Albert Vogel, voordrachtskunstenaar (1874-1933): Een onderzoek naar retorica en voordrachtskunst in het eerste kwart van de twintigste eeuw

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Albert Vogel, elocutionist

This dissertation examines the life and work of the Dutch reciter Albert Vogel (1874-1933). Its purpose is to place Vogel's art in the history of Dutch theatre and literature of the early twentieth century.

Albert Vogel was an officer in the Dutch army who exchanged his military career for the uncertain existence of a professional reciter, declaimer and monologuist. In that capacity he travelled around the globe, reciting Dutch and other literature, in various languages. In later life, he concentrated more and more on the theory of his profession in the framework of classical rhetorica. He published several books about his art.

Since Vogel operated mainly as a solo-artist, his performances have left but few traces in Dutch theatre history. Also, his specific brand of rhetorical declamation was out of touch with the latest developments in contemporary Dutch theatre at the time.

Around the time of Vogel's debut in 1899, naturalism was having its heyday on the Dutch stage. Also, the influence of French Symbolism was beginning to penetrate. Stéphane Mallarmé's quasi-sacred approach of reading poetry in a sing-song manner, with few gestures and in a symbolic setting, soon became de rigueur in The Netherlands. It was especially promoted by the editors of a literary magazine called De Kroniek.

Albert Vogel's performances were, however, more akin to the heroic representations of classicist actors of the early nineteenth century. Vogel was convinced that recitation was the ultimate purpose of a piece of literature. In his view, it had to be based on the acting traditions of the classic verse drama, with noble poses, grand gestures and dramatic diction. In his rendering of verse-drama especially he applied the musical, classicist approach.

The point of departure of my research was Professor van den Berg's conclusion in one of his publications: 'An investigation into the fate of the professional elocutionist in the early twentieth century is to be recommended. Has the declaimer been silenced, because the convention of reading has replaced the oral tradition? Does the reciter turn into an extra, who speaks up only at a lecture of 'het Nut'?' Is the career of Albert Vogel - famous reciter in The Netherlands and abroad - an exception or is it representative for all those artists of the spoken word around the turn of the last century?'

The book tries to formulate an answer to the latter question.

My research was based on the contents of Vogel's private archives, which are kept in the Municipal Archives of the Hague. These contain his publications as well as programmes, photographs of Vogel in action, reviews of his performances and didactic material. Also, there are fourteen gramophone records of his recitations dating from before 1930. Unfortunately, the archives contain but little correspondence.

The first part of the book is devoted to Vogel's theories of elocutionism; the second part concerns the practice of his art.

PART I: THEORY

In the first chapter of the first part elocutionism is traced to its origin as the fifth and according to some, the most important part of classical rhetorica. Ever since classical antiquity, the art of acting was based on the rules of rhetorica. Classicist acting was characteristically statuesque; the actor was
meant to move from one lofty 'pose' to the next, always taking 'contraposto' or counterbalance into account. Ideally, these poses were copied from classical painting and sculpture. Theatrical criticism therefore often described acting from the point of view of the visual arts. As of the eighteenth century, acting developed into an independent art. This same period saw the birth of elocutionary rhetorica. In this context, the importance of physiognomy and later, psychology is discussed.

The second and third chapters examine Vogel's publications. His very first articles, which were published in a local newspaper in 1900, display his indebtedness to theories of classicist acting. His book Voordrachtskunst (The Art of Elocutionism, 1919) is an example of elocutionary rhetorica in the broadest sense of the word. It is examined against the background of the development of elocutionary rhetorica, the tuition of acting around 1900, classicist acting theories and, eventually, contemporary psychology. Rhetorica (1931) contains a discussion of the five tasks of the orator and as such, fits into the Quintilian tradition of 'the art of speaking well'. It is a late example of a classicist rhetorica. This book is targeted towards the orator, not towards the performing elocutionist. Het Japanse Tooneel (The Japanese stage, 1911) is a study of Japanese theatrical traditions which had impressed Vogel on his visit to that country in 1908. His fourth publication, the military treatise Je maintiendrai. Een boek voor leger en volk (I will hold out. A book for army and people, 1917), is about the education of the military and falls outside the scope of this dissertation.

Vogel's publications on his art show a tribute to the theories and traditions of classicist acting, combined with an interest in contemporary psychology, especially the theories of Wilhelm Wundt. As he had not had a classical education, his knowledge was mainly self-taught.

PART II: BIOGRAPHY

Albert Vogel descended from an old German lineage of officers and officials. In the eighteenth century his great-grandfather, Georg Vogel, was governor of the county of Triebel in Silezia. His grandfather, Johann Heinrich Traugott Vogel, joined Napoleon in the latter's doomed march into Russia, never to return. Albert's grandfather, Carl, and his brother Theodor grew up in the family of General Carl Heinrich Wilhelm Anthing, commander in chief of the Dutch East Indian army. Both Carl and Theodor became officers. Carl Vogel distinguished himself in the battle against the independence of Belgium. He was the founding father of the Dutch branch of the family. Henceforth it was self-evident that all male offspring in the Vogel family would join the army. So did Albert's father, his two uncles, his four brothers and eventually, so did Albert himself. Vogel later stated that he inherited his artistic inclinations from his mother, Pauline Sophie Sassen, who descended from an aristocratic Limburg family in the south of the Netherlands. Around that time the acting profession was held in very low esteem. For a young person of good family to become an actor was just unthinkable. Yet Albert contemplated the possibility from an early age onwards.

Aged sixteen, Albert Vogel left school in order to join his father's Regiment. In 1900 followed his investiture as an officer. At school as well as at the Kampen Military Academy he indulged in amateur dramatics by the side. He was an ardent admirer of the greatest Dutch actor of his day, who had made himself immortal in the part of Shylock in Shakespeare's Merchant of Venice: Louis Bouwmeester. Albert Vogel was gifted with a similar
English summary

carrying, baritone voice. His other hero was the French actor Jean Mounet-Sully; also he revered Joseph Kainz and Beerbohm Tree.

Next to performing his military duties, Albert Vogel read the classics of world literature. Sophocles’ *Edipus King* became the turning point. Vogel began to learn the whole tragedy by heart, interpreting all the different characters in turn. He started by reciting to his fellow officers.

Vogel’s official stage debut took place in the autumn of 1899. Around the turn of the twentieth century, there were several institutions that welcomed travelling reciters in The Netherlands. One of those was the Maatschappij tot Nut van ’t Algemeen (Society for the General Good), which ever since its inception in 1784, had the education of the common populace of the country as its purpose. To that effect, it had departments in every province of the land. Also, big towns such as Amsterdam, Rotterdam and The Hague saw the creation of independent Art Circles to the models of the Munich or Wiener Secessions.

Between 1900 and 1906 Vogel led a strange double existence. During the day he performed his military duties, but in the evenings, he travelled the country with his first performances. As an officer, he could not ask for renumeration; his art had to remain a hobby. During all this time, he was Lt. L. A. Vogel, and he called himself a dilettante in his art.

From the start, Vogel specialised in the declaiming of entire ‘verse drama’s’ and monologues. In his choice of subjects his military background played a certain part. Vogel had a strong preference for the romantic repertoire such as the Shakespearian drama *Starkad* by the Belgian Alfred Hegenscheidt, Byron’s *Manfred*, Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus*, but also rather risqué material such as *Salome* by Oscar Wilde. His repertoire gained him the title ‘romantic declaimer’, after the title of a book on Vogel by the drama critic H. De Boer (in 1907). Vogel never worked with sets, but he would sometimes dress up as one of the characters in a particular play, or as a classical orator. Photographs of this period testify that in his poses, Vogel characterised each of his characters in the classical way. In the nature of his performances he showed himself to be more of a classicist than a romantic.

Vogel’s performance of *Edipus King* generated heated debates in circles of professional drama critics. The real breakthrough took place in 1906. In that year, Vogel was asked to perform in Amsterdam at the commemoration of the Dutch poet Willem Bilderdijk. Also invited were his hero Louis Bouwmeester and the two most famous actors and theatre reformers of his day: Willem Royaards and Eduard Verkade. After this event, Vogel withdrew from active service in the army and became a professional reciter and monologist. Vogel was now married and naturally this step meant a financial risk. The marriage was not to last. It was dissolved in 1916, and there were no children.

Vogel started his new career by touring the Dutch East Indies with his repertoire. This trip was a success and convinced him he could live off his art. Subsequently he went to Berlin where he followed lectures at Max Reinhardt’s Theatre School. Vogel was especially indebted to the romantic declaimer Alexander Strakosch.

In Berlin Vogel got to know ‘Melodrama’ in the sense of a musical declamatorium. In 1910 he besieged Amsterdam with a repertoire of mainly German melodrama’s, to be performed either with a full orchestra or with piano accompaniment only. His favourite was *The Witch’s Song* by Ernst von
Wildenbruch, which was also performed by the German reciter and singer Ludwig Wüllner.

Soon Vogel went on tour with his new repertoire. He travelled in Flanders and Roumania, where he was received by the poetess Queen Elizabeth, also known as Carmen Sylva. In 1912 he made a trip around the world. While en route, he added new items to his stock. By now, he could recite *Edipus King* in the German translation by Wilamowitz-Möllendorff and in the English one by Gilbert Murray. In America, he declaimed Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, and Vondel's *Lucifer* in the translation by Charles Leonard van Noppen. He performed the latter for President Woodrow Wilson in the White House.

Vogel returned to The Hague in the spring of 1914. When the First World War broke out, he had to join the army. As a reserve officer, he spent most of the War in the north of The Netherlands. During this time Vogel met the woman who was to become his second wife: the sixteen year younger Ellen Buwalda. She was the eldest daughter of a Friesian businessman who had made his fortune in the Dutch East Indies and a Dutch woman of partly Chinese descent. Ellen Buwalda had grown up in Geneva, Switzerland, where she had devoted herself to the reciting of French poetry. Back in The Netherlands, she took some lessons in elocution. By the time she met Vogel, she performed under the name Ellen Vareno.

Soon Albert Vogel and Ellen Vareno went on stage together. Their performances were announced under the heading 'dramatic elocutionism'. In 1916, they got married. They had three children: Tanja, who was to become a ballerina, Ellen, the actress and Albert jr., who followed in his father's footsteps.

In 1920, Vogel was relieved of his military duties. Now he founded his own theatre company, Het Klassiek Tooneel (The Classic Stage). With this company, he staged four open air spectacles in the East of The Netherlands. Here Vogel operated as a director and an actor. In these spectacles, Vogel displayed a restrained classicist approach with a minimum of sets and props. He did not use mass direction in the way Max Reinhardt did. With the performance of *Abraham's Sacrifice*, a world première of a sixteenth century Cretan play, he created theatre history.

In the twenties, the Vogel family moved to The Hague. The last ten years of his life the reciter concentrated more on the theory of his art. As of 1920, he taught elocutionism at the universities of Utrecht and Leiden. In 1926 he founded the Maatschappij tot Bevordering van Woordkunst (the Society for the Promotion of the Spoken Word). This organisation sought to stimulate elocutionism in education by striving for a university chair in the subject. Also, it organised national oratorical contests for the young. In the late twenties, Vogel got involved with developments in the German film industry. In 1931, he appeared in what is recorded as the first speaking film in The Netherlands. Unfortunately, a copy was never found.

Vogel died in 1933, two years after the publication of *Rhetorica*.

CONCLUSION

The answer to Professor van den Bergs question is as follows. Albert Vogel's career is an exception in so far that he was the only one of his generation who operated as a full time professional; all the other elocutionists did it only occasionally. Albert Vogel was the last representative of the grand
style of oratory. He elevated it to a solo art and propagated it in theatres and concert halls around the globe, in various languages.

As of 1900, the critical estimation of the art of elocutionism went into decline. At university level, rhetorica has turned into applied linguistics. This development wasn’t restricted to The Netherlands only. ‘When discussing declamation, critics tend to adopt a somewhat defensive or apologetic posture, as if expecting at any minute to be censured for the essential triviality of their subject, which they feel they cannot quite defend as literature,’ Maud Gleason wrote in 1995. The convention of reading had replaced orality and the likes of Albert Vogel fell victim to this change.

In the twentieth century, elocutionism is closer to the art of the theatre than to that of literature. Monologuism persists to the present day. Its history still has to be written. In this context, a re-evaluation of Albert Vogel’s art is appropriate.