

KUNSTHAL

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presents

L'OISEAU BLEU Exhibition

Op zoek naar geluk - À la recherche du bonheur - Chasing Happiness - 青い鳥を追い求めて

L'Oiseau bleu: The play

In 1905 a miracle took place in the art world. The symbolist Maurice Maeterlinck had written a new play, and not just another gloomy story but something that looked like a brilliant fairy tale. *L'Oiseau bleu. Féerie en six actes et douze tableaux* tells the story of two children who go on a fantastic journey, experience a series of strange encounters and then set out in pursuit of the Blue Bird. Initially considered impossible to stage, the play was nevertheless launched in 1908 in an avant-garde theatre in Moscow. It was an immediate hit. Over the years, and especially in Russia, England, the United States and Japan, the play acquired a cult status.

The *L'Oiseau Bleu. Chasing happiness* exhibition evokes this philosophical fairy tale of the same name. The visitor is gently transported into the mysterious dream of Tytyl and Mytyl, the son and daughter of a woodcutter. Guided by Light, brother and sister wander successively through the Land of Memory, the Palace of the Night, the Forest, the Garden of Delights, the Cemetery and the Kingdom of the Future, where children wait for their birth. Their mission is to capture the - elusive - Blue Bird, which symbolises happiness. The children have a magic diamond that allows them, fleetingly, to see the true nature or soul of things and the essence behind appearance. They awaken from their enchanted dream trip with a new, beautiful view of the simple world in which they live.

Maeterlinck's Philosophy

Maeterlinck described *L'Oiseau bleu* as a fairy play or fairy tale, but in a letter he wrote that "cet Oiseau qui n'a l'air de rien" was harder to translate than a page of philosophy. In a light-hearted and optimistic way it expresses his personal quest to answer the great questions of life and man's fate, completely in line with his earlier work and his earlier symbolist plays and reflective essays. Tytyl and Mytyl do not experience adventures as in classic fairy tales, they encounter no giants, dragons, and enchanted things. Their journey is primarily a moral adventure, an introduction to wisdom. Here Maeterlinck was inspired by the German

Romantics; he combined elements of folk tales or *Märchen* by the Brothers Grimm with those in the literary fairy tales by Tieck and Novalis. Blue, the colour of the absolute, was the favourite colour of German Romanticism. In Novalis everything is blue, it is the colour of philosophy and his blue flower represents unfulfilled desire. Maeterlinck did conceal a multi-layered, universal message in his work. The child's quest is also an initiation into the adult world with its mysteries of life and death, past and future, and reveals the mystery contained in the everyday, and offers a hopeful perspective on man and his finality. Consequently the play can, and did, appeal to both young and old.

Theatre in an exhibition?

Just as in Moscow in 1905, Ghent will take on the challenge in 2011. The St Peter's Abbey Arts Centre will be presenting *L'Oiseau bleu* for the first time as an exhibition with an original stage set in a multimedia presentation. Through the specific nature of the work visitors can experience the nightly quest of two children through a succession of colourful scenes. Like Tyltyl and Mytyl, he or she will experience this fairy tale, not from a theatre seat, but walking through the play in the great abbey refectory which for the occasion has been transformed into a fairy tale landscape under a sparkling starry sky. The audio guides will focus on the original text.

Collaboration with NTGent

The audio guides were realised in close collaboration with NTGent. Bernard Dewulf, winner of the Libris Literature Prize 2010, adapted the text in his characteristic understated style that perfectly matches the mood of *L'Oiseau bleu*. Actors from the permanent NTGent ensemble were responsible for the dialogues. The voices of top actors such as An Miller, Chris Thys, Els Dottermans, Oscar Van Rompay and Steven Watermeulen bring the tale to life. The arrangements of Ron Reuman draw the visitor into the fairy tale dream world of *L'Oiseau bleu*.

Original set design

For the set design the original designs for the earliest performances of the miracle years were used: the world premiere at the Arts Theatre in Moscow (1905) – realised by the pioneering director Konstantin Stanislavsky and later revived by the Théâtre Réjane in Paris (1911) - the performance in Theatre Royal Haymarket in London (1909), the opera at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York (1919) and the same opera by Albert Wolff at De Munt in Brussels (1920). It is thanks to the cooperation of the Moscow Art Theatre Museum, the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge and De Munt in Brussels that beautiful costume designs and scenery models can transport visitors into the atmosphere of these very first performances.

The Blue Bird craze

The exhibition also focuses on the craze *L'Oiseau bleu* created. Indeed, it was the play that persuaded the judges in Stockholm to award Maeterlinck the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1911 and although the First World War upset The Blue Bird's optimistic message, it was immediately revived in New York as an opera. There was a true Blue Bird mania in America and England, where to this day Maeterlinck's bird remains the most popular symbol of happiness. Even Paul McCartney once sang 'I'm a bluebird'. And the fairy tale was far from over. Over the years it was translated into no less than twenty-five languages and gradually became embedded in the collective memory and popular culture of Japan. Since 1911, it has been published more than one hundred times. It is still a very popular children's story, manga and anime. In Russia too Tytyl and Mytyl are still very much alive. Every child knows this magical fairy tale. Belgium is even referred to here as 'the land of the Blue Bird'.

The success story was also filmed several times, including *The Blue Bird* in 1940 with Shirley Temple as Mytyl and in 1976, directed by George Cukor with Elizabeth Taylor as the witch and the fairy. However, these versions could not surpass the silent film by Maurice Tourneur in 1918. It had to wait until this year when the Flemish filmmaker Gust Vanden Berghe surprised audiences at the Cannes Film festival with a fresh new *Blue Bird*.

Also on display for the first time is a series of original drawings by Carll Cneut from the brand new children's book *De Blauwe Vogel*. This beautiful retelling for children today by Do Van Ranst was published by De Eenhoorn in the context of the exhibition.

Maurice Maeterlinck

To conclude the exhibition the makers also highlight the figure of Maurice Maeterlinck: his childhood in his hometown of Ghent, his extravagant residences in France, his relationship with Georgette Leblanc and Renée Dahon, and the Nobel Prize for Literature awarded in 1911. For the first time the medal and beautiful Nobel Prize certificate, with Blue Bird, will be exhibited in Ghent. All this allows the visitor to experience the exhibition not only as a blue magical fairy tale, but also as an introduction to Maeterlinck's fascinating life and ideas.

L'Oiseau bleu and children

Children aged eight years and older can listen to the radio play on the audio guide together with their parents.

Toddlers

Younger children can participate in the quest '*Where is that bird of happiness?*'. Together with their mom, dad, grandpa, grandma or teacher, they look for fun objects in the exhibition. At the end of their expedition they can colour in their bird of happiness and to top it all off, also receive a gift.

Mr. Maurice in the classroom

Primary school teachers can visit the *L'Oiseau Bleu. Chasing Happiness* exhibition with their class free of charge. The educational package which will help them prepare for the exhibition, is available on request, and was developed in collaboration with vzw Rijms, the city of Ghent Educational advisory department and WOCK. The thread that runs through it comprises themes of happiness, talent and spirit of the times, which immediately takes pupils to the heart of the matter and guides them through the exhibition in a creative way.

The blue hour (Het uur blauw)

During the exhibition the Library Attic in St. Peter's Abbey will be transformed into a true theatre workshop on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Groups of pupils will work together with Jeugdtheaterhuis Larf on improvisation sessions on happiness. They will focus on Maurice Maeterlinck and the spirit of the times in which he lived.

Publication

The exhibition includes an accompanying, lavishly illustrated book, with versions in Dutch and French. Following an introduction to the full text of the third scene, 'The Land of Memory', the book includes contributions by André Capiteyn, who situates *L'Oiseau bleu* in Maeterlinck's life and work, Professor Christian Angelet, about the deeper meaning of *L'Oiseau bleu*, Martine Van Asch, about the contacts between Maeterlinck and director Stanislavsky, Professor Beachboard, about the 'Blue Bird craze in the United States, and about the incredible impact Maeterlinck and the Blue Bird had in Japan by Professor WF Vandewalle, who did special research on this at the Shira Yuri University in Tokyo.

L'Oiseau bleu. Chasing Happiness is part of the comprehensive programme of the Maeterlinck Year 2011 programme, organised by the Department of Culture of the City of Ghent as part of the 100th anniversary of this literary Nobel prize.

PRACTICAL INFO

The exhibition will be held in the St. Peter's Abbey Arts Centre from Friday 9th December 2011 to 22nd April 2012.

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OPENING HOURS

closed on Mondays
open from Tuesday to Sunday from 10 am to 6 pm
by way of exception, open on Monday 26 December
closed on 24, 25, 31 December and 1, 2 January

ADMISSION

individual visitor € 9
discount € 6,75
19 to 26 years old € 4
under-19s free

The admission price includes the use of an audio guide available in three languages: Dutch, French and English.

Your admission ticket for *L'Oiseau bleu. Chasing happiness* entitles you to 1 euro discount at the Minne-Maeterlinck exhibition in the Museum of Fine Arts Ghent, and vice versa.

PUBLICATIONS

L'Oiseau bleu, op zoek naar geluk. André Capiteyn (ed.), published by Snoeck Publishers, 2011, 120 pp., 100 illustrations. - ISBN 978-94-6161-029-4 - € 19.90

Also available in French: *L'Oiseau bleu. À la recherche du bonheur*. ISBN 978-94-6161-030-10.

De Blauwe Vogel. Do van Ranst (ed.) en Carll Cneut (illus.), published by De Eenhoorn, 2011 - 96 p. - ISBN 978-90-5838-733-2 - € 15,95

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