

videodocumentation of the performance: <http://vimeo.com/maximilianhaas>

# BALTHAZAR

*Balthazar* is the first result of a long-term artistic research project by David Weber-Krebs (Director) and Maximilian Haas (Dramaturge), which looks at animals and their behaviour on stage. The first outcome of *Balthazar* was rehearsed and staged at the mime department of the Amsterdam School for the Arts as part of a project with students in March 2011.



## THE PERFORMANCE

*Balthazar* is a piece for one animal performer and six human performers. The protagonist is a donkey named Balthazar who is central to every action that takes place on stage. The project was inspired by Robert Bresson's film *Au hazard Balthazar* (1966), which tells the eventful life story of a donkey: from his early adoption by a human family, through several changes of owners and tasks, until his lonely death; the animal spirals down towards its tragic destiny. The film enacts the dramaturgy of ancient tragedies (especially as understood by Walter Benjamin) and of the Christian passion. These two leading Western narratives concern the isolation of a single outstanding and exemplary person – who represents mankind as a whole – and the fulfilment of his destiny. Bresson takes as his central figure who suffers a distressful fate an animal – that most indulgent of beasts, a donkey. By so doing, he brings animality into the very heart of Western tales that track the course of man into his own being.

Unlike in the movie, the human actors in *Balthazar* have no names and no specified or stable characterisation, and there is no plot. Instead, it is a loose collection of events that happen to or with the animal throughout the performance. The piece sets and modifies performative constellations involving the animal,

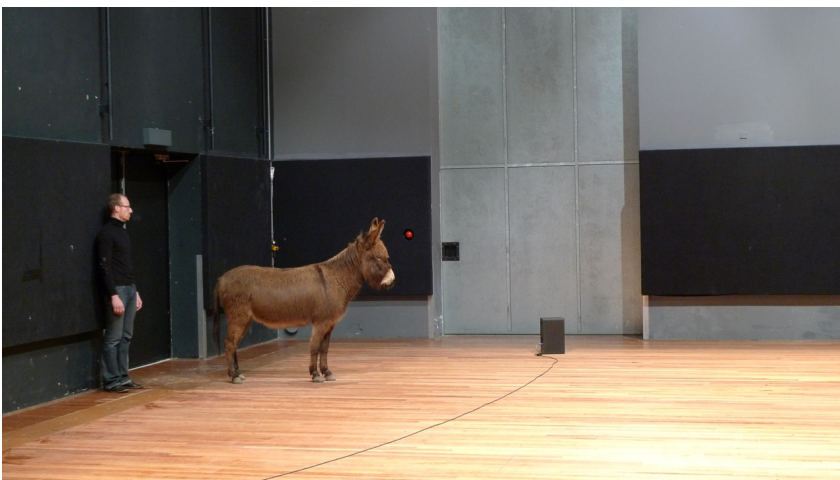
the human performers and the audience, thereby developing theatrical experiments with notions of animality and the otherness of nature. *Balthazar* repeats on stage the artistic approach to the animal applied by Bresson on film: the donkey (representing nothing other than itself) is transferred into an alien artistic context designed for representing humankind – and this in turn impacts on the context in which it is placed.

*Balthazar* juxtaposes scenes in which the animal is involved in simple constellations and patterns of movement, with scenes in which the human performers influence the situation by superimposing fragments of narration onto it that present cultural projections about the animal and evoke these projections in the audience. The piece thus shifts back and forth from performance to theatre – where we define ‘performance’



as a live and active intercommunication between performer and audience (and among performers) that has an open outcome, and ‘theatre’ as a specific representation of an absent meaning. It oscillates between provoking a – paradoxical – face-to-face encounter between the animal and the spectators, on the one hand, and presenting the animal as an element in a framed image, on the other.

*Balthazar* confronts the spectator with his narcissistic desire to identify with the animal, fully knowing that this projection – which is fundamental to conventional theatre – is inadequate for this situation. Looking at the animal, the spectator is tempted to assign a psychological significance to his behaviour and an artistic or an anti-artistic purpose; and/or he may assume that the donkey is complying with the performance, that the beast is understanding and approving of it, that he is participating in the piece and developing it further using artistic means. Inevitably we follow this reading of the animal, while being fully aware of its absurdity. Herein lies the performance’s humorous component. Neither theatre nor film can communicate an animal’s *thoughts*



– or, arguably, their *sentiments*. In fact, the same applies to humans, but there are conventions and techniques in the media that allow us to forget that. On stage, however, we can bring to the fore anthropomorphization and other projections that the spectator applies to the animal, and reveal the limits of such identifications and projections.

## THE PROCESS

In the vast majority of theatre performances, any animal on stage is a mere attribute of a human character – often a silent and loyal servant of a master. It is thus a stage prop rather than an actor. *Balthazar* creates a contrast to this archetype by assigning the donkey a protagonist's role.



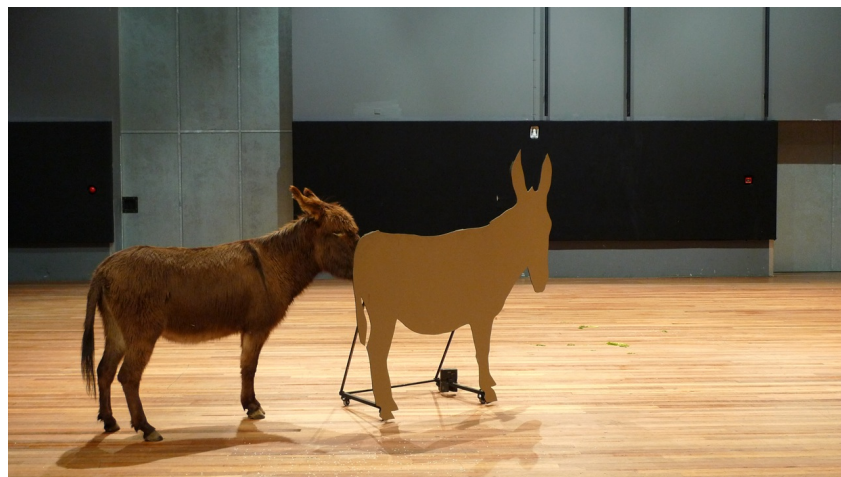
To do this it was necessary to find a mode of presentation in which the animal and the human performers give each other enough space to develop their own complex presence on stage. Usually, animals are assigned a clearly defined position and significance, be it in highly choreographed theatre, in circuses or in magic shows: the horse is hot-blooded, a withheld force; the lion is ferocious, but nonetheless obedient to the tamer; and the rabbit from the hat is in fact no more than a living object. The donkey was our attempt to find and present the *un-fixed animal* (a notion that Friedrich Nietzsche claimed for man), a potential for meaning that can develop in a wide range of directions. Our approach was aimed at ridding ourselves of cultural conceptions of the animal.



We originally planned to stage at least some tightly scripted and choreographed theatre scenes with the animal. We soon realised, however, that any action involving the human performers and the donkey had to evolve from their respective attitudes. There were both aesthetic and practical reasons for this. It was clear that in the presence of the entirely non-theatrical element of the animal, any dramatic performance by the humans on stage would appear overdrawn, hysterical and exaggerated, and therefore not credible. Any prepared and specified action imposed from the outside by the author or director would have felt forced upon the stage or its elements. For this reason, we chose actions that produced certain atmospheric qualities and which presented specific pictorial elements and intended semantics. However, when placed in the context of communication with the animal these components produced a range of different results. In fact, every rehearsal and every presentation featured another expression and another course of action. It proved unfeasible to perform a wholly composed play with the donkey – who remained unpredictable and capricious throughout. We devised a number of scenic tools with which we were able to influence the behaviour of the animal in one or the other way, and thereby implement our aesthetic concept. But there was always the risk that – for foreseeable or unforeseeable reasons – the donkey would be too anxious, tired, agitated or uninterested to ‘act’ in a way that was convenient for the performers on stage.



We therefore dismissed the causal and consequential approach. We disaggregated the material that we had assembled in rehearsal and drew up a list of actions which could happen to and with the animal. These actions were preset to occur at specific moments in the play but they could, in principle, be tried, interrupted or repeated at any moment, depending on the possibilities or needs of the situation on stage.



An animal on stage compels improvisation – an open form. It cannot be known at any given moment of a piece created in this way whether an action relating to the donkey – developed with it and specified in rehearsal – can be initiated in the performance itself. The representation is at all times a decision ‘into the open’; it is a theatrical challenge, and an artistic evolution both imposed on the animal and developed with it. This model sees theatre emerging only at moments where a constellation of circumstances and events on stage meets the theatrical expectations of the audience, triggering a fictional interpretation – whether intended or not.



The donkey is the protagonist in *Balthazar*, its moving centre towards which all actions are orientated. He is the master of the stage. He appoints the performers; nothing can happen without him. He is the cloudy centre of the piece where all narrative strands converge, become entangled and are lost. He is an insurmountable hurdle for the constitutive elements of the ‘stage’ as

an artistic system: intention, identification, representation, framing, shared experience, community of minds, and so on. It thereby questions that entire system. The presence of the donkey shows the obscene underside of action. All the guiding lines of the stage events are directed towards the protagonist who did not choose this role and who excels primarily in apathy. It makes no difference what happens – when the play begins, when it ends, whether the performance is a success or not, whether its artistic message is interesting, which notions of animality are addressed, or whether the public applauds – the donkey couldn’t care less!



*David Weber-Krebs* is a theatre director, a film- and video-maker, and a performer. His work varies between theatre performances that either are intimist or stage crowds, lecture performances, events for one spectator in the public space, as well as films and videos. He explores various contexts as a basis for an experimental process, which questions the traditional relationship between the work of art and its public. The work of David Weber-Krebs is shown all over Europe and beyond in theatres, art spaces, cultural centers and festivals. For more information: [davidweberkrebs.org](http://davidweberkrebs.org)

*Maximilian Haas* is a writer, dramaturge and curator based in Berlin. He studied Applied Theatre Studies in Giessen and Munich. Most recently he curated the weekly performance and live-art salon *Baron Saturday* and the conference *Idea of Communism. Philosophy and Art* (art program) at the Volksbühne am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz in Berlin. Currently he is working on a PhD project at the Academy of Media Arts Cologne on *Performances of Passivity: Things, Animals and Faineance on stage (Performances des Passiven: Ding, Tier und Nicht(s)tun auf der Bühne)*.

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