

The poetic universe of Oxana Sankova is often inhabited by figures on the fringes — stuck between the tiles in the pavement, drifting between reality and fiction. She draws inspiration from both personal experiences and literature, from her native Russia, as well as the broader world. For this production she was inspired by those who chose weakness as a form of resistance, like the “alcoholologist” Venichka in Jerofeyev’s *Moscow-Petushki*, or the seemingly self-destructive characters of Platonov.

What happens when someone deliberately weakens themselves — physically and mentally—perhaps by consuming vast amounts of alcohol? Will they lose all solid ground under their feet, become as indifferent as the world itself? Or might this detachment lift them, carry them beyond themselves, and reveal a vulnerability that allows them to open themselves up to the world? If their weakness becomes a form of strength, is it still weakness? Does the world even care? And what to do with all these empty bottles?

director: Oxana Sankova
cast: Kaat Arnaert, Lucas van der Vegt
text: Oxana Sankova, Kaat Arnaert, Lucas van der Vegt
dramaturgy: Bart Capelle
outside eye: Lukas Smolders
scenography and lighting design: Eric Engels
intern scenography: Olesia Ostrovskaia
costumes: Anna-Catherine Kunz
sound design: Niels Vanherpe
lighting design: Jonas Lambrigts
illustration poster: Mario Debaene
subtitles: Dries Gijssels
production: Antigone
special thanks to: detheatermaker, Tristero, Monty
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From childhood, we are raised to believe we have to be strong. That we must fight for our place under the sun. If we neglect to fight, life will devour us. Then we have lost. We fear this, falling behind, hitting rock bottom.

One day, I came across these words in the Taoist text Tao Te Ching:

‘When a person is born, they are soft and weak; when they die, they are hard and rigid. All hard and rigid things are companions of death. All soft and flexible things are expressions of life. Therefore, what has hardened will not win.’

Those words struck me — beautiful and frightening at once. What would happen if you truly tried to live by them?

—Oxana Sankova

ANTIGONE

SONGS OF THE FOOLS

Oxana Sankova - Antigone

December 11 & 12 2025



Language: English with Dutch subtitles

Duration: 60'

‘IT TAKES GREAT STRENGTH TO BE WEAK’

In *Songs of the Fools*, Oxana Sankova illuminates the shadowed edges of our humanity. Fascinated by figures who deliberately embrace weakness, she explores — with performers Kaat Arnaert and Lucas van der Vegt — what it means to consciously step out of our relentlessly fast-spinning world. A conversation with Oxana about hangovers, simplicity, and cynicism.

Oxana Sankova grew up in Russia, where she worked as an actress in Moscow. After fifteen years, she chose a new path: to leave Russia and settle in Brussels, where she discovered a fresh artistic voice while studying directing at RITCS School of Arts. *Songs of the Fools* marks her fifth production. While her earlier work was deeply autobiographical, Sankova now seeks to explore the intersection between the personal and the literary — a dialogue with the writers who taught her to dream.

What do you take from your years as an actress in Russian repertory theatre now that you create your own work?

A performance stands or falls with the relationship between actor and director. Having spent years on stage myself, I attach immense importance — both consciously and unconsciously — to that connection. Only by truly trying to understand your actors you can allow them to reach their full potential. In repertory theatre, the actor's role is largely to execute the director's instructions. The actor's creative input is rather limited to interpreting a character.

In the first production I created in Belgium, I was thrilled by the freedom to experiment artistically. I enjoy making autofictional theatre, using personal life experience as an entry into fiction. With *Songs of the Fools*, I meld this autofictional approach with my experience in repertory theatre. This time, stories and characters from literature, together with my own and my performers' personal backgrounds, form the starting point.

What inspires you as a theatre-maker?

Life in its simplest, most unadorned form, banal as it may sound. How we, as humans, navigate daily reality. My own relationship with the world is my main creative compass — but also the world around it. Why do we keep falling into the traps of the past? Look at the resurgence of nationalism and racism. At one point it seemed we had learned our lesson. “Never again,” we said. I am endlessly fascinated by what drives humanity to repeat these same mistakes.

In *Songs of the Fools*, human weakness takes centre stage.

Us humans are expected to meet so many demands: to be perfect, strong, ambitious, successful and oh so grateful. To survive in such a world does not allow for real weakness. We must conceal our failures, dark tendencies, tears, and screams — or we fall behind. In *Songs of the Fools*, I want to create a radical space for our weaknesses. Imperfection is an inseparable part of being human. People who dare to stop fighting fascinate me. Weakness shelters a sort of veracity. The vulnerability makes us more human.

In daily life, I rarely allow myself such weakness — the risk feels too great. What if you lose your job, your home, your loved ones? There is no telling where you would end up. On stage, in the safety of the theatre's black curtains, I explore what fragility and helplessness could offer us humans.

Does living in weakness constitute a form of resistance?

Consciously letting go of control takes courage. It is a rebellion against imposed expectations — from others as well as ourselves. Paradoxically, it takes immense strength to allow yourself to be weak. Our society seems collectively plagued by the fear of failure. Admitting you tried something and failed is a huge hurdle for many. It makes me think: what does it really matter? In the end, we are all losers, and we all die.

In his novel *Moscow-Petushki*, Russian writer Jerofeyev explores a character who turns to alcohol as a form of resistance — deliberately weakening himself in response to a society that relentlessly drives ever forward. How could the refusal to participate in that rat race not contain a form of rebellion.

When did you first encounter Jerofeyev's work?

Jerofeyev is part of the Russian literary canon. His words and phrases have entered everyday language. *Moscow-Petushki* is one of those books everyone in Russia knows. For the longest time, I mistakenly thought I had already read it because of how familiar it felt. When I finally did read it, I realised that it is far more than just the humorous tale of a man addicted to alcohol. Jerofeyev uses alcohol as a tool to explore the human condition. It is less about the act of drinking than the aftermath. When you are left exhausted, hungover, and spent. All sobered up, only a weary body and guilt remain.

That vulnerable state of mind carries a kind of gentleness toward the world.

The subject does carry some weight. How do you avoid cynicism?

Humour is essential here. It allows theatre to explore heavy themes without drowning in them. This humour is like a mysterious gift of unclear origin. We seem to carry it within us. Without humour, I doubt humanity would be able to persist for long.

Which human flaws do you have the most compassion for?

I would like to say many — but practising tolerance is a challenge for me as much as anyone. When I feel irritated toward someone, I try to treat it as an opportunity for introspection. It is far more interesting to reflect on where that feeling comes from within yourself. To understand the source of our frustrations is the first step toward gentleness.

Lastly: what are you moved by?

Connection. The warmth and gentleness of the people around me. During rehearsals with Lucas and Kaat we shared countless small, quiet moments of intimacy, thinking about simple questions together and searching for meaning. In that simplicity, I find peace — and perhaps the purest form of being moved.

Marte Van Poucke