS

### Ancienne Belgique

Anspachlaan 110; 02.548.24.24, www.  
abconcerts.be  
Concerts at 20.00:  
MAY 6 Tom Russell MAY 9 Sara  
Tavares MAY 10 Brandy MAY 11  
Richard Swift + The Veils MAY 14  
12.30 Steppe

### Dolle Mol

Spoormakersstraat 52, www.  
dollemol.be  
MAY 8 20.00 Two Dollar Bash

### Fuse

Blaesstraat 208; 02.511.97.89  
MAY 9 23.00 Tobi Neumann, Cassy,  
Damian, Lazarus, Geoffroy aka  
Mugwump, Sweatshop

### Koninklijk Circus

Onderrichtsstraat 81; 02.218.20.15,  
www.cirque-royal.org  
MAY 7 20.00 Grails + Woven Hand  
MAY 8 Chat + Jane Birkin MAY 9  
Laura Marling + Phosphorescent +  
Andrew Bird MAY 10 Karin Clercq  
+ Mathieu Bogaerts + Cali MAY  
12 Babel Live #2: Stuart Staples +  
Murcof + Hindi Zahra MAY 13 La  
Chanson du Dimanche + Anaïs MAY  
14 Sleepy Sun + Pink Mountaintops.  
Toumani Diabate Mali

### Le Botanique

Koningsstraat 236; 02.218.37.32,  
www.botanique.be

Concerts at 20.00:  
MAY 6 Clare & The Reasons +  
Broadcast MAY 8 Baddies + Official  
Secrets Act + Asteroids Galaxy Tour  
+ Baddies. MAY 9 Subtitle + Veence  
Hanao + Abd Al Malik, Pit Er Pat  
+ Battant + Beast 'Sound System'  
+ MVSC. John & Jahn + Jennifer  
Gentle + Joe Gideon & The Shark.  
Sammy Decoster. MAY 12 Quebec  
night: Duchess Says + Karkwa +  
Malajube. Naïve New Beaters + We  
Are Wolves + Metronomy. Alex  
Beaupain. Coeur de Pirate MAY 13  
Belgian Night: Les Vedettes Disque  
N°1 + K-Branding + Daan + Sharko

### Recyclart

Ursulinenstraat 25; 02.502.57.34,  
www.recycleart.be  
MAY 9 23.00 Les Nuits Botanique  
after party with Poni Hoax, Disko  
Drunkards, Krak Attack, La Fille d'O

### Vorst-Nationaal

Victor Roussealaan 208;  
0900.00.991  
MAY 13 20.00 Tryo

## GHENT

### Handelsbeurs

Kouter 29; 09.265.92.01, www.  
handelsbeurs.be  
MAY 11 20.00 Zappa plays Zappa

### Vooruit

St Pietersnieuwstraat 23; 0900.26.060,  
www.vooruit.be  
MAY 6 22.00 Styrofoam  
MAY 7 21.30 Eleni Mandell  
MAY 13 22.00 Karkwa

## HASSELT

### Muziekodroom

Bootstraat 9; www.muziekodroom.be  
MAY 7 20.00 Boo Boo Davis  
MAY 8 20.00 Daan  
MAY 9 20.00 Pivot

## KORTRIJK

### De Kreun

Jan Persijnstraat 6; 056.37.06.44,  
www.dekreun.be  
MAY 8 20.00 Adyssa

## LEUVEN

### Het Depot

Martelarenplein 12; 016.22.06.03  
MAY 8 20.00 The Neon Judgement  
MAY 13 20.00 Buraka Som Sistema  
MAY 14 20.00 The Black Box  
Revelation

## Stuk

Naamsestraat 96; 016.32.03.20, www.  
stuk.be  
MAY 7 20.30 Peter Broderick + Finn  
MAY 14 20.30 Believe! + Toman



## ANTWERP

### Zuiderpershuis

Waalse Kaai 14; 03.248.01.00, www.  
zuiderpershuis.be  
MAY 7 20.30 Tenores de Bitti:  
Mialinu Pira, polyphony (Sardinia)  
MAY 8 20.30 Tejendra Narayan  
Majumdar, sarod (India)  
MAY 14 20.30 Hasan Yarimduina,  
clarinet: Turkish and Roma

## BRUSSELS

### Art Base

Zandstraat 29; 02.217.29.20, www.  
art-base.be  
MAY 8 21.00 Ceili Moss, folk rock

### Atelier 210

Sint-Pieterssteenweg 210;  
02.732.25.98, www.atelier210.be  
MAY 13 21.00 Melody Dalton, folk

### Espace Senghor

Waversesteenweg 366; 02.230.31.40,  
www.senghor.be  
MAY 9 20.30 Luthomania, lute music  
from the Far East, the Maghreb and  
Europe

### Flagey

Heilig Kruisplein; 02.641.10.20,  
www.flagey.be  
MAY 14 20.15 Junko Ueda, Japanese  
traditional music

### Piola Libri

Franklinstraat 66-68; 02.736.93.91,  
www.piolalibri.be  
MAY 9 18.00 Vinicio Capossela

### Sass'n Jazz

Koningsstraat 241; 0475.78.23.78,  
www.sazznjazz.be  
MAY 11 21.30 Hasan Yarimduina,  
Ensemble, gypsy Turkish music

### Théâtre Molière

Bastionsquare 3; 02.217.26.00, www.  
muziekpubliek.be  
MAY 8 20.00 Hanggai (China/

## ANTWERP

### deSingel

Desguinlei 25; 03.248.28.28, www.  
desingel.be  
Until MAY 9 20.00 Societas Raffaello  
Sanzio in Inferno, based on Dante's  
La Divina Commedia (in Dutch)

### Zwarte Zaal Fakketeater

Reynderstraat 7; 03.232.14.69, www.  
capricornarts.com  
MAY 13 20.30 The Crumbs,  
Canadian improvisation duo (in  
English)

## BRUSSELS

### Bozar (Paleis Voor Schone Kunsten)

FLANDERS TODAY  
MAY 6, 2009

GET YOUR  
TICKETS NOW!

## Leonard Cohen

4 July, 20.30  
Sportpaleis, Antwerp

Even if he had not published his first book of poetry a few years before releasing his first album, generations would have referred to Leonard Cohen as a poet. One of the finest songwriters of all time, the 74-year-old's creatively incisive lyrics and sophisticated way of delivering them continue to win the hearts and minds of teenagers venturing into music shops. From "Suzanne" to "Bird on the Wire" to "Hallelujah", Cohen songs have been covered by other musicians more than any other songwriter. His place in music history has long been assured; now you should assure yourself a place in his audience.

→ [www.sportpaleis.be](http://www.sportpaleis.be)



## BRUGES

### Cultuurcentrum

't Zand 34; 070.22.33.02, www.  
concertgebouw.be  
MAY 6 20.00 Deutsche Angst -  
Lamentatio - Extraction, solo works  
by Marc Vanrunxt

## GHENT

### Vooruit

St Pietersnieuwstraat 23; 0900.26.060,  
www.vooruit.be  
MAY 13-14 20.00 Damaged Goods  
& Mumbling Fish in Maybe Forever,  
choreographed by Meg Stuart and  
Philipp Gehmacher

## LEUVEN

### Stuk

Naamsestraat 96; 016.32.03.20, www.  
stuk.be  
MAY 13-14 20.30 Specchi,  
choreographed by Manuela Rastaldi



## ANTWERP

### deSingel

Desguinlei 25; 03.248.28.28, www.  
desingel.be  
Until MAY 9 20.00 Societas Raffaello  
Sanzio in Inferno, based on Dante's  
La Divina Commedia (in Dutch)

Reynderstraat 7; 03.232.14.69, www.  
capricornarts.com  
MAY 13 20.30 The Crumbs,  
Canadian improvisation duo (in  
English)

Ravensteinstraat 23; 02.507.82.00,  
www.bozar.be

Until MAY 27 Mort de chien (The  
Hair of the Dog) by Hugo Claus,  
directed by Philippe Sireuil (in  
French with Dutch surtitles)

Facultés Universitaires Saint-Louis  
Broekstraat 107; 070.660.601, www.  
ticketnet.be

Until MAY 16 20.00 Accent  
Productions presents Someone  
Who'll Watch Over Me by Frank  
McGuinness, directed by Liz Merrill  
(in English)

### Kaaistudio's

Onze-Lieve-Vrouw van Vaakstraat  
81; 02.201.59.59, www.kaaitheater.be  
MAY 7-9 20.30/22.00 Tristero and  
Transquinquennal in Coalition  
(in Dutch and French with Dutch  
and French surtitles; part of  
Kunstenfestivaldesarts)

### La Maison Blanche

Sint-Jobsteenweg 606; atc.  
theatreinbrussels.com  
Until MAY 9 20.00 American  
Theatre Company in Riverside  
Drive by Woody Allen, directed  
by Christine Marchand, plus other  
drama, music and improv comedy  
(in English)



## ANTWERP

### Extra City

Tulpstraat 79; 0484.42.10.70  
Until JUNE 20 Sergei Eisenstein: The Mexican Drawings, 1930s sketches by the master Russian filmmaker during his stay in Mexico

**Fotomuseum**  
Waalse Kaai 47; 03.242.93.00  
Until JUNE 7 Erwin Olaf: EyeCandy, retrospective of the Dutch photographer's cutting-edge work  
Until JUNE 7 Yang Fudong: East of Que Village, video installation

**Plantin-Moretus Museum**  
Vrijdagmarkt 22; 03.221.14.50  
Until JULY 19 In the Wake of Columbus: Antwerp Books and Prints around the World, early books, maps and illustrations printed in Antwerp

**Royal Museum of Fine Arts**  
Leopold De Waelplaats; 03.238.78.09  
Until MAY 10 Camiel Van Breedam: Collages 2002-2008, recent works on paper by the contemporary Belgian artist  
Until JUNE 14 Goya, Redon, Ensor: Grotesque paintings and drawings

**Zilvermuseum Sterckshof**  
Cornelissenlaan; 03.360.52.52  
Until JUNE 21 Van Kempen, van zilversmid tot fabrikant (from Silversmith to Manufacturer), silverware by the Dutch designers since the 19th century

**BRUGES**  
**Groeningemuseum**  
Dijver 12; 050.44.87.43  
Until JULY 21 Charles the Bold: The Splendour of Burgundy, Flemish Primitive paintings, armour, tapestries, manuscripts, fine gold and silverware that were stolen from the Burgundian court in the 15th century

**BRUSSELS**  
**Atomium**  
Atomium Square; 02.475.47.72, www.atomium.be  
Until MAY 24 Bi-Polar: From South to North, current research and expeditions in the Arctic and Antarctic

**Belgian Comic Strip Centre**  
Zandstraat 20; 02.219.19.80, www.stripmuseum.be  
Until MAY 17 Czechriculum Vitae, Czech history and legends in comic strips by contemporary Czech artists  
Until JUNE 7 20 years of Manga in Europe, Japanese comic strips

**Belvue Museum**  
Paleizenplein 7; 02.511.44.25, www.belvue.be  
Until MAY 31 Boy or Girl...Destiny for a Lifetime? Belgium 1830-2000, the evolution of perceptions of masculinity and femininity in Belgium

**Bozar (Paleis Voor Schone Kunsten)**  
Ravensteinstraat 23; 02.507.82.00, www.bozar.be  
Until MAY 17 Monumental installation by contemporary Italian artist Maurizio Cattelan  
Until MAY 17 United Artists of Italy, 150 portraits of Italian artists  
Until MAY 24 From Van Dyck to Bellotto: Splendour at the Court of Savoy, paintings from Turin's Galleria Sabauda, with works by Flemish masters, including Brueghel, Rubens and Van Dyck

**CCNOA**  
Bld Barthélémy 5; 02.502.69.12, www.ccnoa.org  
Until MAY 24 Eric Tillinhast, installation  
Until JUNE 14 Terence Haggerty: wall painting by the British artist

**Costume and Lace Museum**  
Violettestraat 12; 02.213.44.50

**Until JUNE 21** Carmen Hoyos-Hoy: Virevoltante/Wervelend, installation

**DVC Gallery**  
Burgstraat 20-22; 09.224.14.40, www.dvc.be  
MAY 8-14 Exhibition and auction of over 750 works of art from the extensive collection of the late Ghent professor Jacques Schotte

**Design Flanders**  
Kanselarijstraat 19; 02.227.60.60, www.designflanders.be  
MAY 8-30 Je suis dada: Tussen droom en realiteit, design with a Surrealist touch by contemporary Flemish designers

**Espace Architecture La Cambre**  
Flageyplein 19; 02.642.24.50  
Until MAY 31 Tel Aviv's White City, early 20th-century architecture in the Israeli capital, a UNESCO World Cultural Heritage site

**Flemish Parliament - De Loketten**  
IJzerenkreisstraat 99; 02.552.40.43  
Until JUNE 13 The World of Roger Raveel, paintings by the contemporary Belgian artist

**Folklore Museum**  
Eikstraat 19; 02.279.64.36  
Until JUNE 21 BrusselSe Orgels, didactic exhibition on organs

**Fondation pour l'Architecture**  
Klusstraat 55; 02.642.24.80, www.fondationpourlarchitecture.be  
Until OCT 18 De tijd van de boetiek (The Time of the Boutique), window shopping from 1800 to today

**ISELP**  
Waterloosesteenweg 31; 02.504.80.70  
Until JUNE 6 Dorothée Van Biesen, textiles  
Until JUNE 6 Romina Remmo, paintings

**Museum van Elsene**  
Jean Van Volsemstraat 71; 02.515.64.22

Until MAY 30 Paul Delvaux, a selection of works on paper by the 20th-century Belgian artist (1897-1994)

Until MAY 30 L'Oeil de la rue, drawings and prints by Théophile-Alexandre Steinlen (1859-1923)

Until MAY 30 Jacques Guilmot, sculptures by the recently deceased Belgian artist

**Plan B**  
Kazernestraat 37  
Until MAY 9 Aan Tafel/A table, 21 artists' interpretations on the title in preparation for the Zinneke parade 2010

**Royal Museum of Fine Arts**  
Regentschapsstraat 3; 02.508.32.11, www.fine-arts-museum.be  
Until JUNE 30 Brussels Comics: Frames of Reference, 20 contemporary Belgian comic strip artists and works by those who have influenced them

**Sint-Gorikshallen**  
Sint-Goriksplein 25; 02.502.44.24  
Until MAY 14 MicroMega, the Art of Wonder: works by contemporary Italian artists

**WIELS**  
Van Volxemlaan 354; 02.347.30.33  
Until MAY 31 Bruno Serralongue, photographs  
Until AUG 2 Luc Tuymans: Against the Day, 20 new paintings by the contemporary Belgian artist

**DEURLE**  
**Museum Dhondt-Dhaenens**  
Museumlaan 14; 09.282.51.23  
Until MAY 31 Wade Guyton, monochrome images on canvas by the contemporary American artist  
Until MAY 31 Peter Buggenhouts,

## DON'T MISS

### House of the Sleeping Beauties

**8-16 May**  
**De Munt, Brussels**

What started out as a short novel in 1961 by Nobel prize winner Yasunari Kawabata, has been reproduced as a play, a film and now a brand new opera by composer Kris Defoort and producer Guy Cassiers. The stream-of-consciousness style of the novella about an old man grappling with his past and impending death in the bedrooms of a brothel has made the more visual representations to date less than successful. But the Flemish team that brought the critically acclaimed *The Women Who Walked Into Doors* to the stage use both a soprano and a baritone to convey conflicting emotions and dread from both sides of the bed. The production premiers at De Munt before touring Flanders in June.



redefining what it can mean to be a woman in a fast-evolving world

### KNOKKE

**CC Scharpoord**  
Meerlaan 32; 050.63.04.30, www.fotofestival.be

Until JUNE 7 International Photography Festival, local and international photography show and competition, plus installations on the theme of the relationship between still and moving images

### Hotel Approach

Kustlaan 172; 0496.62.50.00,  
Until MAY 24 Kunst ontmoet Kunst 14 (Art Meets Art 14): group show of paintings and sculpture

### Machelen-Zulte

**Het Roger Raveelmuseum**  
Gildestraat 2-8; 09.381.60.00  
Until JUNE 14 Objectenchilderijen, works by various artists

### YPRES

**Ikob**  
Loten 3; 087.56.01.10

Until JUNE 21 Angebot + Nachfrage: Bring It All Home, paintings by contemporary Dutch artist Loek Groothans and installations by 20th-century Belgian artist Marcel Broodthaers



### BRUSSELS

**Dring Dring - Bike Week**: Bicycle activities in the Brussels Region, including workshops, tours and information on cycling in and around the capital, plus Velo-city conference

May 11-17 at Tour & Taxis, Havenlaan 86C  
www.dringdring.be

**European Opera Days**: Opera houses all over Europe take part in this annual open-house event, which this year includes the world premiere of Kris Defoort's House of the Sleeping Beauties, plus workshops, guided tours, tea ceremonies and children's activities

May 9 at De Munt, Muntplein 070.23.39.39, www.demunt.be

**Festival Court Metrage**: Short film festival with more than 250 films from Belgian and international filmmakers

Until MAY 10 at Cinéma Vendôme and other venues  
www.courtmetrage.be

**Festival of Europe**: Annual open day at the European institutions, including shuttle service between the institutions, guided tours of the European Commission, Parliament and other EU buildings, plus information stands and activities

May 9 10.00-18.00 in the Schuman area  
www.consilium.europa.eu

**The land of a thousand and one nights - a journey through Yemen**: Reading by Isabelle Dierickx (in Dutch)

May 9 10.00-12.30 and 14.00-16.30 at De Markten, Oude Graanmarkt 5 02.512.34.25, www.demarkten.be

**Iris Festival**: 20th anniversary celebration of the Brussels Region with concerts, fireworks and street parties

May 9-10 at Palace Square  
www.fetedeliris.be

**Jette Organ Festival**: Series of organ concerts by international musicians

May 10-JUNE 21 16.00 at Sint-

DUSK 'TIL DAWN SAFFINA RANA

### Pilgrimage



### Westside, Brussels

If you've been looking mournfully at the DMs sitting at the back of your wardrobe wondering if you'll ever dance to The Cult in them again, then have I got a treat for you.

Put on your black eyeliner and get yourself down to Westside in Brussels on 8 May for all things bat cave, cold wave, post-punk, industrial, electro and EBM. Sounds like a bit of a mish-mash? It is. But it's great fun.

I discovered Pilgrimage last month after a lovely ex-Goth friend of mine and I got so nostalgic for the Slimelight nights in London that we decided to investigate the local scene.

We walked into Westside after midnight to find a club full of revellers dressed in black, writhing around to an industrial Depeche Mode mix, far too cheerful to look undead or even a tiny bit angst-ridden. The highlight of the evening was at 2.00 with the whole of the dance floor shouting along to Iggy Pop's "I Wanna Be Your Dog" with reckless abandon. The tackiest was a couple pole dancing to it (or trying) at the same time.

Sadly Westside boasts "a pole", otherwise, with its exposed brickwork, industrial beams and UV-lit bar, it was just right place to host the party. Tip: Try not to drop the black drink tokens in the dark.

(Wondering what DMs are? We Belgian-Brits call Dr Martens DMs and not Doc Martens like many of our American cousins)

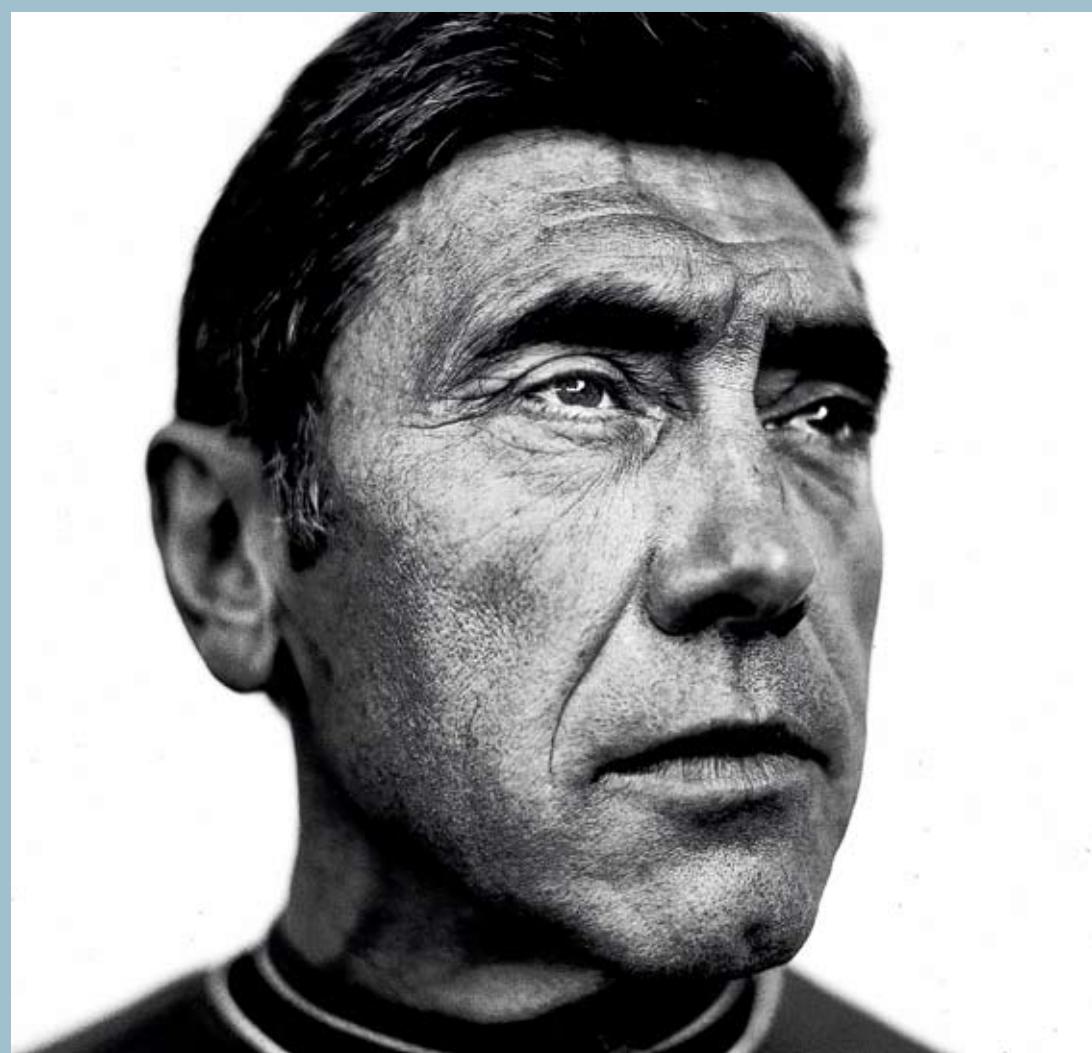
Last Pilgrimage before the autumn, 8 May  
Westside,  
52 Kartuizerstraat, Brussels

→ [www.pilgrimage.be](http://www.pilgrimage.be)

Pieterskerk, Kardinaal Mercierplein 0478.28.31.02

**Royal Palace Greenhouses**: annual opening of the royal greenhouses to the public with many rare plants and flowers on display

## FACE OF FLANDERS



ALAN HOPE

## Eddy Merckx

*A new book celebrates in words and pictures the life of the greatest cyclist of all time*

There cannot be many Belgians who would succeed in uniting prime minister Herman Van Rompuy, journalist Walter Pauli and crooner Helmut Lotti in praise. One is probably a fictional boy reporter in a comic strip. The other is flesh and blood and won his hero's crown by riding a bike very, very fast.

Eddy Merckx was born on his grandparents' farm in Meensel-Kiezegem, Flemish Brabant, in June 1945, but grew up in Sint-Pieters-Woluwe, where his parents ran a grocer's shop. He hated school but loved sport and started cycle-racing in 1961 for a club in Evere.

His first win came in his 12th race in Lettelingen, and last week the flower-girl who greeted Merckx with a kiss after that race was reunited with him in the Town Hall of Brussels.

The occasion was the launch of the book *Merckxissimo*, dedicated to the Flemish cyclist's career, and especially to his epic 1969 win of the Tour de France (the first of five). The book is the work of Karl Vannieuwkerke,

who tells the story of the 26 stages of the Tour in 26 chapters, and photographer Stephan Vanfleteren, who contributes new photos in addition to the archive shots of Merckx in his heyday. Merckx won not only five Tours de France but all the classics bar one for a total of 525 victories in his career.

The reception took place in the sumptuous surroundings of the Gothic Hall in the presence of Brussels mayor Freddy Thielemans, Merckx's fellow cycling veterans Roger Pingeon and Raymond Poulidor, the prime minister and a sprinkling of guest writers who contributed 25 chapters to the book: stand-up comic Wouter Deprez, professor Rik Torfs, investment adviser Paul d'Hoore, showbiz idol Helmut Lotti and members of Merckx's Faema team who rode with him in the Tour in 1969.

"Nobody watched to find out who was going to win," according to Deprez, who was only five months old when Merckx won his last Tour de France. "People watched to see him do battle against his own limits."

"Eddy Merckx was rather un-Belgian," says professor and TV personality Rik Torfs, who admitted to having been more of a fan of Felice Gimondi at the start of the 1969 Tour. "He really won, instead of saying he was going to win and then losing and then making excuses."

Lotti, meanwhile, told of a time he was invited to ride with Merckx, who looked him up and down disdainfully, concluding there was hardly enough meat

on Lotti to grease his front wheel. (We were reminded that Merckx's nickname had been, and probably still was, The Cannibal.)

Van Rompuy said he was aware how Merckx doesn't like being lionised, before going on to praise him to the skies and beyond. Not only is Merckx considered the greatest cyclist of all time, "he is still the strongest," said Van Rompuy, as well as "Belgium's greatest ambassador to the world". The prime minister went on to show a not unexpectedly geeky side, rhyming off major and minor victories and their dates, a heroic stretch here and a heroic climb there.

"But I know that your finest victory is one in which you didn't yourself take part," he told Merckx. "That was when your son Axel won the bronze at the Olympic Games [in 2004 Athens], and he stood there on the podium with the Olympic crown on his head."

Merckx retired in 1978 and since then has worked for the Damiaanactie, a charity assisting lepers in the developing world. He came third in a 2005 poll to find the greatest Belgian of all time. (The first was Father Damiaan, the namesake of Merckx's organisation.)

*Merckxissimo*, with a foreword by International Olympic Committee president Jacques Rogge, is published by Uitgeverij Kannibaal and costs €45. Part of the proceeds goes to the Damiaanactie.

→ [www.damiaanactie.be](http://www.damiaanactie.be)

ALISTAIR MACLEAN

## TALKING DUTCH



### boete →

The best way to learn to read a language, not surprisingly, is by reading. And it's quantity not quality that counts: not just words in a textbook but hundreds of pages of real books.

I started with Dutch translations of Perry Mason; though Earl Stanley Gardiner is not an author I would normally turn to, his books follow the same format, and that predictability meant I could page-turn even with rudimentary Dutch.

I still visit my local library to take out five books at a time, two of which I might actually read. Recently, I was so engrossed in a thick tome that I forgot to return it on time, with the result that I had to pay a fine – *een boete*.

No one likes have to cough up, even if it was only a couple of euro for overdue library books. Though there are plans afoot which will see some people happily paying fines. The idea is that fraudsters will be able to buy off their jail sentence with a fine. This would certainly reduce pressure on the courts and the jails, and those convicted would first have to pay back the proceeds of their fraud.

Will this mean negotiating with criminals? "*Geen sprake* – No way," says the fraud squad. Yet

it does smack of one law for the rich and another for the poor.

One man who has been fined rather than sent to jail is the former manager of a bank in Bruges. Bank managers are ranked just below estate agents in public popularity these days, but this banker was described by the judge as a modern-day Robin Hood. This is what he did: *jarenlang haalde hij geld af van rijke klanten* – for years he took money from rich customers. Do I need to translate the rest: *en leende het uit aan mensen die nergens crediet konden krijgen* – and lent it out to people who could get credit nowhere else.

He started doing this with his own money but, when that was used up, he switched to his rich customers. The trouble was – and it shouldn't have come as a great shock to him – the lenders weren't able to pay back their loans: *in totaal ging zo 1 miljoen euro verloren* – a total of €1 million was lost.

Robin Hood's punishment was *een voorwaardelijke celstraf* – a suspended sentence and *een boete van 500 euro*. Now he has no money, no house, no job. He does admit to being a bit naive and, though what he did is still theft, he did not profit from it, unlike some other bankers. And unlike them, you can't help but admire him just a little.

### The last word →→→

#### Google TV

"People often ask me if TV will still exist in five years. The answer is yes, but television will come to look more like a webpage. More information will be given with a programme, and the viewer will watch interactively. Sooner or later, a search engine like Google will exist for video on demand: you type in *LouisLouise* and there it is, waiting ready for you."

Duco Sickinghe, CEO of cable company and ISP Telenet

#### Home furnishing

"The furniture and artworks will apparently be able to be returned to the palace in the middle of 2010."

Flemish minister-president Kris Peeters reports on furniture "borrowed" by Prince Philip in 1995

#### Weather report

"Exceptional. Exceptionally high. Exceptionally low. Abnormal."

Weather reports describing the average temperature, average maximum temperature, wind speed and relative humidity for the month of April, no longer the cruellest month

#### Last laugh

"We are not therapists, but we do realise that our sessions have a therapeutic effect. Laugh-yoga is especially useful in this time of crisis. We do most of our work with businesses."

A spokesperson for Belgium's laughter clubs, who gave free courses in Brussels last weekend