

Stage

Leading ladies

The achievements of two very different women directors have been honoured with Official Jury Selection at this year's Dutch Theatre Festival. **Alize Zandwijk** and **Ola Mafaalani** tell *Malcolm Rock* about the importance of female storytelling onstage

Critics have hailed her as Holland's heir to Franglo theatre patriarch Peter Brook, but Ro Theater artistic director Alize Zandwijk is all woman. For this month's Dutch Theatre Festival (basically the greatest hits of the past year on stage) Zandwijk will revive 'Branden' ('Scorched'), Wajdi Mouawad's play about a grandmother whose family is scattered by civil war.

The principal role of Nawal has been described by Kester Freriks of *NRC Handelsblad* as worthy of 'a grand tragedienne', and the supporting cast is an eclectic mix of international actors and local amateurs – hence the parallels with 'Lord of the Flies' director Brook.

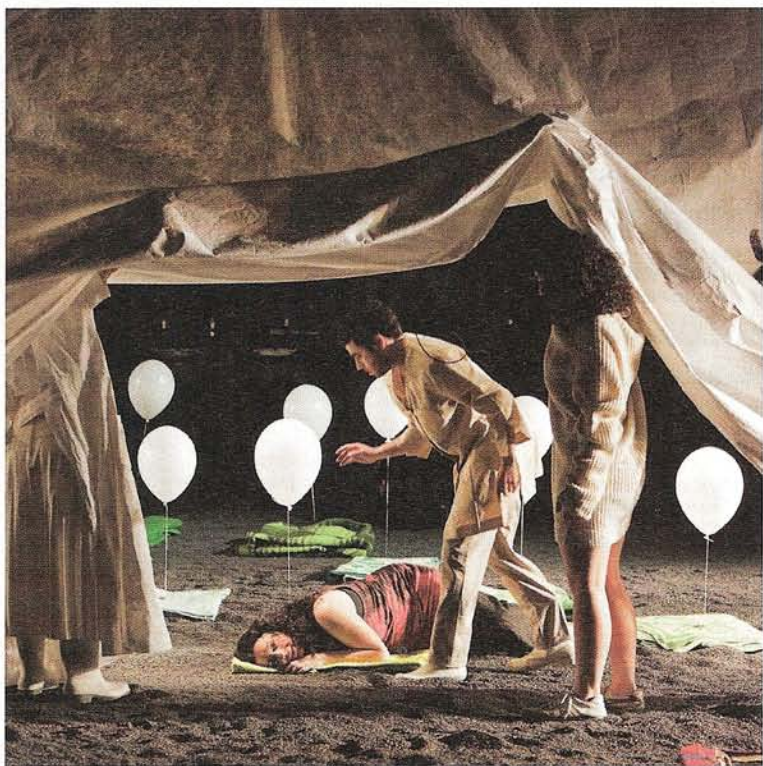
'I can't say I have Peter Brook in mind when I'm casting or planning a project,' Zandwijk reflects, 'but it is very flattering to be compared with such a great man in the theatre. I suppose my approach to directing, like many directors of my generation, male as well as female, has been influenced by reading his book "The Empty Space".'

Like Brook, Zandwijk endorses a 'poor theatre' – that is to say, performance with minimal decoration or other flourishes – to reveal the hidden struggles in society, especially those endured by women. For 'Branden' (which is performed in Amsterdam for the first time with English surtitles) she uses simple shadows on sheets to depict a war-torn Lebanon. Zandwijk is keen to point out, however, that the play is about the consequences of any armed conflict that affects women and their families.

'It could be the war in Sudan, the war in Iraq – wherever there has been war that transfers from one generation to the next; from mother to daughter,' she explains.

'With war comes anger in the population and within households.'

'Branden', which had its premiere in Rotterdam earlier this year, has been singled out as an Official Jury Selection at the festival. But it was also commended by the *Wijkjury*, a ten-strong panel of women from diverse



Balloon debate: 'Branden' deals with the impact of war

cultural backgrounds who wouldn't normally attend live theatre.

Unusually, the jurors asked for a repeat viewing: a superlative compliment for Zandwijk who believes that 'Branden' is a play for all women, both in the audience and onstage: 'We have amateur actors performing some of the roles, which makes the performance more real.'

'One girl earned her pimp more than €4 million'

Ola Mafaalani of Noord Nederlands Toneel is similarly interested in the trials and tribulations of extraordinary women. Following her 2009 reimagining of Greek gore-fest 'Medea', the artistic director has come up with 'Eleven Minutes', a part-fiction, part-verbatim drama about female prostitutes and sexual slavery in the Netherlands.

'[I became] interested in how our cities change at a certain hour of the night,' Mafaalani says, 'how we have these family-friendly streets by day that, suddenly, when the clock strikes one, are taken over by working women.'

'11 Minutes' – also one of the three Dutch Theatre Festival Jury Selections performed with English surtitles – melds chapters from Paulo Coelho's novel about a girl trapped in whoredom with the true-life experiences of female escorts working in Holland today.

'We conducted a lot of interviews and recorded some extraordinary stories from women who have come over from Russia and Brazil with the promise of a new life,' Mafaalani says. 'We learned that after two weeks these girls realise they can't reimburse the men who've paid to bring them over, so they're forced to start taking on clients. One girl worked night and day for seven years and earned her pimp more than €4 million.'

Mafaalani believes these are precisely the sorts of stories women directors should be exploring on the stage. 'Women are slaves in these places. They eat, sleep and work in isolation. Some escape to safe houses, but for others it simply becomes their reality. The sex industry in this country has become something of a joke – an international curiosity – but these women are real and they are just like me. As a director it is my job to ask difficult questions of civilisation. As a woman I can only keep on telling the stories of other women.'

Dutch Theatre Festival, 2-12 Sep, various locations (tfl.nl). See listings, right.