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© Mick Tsikas / REUTERS

The butterfly effect

A Ghent researcher is catapulted into the spotlight for his work with insects, which has global implications

ALAN HOPE

As Guy Smagghe of Ghent University awoke one morning last November, he found himself transformed into a member of one of the world's most prestigious scientific circles. Professor Smagghe leads a research group on crop protection in the university's bio-engineering faculty, and his speciality is insects – in particular, the metamorphosis of insects such

as caterpillars, beetles and aphids. Understanding their development can lead to new means of protecting crops from the ravages they inflict. His work has not gone unnoticed: The American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), one of the world's most prestigious scientific communities, approved him as a fellow last autumn. Smagghe is only the second Fleming to ever earn the honour after

Nobel Prize winner Christian de Duve. "One of the things that's very intriguing for me is insect metamorphosis," Smagghe tells me from his office in Ghent. "So when you have a caterpillar, and it develops into a butterfly, what are the mechanisms of life? What is the process, what sort of hormones or receptors are coming into play in this remodelling of life? This is developmental biology, more fundamental work."

Insects are one of the main hazards facing crops worldwide, from the sap-sucking aphid, of which there are more than 4,000 species attacking everything from cabbage to cherry trees, to the Colorado potato beetle, which spread to Flanders from US military bases in France in the first half of the last century.

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Ghent University Hospital performs face transplant

A team of surgeons at the University Hospital in Ghent has carried out the country's first face transplant in an operation lasting 20 hours, which required the services of 65 medical staff.

The operation was carried out under the supervision of surgeon Phillip Blondeel (pictured), the university's professor of plastic surgery. The patient was said to be a man, though no further details, including the cause of the facial disfigurement, were released. It was revealed, however, that the operation has been in preparation for three

year, awaiting a suitable donor. The operation involved the transplant of skin and bone – the largest amount of bone ever transplanted in an operation of this sort.

The first-ever partial facial transplant took place in France six years ago, and the first full-face operation was done in Barcelona in 2010. The patient, Professor Blondeel said, is already able to speak and drink water. The hospital plans to release more details of the operation this coming weekend. Check next week's *Flanders Today* for the full story.



Flanders faces heavy budget cuts

N-VA points a finger at public transport authority De Lijn

ALAN HOPE

Flanders can expect to face "difficult times" in 2012, with necessary budget cuts of €250 to €500 million, minister-president Kris Peeters has warned. "The Flemish government will have to tighten its belt. Some ministers will feel it more than others, but the money has to be found."

Peeters' warning sparked off a round of speculation, with immediate suggestions that cultural subsidies and public transport could be most

affected. Peeters was careful to outline his government's priorities: "Investments in the struggle against child poverty; the provision of social services. Besides those, making innovation more attractive and investing in economic growth."

The government will carry out a budget revision in February. "By then we will know what sums are involved," said Peeters. "But it's not looking good."

► *continued on page 3*



Yasmine Kherbache

Just before the end of last year, new Belgian prime minister Elio Di Rupo published an open letter in *De Morgen* reassuring Flemish readers that he would do his utmost to befriend the region, learn more of its culture and speak its language.

Di Rupo is the first French-speaking prime minister since the 1970s; he now becomes the first prime minister ever to split his cabinet into two, with one Dutch-speaking and one French-speaking chief of staff. Yasmine Kherbache is not only a Fleming in the cabinet of a French-speaking prime minister, she is also, like Di Rupo, a product of immigration. Her father is Algerian and her mother is from Oelegem, part of the municipality of Ranst in Antwerp province. When Kherbache was a baby, the family moved to Algeria, returning when she was seven. Kherbache still lives in Oelegem, in her grandmother's house. She studied law at the University of Leuven, before specialising in social law at the French-speaking Free University of Brussels (ULB). That led to a law career and to a period of representing artists in discussions with the Flemish

culture ministry on the question of the official social status.

That brought Kherbache to the attention of social affairs minister Frank Vandenbroucke, a socialist who took her on as an adviser; she later rose to deputy chief of staff. Vandenbroucke was dropped by his party in the allocation of ministerial posts in 2009, and Kherbache moved, still within the socialist family, to the cabinet of media and poverty minister Ingrid Lieten, where she served as deputy and then chief of staff.

"Yasmine is expert and committed," says Vandenbroucke. "She will never settle for the status quo; she wants to change things." Lieten, meanwhile, told *DS Weekblad*: "Yasmine is proof that what really matters in politics are your abilities and skills. You wouldn't last long in a cabinet otherwise."

Kherbache will be responsible for steering through the details of the social aspects of state reform contained in the political agreement that brought Di Rupo to office. "Both governments will be working extremely hard in the coming years, but I'm ready for it," she told *De Morgen*.

ALAN HOPE

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FLANDERS TODAY
JANUARY 11, 2012

News in brief

A fire that broke out in the justice palace in Brussels last week was probably set deliberately, police said. The fire started in two places on the second floor of the building, where the court of appeal is housed. About 45 case files were reported damaged, though it was not clear which cases are concerned or whether that was the intention of the arsonist.

A research project carried out by a scientist at the Free University of Brussels (VUB) has been named **one of the most important of 2011** by the top journal *Science*. The project by Jeroen Raes looked at the classification of the beneficial bacteria that live in the human intestine, which showed they belong to one of three groups, with possible links to the development of conditions like diabetes, obesity and even acne.

Unizo, the Flemish organisation that represents the self-employed, will cooperate with Child Focus on a new **Child Alert system**, using its own communications channels and 85,000-strong member network to send out alerts for missing children.

A painting by René Magritte stolen from a museum in the Brussels commune of Jette two years ago has been recovered after the insurance company reportedly paid €75,000 in ransom. The painting, a nude titled "Olympia", was snatched from the private museum, housed in the painter's former home, in September 2009, but the thieves were unable to sell it thanks to media attention.

Rail infrastructure company Infrabel will **halt the replacement of train station clocks** in ticket halls and on platforms in an attempt to save

€200,000 a year in costs. Faulty clocks will still be maintained, but broken clocks will no longer be replaced.

An Airbus A330-200 flying from Abu Dhabi last week made an **emergency landing at Brussels Airport** after the Etihad Airlines aircraft shut down an engine following severe icing. Airport fire services were joined by Vilvoorde fire brigade in standing by, but the landing went ahead without incident.

Heusden-Zolder in Limburg last week became the first municipality in Europe to allow **payment for parking using a QR-code** application for smartphones. A sort of advanced bar-code, the QR-code is scanned with the free application which then tracks the parking session and organises payment via the telephone operator. The app is currently only available for Android phones, with an iPhone app expected by the end of the month. The service will later be rolled out to other towns.

→ <http://flande.rs/84>

The Belgian Film Critics Union has awarded its **Grand Prize for 2011** to the French film *The Artist*. The prize is awarded annually to the film that best uses the art of cinema and progresses filmmaking as a whole. *The Artist*, directed by Michel Hazanavicius (OSS 117), is a silent film, an homage to the first decades of movie making. The union awarded its prize for best Belgian film of the year to Flemish director Michael Roskam's *Rundskop*.

Leuven city council has gone ahead with a decision to **change the name of the Maarschalk Fochplein** in the city centre, named after the French general once described by Leuven mayor Louis Tobbac as a "war criminal". The square will now be known as Piet De Somerplein, after an influential rector of the university.

Leuven-born Brigadier-General Eddy Staes has been named as **head of the Nato Response Force**, the organisation's rapid-reaction mechanism. The force, which can call on up to 25,000 troops, is based in Brunssum, the Netherlands, and intervenes in peace-keeping operations as well as natural disasters. It took part in security operations for the Olympics in Athens and elections in Afghanistan.

Despite a chilly summer, 2011 was the warmest year in Belgium since records began in 1833, with an average temperature of 11.6 degrees compared to 9.7 degrees in 2010. The warmest three years in Belgian history all took place in the last six years: 2006, 2007 and 2011. Meanwhile New Year's Eve was the warmest since 1883, with a minimum temperature measured at the Ukkel observatory of 10.4 degrees.

Police in Brussels have arrested a new suspect in the case of the **murder of an Overijse businessman** shot in 1996 in the Brussels commune of Watermaal-Bosvoorde. The murder remained unsolved until new DNA tests were carried out, which led to the arrest of the suspect. The suspect has not yet been named.

Ikea has issued a return notice for the **Antilop baby chair**, after a fault was found with the safety harness, which can come undone unexpectedly. Three babies were reported injured as a result. Ikea stores will replace the harness on chairs sold between July 2006 and November 2009 free of charge.

OFFSIDE

Snappy New Year

The top New Year's resolution in Flanders, according to a poll by *Gazet van Antwerpen* was to lose weight. *De Standaard*, meanwhile, canvassed a number of well-known figures, who revealed a lot more things they would like to see done away with. If it were up to comedian Urbanus, the first thing to go would be bad news, which he accuses the media of being full of. Veteran singing duo Nicole and Hugo could stand to see less of reality shows "filled with people who have nothing to say." Musical star Clara Cleymans, on the other hand, has had enough of people with *too much* to say on "sites like Facebook and news sites". Opinions, "founded or not" are also a bugbear for TV journalist Linda De Win, as is the word

"crucial". Economist Geert Noels calls time on the word *eigenlijk* (actually) and suggests we all start a Mexican wave whenever anyone uses it.

Language maven Ludo Permentier, meanwhile, nominates loud phone calls for annihilation, especially when they concern gossip. Film director Jan Verheyen wants to see an end to stupidity, arrogance, body hair and Lars Von Trier.

But the award for Grumpy Old Man of the Year goes to TV presenter Johan "Jo" De Poorter, who managed to come up with "a couple of annoyances" he would rather go without in 2012, including: the word *middaglunch*, meaning "midday lunch"; diminutives like *groentjes* (for "vegetables"); people not

FLANDERS TODAY



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ALAN HOPE



Serious cuts on the way for Flanders

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In previous years, the approach to budget cutting has been described as that of a *kaasschaaf* – a cheese slicer that shaves off thin slices, representing budget cuts that took a little off everything. That approach had “reached its limit,” said Peeters. “Tough measures are unavoidable and essential. The trick now is to cut even deeper, where necessary, without reaching the muscle. Otherwise the whole operation will be in danger.”

A slimmer De Lijn?

The option of cutting into public transport was raised by minister of administrative affairs and local governments Geert Bourgeois (N-VA), who pointed out that De Lijn, the public transport authority, receives €1 billion a year in subsidies and has yet to reach its target of bringing in 17.5% of its income. Flemish mobility minister Hilde Crevits (CD&V) had a first meeting last week with De Lijn director-general Roger Kesteloot to explore a number of possible scenarios. It is also a subject of interest to

the third coalition partner, the SP.A socialist party, whose deputy minister-president Ingrid Lieten was Kesteloot’s predecessor.

“The story of free public transport has reached the end of the line,” Bourgeois said. “That has to be looked at if we want to maintain a balanced budget.”

Bourgeois’ party colleague and speaker of the Flemish parliament, Jan Peumans, told VRT radio: “If you look at the share of De Lijn in the transport methods used by Flanders, you see it is relatively low. Considering the €1 billion subsidy for only 150 million paying passengers, with the rest being transported at taxpayer expense, we have to ask if that’s sustainable in these times.”

Peeters responded by writing a letter to Peumans asking if he might suggest savings to be made in the operations of the parliament itself. De Lijn is one of the most efficient public transport authorities in Europe, according to external studies, which makes efficiency savings difficult. Other options, such as cutting services or scrapping

some of the free travel provisions offered, could “lead to social unrest”, union representative Jan Coolbrandt suggested.

Former budget minister Dirk Van Mechelen (Open VLD) has suggested the deficit could be substantially larger than Peeters’ figure, at up to €750 million. According to Van Mechelen, the calculations neglected to take account of lower economic growth, lower income from regional taxation, higher pensions for civil servants, tax breaks for environmentally friendly cars and new responsibilities transferred to Flanders from the federal state.

2011 ends with surplus

Meanwhile it was announced that the Flemish government ended 2011 with a budget surplus of €97 million. “Despite a turbulent economic year and the liquidation of the Municipal Holding, Flanders has more than achieved its target of balancing the budget,” said budget minister Philippe Muyters. The surplus, he said, was the result of “cautious



Jan Peumans (right) and Kris Peeters clash over budget

policies and continual supervision”. The surplus isn’t nearly enough, though, to save the government from its 2012 deficit. The government had planned a certain number of reserves that, in the end, did not have to be used, Muyters explained, but the problems of the Municipal Holding created a new unforeseen hole of €265 million.♦

Heart scare for cyclo-cross star Wellens

Former cyclo-cross world champion Bart Wellens (pictured) was rushed to the hospital on Saturday night after suffering what was described as “life-threatening” heart problems. His Telenet-Fidea team manager says that the Flemish cyclist’s condition has stabilised, but doctors are mystified about what caused the shocking organ failure. Wellens contacted his team when his body temperature rose to nearly 40 degrees and his heartbeat became irregular. Initially sent to hospital in Geel, the 33-year-old was transferred to the intensive care unit at the University Hospital in Antwerp when his kidneys and liver failed.

His heart is currently only working at 10% capacity, doctors said. The incident occurred on the eve of the Belgian national cyclo-cross championships in Hooglede-Gits, in which Wellens was due to take part. The event was won by Sven Nys for the eighth time, with Niels Albert second and Rob Peeters third.♦

→ www.cyclo-cross.info

Government to apply for .vlaanderen extension

The Flemish government has decided to apply for the right to use the internet extension .vlaanderen to ICANN, the international organisation that regulates domain names. The intention is to allow businesses to use the extension, as well as for the government to use it for its own purposes. Critics have pointed out that, at 10 letters, the extension is too long and that the word “vlaanderen” means nothing to

non-Dutch speakers and will have to be spelled out every time. The government would have preferred the simpler extension .vl, but two-letter extensions are reserved by ICANN for national domains. According to the office of Flemish minister-president Kris Peeters, the choice of .vlaanderen is the clearest and most obvious. The government has until April to submit its application.♦

€1 million

approved by media minister Ingrid Lieten for a media academy for ongoing training of journalists and other media professionals

3.2% of drivers in Flanders found to be over the limit in alcohol checks carried out over the holiday period, compared to 9.8% in Brussels

5.6kg

of food thrown away every year on average by every man, woman and child in Flanders, according to the Flemish public waste management agency

551,000,000

passengers carried by Flemish public transport authority De Lijn in 2011, about the same as the previous year. The free bus service on New Year’s Eve, meanwhile, carried 11% fewer passengers at 189,400

2,140,869

people watched last year’s final of the quiz show *De allerslimste mens ter wereld op Eén*, making it the most popular TV programme in Flanders in 2011

FIFTH COLUMN

ANJA OTTE

End of the line?

In times of budget cuts, hard choices have to be made, even in a wealthy region such as Flanders. The first party to speak out on the cuts was N-VA. Last week, Jan Peumans, speaker of the Flemish Parliament, pointed out that De Lijn, the Flemish public transport company, generates only 15% of its own income. The rest is public funding. De Lijn states that it has become extremely cost efficient in recent years. Cutting the budget is possible only by scrapping services or raising ticket prices. Both have become rather symbolic in Flemish politics, as the socialist party was in charge of De Lijn for years. (In fact, socialist vice-minister-president Ingrid Lieten is a former Lijn director-general.) SP.A believed in two concepts: basic mobility (everyone should have access to public transport, irrespective of where they live) and free public transport. As a result, De Lijn has overcrowded lines in and around the cities but empty buses in more rural areas, while busses and trams are free for the elderly and cheap for school children. Peumans calls the ticket prices “ridiculously low”.

Doing away with all that seems attractive to some – mostly those who rarely use public transport – but is rather unpopular with people who depend on it to get to school, work or to just get out. Flemish mobility minister Hilde Crevits (CD&V) has already said that she will not allow a raid on De Lijn.

Minister-president Kris Peeters, meanwhile, sent a letter to Peumans, who started this debate. How, Peeters asked, can the Flemish Parliament cut its own budget? This question had nothing to do with Peumans’ statements on De Lijn, Peeters says. How dare we think this was his way of striking back? Peumans, who proposed to cut his own wages some years ago, duly responded that he would look into it.

All of this shows that the Flemish government is not immune to the worsened climate between CD&V and N-VA, which formed a cartel until some years ago. N-VA blames CD&V for joining a federal government that has no Flemish majority and will not deliver the state reform for which both parties asked. CD&V, on the other hand, depicts N-VA and its popular leader Bart De Wever as incompetent and untrustworthy, shortcomings which led to it being left out of the federal talks.

Welcome on board the 2012 political tram! Last time we checked, the tickets were free.

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International research team takes knowledge from Ghent to communities across the world

→ *continued from page 1*

"The fundamental research I'm doing on metamorphosis is teaching me a lot about the receptors present in the nucleus of cells. By playing on these receptors, we can discover new insect-specific insecticides. There is a very interesting group of insecticides that are specific for insects, so there is no harm to humans or to beneficial organisms like fish or birds. [The insecticides] work specifically on the insect's receptors. This is a very important synergy between fundamental research and an application for more environmentally safe agriculture. It's very creative and very original, so this is one of the best examples of what we've been working on in recent years."

Professor Smagghe's priority is simply to expand scientific knowledge. His lab does not work to produce products that will come to market, as some research labs do in fields such as biotechnology, for example.

"I really want to make a difference, contributing to the community through science. That's my drive"

"We contribute fundamental aspects to an understanding of the mechanisms of insect-specific insecticides. We are not like a service lab for industry," he says. "We try to contribute to what is known about the mechanisms, and other people

can employ that and develop products. I see myself more as an interface between academia and what others can deliver."

If you know your enemies, the philosopher Lao Tzu said, you will not be imperilled in a hundred battles. So Smagghe's research has allowed the development of genetically modified plants that express their own toxic proteins, which are fatal to insects. He has also worked with lectins – proteins present in our own immune systems that recognise and confront pathogens. The same system can be used in insecticides to attack one particular insect pest, while other organisms remain unharmed.

Leaving it better than you found it
The bulk of Prof Smagghe's funding comes from two Flemish government institutions: the Fund for Scientific Research and the Agency for Innovation through Science and Technology. "We still have to compete with other projects, though," he says. "The money doesn't come from the private sector because our work is really a contribution to society. One of my credos, as well as a passion for research, is its usefulness for society. I really want to make a difference, contributing through science to the community. That's the drive that I have."

And it's not only the local region that benefits. In the developing world, some 70% of the population lives in rural areas, often farming for themselves. The kinds of solutions being investigated by labs like Professor Smagghe's could offer hope to the people who need it most. The



© Wikipedia

Research in Ghent University's agrozoology lab could help lead to the development of an insect-specific pest control for the Colorado potato beetle, which causes widespread damage to potato crops across the US and Europe

importance of basic research is felt worldwide.

"Yes, definitely it is," he says. "It's not only important to Western society, it's also South America, Africa, Asia. Not everybody has the means to buy extremely expensive chemicals. In my group, I always have researchers from developing countries. Right now I have somebody from Syria and somebody from Brazil. They do fantastic research and then can take the knowledge and technology they obtain here back and make a difference right there in their own countries."

Smagghe describes the crop protection research group

as "young and dynamic", consisting of about 25 post-doctoral researchers, doctoral and master's students. "I know groups in the VIB [Flemish Institute for Biotechnology] of more than 100 people, but for insect research this is a good-sized group," he says. "Within the group I have different subgroups – some working on receptors, some working on bumblebees. The trick is always to find good people. You can write up projects, you can find the money, but then you have to hire good people. That's the same everywhere, but it's also part of my job – good human resources."

The lab is also populated by many non-humans. "I'm a little bit different from many of my colleagues internationally; many of them focus on one or two insects, but I have more than 10 here in my group. I deal with a lot of comparative issues, so I have three caterpillars in culture, two beetles, two aphids, bumblebees. That's the richness of comparative work, and this is why I want to keep the different insects alive in my lab. Of course it also takes time and effort to maintain the colonies, but I think it's worth it."♦

→ www.insects.ugent.be



© Hilde Christiaens

Professor Guy Smagghe's team does the research for the development of insecticides that only harm the insect – not the humans that consume the crops

be able to continue. Of course it's dependent on funding, but even with basic funding you can do great things."

→ www.aaas.org

What is the AAAS?

The American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS, better known as the Triple-A S) is the world's largest scientific organisation. Despite the name, it includes more than 125,000 members from across the world, as well as bringing together 262 scientific societies and academies representing 10 million people. It also publishes *Science*, one of the world's leading academic journals. Founded in 1848 with 87 members as an extension of the Association of American Geologists and Naturalists, it now covers every field of science, from agriculture to statistics, taking in dentistry, philosophy of science, linguistics and science and human rights. Past presidents have included the famous cultural anthropologist

Margaret Mead and influential evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould. The current president is American biotechnologist Nina Fedoroff.

Fellows are elected by their peers, and Guy Smagghe's nomination was one of 539 to be approved in November. They will be formally inducted during the association's annual meeting in Vancouver, BC, next month.

"It's really a great honour for a non-American and for someone who's working with insects," says professor Smagghe (pictured). "Insects is a small field, and Belgium is a small country, so this is really a big thing for me. It's also an excellent opportunity to show what we are doing here in Ghent with insect research. So it's an honour for me personally but also for the whole group."

Smagghe is only the second Belgian ever to receive the accolade of a fellowship of the AAAS. The first was Christian de Duve, the British-born son of Antwerp war refugees, who won the Nobel Prize for medicine in 1974. Viscount de Duve, ennobled by King Boudewijn in 1990, still lives in Surrey in England at the age of 94.

At 43, Smagghe says that he's "still a relatively young professor. According to Belgian law, I have to work for 22 more years. I don't know whether I will get a Nobel prize, but research has already brought me some very pleasant moments, and I hope I'll still be able to achieve good things with my research group. So this is a recognition that we're working well, and I hope to

Returning to its roots

Designer links Antwerp to China through the history of the tulip

NICOLAS DE MOY

Following the silk routes from China via Constantinople and finally arriving in Antwerp in 1562, the tulip has quite an extraordinary history. As we reported a few weeks back, few Flemings are aware that this exotic flower was first introduced in Antwerp before it made it to the Netherlands.

This is why Antwerp province chose Ronald van der Hilst – designer, landscape architect and tulip connoisseur – to create the pavilion for its entry to the China International Garden Expo. It's hosted by the city of Chongqing on the Yangtze River in west-central China. This huge municipality of about 29 million people has a long history of economic and cultural ties with Antwerp. Both harbour and river towns, they are now even connected by a direct rail freight link.

Flowerpots along the motorway
Opening in November and lasting until May, the nearly three billion yuan (€360 million) Garden Expo covers an area of 220 hectares, boasting more than 40 landscaped gardens, 127 exhibition areas and 26 tourist attractions based on China's architectural and landscaping heritage.

Several urban centres from around the world were invited to design their own gardens under the theme "Better garden, better city". The gardens were designed by Abraham Rammeloo, director

of the Kalmthout Arboretum, and Antwerp province landscape architect Leen Dierckx. The main colours of the garden are red and white, reflecting the official colours of the city of Antwerp.

Dutch-born van der Hilst lives and works in Antwerp and designed the garden's massive, pure white pavilion using one of his tulip-based designs. The design highlights the flower's origins in China and the trade relations between the two cities.

Van der Hilst was amazed by Chongqing's attention to the international exhibition. "From our hotel to the garden, all along the motorway were flowerpots. I mean each flower had its own pot!"

Reinventing a cliché

Sitting in van der Hilst's showroom, you are transported to a space dedicated to the aesthetics of the tulip. Based in Antwerp's arty and antique Latin Quarter, his trademark designs around the simplistic beauty of tulips are known worldwide.

"Being Dutch and doing tulip-based designs – how clichéd," he smiles. "I really hated it in the beginning." For an open-door day of the various shops and showrooms in the neighbourhood about five years ago, he spontaneously thought of designs and paintings using tulips. Quite an enthusiastic response followed, and the idea stuck. In 2005, his famous Bulba vase was offered to Queen Beatrix of the

Netherlands during a state visit. The design was an instant hit, and van der Hilst was further motivated to design tiles and other objects inspired by this once exotic flower.

Humble bulb

"The tulip was first introduced in Antwerp in the 16th century," van der Hilst says. "It was discovered by accident as it arrived here in the form of a bulb that looked a bit like an inedible onion."

At first the bulbs were very expensive, reserved for the rich. But eventually, they were easier to come by. "People didn't really know what to do with the bulbs, and they threw them in the garden. As the flower blossomed with unusual colours, residents got really inspired."

The gardens of Antwerp became famous all around Europe for the vivid colours and exuberance of their tulips. "There was more of an artistic approach to the tulip in Antwerp, whereas in the Netherlands, it was more commercial."

This year marks the 450th anniversary of the introduction of the tulip in Antwerp, and van der Hilst is working on a design for the Kalmthout Arboretum of a display of 10,000 tulips. Antwerp will also host the World Tulip Summit in September. Specialists from around the world will gather to discuss the past and the future, the growing and marketing techniques of, says van der Hilst, "this humble, simple flower".



Ronald van der Hilst created the pavilion for Antwerp's entry to the China International Garden Expo

→ www.ronaldvanderhilst.com

Bridging the education gap

Researchers will investigate why boys perform worse than girls in school

ALAN HOPE

Researchers from three Flemish universities will spend the next four years visiting schools in the region in search of an answer to one pressing question: Why are boys doing worse than girls in school? At the end of primary school, boys and girls are roughly similar. By the end of secondary school, however, the boys have dropped far behind: 41% perform below average, compared to only 29% of girls. More than 11% of boys leave secondary education without a diploma, compared to about 8% of girls.

The figures come from Jos De Meyer, a member of the Flemish parliament for CD&V and former director of a technical school in Sint-Niklaas. The opinion of the Flemish government in one case is the same as that of Mieke Van Houtte, the sociologist from Ghent University who will lead the research. Neither sees an advantage in segregated classes – something that is being tested in the Netherlands.

"The benefits of segregated education

have not been proven," commented Kathleen Deckx, who, like De Meyer, sits on the parliament's education committee. There are, however, Flemish schools – in Brussels and in Maldegem, East Flanders, for example – that are experimenting with separating boys and girls for specific classes.

According to Van Houtte, research has adequately demonstrated that the mere presence of a majority of girls in a school is enough to lift the educational level of all pupils. "Boys don't do worse because there are girls in the school. Often the reverse is true: The more girls a school has proportionally, the better both boys and girls perform," she told *De Standaard*.

The research project, called Education in the Bed of Procrustes, supported by the Agency for Innovation through Science and Technology, will examine the causes, in an effort to provide concrete suggestions for ways of tackling the problem.

(Procrustes was a smith in Greek mythology who forced guests to fit his bed by stretching them on a rack or chopping off their legs; the name signifies attempts to force something to conform to an arbitrary standard.) The study, says Flemish education minister Pascal Smet, "will look at the balance of the sexes in schools, the study culture, the differences in performance, teacher profiles and the conditions of identity development, and look for possible solutions. It strikes me as an interesting project."

Situation improving for children of immigrants

Meanwhile, the gap between second-generation children of immigrants and native Flemings in schools is narrowing, according to the latest figures from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Between 2000 and 2009, the learning gap between Flemish children and children of immigrants narrowed by



The more girls in the class, the better for everyone's performance

40 points, the equivalent of a whole year's education. However, children of immigrants are still two years behind their Flemish classmates – the largest gap among the 36 countries and regions that provided figures for the survey.

In some areas, Flanders made very good progress: In literacy, immigrant children in Flemish schools advanced by 29 points. In French-speaking Belgium, the advance was 18 points, while some countries, such as Sweden and Spain, did not advance at all. According to sociologist Dirk Jacobs,

who examined the OECD survey for the King Baudouin Foundation, the situation remains worrying. "Despite some progress, we see that the gulf... in Flanders is the largest in the world for children of the second generation. That's a cause for concern."

A spokesman for Pascal Smet pointed out that the government's equal educational opportunities programme was showing some results. "But our education system is still not succeeding in wiping out socio-economic disadvantages by education alone," he said.♦

Website compares energy company services

Consumers can check ratings of all energy providers operating in Flanders

ALAN HOPE

Energy cooperative Ecopower, based in Berchem, Antwerp province, is the provider offering the best terms of service, according to a new online comparison tool launched last week by the Flemish energy market regulator VREG. At the other end of the scale: the Dutch-based Essent.

Since the beginnings of the liberalisation of the energy market, VREG has offered a web-based service to compare prices, quantities and contract terms offered by the green energy companies operating in Flanders. Last week the so-called V-test (for *vergelijking*, or comparison) was extended to include quality of service.

The 11 companies that provide energy to private homes can be compared on the basis of five criteria: general information provided; efficiency in dealing with queries; cost associated with ending a contract; payment options offered; and additional costs over and above the actual energy price.

Each of the companies was also given a score by the regulator based on the

number of complaints received, on a scale of one to five stars. Essent, the biggest provider in the Netherlands, received the worst score, of 9.35 complaints for every 5,000 private customers, earning the company one star. Ecopower scored only 0.21 complaints per 5,000 customers, to take five stars. Electrabel, by far the biggest of the companies, also gained five stars.

"Apart from energy prices, trustworthiness and good service are the main reasons families switch energy providers," commented Flemish energy minister Freya Van den Bossche. "By providing good consumer information, I want to help them to make an informed choice."

Group purchase earns 30% discount

Energy provider Essent sent a shock wave through the market in Flanders last week, when it concluded a deal with 20,000 families in Antwerp to provide electricity and gas at a discount of 30%. The families had come together in a purchasing cooperative, an increasingly popular tool already used in the fuel-oil



© Shutterstock

market. The group asked companies to tender for the contract, and Essent's price came in 30% lower than competing bids from Electrabel, Luminus and Nuon, the three biggest providers in Flanders. More surprisingly, the price is half of the so-called social tariff applied to people

on benefits. The problem with that is that the government's rules state that the social tariff must be lower than the price offered by the market. The current social tariff of about €1,900 a year "needs to be looked at again," said federal consumer affairs minister Johan Vande Lanotte.♦

Compare energy prices and services at:

→ www.vreg.be/vergelijk-dienstverlening

Look into group energy buying at:

→ www.samengaanwegroener.be

Warning on offers at Brussels Motor Show

Consumer organisation Test-Aankoop has warned motorists to beware of special deals offered at the Brussels Motor Show, which starts on 12 January at Brussels Expo. Buyers could be confused by the various deals on offer, said the organisation. A 0% interest rate, for example, could turn out to be more expensive than a 5% rate, if other incentives, such as extras and discounts, are not included, or if the dealer is offering a lower figure for the buyer's trade-in vehicle.

Test-Aankoop also warns against "balloon contracts", an instalment plan that appears to offer lower monthly payments, but which comes

with a lump sum due at the end of the payment term or a requirement to buy another new car of the same make under the same terms. Balloon contracts in general, the organisation says, end up costing more than a normal instalment plan. To help customers keep track of the conditions on offer, Test-Aankoop has installed a repayment calculator on its website, which provides information on the monthly payments asked by over 100 banks and credit institutions for any given sum.♦

→ www.test-aankoop.be

Agri news: virus in sheep, land around Brussels reclaimed for farming

An outbreak of the **Schmallenberg virus** on a sheep farm in Antwerp province last month has now spread to nine farms across Flanders, the Federal Food Safety Agency reported this week. The virus causes deformities in lambs but is not a threat to human consumers of the meat or milk.

The Flemish government has approved a plan to **reclaim 750 hectares of land for farming** and green spaces in the area of Flanders around Brussels, known as the rand, over the next nine years. The land, in an increasingly urbanising area of the region, will be administered by the Nature and Woodland Agency and the Flemish Land Agency.

Two universities, two university colleges and the Institute for Agriculture and Fisheries are joining Ghent University's **agri-food expertise centre Food2Know**.

The universities of Brussels and Antwerp, together with university colleges in West Flanders and Ghent, are concerned that innovations in the industry, which employs more people in Flanders than any other, are not receiving the support they need in times of economic crisis compared to smaller industries such as ICT, technology and chemicals.♦

→ www.food2know.be

Major expansion for Technopolis



© Technopolis

Technopolis, the hands-on science and technology museum in Mechelen, has been granted planning permission for expansion. The plans involve three separate projects comprising the expansion of the museum's exhibition space from 5,450 square metres to 6,850 square metres.

One aspect of the expansion involves enlarging Technopolis' "do-centre": an enormous hangar-like space in which children are free to explore the many exhibits on offer, each of which illustrates some aspect of science or technology.

For older visitors, the second part of the expansion will also offer a number of interactive experiences. The area will also include a state-of-the-art laboratory and a workshop

where teachers will be able to explore aspects of science using equipment and apparatus to which most schools do not normally have access.

The third part of the plans involves a library for the use of teachers, where they can consult records to find out what sort of educational materials are available in Flanders. They will also be able to inspect the material and test it, as well as take more formal courses in its use.

Finally, the museum's cafeteria will be renovated and expanded.

The plans involve a total investment of €6.85 million, which includes €3.02 million from the Flemish government, €2.74 million from the EU and €62,000 from Antwerp province. Preliminary works start this week.♦

Changes in 2012

A number of changes to laws and regulations took place on 1 January. The price of a **postage stamp** for inland mail went up by 4 cents to 75c for single stamps and 65c for blocks of 10.

VAT on **pay television** went up from 12% to 21%.

Belgacom increased charges for some **mobile and internet** services by 3.41%.

The cost of registering a new **motor vehicle** goes up from €20 to €30.

Taxes for company cars will increase.

The telephone number for the correct time changed from 1200 to 078 05 1200.

Electronic payments become cheaper for shopkeepers.

Students may now work for 50 days a year without losing their social security status.

Federal tax deductions for energy-saving **renovations** disappear.

Tax breaks on low energy **house construction** and passive houses are scrapped.

THE WEEK IN BUSINESS

Advertising • Kinepolis

Ghent-based Kinepolis group, the country's largest cinema chain, has acquired the Brussels-based Brightfish, which supplies 97% percent of cinema advertising. Kinepolis also operates in France, Spain, Switzerland and Poland.

Airlines • Aer Lingus

Irish national carrier Aer Lingus will launch a three flights a week service from Brussels to Cork service from 26 March. The new link will allow passengers to connect with 24 destinations served by the airline. Meanwhile, Brussels Airlines has confirmed its plans for a Brussels-New York service from 1 June.

Autos • Sales

New car sales hit 48,763 in December, a nearly 67% increase on the same month in 2010. The surge is linked to a rush to buy a new car before state-funded premiums on "clean" vehicles ended on 31 December. The total for 2011 was 4.5% higher to reach an all-time record of 572,000 new vehicles sold. The market leader was Volkswagen, followed by Renault and Peugeot. Meanwhile, car production rose to over 560,000 vehicles in Flanders last year, 30,000 more than in 2010, despite the closure of the Opel plant in Antwerp. The three producers, Volvo in Ghent, Ford in Genk and Audi in Brussels, performed well in a European market affected by overcapacity. The annual Brussels Motor Show begins on 12 January.

Banking • Dexia

Dexia BIL, the Luxembourg-based affiliate of Dexia Bank, has been sold to the Quatari Precision Capital holding group for €730 million. The move is part of the Quatari family's spending spree on European banks and closely follows the recent acquisition of KBL Private Bank for €1.05 billion.

Gas • The Sniffers

The Sniffers, specialised in technology that detects gas leaks for the oil and gas industries, has been taken over by the US Carlyle Group. The Sniffers, based in Balen, Antwerp province, has operations in more than 20 countries worldwide.

Pharmaceuticals • Arseus

Arseus, supplier of products and services for the health-care industry, has acquired the Polish Pharma Cosmetic company to become Poland's largest distributor of products to the pharmacy sector. Based in Waregem, West Flanders, Arseus operates in 24 countries worldwide.

Property • Cofinimmo

Brussels-based property group Cofinimmo has sold its stake in the Antwerp Citylink office project to the Mercator Verzekeringen group for some €63 million. The company has immediately re-used the cash by paying €108 million for property ownership of 285 branches and offices of the French insurance group MAAF.

Special Edition

Welcome home

LEISURE Bars, books and what's on the box

WORK Employment and retirement

HOME A guide to moving and settling

Newcomer is published by The Bulletin twice a year to give you all the information you need to start a new life in Belgium. Our writers know the country inside-out — so we know the sort of questions people ask and the answers that can make all the difference as you settle away from home.

Getting legal

visas

To simplify travel in Europe, 13 countries, including Belgium, have signed the Schengen agreement, which allows for free movement across borders. However, there are still documents to be obtained and rules to be followed if you plan to stay in Belgium for substantial periods of time.

For European Union citizens who come to Belgium for a period of less than three months, a visa is not usually necessary. These individuals can stay based on their national passport or identity card, provided they repeat their presence and address to the relevant administration within eight days of moving to their new home. This is only necessary if they are not staying with friends or family or in a lodgings. Certain non-EU citizens — such as those from Canada, the US and Japan — do not need a visa for stays under 90 days in any six-month period.

non EU

Non-EU nationals must have a visa if they intend to stay in the country for more than 90 days. The specific type of visa to apply for depends on the individual's purpose (e.g. a 'student' or 'type D'). There are only a small number of reasons for which non-Belgians and non-EU citizens can obtain a visa. This includes employment (self-employed, family reunification, cohabitation and marriage). The documents required are a passport valid for at least six months, a return ticket, a valid conduct issued no more than six months earlier, a medical certificate and a work permit or other documentation explaining why a visa is necessary.

Renting and buying property

renting

In Belgium, there are two common rental leases: a long-term lease for periods between three and nine years and a short-term lease for contracts up to three years. The nine-year lease allows the tenant to break the lease with three months' notice and a fee (a penalty). The rent amount is fixed for nine years, apart from annual increases determined by Belgian law.

The short-term lease may be set for any period up to three years and may not be broken by either tenant or landlord. It may be renewed once only, up to a maximum of three years — for example, a one-year lease may be renewed with a two-year lease.

deposits

The lease will require you to put down a security deposit, normally equal to two months' rent, against any damage caused to the property or fixtures. On moving in, tenants are generally responsible for a detailed examination of the property and the landlord must inspect the property so you don't get charged for them when moving out.

mortgages

If you want to rent a fixed place, it's possible to do so on a leasehold basis, where the landlord agrees to the transformations being made and pays the tenant by reducing the rent. It's best to get legal advice while drawing up this contract.

buying

Buying a home is another viable option if you plan on settling in Belgium on a permanent or semi-permanent basis. The first step is to find a real estate agent or broker. Upon signing, the buyer becomes responsible for the property, and the seller for the period of time a down payment is also required from the buyer (usually about 10 percent of the total cost). Closing follows within four months.

The remainder of the money changes hands at this point. Unfortunately, the price agreed upon in the contract and the amount you end up paying can be quite different. As a rule of thumb, most properties require a 12.5 percent registration tax be paid to the state. However, if you don't own any other properties in Belgium, you are eligible for a rebate.

We can help you find the ideal neighbourhood and the right schools, and point you in the direction of where to learn a language, so you can really integrate into Belgian society. We also talk you through the social scene, getting married — or divorced — and finding a bank or health insurance policy. Not forgetting, of course, our guide to TV, books and bars.

Welcome to Belgium — we hope you like it here as much as we do.

*The Autumn 2011 edition of
Newcomer is on sale at newsstands*

**THE
Bulletin
Newcomer**

Ante up

Turnhout's playing card museum investigates the outlaw history of poker

ANDREAS ILEGEMS

When I arrived in Turnhout, I had my reservations. I was off to visit the National Playing Card Museum and its current exhibition on the history of poker. But I am no poker fanatic. Royal flush, four of a kind, full house. Everybody knows these terms and, sure, legends of whiskey-drinking con men and gun-toting outlaws appeal to me. But the game, which is, I was soon to learn, nearly 200 years old, remains a hazardous undertaking that has its own complicated set of rules. As it is described in one of the many old poker wisdoms dispersed about the walls of the exhibition: "Poker is not a game about life and death; it's much worse".

Aside from its menacing reputation, experts also point out the many positive qualities of the game. Since its beginnings in the 19th century, poker – or "bluff" – gained steadily in popularity. From the US to China, people from all over the world began gathering around the poker table.

I discovered that playing poker is a great way to learn how to deal with risks, as decisions during play are based on probability and psychology. "To host an exhibition about poker is quite tricky," says Filip Cremers, curator of the Playing Card Museum. "It took us some time to figure out how to convey this intricate game to the audience, so those who are unfamiliar with poker can still get a grasp of its history."

Outlaw status

Poker in its modern form emerged in the 1820s in New Orleans, Louisiana, as a simple game with a deck of 20 cards and four players. "Though it was thought to be an American invention, its origins date back to European precursors," explains Cremers.

"Poker is not a game about life and death; it's much worse"

"The basic idea was brought to New Orleans from France and bears a strong resemblance to European gambling games like poque." As it spread north and to the west during the gold rush, poker attracted fortune seekers and adventurers. The game fanned out to the rest of the country by Mississippi river boats, on which gambling was a successful leisure activity. Some shipping owners even transformed their boats into floating saloons. It was a matter of making easy money while entertaining passengers. "Poker is essentially a game about raising the



stakes," says Cremers. "But even more so, it's a game about money."

This explains how the game got its infamous outlaw status – associations with the relatively lawless Old West, the many stories of violence (like Wild Bill Hickok's "dead man's hand") and the widespread cheating. This image of romantic danger was further amplified by popular literature, comic books and later films. The American government and Catholic church took measures to warn people against gambling and its addictive excesses.

"The earliest Dutch report on poker dates back to 1890," says Cremers. "It was a news bulletin about an American clerk who squandered thousands of dollars in government money."

Casino Royale

By the latter part of the 20th century, poker finally became a global phenomenon, evolving from seedy backrooms to flashy casinos and becoming a sporting event with competitions and tournaments taking place somewhere in the world almost every week. It has gone from being primarily a pastime – bound to small groups of mostly male enthusiasts – to a widely popular spectator activity with international audiences and multi-million dollar prizes. And women are a constantly growing part of that interest.

In 1970, the first World Series of Poker – the official world championship – was held in a Las Vegas casino. This annual event attracts players from all over the world to compete for money and titles as the world's top poker players. Last November, the 22-year-old German Pius Heinz

claimed the champion title, which garnered him \$8.7 million – in cash. (An equivalent pile of paper bills is shown at the exhibition.)

In the last decade, more and more young people have been attracted to the challenges of this much celebrated card game. Players can now find literally hundreds of variations, both online and at local casinos and poker rooms. "Obviously the glamorous side of poker was encouraged by the success of the 2006 Bond movie *Casino Royale*," says Cremers.

One of the key moments in that film takes place during a high-stakes poker game. Turnhout's Cartamundi – a worldwide leader in the production and sales of playing cards – printed a special deck that was used in the film. You'll find it at the exhibition, along with other unique sets of playing cards, such as those used in the cabins of military submarines.

Poker aficionados will undoubtedly find the *Poker* exhibition to their liking, but novices can also learn a lot here, travelling through time to get a grasp of the history of the game and its European precursors, discovering the various alternatives of play and getting to know different gambling techniques.

This small but charming exhibition deserves nothing less than a full house.♦

Poker

Until 22 October
National Playing Card Museum
Druivenstraat 18, Turnhout

→ www.tram41.be

National Playing Card Museum



In 1826, entrepreneur Pieter Jozef Brepols printed his very first playing card. The market was ripe and the business brisk. By the 20th century, Brepols was the only playing card manufacturer in the low countries, and it led to the forming of Cartamundi in 1970 – one of the biggest players in the world in card manufacturing. It sells cards all over the world, including healthy business in the US, Russia and China, and is a licensed manufacturer for Walt Disney, Harry Potter and James Bond movies. The National Playing Card Museum opened in 1996, one of the few in the world devoted

to the history of playing cards. With its vast collection of cards dating back to the 16th century and historical documents as old as 1100 BC, visitors can get interactively acquainted with this unique graphics industry.

The museum also emphasises the many technical aspects of the card game industry, demonstrating different printing procedures, while temporary exhibitions show different aspects of card games. The icing on the cake is the colossal and splendidly restored steam engine, unique in Europe.

WEEK IN ARTS & CULTURE

The Flemish comic strip association Onafhankelijke Stripgilde has awarded its annual **StripVos prize for an entire career** to Robert Merhottein. Better known by his pen name Merho, he is the author of *The Kiekeboes*, which celebrates 35 years of publication this year. The association noted that *The Kiekeboes* is the last remaining series of comic albums that stands on its own without the support of other media and has seen such long-term success because of "an intelligent story arc and an accurate response to the trends and characteristics of the times". The prize was awarded during Turnhout's Strip Festival last month, as was the **Flemish Culture Prize for Strips**, which went to Steven Dupre, known for several independent series, such as *Wolf*, *Coma* and his latest, *Midgard*.

→ www.stripgilde.be

Are you tired of those many holiday out-of-office messages that all sound the same? Stichting Lezen (Reading Foundation) feels your pain and asked five Flemish poets to pen something a bit more creative. You can download their **unique out-of-office messages** to use in your own signature line. It's meant to gear you up for Gedichtendag, or Poetry Day, which takes place across Flanders and Brussels on 26 January.

→ www.gedichtendag.com/outoffice

The Belgian Film Archive has released the first two DVDs in the new **Henri Storck Collection**. A pioneer of Belgian cinema, Storck shot newsreels, documentaries and short fictions from the 1930s to the 1980s and is particularly known for his work in Ostend, his hometown, and for his work on social issues. He was one of three who founded the film archives in 1938. The first two DVDs are titled *Images of Ostend* and *The Social Films*. Two more DVDs, the documentary *Boerensymfonie* (Farmers Symphony) and a collection of profiles of Belgian artists, are due out a year from now.

→ www.cinematek.be

Flemish jewellery designer Rembrandt Jordan has won a prestigious HRD Award, the "Academy Awards of the diamond jewellery design industry". Sponsored by the Antwerp World Diamond Centre, the 2011 ceremony took place last month in Shanghai. The theme was "You and Me", with designers being asked to consider duality in their designs. Jordan's pair of brooches, meant to be worn together, express the relationship and interaction of two objects or people. Brussels-based designer Mei Lee also won an HRD award for her elaborate "Fire for life" headwear, inspired by women who carry home firewood on their heads.

→ www.hrdawards.com

(Lisa Bradshaw)

Daring man

Theatre director Jan Decorte on his passion for Shakespeare, Purcell and the importance of intuition

MARIE DUMONT

The Daring Man, a narrow café on Brussels' Vlaanderenstraat, with grimy wood-panelled walls and a hissing espresso machine, stands out like the remnant of some bygone age amid the trendy shops and bars that seem to have taken over the rest of the street. The place is alive every evening with a bustling, mostly Dutch-speaking crowd of regulars. Rock singer Arno can usually be spotted brooding in a corner. And, come rain or shine, you're likely to find Flemish theatre director Jan Decorte sipping a glass of white wine with Sigrid Vinks, his partner in life and on stage.

Decorte and Vinks are both from Antwerp but live in Brussels – in the posh upper part of town, on Louizalaan. The café, though, is like their second home. "We go there every day," Vinks tells me when I call them up to make an appointment.

Shakespeare redux

Decorte, 61, is often referred to as "the *enfant terrible* of the Flemish stage" in a pale attempt to capture his huge and manifold talent, which embraces drama as well as cinema, dance and poetry. His plays are rough gems, often spun from old myths and stories, with a raw, elemental energy about them.

The man is not very well known outside Belgium, although he and Vinks did produce a play in French for the Avignon Festival once, with music by Arno and dance by Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker. At home, however, Decorte (*pictured*) is in constant demand. Right now he's directing two productions at a few days' interval. The first, which premieres this week at Brussels' Kaaitheteater before touring Flanders, is called *Niks of niks* (*Nothing or Nothing*), a high-octane reworking in Dutch of Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*. The second, at Antwerp's deSingel, is the repeat of his much-admired

Kunstenfestivaldesarts production from last spring, a pared-down and deeply personal take on the baroque opera *The Indian Queen*.

Of the former, he says: "I read the play in English, understood about one third of it, let it swirl around in my head a bit, then rewrote it my own way." In his more than 30-year career, he has similarly absorbed and regurgitated a great many classics – by Aeschylus, Sophocles, Goethe and Chekhov, among others. Shakespeare, though, holds a special place in his creative universe. He's done *Macbeth* and *King Lear* and now has his eye on *The Merchant of Venice*. "I love his use of language," says Decorte. "Shakespeare and Marlowe and all; they worked at a time when English wasn't set in stone yet. Everything had to be invented. They could be very creative with language. And Shakespeare was the best in that."

Vinks joins in. "In a way, that's what you do, too: invent your own language. It's not regular Dutch, but something very child-like, archaic and personal. It's an intensified use of language, stripped down to its essence."

To say that our interview went smoothly would be plain lying

Shakespeare may even be the reason why Decorte embraced theatre in the first place. He remembers experiencing a shock when he first read *Macbeth* in a bilingual edition his mother had given him as a birthday present. Feeling the urge to "do something with it but not knowing exactly what," he dropped out of university and signed up to do drama at Brussels' Erasmus University College.



© Danny Willems

Analyse at your own risk

A tall man with long, grey hair and a stern expression, Decorte is guarded but not unfriendly. To say that our interview went smoothly, however, would be plain lying. To an outside viewer, our encounter must have seemed straight out of some absurdist drama as we spectacularly failed to establish a connection, our voices drowned in the mounting din of surrounding conversations. There were long silences, sudden interruptions, rapid-fire questions and evasive answers. Clearly, he and I don't speak the same language. That's fair enough: Decorte believes that his works are better experienced than analysed. Art should speak to our emotions and have nothing to do with the intellect. "Shakespeare wrote like a 12-year-old, and that's something I try to imitate," he says. "Because it opens up something in people. It makes them ready to receive the soul of the production. All we do is leave images in their eyes."

Adds Vinks: "When we did *The Indian Queen* in May, a lot of people were surprised that they didn't feel the need for an explanation."

The Indian Queen is Decorte's second opera. His first was in 2008, when he put up *Dido and Aeneas*, also by the 17th-century English composer Henry Purcell. Both shows, performed in English, are formal, haunting rituals involving the Ghent-based Baroque ensemble B'Rock, whose musicians can be seen on stage, barefoot but otherwise dressed in black.

"Purcell's music is beautiful," Decorte says. "It's clear and open, full of soul. And the great thing about him is that he doesn't care about the plot."

Neither does Decorte: his staging gleefully scraps the play by John Dryden that served as a backbone

for Purcell's music. Gone are the stodgy spoken dialogues and the convoluted intrigue between Aztecs and conquistadores. What's left is attractively opaque, abstract and timeless. One might quibble that he is blatantly misusing his sources, but so did Dryden and Purcell, who knew next to nothing of the Mexico they were describing. Misunderstandings, their opera seems to prove, can sometimes be the stuff of great art.

Drama queen

Vinks' role in both operas is intriguing: She glides around the stage, diligently setting up props and pushing performers to the right position when it's their turn to sing, enhancing the work's sense of artificiality. "I'm a kind of master of ceremonies, a *metteur en scène* in a very literal way," she suggests. "All the acting is concentrated on me, which is handy: Most opera singers can't act."

I suspect that's close to her real-life role as well: She's the one organising the couple's agenda, answering phone calls, preventing interviews from veering to complete disaster. She and Decorte met, of all places, in a café, when she was still a literature student in Antwerp and he already an established theatremaker. These days their plays are largely

collaborative efforts. Do they sit at home constantly bouncing ideas off each other? "No, we hardly talk at all," says Decorte, ordering himself another glass of wine.

"There is no need to say much," Vinks continues. "It's all intuitive, a matter of trust. It's the same with our actors. We tell them, 'here's your text, do with it what you feel you can do.' It's a big responsibility for them because freedom always comes with responsibility. But it also makes working together pretty stress-free: We rehearse for half an hour, perhaps an hour, then the day is done. We go to the café, and we talk – about everything but work."

Niks of niks

12-14 January

Kaaitheteater

Saintelettesquare 19, Brussels

In Dutch with no surtitles

► www.kaaitheater.be

The Indian Queen

18-19 January

deSingel

Desguinlei 25, Antwerp

In English with no surtitles

► www.desingel.be

Decorte in short

On Shakespeare

"I love his use of language. [He] worked at a time when English wasn't set in stone yet. Everything had to be invented."

On Purcell

"His music is clear and open, full of soul. And the great thing is that he doesn't care about the plot."

On working with his partner

"We hardly talk at all."



Decorte's *Indian Queen* gleefully scraps the play by John Dryden, leaving an abstract interpretation of Purcell's beautiful music

Going out with a bang

Popular musical comics De Nieuwe Snaar are calling it a day after 3,600 shows

CHRISTOPHE VERBIEST

Don't call us just a theatre troupe, a comedy ensemble or a music group," warns Kris De Smet of De Nieuwe Snaar during one of those last grey days of 2011. "We're all of that."

It might sound like bragging; but it isn't. De Nieuwe Snaar (The New Chord) hold a unique position in the Flemish performing arts world. Their performances are a seamless blend of songs and gags, strung together with a narrative.

Their new show *Koñec*, a sort of retrospective made up of material from previous shows, will be their last, and this month the foursome embarks on an intensive tour of Flanders and the Netherlands. It's clear they're not stopping due to a lack of popularity.

At the start of their career, they also played in France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Switzerland and Canada. "Strangely, when the integration of the European Union grew stronger, it became more and more difficult to play abroad," says De Smet (second from left in photo).

"I have the impression that with the transformation of the EEC into the EU, the different member states, on a cultural level, became more protectionist."

But there was another reason for the early success abroad, says De Smet. He started De Nieuwe Snaar in 1982 with his older brother, Jan, and Geert Vermeulen. (Walter Poppeliers joined the band in 1999.) Before that, the De Smet siblings had been playing for more than 10 years as De Snaar, a folk and skiffle group. "De Snaar intensively toured the European folk circuit. When De Nieuwe Snaar started, we could build on that reputation. Moreover, those first years we played the majority of our shows abroad, with only a minority of performances in Flanders."

In 1984 De Nieuwe Snaar turned their first theatre show, *Fragmenten van de geillustreerde muziek* (*Fragments of the Illustrated Music*), into a TV special called *Musicomicolor*. It won the Bronze Rose at the Rose d'Or festival in Switzerland, the most important awards in Europe for entertainment television.

"The award boosted our popularity in Flanders: more shows, bigger venues and a better long-term prospect," says De Smet. "Our shows became bigger, but abroad we never outgrew the small theatres, which led to logistical problems. So, at one point we chose the certainty that Flanders and the Netherlands had to offer."

The final curtain

Anyone who has seen De Nieuwe Snaar's recent shows will agree that the band is still going strong. So, why call it a day? "We had the feeling our story had reached its conclusion," De Smet says simply. "We worked in cycles of three years: one year to create the show, followed by two years of playing. That first year has become more and more difficult; it wasn't always fun anymore. Instead of withering away, we'd like to go out with a bang." And, he adds: "We stop the band as friends, but I'm not sure we would have stayed friends if we had continued."

Koñec is De Nieuwe Snaar's 11th show, a compilation of the best bits of the previous 10. "We thought it would have been easier to make than the previous shows because we didn't have to come up with new songs." He laughs wryly. "In the end, it was as backbreaking a process as before!"

Every previous show had a different tone and narrative, he explains, so "finding a unity has been a hell of a job. We've killed loads of favourites. And of course, we did add some new things to make the passage between songs and sketches smoother."

Koñec is the Czech word for "end". "I learned the word when I was a child," says De Smet, "and Flemish television used to broadcast a lot of animated Czech films. They always ended with *Koñec*, which sounded mysterious, almost magical at that age."

But the end isn't really near. De Nieuwe Snaar will be playing *Koñec* for the rest of this season. And they're planning to play the show the whole of next season, too. So the end won't come before the middle of 2013.



And they hope to continue the show even beyond that. "It depends mainly on the Netherlands. Due to drastic cuts in the arts budgets, theatres there have implemented a new system. Up to now we were paid a fixed fee, regardless of the number of spectators. In future, we'll just get a percentage of the receipts. So we have to take the financial risks ourselves. We'll see."♦

11-13 January

Ancienne Belgique

Anspachlaan 110, Brussels

→ www.abconcerts.be

See website for a complete schedule of shows

→ www.denieuwesnaar.be

History as a page-turner

Everything, but really everything, you always wanted to know about De Nieuwe Snaar but were afraid to ask, you can find now in *Het verhaal van De Nieuwe Snaar* (The Story of De Nieuwe Snaar) by Kris De Smet. It's a painstakingly detailed book, which starts at the first rehearsal of the original De Snaar, on 3 October 1970, when De Smet was only 15, and ends in October last year, during the rehearsals for their final show *Koñec*. It has almost 500 pages of text (small print!) and more than 100 pages of illustrations. De Smet's most important sources were his own vast archive and the scrapbooks his brother kept. "By going through all that information, I also kept remembering

things," he says. It might easily have become a list of uninteresting details, but since it's written with loads of gusto and spiced up with humour, it ultimately becomes a real page-turner.

"The idea of writing this book has been germinating for some years," admits De Smet, "but I hesitated for a long time, since I'm not an author. On the other hand, I'm an avid reader, and I'm very fond of biographies. I think I know what a good book should be like. If we had asked an external biographer, I would have needed to tell him or her the whole story anyway. So I thought, let's put it down on paper first." He started writing at the beginning of 2011,

five days a week, from morning till evening. "I got the hang of it, and the publisher gave positive feedback on the first chapters, so I decided I could achieve it without a ghost writer."

De Smet is even working on ideas for a next book, though he says it's too early to share them. At 57, writing might be a new career, although he doesn't rule out music. "Honestly, I have no idea yet what I will do after *Koñec*." And he ends with a big smile: "I'll take every interesting proposal into consideration."



The complete history of De Snaar old and nieuwe in Kris De Smet's new book



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www.tvbrussel.be

Chic antiques

GALERIE FLORE

MARIE DUMONT

Forget the Zavel and Sint-Katelijne – the elegant Elsene district is fast becoming Brussels' new hotspot for fine arts and design. Xavier Hufkens, Isabelle de Borchgrave and Almine Rech already have spaces there, and they've now been joined by the sophisticated (and a tad eccentric) French antiques dealer Flore de Brantes. Two months after opening, her Galerie Flore, which takes up all three floors of an Art-Nouveau mansion a short walk from Louizalaan, still feels like a well-guarded secret. Without a sign to advertise its presence – save for a striking modern chandelier that can be seen from the street and neighbouring houses – entering it feels a little like trespassing into somebody's home.

In a way, you are: de Brantes' initial plan when she bought the house five years ago was to move in with her husband, two children and the family dog. "But the building is listed," she sighs. "It will be ages before we can make the necessary transformations."

She decided to put the wait to good use and turn the space into a gallery. A bright welter of rooms with white walls and stripped concrete floors, it is filled with an odd assortment of old and new: dainty gilded chairs stand next to bold

modern consoles, old Chinese vases are displayed alongside contemporary paintings. The effect is fresh and invigorating and is a particular hit with adventurous Flemish collectors. De Brantes, whose father is a French aristocrat and whose mother is American, grew up in the Loire valley, surrounded by books and antiques. "My childhood was spent in blissful ignorance of the modern world," she recalls. "For a while, after the 1973 oil crisis, my family even stopped using a car; we went around in a horse-drawn carriage."

When she decided to train as an art dealer, she naturally specialised in the only style she'd ever known: 18th-century French furniture. She worked for Christie's in New York, then was hired to furnish a replica Louis XVI mansion being built in Rhode Island – "a genuine period building," she smiles, "improved with elevators and air conditioning."

In the 1990s, she opened her own gallery in Paris, where she began to include contemporary design as well. "Nobody wants to furnish their homes with only antiques these days," she says. "And the opposite is true, too: all-contemporary interiors can seem a little cold."

De Brantes' one driving concern is quality: beautiful materials

and impeccable craftsmanship. Both are evident in the works of the three contemporary artists she's picked for her first temporary exhibition: London-born Ian Davenport creates smooth abstract works with industrial paint, often pouring it from a syringe to form brightly coloured vertical lines. "He can throw a hundred away before making one he likes," de Brantes tells me.

The dynamic compositions produced by the French twosome Todd & Fitch are just as exacting, featuring hundreds of hand-made disks, each painted a different colour. Lit up from the sides with LED lights, their bold shapes seem to come floating into the room. As for neo-baroque Parisian designer Hervé van der Straeten, he revisits old forms and techniques with a modern twist. He is the one who designed that impressive chandelier displayed at the window. With its bronze branches curving in around an irregular rock-crystal ball, it vaguely resembles some oversized piece of antique jewellery. "It's made to last," de Brantes says. "You wouldn't want to wear it as an earring, though."



Ian Davenport - Todd & Fitch - Hervé van der Straeten

Until 17 February
Galerie Flore
40 Dalstraat, Brussels

→ www.galerieflore.com

CLASSICAL

Born two centuries apart on either side of the Atlantic, Mozart and Thelonious Monk seem light years apart musically – one known for his pure, balanced compositions, the other for percussive and discordant performances that once owed him the nickname of "the elephant on the keyboard". A concert in Brussels, however, aims to show that there is more in common between the two than the first two letters of their last names. Both were fiendishly talented pianists, for one thing. And both regarded composing and improvising as two sides of the same coin.

The links between these two musical practices is really the crux of this concert, which will be performed on two pianos by a pair of Flemish musicians: Liebrecht Vanbeckevoort, a former Queen Elisabeth laureate and closet improviser, and Jef Neve, who trained as a classical pianist but is generally recognised today as one of this region's finest jazzmen.

Typically, Vanbeckevoort will perform a Fantasy by Mozart, but also pieces by Ravel, Liszt and Schubert, on which Neve will ad-lib (although the roles will occasionally be reversed). As Neve puts it, the line between the two types of repertoires is very thin indeed: We'll hear classical strains in his jazzy improvisations, but also the hesitations, the mood shifts, the humour and sheer whimsical spirit of classical pieces that we normally regard as set in stone. (Marie Dumont)

→ www.brussel.davidsfonds.be



If Mozart & Monk Were Brothers

27 March, 20.00
CC Oudergem, Brussels

MORE CLASSICAL THIS WEEK

Antwerp

Christine Schäfer & Julien Salemkour: Opernwelt's 2007 Opera Singer of the Year, the German Christine Schäfer, joins her countryman, the young pianist Julien Salemkour, for Mozart's Ausgewählte Lieder, Alban Berg's Sieben frühe Lieder and Anton Webern's Fünf Lieder nach Gedichten von Stefan George, Opus 3.

JAN 19 19.15 introduction at deSingel, Desguinlei 25
www.desingel.be

Brussels

National Orchestra of Belgium: The country's orchestra is fronted by Belgian cellist Marie Hallynck and conductor Gilbert Varga in this vivid interpretation of Dvorak's Amour de la patrie et histoires terrifiantes
JAN 13 20.00 at Bozar, Ravensteinstraat 23
www.bozar.be

Agenda

KIDS

He's a burly, bearded sailor on a journey around the world, and he sings songs like *Ik zag twee beren* (I Saw Two Bears) and *Er was een vogelke da kon nie meer kakke* (There Was a Birdie That Couldn't Go Potty). Kapitein Winokio has got Flemish kids wrapped around his nimble finger. His CDs and books are flying out the door just as quickly as tickets to see him perform live (including, most recently, six consecutive sold-out shows at Ancienne Belgique). So hurry up and claim your place now for this irresistible entertainer and his entourage of truly talented musicians. (Robin Boyle)

→ www.kapiteinwinokio.be



Kapitein Winokio

18-19 February, 15.00
Bourla Schouwburg, Antwerp

MORE KIDS' ACTIVITIES THIS WEEK

Aalst

Twist: Kopergierty and New International Encounter present the story of Oliver Twist (in Dutch)
JAN 15 15.00 at CC De Werf, Molenstraat 51
www.ccdewerf.be

Hasselt

Plop en de Fopkampioen: Kabouter Plop and his friends meet a mysterious jester gnome in this stage show (in Dutch)
JAN 15 13.00 & 15.15 at Grenslandhallen Gouw Verwilghensingel 70
www.studio100.be

DANCE

Maybe Forever

20-21 January, 20.30
Kaaithéâtre, Brussels

Two individuals flit across the stage. They're avoiding each other, then trying desperately to connect. Meanwhile the law of nature keeps reminding them of their own futility, their transient human existence. But this beautifully melancholic push-pull continues almost obsessively. They don't know what else to do, these two lonely souls all too aware of what's to come of them. This seething performance

is choreographed and performed by Brussels-based Meg Stuart and Vienna's Philipp Gehmacher, two major names in the world of contemporary dance. Their moves embody love and loss, flowing in perfect symbiosis with the live music, haunting guitar licks and lyrics by Brussels-based singer-songwriter Niko Hafkenscheid. (RB)

→ www.kaaithéâtre.be



© Eva Wurtinger

MORE DANCE THIS WEEK

Brussels

It's going to get worse and worse, my friend: Voetvolk presents this premiere of the latest work by choreographer Lisbeth Gruwez, on the power of speech (in English)
JAN 12-13 20.30 at Beursschouwburg
A Ortsstraat 20-28
www.beursschouwburg.be

Leuven

Cesena: Rosas performs to a 14th-century score by Graindelavoix in this latest piece by Flemish choreographer Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker
JAN 12-13 20.00 at 30CC Schouwburg, Bondgenotenlaan 21
www.30CC.be

Mechelen

In jouw schoenen (In Your Shoes): Interactive contemporary dance show for kids (ages 4 and up)
JAN 14-15 15.00 at Figurentheater De Maan, Minderbroedersgang 1 & 3
www.demaan.be

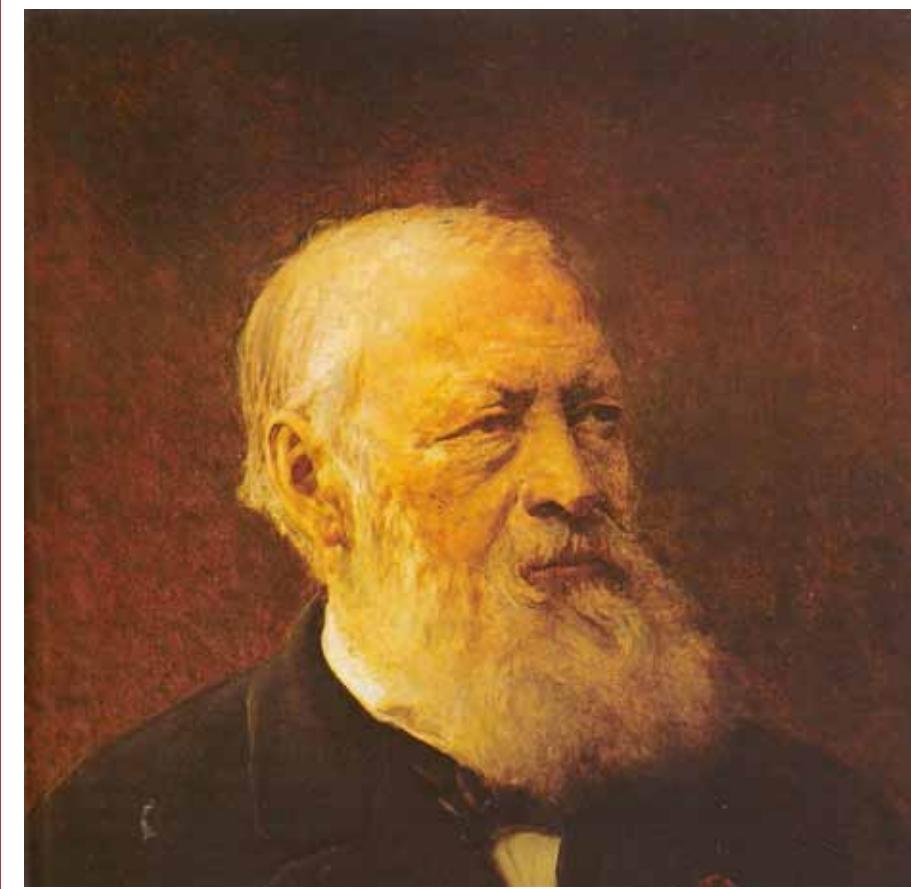
LITERATURE

Hendrik Conscience Jubilee

14 January to 1 December
Schilde (Antwerp Province)

Two hundred years ago, a man was born in Antwerp who insisted on writing books in Flemish to the disgrace of his French father (among others). Since the success of his 1838 legendary tome *De Leeuw van Vlaanderen* (*The Lion of Flanders*), Hendrik Conscience has been credited with awakening the Flemish people to a sense of cultural identity and spurring the national movement that began in the 19th century and continues to this day. Conscience was a real maverick to be penning novels in his mother tongue at a time when it was considered vulgar – at least according to members of academia, politicians and the upper class. "I do not know why, but I find the Flemish language indescribably romantic, mysterious, profound, energetic, even savage," Conscience once wrote. On this 200th anniversary of his birth, Antwerp is honouring the writer with a year-long programme of events, from readings and exhibitions to guided walks, bike rides, concerts and more. (RB)

→ www.baasgansendonck.be/hc2012



HENDRIK CONSCIENCE THIS WEEK

Jubilee Year Opening: Writer Gaston Duriez gives an opening speech, followed by an official ceremony to kick off the jubilee year with live music and a reception
JAN 14 18.00 at Schilde Town Hall, Brasschaatsebaan 30, Schilde

Literary Brunch: Walk organised by Davidsfonds, followed by brunch and a talk by University of Antwerp Literature Professor Reinhart Ceulemans
JAN 22 21.15 at Dennenhof, De Rentfort 9, Schilde

WinterJazz Festival 2012

17-28 January

Marni & Flagey, Brussels



None other than Philip Catherine kicks off this fifth edition of Brussels' favourite winter jazz fest. The London-born Flemish guitarist, who has been at the forefront of the European jazz scene since the 1960s and is sometimes referred to as a "jazz romantic", will be accompanied by prize-winning Italian composer and pianist Nicola Andrioli. Another highlight, and something entirely different, is Frown-I-Brown (*pictured*), Brussels' wickedest

jazz hip-hop quartet, promising to rock the house on 19 January. At the whole other end of the spectrum, there's Marquito Velez with his swinging gypsy jazz and flamenco guitar group (25 January). To close the event, 20 musicians from seven European countries will perform a celebratory tribute to the cutting-edge network JazzPlaysEurope. One €35 pass gets you entrance to three concerts of choice. (RB)

→ www.winterjazz.be



© Audrey Caeys

MORE JAZZ THIS WEEK

Antwerp

WIRDo: Jazz, funk, world and rock fusion quartet
JAN 13 22.00 at Buster, Kaasrui 1
www.busterpodium.be

Ghent

Naná Vasconcelos & Ivan Paduart Quintet: The Brazilian percussionist joins forces with the top European jazz pianist
JAN 12 20.00 at Vooruit, Sint-Pietersnieuwstraat 23
www.vooruit.be
Joep Peeters Quintet: Fun New Orleans jazz band from the Netherlands
JAN 13 20.00 at Lazy River Jazzclub, Stadhuissteeg 5
www.lazyriverjazzclubgent.be

DUSK 'TIL DAWN

KATRIEN LINDEMANS

Mr Wong

Zwarte Lievevrouwstraat 10
Brussels

And what are your good intentions for 2012? Quit smoking? Stop drinking? Go out more (or less)? Make new friends? Visit the hottest venue Mr Wong in Brussels?

Mr Wong sure knows how to create mystery. This is how he's described on the internet: "Of unknown age and Asian origins, Mr Wong recently arrived in Brussels. His parties are powerful, wild, glamorous and funky. Their reputation has been whispered among men across centuries and continents. Welcome to his bar, in the centre of Brussels, where at some point during the night you might see him."

Mr Wong's bar – where almost everything is possible – is right in Chinatown, bang in the centre, and

surrounded by great bars and restaurants. With its Art Deco interior, hardwood floors, warm red tones, not-too-loud music and far-from-pretentious atmosphere, Mr Wong only needed a few events to attract a loyal crowd of nightcrawlers looking for something a bit more sophisticated.

This month, Mr Wong throws all sorts of gigs and parties, from Wednesday until Saturday. There is, for instance, deep disco and tropical dynamite with Funky Bompa (funky granddad) on Wednesday 11 and 25 January. Or how about some great house music by The Criime & Asura on Thursday 19? Expect the best party music on Fridays and Saturdays: Join the House of Vice on Friday 20 and dance to the tracks of Brussels DJ Rick Shiver and the French Fresh Leather. Come on Saturday 28 if you like electro pop, as We Are Enfant Terrible is playing live.

For the full list of events, look for Mr Wong on Facebook.

A Strong Tendency towards Curiosity

26 January-28 February

Sint-Gorikshallen, Brussels

PHOTOGRAPHY

Not only are the Sint-Goriks Halls architecturally stunning to look at, but this month the building around the corner from the Beurs plays gallery to a collection of equally stunning works by young photographers. Worbz.com is the platform that makes it all possible, encouraging up-and-coming artists with an eye for unique snaps to show off

their work to an international public. One of the featured artists is 25-year-old French photographer Frédéric Arnould, otherwise known as Cetrobo (*works pictured*). To ensure the greatest amount of exposure for these budding talents, the exhibition is free and open every day. (RB)

→ www.zilvermuseum.be



© cetrobo.com

MORE PHOTOGRAPHY THIS WEEK

Aalst

My Last Life: Works by the Brussels-based American photographer Vincent Meessen based on the mythological character Herbe from author Roland Barthes
Until MAR 3 at Netwerk, Houtkaai
www.netwerk-art.be

Berlare (East Flanders)

Red Journey: Works by Flemish photographer Nick Hannes on the lost glory of the former Soviet Union
Until JAN 29 at CC Stroming, Dorp 101
www.nickhannes.be

Oostduinkerke

Vissersvrouw: Portraits of fishermen's wives by Flemish photographer Wouter Rawoens
Until FEB 15 at the National Fishery Museum, Pastoor Schmitzstraat 5
www.visserijmuseum.be



bite

ROBYN BOYLE

Il Mezzogiorno ★★★

What a great place for a birthday party. This stylish townhouse on the Leie river flung its doors open in 1997 on the whim of one homesick Sicilian named Michele who sensibly put Dario in the kitchen and Sonia behind all the fresh pasta and desserts.

They've done a great job of recreating a little bit of Italy in Ghent. Our party of eight is seated at a long wooden table enveloped in warm ochre walls and dim lighting. The two dining rooms are adjoined by the kitchen, requiring you to pass through and receive a welcoming "Buona sera" from the chef.

As we have something to celebrate, we start by ordering two bottles of dry red Italian table wine. With such a large group, we're limited in the number of main dishes we can order. But this is not a problem, as we easily agree on three orders of roast pigeon, three orders of ravioli and two orders of risotto.

My roast pigeon is a good-sized chunk of meat cloaked in a sweet and nutty red wine and chestnut sauce – a perfect sauce for the winter holiday season (*pictured*). We suspect that the meat, with its distinct earthy and mildly gamey flavour, might be wild pigeon as it on the tough side. The oven-roasted, skin-on potato wedges are simple and delicious with a sprinkling of

pinkish-orange, buttery scampi.

sea salt, high-quality olive oil and sprigs of fresh rosemary. Next to this is a mixed leafy green salad.

The next time I visit a restaurant that specialises in the authentic, grandmother-inspired cuisine of Southern Italy, I will do better by ordering something other than meat and potatoes. Most of my dining companions knew what they were doing when they went for the risotto and pasta dishes. The risotto is my favourite by far, creamy and al dente at the same time, with a huge amount of flavour from sautéed wild mushrooms and fresh parmesan shavings.

And confirming for us all that a good meal doesn't have to include red meat, the ravioli is also top-notch. Obviously fresh, the pasta is al dente and stuffed with a tasty broccoli-parmesan mixture. The surrounding sauce is a simple combination of tomato and olive oil, with here and there a curled-up piece of

pinkish-orange, buttery scampi.

The birthday girl decides to end the night with tiramisu, and the rest of us follow suit. It's just as it should be: a thick layer of creamy whipped mascarpone and a dusting of cocoa, followed by a spongy layer of espresso-infused ladyfingers. The bill comes to about €30 a head.

→ www.ilmezzogiorno.be

Contact Bite at flandersbite@gmail.com



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TALKING SPORTS

Clijsters stumbles on her last lap

It bodes ill for her long-planned glorious finale: Last week Flemish tennis player Kim Clijsters suffered an injury scare midway through her semi-final at the Brisbane International after pain shot through her left hip. Although one set up against Slovakian player Daniela Hantuchova, she promptly pulled out of the tournament. "I couldn't go forward, and I couldn't put any pressure on when I was going for my serve," she said. "It was just spasming up and it was getting worse throughout the first set."

The immediate issue for Clijsters is the defence of her Australian Open crown, which she won last year, beating China's Li Na in the final. Her team said she should be ready for Melbourne but still needs to rest for a few days and get intensive treatment.

But it also raises obvious concerns about whether the 28-year-old will be able to complete her season – and her career – in style as she counts down to her end-of-year retirement from tennis.

Last year, the four-time Grand Slam title winner was sidelined from many tournaments: She withdrew from Wimbledon due to a foot injury, suffered an abdominal injury at a Toronto WTA event and was forced to skip the US Open where she was the double defending champion. Currently 13th in the WTA rankings, Clijsters has long repeated that she will retire at the end of this year, perhaps after the London Olympics. The date offers her a focus, but it also underlines her mortality. Clijsters, of course, has already retired once, in 2007. But two years and one baby girl



Clijsters during the semi-finals in Brisbane, from which she dropped out after experiencing hip and thigh pain

later, she announced her comeback. It was an extraordinary return to the sport: Retiring with just one major, the US Open, to her name, when she came back she notched two more and, last January, the Australian title.

But this time around, injuries seem to be finally catching up with the Miss Congeniality of tennis. In just one year since her Melbourne triumph, the injuries have become more frequent and the recovery times longer. Clijsters understandably wants to go out on a high in her final year, but her body is faltering in this final furlong. While fans far beyond Flanders will be willing her on, she will still have to summon up all her mental and physical resources if she is to grasp a prize in the year to come.

→ www.kimclijsters.be

LEO CENDROWICZ

THE LAST WORD . . .

Speaking in tongues

"I don't understand why ministers don't take the trouble to speak the language of 60% of the population. It's time the Walloon side made an effort."

Federal foreign minister Didier Reynders, a Walloon, argues in favour of speaking Dutch

Win some, lose some

"I paid €117,000 tax last year, and I was happy to do it. Without social security I wouldn't be where I am now. My parents were always too poor to bring me up."

Author Dimitri Verhulst called on Belgians to fill in their taxes correctly

Snowed under

"There was no point in staying any longer. You couldn't ski, and the electricity had gone out. There was no lighting in the rooms. For breakfast, the hotel cooks had to make do with gaslight."

Worst ski holiday ever as Flemish tourists in Austria are trapped by heavy snowfalls

Heavyweight politics

"Bart is an outstanding pupil with a huge character. It's great that he's sticking so strictly to the Pronokal diet."

Chris Goossens, doctor of Beerschot football club, is training N-VA president Bart De Wever, who has lost 16 kg since 18 November

NEXT WEEK IN FLANDERS TODAY #213

Cover story

Flanders is big on psychoanalysis – both in studies and in practice – but recently a controversy has emerged as to whether the famous "talking cure" is really effective. We talk to Flemish professors and psychoanalysts about Freud, dreams and the future of the couch

Tourism

The new MooF (Museum of Original Figurines) in Brussels is home to thousands of comic figurines, beautifully displayed in tableaux. It's loads of fun to just browse, but it's also a history of the Belgian comic

Arts

Legends abound regarding Matilda of Flanders, the daughter of Baldwin V, Count of Flanders, and Adèle of France – from William the Conqueror's conquest of her to her supposed revenge on a Saxon named Brihtric. It's high time for a good biography, so we talk to the author of the new book *Matilda: Queen of the Conqueror*