

# A MAN STANDING

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JEAN-MARC MAHY

## PRESS KIT



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# PRISON LIFE ON STAGE

Delinquency isn't born from nowhere. It is often the result of a social situation and a loss of points of reference in society." A standing Man" translates the embarrassment of a young person whose search for himself is translated in violence. This theater play is built like a succession of realistic moments spent in prison. It allows the audience to put in perspective the consequences of a "delinquent path" and, we hope so, to wonder about their choices in life.

We do not intend to impose the audience a moral lecture but to let them know about an experience and to help them to keep alive their ability to examine their conscience and their imagination. The performance systematically ends with a dialogue and a meeting between the audience and the comedian.

This moment is regularly enriched by Jean-Marc Mahy's upstream interventions in the classrooms in order to start a debate about the numerous notions arisen by the play.



## THE BIRTH OF VIOLENCE

Violence isn't exclusively restricted to teenagers, it can grow in any human being. Some factors allow people to understand violence, to explain it and to take the lead in order to avoid violence to become the only answer to difficult situations. Helping young people to regain self-confidence through dialogue and educating them allows them to meet their basic needs. If these are not met, it can lead to a violent behavior as an "answer" to this lack. And, when violence is a substitute for words, the society's answer is often punitive ; this lets the person misunderstood, his needs are not met and the individual is kept in his initial distress. This becomes a deadly cycle.

### **A possible alternative : liberating oneself through creative activity**

A teenager is often talented. His imagination even seems limitless. His skills in the very latest fields are well-known : new technologies, a new economy...

Sometimes a teenager is purely and merely a genius. History is filled with teenage geniuses : Pascal, Rimbaud, Mozart ... So many examples counter the vision of a castrating education which discredits teenagers locking them in a social role of "teenage crisis".

# THE ISSUE OF RESPONSIBILITY

While teenagers, at the turning point when young people build their own values, they are brought to flirt with limits and are not afraid of taking risks. At this time, they shake up the standards and the principles with so much vehemence that bans seem too strict to them. But during their teenage years, young people also learn to take their own responsibilities. They face more and more directly the consequences of their acts : growing autonomy, detachment from the family unit, more academic self-management...

A young person, whatever his age, must become aware of his acts and learn the society's rules and about the responsibilities he has to take. In the play "A Standing Man", the originality of the approach is based on the intervention of an educational third who will be seen as an "former young person".



Jean-Marc Mahy's powerful testimony is stoked by his own knowledge about delinquency and so, this can make young people refer to their own path through a game of mirrors as the actor speaks about his personal life ; he can be seen as a positive resource person. This makes young people think about their own responsibilities sometimes generating awareness, a trigger. As the systematically didactic relationship is broken, a dialogue without taboo can start about the respective path of everyone.

## A LAWFUL SOCIETY

Society is built on basic rules, on laws to organize life in community and to live in harmony. Without these universal human laws, society would sink into chaos where the only existing law would be the law of the strongest. If guidance always seem strict and sometimes frighten the youth, it is nevertheless necessary to live in community.

Some young people who have broken off relationships do not accept rules anymore or they are unaware of the possible consequences of their acts. If Justice seems efficient in Belgium faced with the delinquency of young people who live their teenage crisis and look for limits, it seems to have less answers faced with young people who commit crimes because they haven't integrated any rules (the committed act seems trivializing to them) or young people who rebel against a society which doesn't offer them any place or any future, as it was Jean-Marc Mahy's case.

## THE BELGIAN SYSTEM - THE CASE OF MINORS

In Belgium, the lawmaker insisted on the minor's protection for a long time. (the protection model proposed by the lawmaker with the law of 1965 appears as a "therapeutic" model in which the judge will take, with a certain paternalism, the necessary corrective measures for this youth or for the parents who endanger their children. Then, the evolution of delinquency urged the government to set up a more penalizing model. The law of the 2nd of March in 2002 about the temporary placement of minors who committed an act qualified as an offence shows a shift : the minor's protection is replaced by the society's protection and this justifies the young offender's confinement.

At present, the debates move towards a model which would combine protection and sanction in a restorative approach through measures which would repair the damage suffered by the victim.

### **The course of legal proceedings**

In a concrete manner, when a young person is arrested for a crime by the police, the Prosecutor can refer the case to the Juvenile Court. Then a preparatory phase starts ; during this 6-month period, the Juvenile Court judge can :

- reprimand the young person ( call him to order)
- conduct investigations about the living environment of the young person
- take provisional measures (either a temporary placement in a youth institution or a measure of surveillance or guidance of the young person in his family)

For serious or repeated facts, the Juvenile Judge can place the young person in a detention centre and, exceptionally, in a federal public centre (the Center of Saint Hubert) for an unlimited period.

At the end of this preparatory stage, the minor's case is fixed in an Open Court. At the time, the judge delivers a measure of surveillance or an education measure. These measures are very similar to the ones included in the preparatory stage.

- The monitoring by the education guidance center or by the service of help and educational intervention
- The guidance of the young person in a family carried out by the representative responsible for the judicial protection
- The young person has to provide community service for some hours freely
- The minor's placement in a host family or in an institution that provides help to the youth
- The placement of the young person in a public institution of youth protection, either open or closed
- At last, if the judge considers that the protection measures have become inadequate for a minor who has committed one or more crimes after sixteen, he can remove the case to the Crime Court. Then, the minor is judged as an adult would be, as it was Jean-Marc Mahy's case.

## **THE MINOR OFFENDER'S REEDUCATION**

The minor offender's reeducation aims to develop a triple action concerning the young person :

- A therapeutic action : the young person must be given a medical and psychological therapy (either individual or a group therapy) in order to improve his behavior
- An action of professional training : the young person has to get ready to earn money. After his schooling, he has to learn a job. Therefore, he must get a professional training and often study at the same time. It has been noticed that most young offenders have broken with the school system.
- An educational action whose aim is, for the young person, to make peace with himself and with others, to have self-control, to reach and take on self-sufficiency and to integrate in society.

# THE FORMER PRISONER' S REHABILITATION

Many prisoners get out of prison and enter a world which has become a stranger for them ( no culture in prison, the fast evolution of society, a change in the family life, the obligation to leave an encouraging crime environment, ...). This world has also become hostile (stigma, rejection ) and incomprehensible. In this “new” world, the young person will have to build (or rebuild) any relationship, either conjugal, family, friendly, professional or social ...

Society has everything to gain (and nothing to lose) to support humanly the former prisoners who feel like living (or living again) their lives in a different way. Otherwise, the consequences of a detention will inevitably result in a failure. Without the possibility of a rehabilitation, without new marks, recidivism is unluckily possible.

## OBSTACLES TO REHABILITATION

A lack of interest for the development of education in prisons can be noticed in public opinion. Nobody helps the prisoner. The state of deficiency of the prison system and the economic context stand in the way of rehabilitation. The criminal record, the lack of certificates make looking for a job very difficult; housing is impossible without money and without a job. The parliamentary assembly of the Council of Europe in its recommendation 1741 about the prisoners' rehabilitation mentions that “ education is a fundamental human being right and therefore, the prison authorities should provide appropriate measures of education for prisoners” (...)

The prison authorities have a four-fold mission which consists in four main lines : protecting society, following up the convict's sentence, favoring his amendment and allowing his rehabilitation. The first two missions are successfully fulfilled ; the next two missions are not fulfilled at all or just very little”. (Prison, “The prisoners' rehabilitation”, <http://prisons.free.fr/reinsertion.htm>)

## THE NOTION OF VALUES

“I have recently accepted to go in the classroom of a secondary school in Mons to give a short lecture for students in their last years who had attended a trial for one day. The aim of this speech was to answer their questions about Justice and, consequently, raise awareness of citizenship among them. At first, the contact was difficult because this youth had no confidence nor hope in the judiciary. These young people were ready to send the defendant to the gallows without even asking themselves questions about the reasons of his acts, his life, his history, his problems, the whys and therefore. And there I was, arguing to defend my convictions. The discussion was lively but, apparently, effective. They finally recognized it was not necessary to judge a fact but a man. That is why it is so important, even for a guilty person, to be brought to trial, to look into what happened closely and to try to understand it in order to penalize in a right way. Within the following weeks, the students had to write small texts in pairs ; some of them were published in a local newspaper.

It was a great satisfaction to notice how their ideas could change in a few hours. The result was in favour of my convictions , the most greatest cause in my opinion. Many lawyers dedicate some of their time to restore public confidence in justice, to avoid risky or categorical sentences, to develop critical thinking, which is necessary for everyone (Céline Parisse, lawyer, in the newspaper “La Libre Belgique – 29 July 2005)

Speaking to the youth is important, because beyond the issue of prevention / awareness, many stereotypes must be broken down. In the media, the horrors of crimes are always highlighted ; this smother factors which create violence. So, the murder seems senseless and thus just unforgivable. Therefore, the Justice only considered in terms of repression is accepted as “normal”, logical.

Prison mustn't be a helpless solution where citizens are secure when the wrongdoer is placed in a space out of the running, excluded from the outside world. Prison must provide solutions becoming a place where one can think, in decent conditions, about the significance of one's acts, their consequences (besides the imprisonment itself, precisely), a place where one can learn to build markers in order to re-integrate society. Finally, it must be a place where one learn to become a responsible citizen. Nowadays, prison is a place where prisoners are just accommodated and, in some ways, maintained in a climate of violence without any possibility of a dialogue. But transforming prison into a place of social rehabilitation, and not into a place of social suicide, also goes through civic education. A possible reconversion must be shown without confining the former-prisoner in a bad role arguing he has “the vice in his blood”.

(Information from educational files of “A Man Standing” and “Stone”)



# INTERVIEW: JEAN-MARC MAHY, AUTHOR OF A MAN STANDING

Source : <http://www.notshutup.org/the-theatre-play-a-man-standing/#more-524>

**Luk Vervaeet meets former Belgian prisoner Jean-Marc Mahy, whose play *A Man Standing* puts his own experiences of life and death in solitary confinement on stage.**

## INTRODUCTION

How can a human being survive solitary confinement?

Can he ever overcome the impact of being locked-up in long-term isolation, a detention regime described by detainees, academics and human rights activists around the world as “white torture” and “psychological warfare” inside cells that are “tombs of silence”?

Prisons are in and of themselves part of a hidden world. But another layer of invisibility is super-imposed on the prison world in supermax prisons or supermax sections inside normal prisons. Few outsiders know what life is like in these pits of oblivion. Whether it be families of prisoners, journalists, lawyers or academics, their contact with the reality of supermax units is limited, limited to official visits held in selected locations and human contact behind glass. Very few are living witnesses, those who can give first-hand account, because it is they who have suffered this inhuman treatment and who can – or even want to – testify about it.

This is what makes the testimony of former prisoner Jean-Marc Mahy particularly valuable and unique. He was just 19 years old when, in 1987, he was confined for 36 months in what he calls “the land of the dead.” It happened in a prison in the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg. Returned to normal prison life after three years of solitary confinement, Jean-Marc filed a court complaint, arguing that his treatment was in violation of Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights. Thirty inmates joined as co-plaintiffs to the complaint. Parliamentarians came to inspect the prison. Due to this legal action, Jean-Marc found himself subject to intolerable pressure over the next two years, his life repeatedly threatened by prison guards.

At this time, a new law came out allowing detainees with Belgian nationality, like Jean-Marc, to be transferred from a prison in a foreign country back to Belgium. But Belgium no longer wanted him. It was Luxembourg that puts the pressure on Belgium to accept his transfer. In 1992, a police reception committee was waiting for him at the border. Alive, but psychologically devastated, he was taken to the courthouse in Liege where the prosecutor warned him: “We didn’t want you here. But here you are. I’ll be clear. If you try to take to the walls and escape again, you will be shot. Your death certificate is signed.”

Jean-Marc replied that he had no intention of escaping any more. And that he accepted his sentence. In 1993, he began a training course in prison to qualify as an electrician. It would be the first of a series of degrees he obtained in prison in the seven years that followed. But at the same time, he sought to find another way to escape and forget prison. He became addicted to drugs which were circulating behind prison walls. From this addiction, he managed to liberate himself through his own will power and determination in 2000.

## “A man standing”

His struggle against long-term solitary confinement and the scars it left embedded within didn’t stop there. Freed on parole in 2003, Jean-Marc went on to create, with help from Jean-Michel Van den Eeyden,

the director and theatre manager of the Anchor, a one-man performance called “A Man Standing”, based on the horrors he experienced in solitary confinement. In it, he himself acts, without any mask, taking us into the silent tomb where he was held for 1,100 days. In this play, Jean-Marc stands alone on an oppressive black, hollowed-out stage, a rectangular outline on the floor symbolising the isolating walls. There is only a stool in there with him for company.

On tour since 2010, across Belgium and France (Paris, Avignon, Grenoble), “A Man Standing” has been **performed nearly 170 times, each performance a full-capacity sell-out**. A version of the play, subtitled in Dutch, has been performed in the city of Mechelen, for audiences which included 1,500 students in Charleroi, the hometown of the Anchor Theatre. During his tour, Jean-Marc has received **more than 6,000 letters from young people**, describing their reactions and perceptions on seeing the play.

On the 16th of September 2013, after ten years spent on parole, Jean-Marc became a free man again. On this date, he had spent thirty years of his life in prison or on parole. A few months ago, with the permission of his probation officer, Jean-Marc Mahy went to London to start looking for theatre companies that might be willing to produce “A Man Standing”, as Jean-Marc and Jean-Michel now plan to present their play in the UK.

As I interviewed him about his past and about his play, this former prisoner took me on a journey dominated by violence, both physical or psychological, always on the edge between life and death. He assumes responsibility for his past and his deeds without looking for excuses. It reminded me of the often-repeated phrase in Mickey B (a film based on Shakespeare’s Macbeth, made and written and acted by prisoners) “What’s done cannot be undone”<sup>2</sup>. Jean-Marc doesn’t ask for our forgiveness. He only tries to give a sense to the life that has been left to him, conveying a message of humanity. Looking to help young people in trouble, like he was 30 years ago, to win back and realize their lives. Especially for them, he describes his descent into hell and how he came out as “A Man Standing”.

**Luk Vervaeke: You start your play saying “Good evening, my name is Jean-Marc Mahy. I’m not an actor, but I invite you to revisit a part of my past life with me”. And you end the play with the phrase: “Out of respect for my victims and for those who were dragged into my story against their will, I won’t come back to bow”. Can you tell us what happened?**

Jean-Marc Mahy: Today, I am 46. Until the age of 17, I lived in Brussels. As a young kid, I became part of a group of young offenders from Forest and Jette, two municipalities of Brussels. Family bonds, love... I found them on the streets. I really had no intention to become a delinquent. And yet, I fell into crime. At the age of 16, I had already been arrested for vandalising a school and for committing petty thefts. But nothing very serious until then.

At 17, on my own free will, I went to a juvenile court at the court house in Brussels to seek some help. I wanted to meet a judge, because I had been forced to run away from home. I was desperate. The judge didn’t have the time to see me. He put me in a cell for 24 hours. In the morning, he saw me for 5 minutes. He showed me the huge amount of files on his desk. He told me he was busy with juvenile offenders, not with children in danger. So he told me to go home and come back with my father. Which I did. And my father told the judge: “It’s ok, I take my kid with me”. That was it.

My father worked nights. And I was already in a situation where I no longer had a frame of reference to hold on to. I continued to go out at night. One day, on November 24, 1984, my girlfriend did not show up for a meeting we had arranged. I was pretty upset. At that moment, two friends invited me to join them to commit a burglary in an old man’s house. They had done it several times before. For me, it would be my first time. The old man wasn’t supposed to be at home. But he was. He recognised one of my accomplices and everything went wrong. He wanted to call the police, wanted to take his rifle from the wall. We panicked and I knocked him out. There was no trace of blood.

The following days, I called him. Hoping he would take up the phone, he or his grandson, who normally visited him every day. Without success. Then I read in the press that the old man had died in hospital. Following this tragedy, one of my associates and I decided to flee. First to Holland. And from there to Latin



America. That's how we reasoned at that time; these were the kind of delusions we had in our heads.

That same evening I, along with my two accomplices, Alain and Abdel, were arrested. I was first locked up for fifteen days in the prison of Saint-Gilles. At that time, there was no law in Belgium that prohibited the locking up of minors in a prison for adults. Then I was transferred to an ortho-educational state centre for juveniles, which had recently opened. There I found a fairly balanced life. I was surrounded by people who took me in hand, a good psychologist and good teachers. In the morning I went to school, in the afternoon I played sports. But my court case was set to start six months later, when I turned 18. The juvenile court declined jurisdiction of the case and I was delivered up to adult justice. On 31 May 1985, I was transferred from the youth centre to the prison in Nivelles. There, I made a first suicide attempt. I lost a litre of blood, before I was saved by prison guards.

A year later, in April 1986, I was transferred to the prison of Forest, because at Nivelles they had suspicions that I wanted to escape. At Forest, I was plied with drugs from morning to night by a psychiatrist called the Indian. Our trial in Brussels began in September. We weren't conscious of what was happening to us. We were really still kids. And very nervous. We laughed amongst ourselves when confronted by the sight of some sixty people sitting outside the court. We didn't know that among them were all the members of the jury at our trial. In court, I didn't want to be a passive presence. I yelled at the jurors. During the trial, they made my mother cry. That was enough for me. On 21st of November 1986, I was sentenced to 18 years imprisonment. The two others to 10 and 12 years. I was in a rage.

In January '87, I was transferred to the prison of Arlon, the furthest and most difficult to reach in the whole of Belgium. My request for a transfer to a prison where I had family living nearby was denied. The director in Arlon was already well informed of my bad reputation. When I arrived, he told me I had to prepare myself to do two-thirds of my sentence. They put me in a cell with four others, including Tony, who was sentenced to life imprisonment. I had known him in the ortho-educational youth center, where I had been before. He too had been discharged by the juvenile court. Tony had already been in Arlon for two years. I remember Tony receiving a very cold letter from his lawyer saying that going to appeal was no option in Belgium, and to go to the Court of Cassation made no sense neither. So, the lawyer wrote, he was not going to contest the life sentence. We tore the letter into pieces. There was no hope.

Tony and I decided to find a way to escape from prison. We needed to find a third person to come with us. This third man was older than us and, so I learned afterwards, an alcoholic capable of drinking sixty beers a day. And very violent with it. We escaped in April '87, taking a prison officer as our hostage. Once outside, we stopped a car, threw the driver out, left the hostage behind and fled. We didn't know where to go. I didn't know how to drive a car. Tony neither. We depended on our third man as a driver. He wanted to see his family so badly, he was capable of driving through the police roadblocks. We crossed the Belgian border with the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg, which was not far from Arlon. What had to happen, happened there in a pub. Two policemen recognized us as the wanted escapees. They wanted to arrest us. Instead of calling for reinforcements, they wanted to do the job themselves. Our third man, who used to rebel against the police when he was drunk, grabbed his knife and threw himself on one of the policemen. If this hadn't of happened, we would simply have been arrested. He yelled at me to take the weapon of the other policeman, which I did within a second. I had never used a gun or shot someone, but this time I did and I shot twice. It's strange what happens at such moments. I don't say this as an excuse. Doctors later told me that I was under superhuman stress. I had had a partial amnesia. When I ran out of the pub, I didn't feel I had a gun in my hand. A hundred meters further, this gun weighed a ton. The policeman died from his injuries. We were arrested ten minutes later.

On the 5th of December 1988, we appeared before the court. Everything was over and done with within five hours. In court they spoke German and Luxembourgish, languages I didn't understand. There were only policemen in the audience, except for the widow of the policeman and her daughter.

It was my encounter with this little kid, from whom I took the father away, that was to bring about my change and salvation. As I say in the play: it was the day that a feeling of guilt and remorse overcame me.

In court, the only thing that was said in my favour was that I never intended to kill the policeman. On 19th of December 1988, I was sentenced to life imprisonment. I didn't request an appeal, because they had told me this would mean an extension of my isolation. And also because they told me that if I did, I would cause the certain death of my partner Tony, who was already at a breaking point.

**LV: *Why did the prison authorities put you in isolation?***

J-MM: I was put in the isolation block from the moment I was arrested. When I arrived at that prison, the isolation section had only been in existence for six months. They had constructed it for a gang called "The Family", gang who had killed many people. For me, the reason why they immediately put me in there was because they thought I wasn't going to survive this treatment. For those put in the isolation block, it was as if the authorities had concluded that normal prison for them was useless. The only thing that was left for them was self-destruction. Everything was done to dehumanize and destroy you. For Tony, my accomplice, who was also there, they succeeded. He, who could neither read or write, literally became crazy after 14 months. I've seen people who were incapable of speaking after just a few months under these conditions. Nine out of ten men placed in isolation are going to go crazy or die there. In the play, I talk about Victor, a fellow prisoner, who cut his tongue in this dungeon. I too came close to death. Isolation, loneliness, to be exposed nude in a hallway, to be submitted to anal searches.. it all drove me towards a new suicide attempt, as I show in the play.

**LV: *You show us how your life took another turn after your failed suicide attempt...***

JM-M: A few days after my suicide attempt, I was allowed to read the newspapers. I read that on the night of my failed attempt, five people had successfully committed suicide. I became convinced that a miracle had happened to me. I decided that from then on I should live. I decided to look for help inside myself, because there was no one who would help me anyway. The only one who can help you is yourself. When I first entered the isolation block, I had read this sentence: "You enter here a lion, but leave a lamb." In the end I came out a man standing. Or this other sentence: "You will find everything here, except help." I had to find help inside myself. This is where I became another man. I discovered my qualities and my potential, and also my faults, that I had carried always inside me. I decided to work on the wealth that was in me, that must have been there since I was born, actually.

**LV: *In the play, you mention on all the books you read, and later, when they gave you a radio, on all the educational programs you followed, which allowed you to survive.***

J-MM: Yes, I quote a lot of titles of the comics and the books I read during my time in isolation. Some of them I read even several times, because they often gave me back the same books. While performing "A Man standing", I soon realized that these were all titles that the young people of today have never even heard of. They don't know who Sidonie or Simenon or Papillon are. But it doesn't matter. They understand that reading helped me to find a way out. I heard that this has motivated some youngsters in the centres for young offenders, who could neither read or write, to ask for lessons in literacy.

If I had to describe the prevailing feeling inside a prison, I'd say it's the feeling of the time that is lost. It is perhaps one of the greatest violences that anyone can be subjected to. All the days are alike. If you ask me to name the date of an event which took place since I got out, I won't be able to answer, but all the dates of my twenty years in prison, I know them all by heart, because these were the only days when something worth noting happened. In prison time passes three times slower than on the outside. In such conditions, you must decide how you will make your brain function. Otherwise you become a vegetable. An object that doesn't move anymore. You become someone who is obsessed by only one thing: how to run away from a world where there is nothing. Literally nothing. The greatest books that saved me in

prison were first of all the Bible and later the Koran, because these were the only ones that initially I had access to. Then came Solzhenitsyn and the gulags. Then all the books about the Nazi concentration camps. The book on the priest Sébastien Kolbe, who volunteered to go into an Auschwitz gas chamber in place of another man, who had children waiting for him back home. The SS who were charged with the surveillance of the bunker where traumatized for life, hearing the 300 people trapped there singing and praying until their very last moment. There is the book on Nelson Mandela. The Edward Bunker trilogy. Tazmamart, the prison of the living death in Morocco, by Ahmed Marzouki. Through my reading, I discovered the human capacity to overcome death by solidarity, by singing or by prayer. I did some drawing too. And when they gave me a radio, I listened to music. To live, a human being must continue to invent stories. To keep on dreaming.

***LV: Violence is a pervasive theme in both your past and in prison. In the play, you show us that the world of prisons is extremely violent. But you don't show the physical violence, besides some cell searches and a few times when they hit you and bully you.***

J-MM: We didn't want to show beatings or physical abuse in prison. We wanted to show in ninety minutes the institutional violence that a human being can be subjected to. I believe this kind of violence can kill a person or transform him into a human bomb. At the same time, we wanted to testify about my life and what led me to violent crime. Thus, the piece is a form of catharsis. A purification of both elements. The public is confronted in a brutal way both by my past and by prison, a world they do not know. And then there are four moments in the piece: the moment of the mirror, where I learn that I killed the policeman. The conversation with my mother, which strikes so many young people in the audience. The moment of the attempted suicide. The moment of Victor, who cut out his tongue, out of despair. On March 27th 1990, I leave the isolation block, as a survivor. When I left the land of the dead for the land of the living, I made a promise to myself, from now on, if I can do something for other people, I will do it.

The experience of prison stays with you for the rest of your life. Ten years after my release, on parole, I still keep the scars of my years in prison. It appears in things that may seem trivial to you. I always close the door of the room where I sleep, at home or in a house with friends, because I don't feel safe. The nights in prison were often noisy, there are shouts, there is music. But when you're alone in your cell, locked up, you are safe, there is nothing that can happen to you. I can be alone for days without seeing anyone, without a phone call, without contact. It is as if I have been conditioned to it. During my last year in isolation, there was no one who came to see if I was still alive. I just saw the hands of someone pushing the plate with food through my cell door. I saw no one, not even a guard, for weeks. Even today, I sometimes need to consult a psychologist about this.

The theme of violence is an important one for young people of today. I'm no longer a violent man, but I still have anger inside me. But it is a reaction which is healthy and positive. That's why I say to young people : you can have violence and anger in you. But don't keep it inside you. Talk about it. Make contact with people. Anger and violence can drive you to change, to grow. But if you keep these emotions inside of you, one day, for a detail, for a stupidity, it will come bursting out like a hurricane. Theatre proved to be my salvation. This cell on stage is like a ring to me. The violence and anger in me, I can express it now in a non-violent way.

After some performances in Villeneuve, near Paris, a young man wrote to me saying: "I admire you for your courage, to be able to talk about your life to an audience you don't even know. You did it without wanting to give an answer to all my problems. This prompted me to testify as well. By doing so, I feel relieved of a burden. I talked about it, and even if those who listened didn't help me, just expressing myself made me feel better." Young people often come to me after the play. Some of them talk to me about their father who is in prison, saying: "What you've shown me, my father will never tell me."

**LV: *I attended several conferences that you gave for young people. What struck me is that you're not preachy. You give the impression that you only want to warn them.***

J-MM: You're right. I don't want to be a preacher. After being released on parole, and meeting young people in difficult situations, I asked myself: "But what if I had known what awaited me in prison, would I really have chosen to follow the path that led me there?" The message I want to convey through my play is very simple. I tell them: "Become the actor of your own life. I will not promise you that your life will be beautiful or easy. But you have to live it outside a prison. Because when you're in prison, your family, all your dreams will be taken from you." There is no morality in the play, no judgment. I try to show that the life of every human being is sacred. A man has got to make his choice to go left or right in his life and write his own story. In the audience, there are all kinds of people. There are those who come to see the play as another sensational news item, or as a kind of police film. There are those who want to be confronted with a real murderer. There are some young people who arrive with their hoods over their heads, wearing dark glasses and laughing, saying yes, yes we know prison, prison break, holiday camps... I tell them, if you make the choice to walk that path, don't tell me that I didn't warn you about what was waiting for you. We live more and more in a culture which is looking for instant gratifications, only what we have and hold today. Tomorrow doesn't exist for them. We don't want to hear anymore about the past or about the future. In letters I receive a common theme is: "You have shown us something that nobody has ever shown us."

**LV: *How did you come to the idea to make a play ?***

J-MM: I was released on parole on 16th of September 2003. I started a job washing dishes at a private TV channel company. The third month of my release, I was offered the opportunity to deliver a testimony about my life in prison to young people. From that point on, I realized that I wanted to either be an educator or a social worker. I began to study to get a degree as an educator. I succeeded. From there and for almost ten years now, I worked as a totally atypical educator, albeit without getting professional qualifications to do so. I met Jean-François Levain, an engaged teacher in secondary schools, teaching religion. For five years, I worked with him on a voluntary basis in what are called the most difficult schools. Then I wanted to fly on my own wings and stand on my own two feet.

One of the nicest jobs I've done were guided visits round the prison museum in Tongeren – these visits involved several hundred young people. I was made for this. It was my mission. In three years, the prison museum had welcomed close to 300,000 people. These people saw what was a prison. They saw behind the scenes. They saw that prisons are not the five-star hotels often described in the media, but then the government decided to close the prison as a museum and transform it into a new youth prison. We launched a campaign to stop this plan. Without success. I was very disappointed. I told myself that if I could no longer show young people what a prison was, then I would invite them to come to my cell. I met Jean-Michel Van den Eeyden and played a small role in his play "Stone". It is based on a true story which happened in Australia, about two youngsters who skip school; they are constantly challenging each other, which culminates in one of them throwing a stone of a bridge over a highway, which ends up causing the death of someone. In the discussions that followed the play's performance, I told my story. This in turn proved a challenge to Jean-Michel. We decided to work together. Initially, it was not going to be me who acted in "A Man Standing". But I didn't want anyone else to play it. Jean-Michel took up the challenge. He took the risk to do the play with me, even though many in his artistic entourage called him "insane". Initially, we planned to run ten performances. Today, we are at 170 and there are still another 30 to come next year.

**LV: *Is it humanly damaging to plunge into your past and into prison, over and over again?***

J-MM: When I perform the play, I am often very close to breaking into tears. There will always be one of those key moments in the play, a breaking point, where it will be hard for me to play it. On different oc-

casions, I had to leave the stage, because I was crying. At the same time, I told myself, when I don't feel those emotions anymore, when I start playing the piece as if I was pressing a button, I will stop.

Journalists who have written reviews about the play were surprised that I play my own role. They asked Jean-Michel: "This is not an actor playing the role of someone else? He plays his own life over and over again. How can he do it?" Jean-Michel answered them: "He's walking on a tightrope. There can be always something unexpected that can happen. That's why he does it."

I like to act. And I learned a lot about how to perform as an actor. At first, it was a problem to be alone on stage and play all the characters who appear in the narrative. In the beginning, young people were sometimes confused, saying: "Damn, he is the judge, he is the cop, he is the priest, we can't follow". I learned to improve my acting by better type casting the character of the judge or the cop. And also I improved in many other aspects of my acting.

**LV: *The play has been translated into Dutch. The next step is an English version. Why do you want to play it in London?***

J-MM: There are several reasons. I don't want to limit myself to just showing the play in Belgium. I mean, in all modesty, "A man standing" delivers a message about the horrors of isolation which is relevant at a European level. Several years ago, seeing the play and then the film "The Kiss of the Spider Woman" marked me for life. Because it's a universal theme. It is shocking that in modern times we are returning to the practice of torture, to the Middle Ages, but torture in a more subtle, more scary form. I want "A Man Standing" to deliver a European message against trapping people isolation. And also to show how a human being, who has experienced the depths of hell, is capable of finding their way back to life. Martin Luther King had his dream. I have mine.

## CADRE - CAST

Who is Jean-Michel Van den Eeyden?



Director, actor and educator, Jean-Michel Van den Eeyden has been the artistic director of the The Anchor Theatre (Charleroi, Belgium) since 2008.

As a director, he has a keen eye on the contemporary world. "Stone", based on a true story and created in 2005 with the Théâtre de la Guimbarde, questions the place of justice when offences are committed by minors and the responsibility within the scope of their actions.

In 2006, with the actress Yannick Duret and the playwright Olivier Hespel, he co-founded Kollektif Barakha. "Push up", by the German author Roland Schimmelpfennig, was the first project staged by the company. The play questions the world around the workplace and the relationships between young "dynamic" executives capable of anything in order to save their skins and to climb the corporate ladder.

In 2007, Jean-Michel Van den Eeyden became responsible for the running of workshops in different theatre high schools of the French Community in Belgium. That same year, he was invited by La Charge du Rhinocéros to collaborate in the Theatre Festival of the 4 paths in Haiti. In 2009, he created Mère Sauvage, named after the novel by Guy de Maupassant, in an adaptation of Paul Pourveur.



In 2009, he founded the Anchor Theatre, where he wrote and staged “A Man Standing”, based on the story told by Jean-Marc Mahy. The play was presented at the Avignon festival in 2011 and has been performed over 165 times to date.

In 2012, he created “Garuma”, an adaptation of a text by Ad de Bondt. This epic story of a street child in Brazil who becomes a football star, deals with the different worlds of extreme poverty and boundless wealth. The piece was created in collaboration with the Moroccan company Daha Wassa and was presented in Rabat, Fez and Casablanca, as well as in various Belgian and French cities.

In 2013, he created the play “Born Black Lung” with the urban poet Mochélan. The play is presented at the Avignon Festival in 2013.



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