

PRESS REVIEWS UNSUNG

<http://one4review.co.uk/2018/08/unsung-skagen-kvs-4/>

* * * * <https://www.fest-mag.com/edinburgh/theatre/104908-review-unsung-by-skagenkvs>
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<http://www.theoutlierscotland.co.uk/2018/08/26/review-unsung/>

<https://www.scotsman.com/lifestyle/culture/edinburgh-festivals/scotsman-fringe-first-awards-six-winners-from-week-three-1-4788465>

http://m.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20180822_03678323

<https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2018/08/10/vlaams-acteur-valentijn-dhaenens-maakt-indruk-op-edinburgh-festi/>

VRT News: Vlaamse acteur Valentijn Dhaenens maakt indruk op Edinburgh Festival met monoloog "Unsung"

De monoloog "Unsung" van acteur Vincent Dhaenens, op tekst van Vincent Stuer, heeft de aandacht getrokken van Britse recensenten. De voorstelling is nu te zien op het prestigieuze Edinburgh Festival in Schotland

* * * * <http://broadwaybaby.com/shows/unsung/736149>

"...*exactly the wake-up call we need*"

<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2018/aug/10/the-best-shows-at-the-edinburgh-festival-2018>

"the best shows at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe"

* * * * <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2018/aug/09/unsung-review-summerhall-edinburgh-fringe-festival-valentijn-dhaenens>

Dhaenens cuts a convincing figure as a slippery, ambitious young leader.

* * * * <http://www.theskinny.co.uk/festivals/edinburgh-fringe/theatre/unsungatsummerhall>

* * * * <https://www.fest-mag.com/edinburgh/theatre/104908-review-unsung-by-skagenkvs>
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<https://thespyinthestalls.com/tag/unsung/>

<http://www.britishtheatreguide.info/reviews/unsung-summerhall-16390>

http://www.heraldscotland.com/arts_ents/16501923.edinburgh-festival-theatre-reviews-pussy-riot-riot-daysfirst-snowunsung/



THE SCOTSMAN

UNSUNG ****

The Scotsman
23 Aug 2018

This monologue at Summerhall, by acclaimed Antwerp-based theatre-maker Valentijn Dhaenens, introduces us to a young politician in the Blair-clinton mould, tired of vacuous slogans about “change” but unable to move beyond them – a man who is a microcosm of all that has gone wrong with centre-left western politics, summed up in a single riveting hour by one of the most powerful performances on the Fringe. See review, p9.

In this latest monologue by the acclaimed Antwerp-based theatre-maker Valentijn Dhaenens, the stage is laid out like an exaggerated version of the speakers’ platform in any deluxe conference centre. There’s a lectern amid a forest of tropical pot-plants; and in the middle, a man in a suit, a fit and handsome-looking young leader-in-waiting, about to make a speech.

He is, it soon emerges, a quintessential politician in the Blair-clinton mould; tired of vacuous slogans about “change” but unable to move beyond them, contemptuous of polls and focus groups but unable to ignore them, obsessed with image, yet also so driven and adrenaline-charged that he takes huge self-destructive risks in his sexual life.

Indeed many sections of the text – created by Dhaenens with scriptwriter Vincent Stuer and dramaturg Kristin Rogghe – come directly from speeches by Tony Blair, and from other incidents in his career; and if that history is now 25 years old, the problems of authenticity and electability facing centre left and green politicians seem hardly to have changed at all.

So what is it that is “unsung” in this brilliant monologue, told partly through live action, and partly on screen, in Skype messages to his lover and fraught television appearances?

My guess is that it is the small, fierce, persistent flame of real political idealism that burns beneath the candidate’s raging personal ambition, and his burnished public persona.

The problem is, though, that if this politician does have a significant vision for the future of his country and the world, he lives in an age when he cannot talk about it honestly for fear of alienating key groups of voters, and when it can be wholly discredited in an instant by his private misconduct, which he seems unable to control.

He is, in other words, a microcosm of all that has gone wrong with centre-left western politics; summed up in a single riveting hour, by one of the most powerful performers on the Fringe. JOYCE MCMILLAN

Until 26 August. Today noon.



Unsung review – sharp attack on personality-obsessed politics



Summerhall, Edinburgh

Valentijn Dhaenens takes us behind the speechifying in a compelling study of how politicians operate



Catherine Love

Thu 9 Aug 2018 16.00 BST



It's six years since [Valentijn Dhaenens](#) blasted fringe-goers with his dazzling mashup of political rhetoric in [Bigmouth](#). Looking back, his dissection of the dangerous power of oratory seems prescient, anticipating the surge of far-right populism. His latest show, by comparison, feels half a step behind the times. *Unsung* takes us behind the speechifying, interrogating the psychology of politics as well as its slick statements, but it has little truly new to say about how politicians operate.

In sharp suit and inoffensive tie, Dhaenens cuts a convincing figure as a slippery, ambitious young leader. The show opens with a speech bloated with metaphors and empty of content. It's familiar stuff, eliciting wry laughs from the audience. Later, we see the protagonist talking strategy, giving statements to the media, making video calls to the family he barely sees, and sending regular, occasionally explicit missives to his lover. Throughout, Dhaenens is alone on stage, suggesting loneliness and self-absorption.





▲ Witty and charismatic ... Valentijn Dhaenens in *Unsung*. Photograph: Murdo Macleod for the Guardian

In a smart touch, he relegates his unnamed politician's beliefs to the background. Here is a man forever talking about change and big ideas without offering any real substance. It's an implicit statement on the emptiness of personality-obsessed politics, amplified by the huge image of Dhaenens hoisted up at the back of the stage. This kind of contest is all about the man - and it is, so often, a man - rather than what he stands for.

While some of Dhaenens' observations are painfully timely - attacks on the media, nasty insinuations about opponents - other aspects of the piece come across as strangely dated. In the wake of Trump's "grab her by the pussy" comments, it suddenly feels naively old-fashioned to suggest that a sex scandal could ruin a politician's chances of winning an election.

As ever, Dhaenens is witty, charismatic and compelling even at his most grotesque. It recalls his performance in *Ontroerend Goed's Fight Night*, another show about how we vote for the who rather than the what. Like a true politician's campaign, *Unsung* is polished and appealing, but it's essentially an old message in new wrapping.

- [At Summerhall, Edinburgh, until 26 August.](#)
- [Read all our Edinburgh festival reviews.](#)

Topics

Edinburgh festival 2018

[Theatre](#) / [Edinburgh festival](#) / [Festivals](#) / [reviews](#)





Edinburgh festival 2018

Frites first: the Belgians making audiences laugh, sing and squirm

The Edinburgh festival's Big in Belgium season features daft whimsy, a Eurovision anthem and a headlong charge into uncomfortable territory



Mark Fisher

Wed 15 Aug 2018 15.09 EDT

When the Smiths released *Paint a Vulgar Picture*, the obligatory rock-band moan about the music business, Morrissey came up with a characteristically waspish one-liner. It was the fate of every singer doing the media round, he protested, to “please the press in Belgium”. Behind the joke is the idea of the pop star having to kowtow to a country of no significance.

It's a stereotype Nele Van den Broeck has no appetite to dispel. When her Belgian band breaks up in *Nele Needs a Holiday: The Musical*, she makes the impulse decision to flee to London. That, as everyone knows, is the only place to make it in the music business. *Belgium*, she accepts with an ironic twinkle, does not figure in the international awareness stakes. Even her boyfriend seems to think she comes from France.

Consequently, the idea of being part of Big in Belgium, the annual showcase of left-field theatre at *Summerhall* in Edinburgh, amuses her enough to incorporate the phrase into one of her songs. Who'd aspire to being big in Belgium? Perhaps the kind of person who would aspire to tell a musical life story that begins and ends in the Low Countries, with a sorry tale of UK failure sandwiched in between. Step forward Nele, with a self-deprecating rags-to-even-more-rags ramble into a fame machine that gets no more glamorous than a 2am pub gig in front of an empty house.



▲ Ironic twinkle ... *Nele Needs a Holiday*. Photograph: Murdo Macleod for the Guardian

The best shows at the Edinburgh festival 2018

17 August 2018



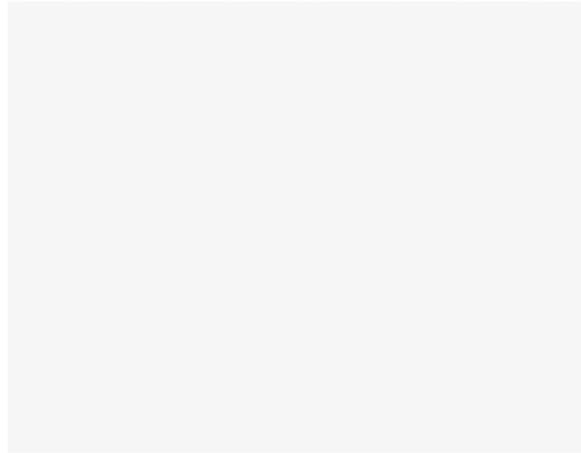
▲ Sharp ... Valentijn Dhaenens in *Unsung*. Photograph: Murdo MacLeod for the Guardian

Unsung

Summerhall, 12pm, until 26 August

The sharp-suited [Valentijn Dhaenens](#) cuts a convincing figure as a slippery, ambitious politician. The show opens with a speech bloated with metaphors and empty of content. It's familiar stuff, eliciting wry laughs from the audience. Later, we see him talking strategy, giving statements to the media, making video calls to the family he barely sees, and sending regular, occasionally explicit missives to his lover. It recalls his performance in [Ontroerend Goed's Fight Night](#), another show about how we vote for the who rather than the what. **CL**

[Read the full three-star review](#)



It's an oddly deflating trajectory for a musical, and that's part of its offbeat appeal. With Anna Soden and Hannah Davis supporting on drums, guitar and keyboards, and all three in spangly jumpsuits, it's a wry tale of deluded ego. Van den Broeck's show is at once self-obsessed and self-aware. Satirising posh flatmates, possessive boyfriends and loudmouth agents, it survives on strong musical arrangements, good humour and quirky charm. Don't expect to see it in the West End any time soon, but it entertains for a daft hour of late-night whimsy.

Marieke Dermul's European Citizen Popsong has a similarly homemade feel and the same idiosyncratic appeal. Her idea is that in these turbulent times, we need to find a way of expressing common European values. And how better to do that than in a Eurovision-style song? Having recruited a makeshift band from the audience, she plays a series of videos in which she meets Eurovision experts, international musicians and passersby who stop to hear her songs (sample lyric: "We share some values / We feel stronger"). There's a poem by Herman Van Rompuy, the former president of the European council, and an endorsement from [SuRie](#), Britain's contestant in Eurovision 2018.

You assume Dermul is being ironic but, with her wide-eyed enthusiasm, she might just be in earnest and, although this one-woman show could have developed its theme further, it's a likable alternative to the many Europe-in-crisis dramas elsewhere.





▲ Idiosyncratic appeal ... European Citizen Popsong. Photograph: Bart Grietens

Compared with previous programmes, it's not a vintage year for Big in Belgium (no Ontroerend Goed here for a start), although Valentijn Dhaenens' Unsung is worth catching for its familiar but pertinent portrait of political hot air and spin. And it wouldn't be a Belgian season without a show that charged headlong into territory that makes UK audiences squirm. This time, that show is Bastiaan Vandendriessche's De Fuut, which has a lot in common with Adam Lazarus's Daughter, around the corner at Canada Hub. Both one-man shows deal with sordid subject matter (paedophilia here, a desensitised pornographic culture there), both assume a false complicity with the audience and go out of their way to make you feel grimly uncomfortable. In the last respect, they succeed. But to what end?

Advertisement

Vandendriessche plays a character who wants you to know he's a reasonable man. He is cultured and articulate, and his volunteering as a leader with the Sea Scouts is, at least in part, an act of altruism. He likes the young generation and wants to help them grow up happy. But something is amiss. Although he condemns another leader for openly grooming and sexually abusing the children, he does so in such matter-of-fact terms that it sounds like a minor transgression, not a criminal act.

Going on to describe his relationship with two 13-year-old girls, his language is a mixture of self-deception, distortion and warped justification, all designed to make his abuse seem other than what it is. You

could argue that his attempt to make the audience complicit in this, reaching out a hand of friendship to the front row, is itself an abuse of power. Either way, it is dispiriting to wallow so unremittingly in this territory without the conflict and release that fully-fledged drama provides.

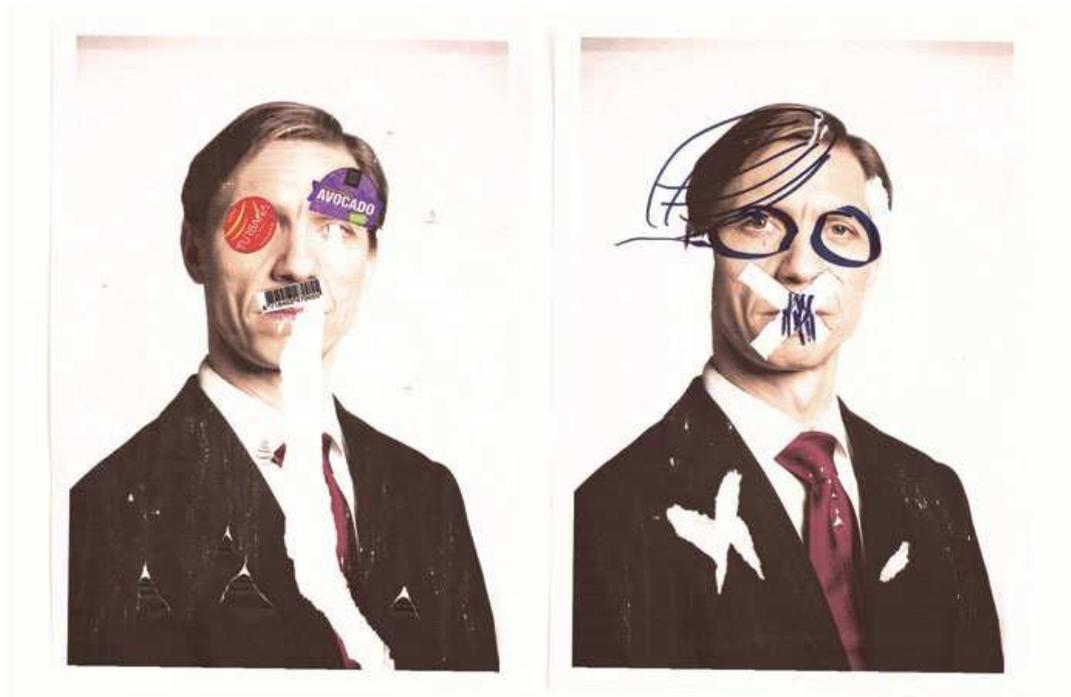
- Nele Needs a Holiday: The Musical, European Citizen Popsong and De Fuut are at Summerhall, Edinburgh, until 26 August.

Edinburgh fringe review: *Unsung* at Summerhall

UNTIL 26TH AUGUST

Flowerpot-humping flair: Valentijn Dhaenens impersonates a politician in his surreal new show.

[DUSKA RADOSAVLJEVIC](#)



'Unsung' at Summerhall. Photo: Danny Willems

Back in 2012 Valentijn Dhaenens wowed Edinburgh with his show *Bigmouth* – a dynamic and insightful history of oratory from Ancient Greece to the present day. It was a simple but effective and innovative idea as Dhaenens rigged up a series of microphones (incidentally against a backdrop that made the set look like a laboratory of sorts), a complex machinery of filters and pedals that let him create complex symphonies with his voice alone. In that piece Dhaenens displayed his distinct power of mimicry and his captivating singing skills, and at the same time made the point that the effect of political speeches was contained in the form of their delivery as much as it was in the content itself. If not more.

Since then Edinburgh could witness Dhaenens' other foreys into voice-based theatre-making including a verbatim piece about the First World War – *Smallwar* (2014) and, with his colleagues from Skagen, a piece based on the testimonies of petty criminals – *Pardon/In Cuffs* (2015).

Unsung is an altogether different kind of theatrical experiment for Dhaenens. Here he goes back to the tradition of dramatic monologue and invents a politician in the throes of an election campaign and an extra-marital affair – all at the same time. The story hinges on the balance between the private and the public and just how much a politician needs to give away in order to win popular support. In a way the aim for Dhaenens seems to be making the point opposite to the one made in *Bigmouth* – namely, that it is content rather than form that ought to matter in representational democracy. The

show leads to a powerful and unexpected finale in which our Politician gets to make the kind of candid speech never really heard from politicians otherwise. However, the route towards it is not always as smooth as one might expect.

Dhaenens has a kind of command as a performer that means he can create significant effect with minimal effort: he frequently comments on his characterisation as a performer with skilled, subtle and deliberate pauses and inflections. He is a master comedian too – you will rarely see someone hump a flowerpot with as much flair as Dhaenens does, all in the interest of a good old laugh. However, there are also moments that just don't gel for me in this show. This might be mostly linked to his departure from the more courageous experimental verbatim performance into the safety of a fictionalised world using pathos and cliches to make its points. At the end of the day, it is Dhaenens himself who is more fascinating to watch than Dhaenens pretending to be someone else – however fascinating and complex and interesting that someone else purports to be.

Review: *Unsung* by SKaGeN/KVS

The fight for political leadership goes behind the scenes



[THEATRE REVIEW \(EDINBURGH\)](#) | READ IN ABOUT 2 MINUTES ©

By [Laura Kressly](#)

PUBLISHED 12 AUG 2018



Unsung

Politics is a nasty game that few people win for long. The rules require players to show personality but not too much, have firm principles but not be too cold, and show superiority over opponents but not with arrogance. Even the best and the brightest struggle to keep this balance, all whilst behaving impeccably, and contrary to what many think, politicians are only human. This game sets them up for a fall.

Valentijn Dhaenens's smartly-suited character is entrenched in the fight for party leadership, the highest level of the politics game. The best of the best try to claim moral superiority on all fronts, but

this backstage perspective shows how a nation's leaders are just as flawed as anyone else. Worse, actually – they are exceptional liars and manipulators. Dhaenen displays all these abhorrent traits, so it's easy to dislike him as he obsesses over policy wording and his opponent's tactics. The solo performance further emphasises the ego necessary to succeed in politics.

Dhaenens doesn't just paint this man as a villain, however. The humanity glints through in Skype calls and FaceTimes with loved ones, showing a stressed and vulnerable person. It's this tone contrast that gives the play its power. Short scenes in chronological order keep it from becoming too repetitive, and there's a consistent build in tension to the climactic end.

Though a touch too long, this production certainly humanises politicians. This is its most potent feature and one that bears keeping in mind in this politically polarised world.

Unsung

12:00, Today

Summerhall, Edinburgh

TOTALTHEATRE

Navigation ▾



Valentijn Dhaenens / KVS & SKaGeN : Unsong

August 10, 2018 | in Reviews | by Dorothy Max Prior | No Comments

Tags: Edinburgh Festival Fringe 2018

A silent space, a backdrop half-raised, the enormous printed face on it partly obscured, crumpled. Some plinths boasting nondescript plants. And bananas. A large portrait-shaped screen, looking like an enormous smartphone. A microphone. A man comes in. A fit-looking man in a smart, straight-legged deep blue suit, crisp white shirt, thin tie. His uniform. Business man? Politician? He taps the mic, smiles at us, takes a breath, and starts to speak – confidently, with energy and pace, addressing us directly, acknowledging our presence. He talks of anchors, and frames, and pillars. Level playing fields, and holistic roadmaps. Business as usual is not an option, he tells us.

Just as we are starting to think to ourselves that we have no idea what is actually being spoken of here, it is clever rhetoric without substance, a second voice from the air (or airwaves) interrupts. Political adviser? Campaign manager? Inner self? I'm not actually saying anything here, says the man, and we laugh. Switch. We see him on the screen, sitting in a pool, talking to a lover, complaining of the monotony of small towns, endless hotel rooms, loneliness.

And so it goes. We find out more, as we switch back and forth from live action to screen monologue. He's a politician in the Blair/Macron mould. Young(ish), vital, lean, hungry. A touch of Obama. Kennedy, even. Taking calls whilst doing press-ups. Trying

to solve the dilemma of whether his elder son should drop Latin. Singing Up On the Hill Lived a Lonely Goatherd to his younger son. Sitting in a lounge bar with his rival for party leadership, trying to persuade him to drop out of the race. Talking to rooms full of party loyalists on the campaign trail – could we put chairs up here on the stage with me, he asks. Practising his acceptance speeches. Having phone sex with his lover. Eating bananas (ah yes, the bananas...)

Valentijn Dhaenens, the writer and performer of *Unsung*, knows what he is doing. Everything that happens onstage is planned with dramaturgical precision and executed magnificently, from the excellent set design and use of props (white shirts in cellophane packages! bananas! plants!) to the snatches of music (Beethoven's 9th!) to the clever switching from mic on a stand to radio mic to giant screen to regular phone. And what a performance – virtuoso. It's very good theatre.

But there is a 'but'. *Unsung* is far more of a straightforward play than the previous blockbuster *BigMouth*. The narrative is beautifully developed, but nothing happens that we wouldn't have expected. The small local references bussed in (Cameron, Thatcher) feel awkward; and the 'nobody loses any sleep over Europe' line is a little cringy (the piece is stronger when it stays universal). And the key event – the politician's embroilment in an extra-marital sex scandal – feels (sadly) rather dated in an era in which we have an unreconstructed pussy-grabber in the White House, with his rival for the presidency the wife of a sexual predator impeached for his behaviour. Real life these days leaves little room for satire or parody.

Yes, *Unsung* does what it says on the can, 'unravels the DNA of the homo politicus', and does so with enormous skill and panache. We see, and appreciate, the rise of the constructed persona and his lust for power, the flawed man behind the public face, and – eventually – the genuinely caring political person he really is.

But to apply the Tom Morris litmus test: there must be surprises. When the play ends, we must have learnt something new, or had our perceptions challenged. There are no big surprises here: we learn nothing about politicians or politics that we don't already know, and we need something more than a well-produced expose of things we already know. Like Valentijn Dhaenens' unnamed politician, *Unsung* is good-looking, persuasive, clever, but flawed.

Unsung is presented at Edinburgh Festival Fringe 2018 as part of the Big in Belgium programme.



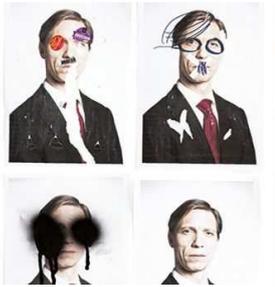
Dorothy Max Prior

Unsung

at Summerhall



Valentijn Dhaenens presents the fall from grace of a political animal.



REVIEWS / THEATRE / UNSUNG
STEVEN FRASER | 6 AUG 2018



Performer and author **Valentijn Dhaenens** stumbles onto the stage loosely holding a small bunch of banana's. He makes his way up to a microphone, awkwardly gives it a tap to make sure it is working and then begins to talk. For the next five minutes he addresses a conference. This could be an academic, political or business conference. It is difficult to tell, as his language is so vague and filled with needless words, he could actually be addressing anyone. Eventually he cracks and acknowledges that his speech is not working. This disharmony was foreshadowed in the excellent set design. The back of the stage is a total mess. A large banner sits half rolled up and is haphazardly hanging as a backdrop. *Unsung* presents a character who is broken, tragic and self destructive. The instance of clarity when he realises his speech is flawed, is a rare moment of empathy. From here on in we see our protagonist begin a downward spiral and Dhaenens plays the role with nuisance and zeal.

The Herald



sundayherald

19 August by Mark Brown

If one is seeking an antidote to the misfiring First Snow, get along to Summerhall where the superb writer and actor Valentijn Dhaenens, of Antwerp-based company SKaGeN, is performing the superb political monodrama *Unsung*. Making innovative use of a mobile phone, recorded audio and a video screen, Dhaenens (who is known to Edinburgh Fringe audiences for the fine works *BigMOUTH* and *SmallWaR*) creates a compelling, humorous and, ultimately, discomfiting portrait of a career politician.

Sharp-suited, image-conscious, cynical and ruthless Dhaenens's politician is reminiscent, at the outset, of Tony Blair in the early days of New Labour or Emmanuel Macron during his meteoric rise. A private phone call in which he professes friendship towards yFatsoy, his rival for the party leadership, before threatening to destroy his political career, has fascinating echoes of the famous Islington meeting between Blair and Gordon Brown.

However, the deeper Dhaenens takes us into the politician's fractured and precarious private life, the more we see a man who is soul-breakingly lonely. Brilliantly performed and beautifully presented, it is a work of tremendous political and human insight, and of remarkable empathy.

Valentijn Dhaenens is a politician. He was indeed rehearsing a political speech. As well as the dishevelled backdrop there is a vertical monitor on the stage. This acts a large smart phone screen where we see iPhone footage of the politician as he addresses his absent wife. There is a ritualistic aspect to the protagonists behaviour. He is constantly seen unbuttoning his shirt, undoing his tie and unpacking new clothes. The politician is a go-getter. He is ready to rise to the top, he is drunk on power, but he neglects his family. The neglect of his wife is his downfall and the ritual we see on stage suggests he has been doing it over and over again.

The politician has failed as a father and husband and this comes to the fore when a secret is revealed. But his fall from grace does not feel dramatic and glorious enough. The politician is given the last word. Even though he is a failure he is still given centre stage to give one final speech. His narcissism and ego are left to shine one last time and the ending feels like a somewhat unsatisfying conclusion to an interesting performance.

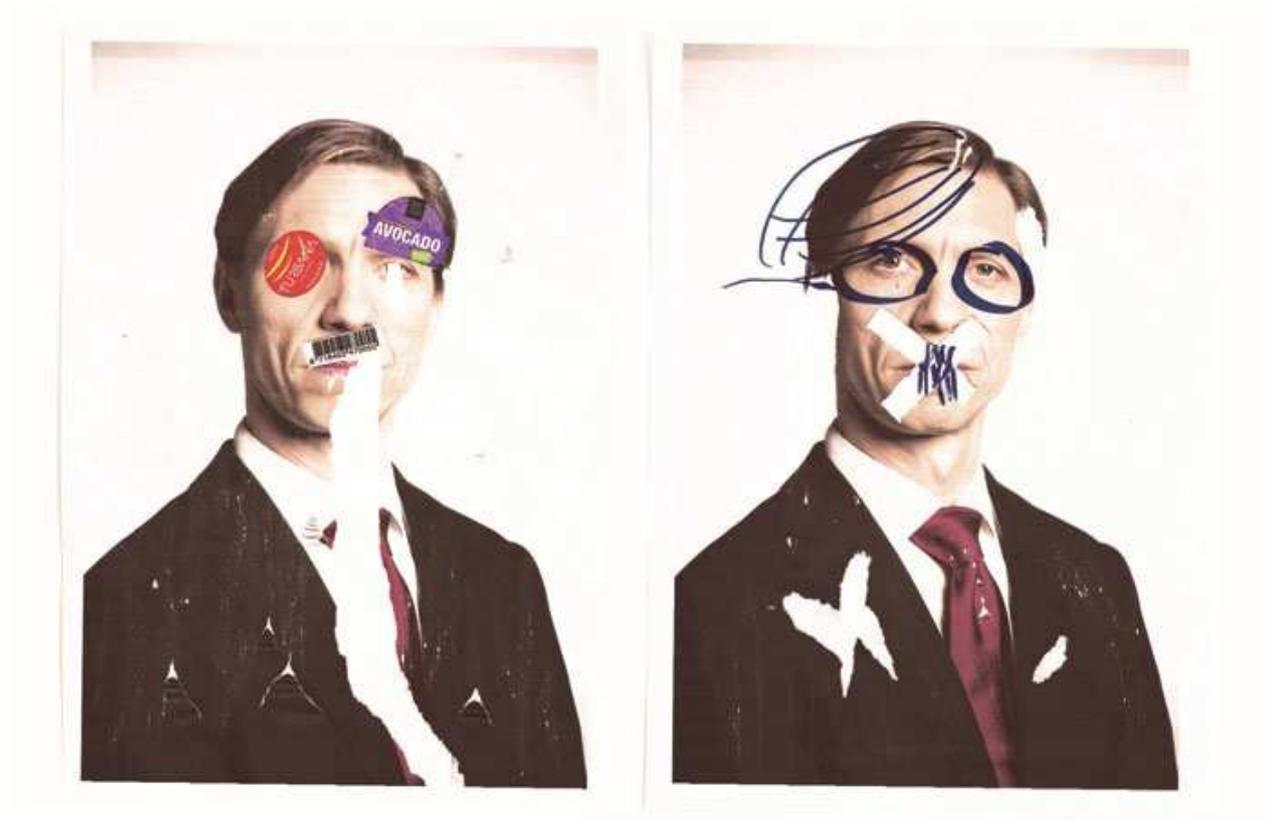


Steven Fraser / @stevenfraserart

Steven is Spoken Word Editor for The Wee Review and also reviews theatre and movies. He studied animation and computer arts at university and currently freelances in illustration. He currently lives in Glasgow.

THE STAGE

Unsung review at Summerhall, Edinburgh – ‘wonderfully elastic performance’



Reviews Theatre

by [Natasha Tripney](#) - Aug 17, 2018

In 2012, the elasti-lipped Valentijn Dhaenens made a splash with *Bigmouth*, a mash-up of historical oratory and a tour de force of stage performance.

He was adept at capturing rhetorical power, while also skewering clumsy and careless political language. In his new show, *Unsung*, he uses a similar collage technique to explore the tactics and mind-set of the career politician, stitching together words from everyone from Jaques Chirac to Hillary Clinton.

Wearing an anonymous blue suit, Dhaenens speaks at length while saying very little. He talks in jargon and stock phrases, avoiding specificity at all costs. There's very little solidity to anything he says. He intersperses these podium moments with phone calls to the wife and kids he hasn't seen in weeks and more intimate video calls to his lover. The isolating lifestyle of the campaigning politician, forever on the road, cut off from the reality of voters' lives, is laid bare.

Politics and policy play second fiddle to persona. We never find out what his party stands for. He switches between a puffed-up Trump, a slick Sarkozy, a confident Kennedy. An unseen adviser tells him when to relax his body language and roll up his sleeves.

Dhaenens is a performer of exceptional vocal dexterity and precision, with astonishingly plastic features. But the form of the show, its embrace of un-talk and campaign speak, creates a hollow at its heart.

Verdict

Wonderfully elastic performance exploring the hollowness at the heart of political campaigning



THE INDEPENDENT

By Lyn Gardner

Increasingly it feels as if I am being groomed. By men. In the wake of #MeToo and shifting perceptions about privilege and entitlement, they are oh-so-eager to tell me their side of the story. To invite me into their heads. To test whether and where I will draw the line.

Will I allow myself to be seduced by the protagonist of *Daughter* (Canada Hub, until 26 August) who presents himself as a loving father of a daughter but who treats women with disdain? Or will I take the hand of the self-justifying, self-confessed paedophile in *De Fuut* (Summerhall, until 26 August) who tells us of his fantasies and of his time as a scout leader which gave him easy access to young girls?

Can I be persuaded to feel sympathy for middle-aged Roger in *Angry Alan* (Underbelly, until 26 August) who has lost his job, his BMW, his first wife and his son and is disconcerted to discover that his girlfriend is taking a women's studies course at the local community college?

Or feel something for the protagonist of *Unsung* (Summerhall, until 26 August) in which Valentijn Dhaenens plays a politician on the campaign trail attempting to win our votes even as his personal morality and public persona reveal him as a hollow man in a hollow world of politics? A world in which it is only image not policies that count?

These one-man shows are some of the most talked-about on the fringe. *Daughter*, in particular has elicited some strong responses, especially from women who have felt that listening to Adam Lazarus's character try and make us complicit is not just distressing but also morally doubtful. Particularly in a world in which men still largely hold the power and take central stage.

But even as Lazarus's character is trying to seduce us in *Daughter* by showing us how he dances with his daughter and what a new man he was during her difficult birth, he betrays himself. To be honest he always seems like a bit of a jerk which works against the dramaturgical set-up.

But the really fascinating thing here is the way the show probes how we, the audience, respond. He keeps pushing and pushing at the line as if daring us to draw it. When will that be? When he slams his daughter onto her bed in anger? Or later? Much, much later?

Daughter is so powerful and unsettling because it blurs the line between performer and character. *De Fuut* tries to do the same but less fruitfully because it is clear right from the start where the interests of the Lolita-admiring protagonist lie and the lengths to which he will use theatre (he is supposedly writing a play) to get us on side and accept that his sexual attraction to children is a beautiful thing.

At the performance I saw, the audience were not having any of it, and I wanted to cheer them. But I am not sure if that makes the show a success or a failure.

As he proved in *Big Mouth*, Valentijn Dhaenens is the most mesmerising of performers but *Unsung* is a slightly overfamiliar story of political ambition wrecked by sexual scandal. But is it the private pictures of private parts that make their way onto social media that are this politician's undoing? Or his inability to connect with his own feelings and have any empathy for others?

Unsung suggests that we are all losers in a world where male politicians are driven primarily by competition, fear of failure and their sexual urges. But the structure of the show is clumsy, the points it makes too obvious, and the character's coldness works against engagement.

Unsung @ Summerhall

A masterful central performance by Valentijn Dhaenens anchors a compelling, contemporary story of political hubris



Review by Jon Stapley | 13 Aug 2018



In *Unsung*, Belgian actor Valentijn Dhaenens plays an unnamed politician on the campaign trail. What ideology, party or even country he's operating in is not entirely clear. If you're the type of person to use the word 'centrist' then he certainly seems like one, but the show doesn't make it clear. Good decision – it doesn't matter, and to pin any colours to this show's mast would only hurt its point. Dhaenens is playing the kind of ambitious, self-loving careerist you'll find in any political persuasion, and he plays him with lip-licking relish. When politicians start to believe their own hype, when mediocre men dismiss their own failings because they believe they are uniquely capable of turning things around, this is what they turn into.

The set makes this clear, gradually unfurling into a colossal image of Dhaenens' immaculately groomed face. Judicious use of voiceover and video immerse us in the politician's world, and the moments of theatricality are well-judged and powerful – when things go wrong, they do so to the tune of 'Flight of the Valkyries'. Dhaenens is a sublime performer, expertly portraying a man whose defining characteristic is his reluctance to be truly seen. It's a textured, layered performance of the highest quality.

You could project any number of real political stories onto this show if you wanted to (Blair and Brown, perhaps) but to do so isn't the point. This is the game of politics that plays out over and over again, and though the players may change and the results aren't predictable, something has embedded itself in our system that is refusing to be rooted out. A campaign slogan Dhaenens' character pitches, rejected by his handlers, is 'Our Politics Are Sick'. His mistake is not recognising that he's no cure – he's just another symptom.
