

Metropolis

BENJAMIN VANDEWALLE / MUZIEKTHEATER TRANSPARANT - TRANSLAB

Cathartic dystopic



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Fritz Lang's 1927 dystopian sci-fi masterpiece 'Metropolis' was both the thematic and aesthetic departure point for Muziektheater Transparant TRANSLAB's latest eponymous offering. Fourteen young artists, under the guidance of Benjamin Vandewalle, have concocted a performance in which music, song, dance, text, and film conjure their own vision of a city one hundred years from now.

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Breezeblocks, stacked like the oblongs of a black-and-white *Tetris* game, form a waist-high labyrinth on stage. At the back of the theatre, a rectangular screen projects a wall of transparent bricks. The only rounded shapes in the gloom are musical instruments: a gracefully curved grand piano, a drum kit, and several guitars.

Before any movement beyond the blinking of computer consoles is seen, a plodding four-by-four rhythm begins to sound. From the depths of the back of the theatre, pale faces emerge. Gradually, a jumble of shuffling bodies comes into view. Shunting forward in unison, all clad in black with grim expressions, they form a single, jagged-edged mound. *One, two, three, four; one, two, three, four* —they slouch between the blocks and disappear again. It's reminiscent of the seminal sequence from Lang's film in which countless weary workers clock in and out of their shifts. But here, instead of uniform mackintoshes and bowed heads, these creatures come in all shapes and sizes: a small figure with swishing hair and a metallic-painted forehead at the front; a giant with spindly legs, padded shoulders, platform shoes and blacked-out eyes at the back. A whole hotchpotch of cartoonish superheroes, they nevertheless remain trapped in a relentless, repetitive rhythm, unable to see beyond the walls even as they tower above them — until one breaks away, escapes the group, and slumps down at the piano. Their fingers on the keys start to play a different tune.

The fourteen performers, ranging in age from sixteen to twenty-three, were recruited by TRANSLAB through an open call. All are eager, aspiring artists, most have little or no stage experience. Over an intense two-week period, the group — guided by professional artists Berlinde Deman, Stef Heeren, and Els Mondelaers for music, Fatou Traoré for choreography, and Vandewalle for overall artistic direction — worked up to twelve hours a day to collectively devise the more-than-hour-long show. Having scrutinised the film, which, nearly a century after its release, resonates even more strongly today, each young artist shared their opinions and artistic proposals with the group. The challenge, explains Vandewalle, was moulding everyone's input into a coherent whole.

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The version of the future these gifted young singers, musicians, and dancers-in-the-making have created is patently apocalyptic. With mechanical movements, they bleakly rebuild the breeze blocks into towers that are then torn down and left smouldering like the rubble of a war zone. The inscrutable authoritarian figure, played by Ukrainian Mykyta Zhernosiekov —currently studying lyrical singing in Belgium — is carried onstage by his minions in a flight case. He briefly steals the show with his operatic voice before blanking out and being wheeled off again, slumped limply back into the flight-case-cum-pram. Then comes British dancer Katie Gathercole's insistent, choreographed refusal to accept the legacy of an empty future, followed by a poignant lament of quiet despair composed and sung by Esra Hendricks.

All these images are heavily tinged with doom. But even so, the embers of human resilience continue to occasionally spark: the backdrop of glass bricks gives way to retro-projections of hands reaching out and stroking each other tenderly; a familiar pop song is rewritten as protest and there's a frenetic, jazzy, drum, piano, and guitar improvisation. And what lightens the experience still more is the performers' tangible pleasure, talent and commitment. This and the wacky costumes created by J Boy—half *Hammer House of Horror*, half high fashion, complete with what resembles anti-facial-recognition makeup means the monochrome aesthetic is enlivened by a comic, camp allure.

The performance ends with a conversation between the youngest performer, Lieselot Herman, and an AI bot on her phone. Asked about the future of artificial intelligence, the bot's evasive response suggests that "hopefully, responsible collaboration with AI will lead to, and enhance, a sustainable future for humankind." A prolonged, silent incredulity follows — then enthusiastic applause, and the cast and coaches' triumphant curtain calls. For all its performed misery TRANSLAB's Metropolis is a blast and has surely been cathartic for all involved.

(To be seen also in KMSKA, Antwerpen on 11/9/2025 https://kmska.be/fr/kmska-en-nocturne-metropolis)