‘Dare to make your own choices’

Cabaret performer Youp van ’t Hek currently holds the position of cultural professor at TU Delft. He is working with 20 students to build “something” that takes the viewer “beyond their senses”. If the subject comes up, he is quite happy to share his life experiences with his students: “Dare to make your own choices, regardless of your parents. As a child, it is also your job to raise them.”

Saskia Bonger

Sagging jeans, unruly hair, jacket hanging open and a plastic bag containing cartons of milk in his hand. “I thought you might like some milk in your coffee,” says cabaret performer, Youp van ’t Hek, as he unlocks his impressive Amsterdam house after dropping by the local supermarket. In his kitchen, with its view over a frozen park, there is a bear from the Kika foundation on the table. It’s for his two-year-old grandson. “He had the nerve to go and live in America,” explains Van ’t Hek, as he whisks the milk and turns on the Nespresso machine.

He explains that he was first invited to be TU Delft’s cultural professor two years ago, “but I didn’t have time back then. Now, as ever, I’m writing a new show. It’s great to be able to do this at the same time.”

In order to take part in your master class, students have to describe, in 300 words, ‘an impossible idea, a fantasy gone mad, a future dream or something you’ve always wanted to do, but can’t’. So what do they write? “These students are truly imaginative, but what they write is totally different from what I expected. What that was, I will keep to myself. I don’t want to single out any one example.”

The theme of your master class is ‘Totally free!’ You want to make the impossible possible, build ‘something tangible’, without any restrictions. Something that takes the viewer ‘beyond their senses’. What kind of thing do you mean? “That’s something I will only share with the students. I do have something in mind, but the students may come up with something better. They know what is technically possible. It suits me if they say: ‘that won’t work, but this will’.”

I read on the internet that it will be a kind of decor “I’m saying nothing, except that it can go where everyone can see it. On campus? Perhaps, it belongs to TU Delft. It may all go terribly wrong, and we will have nothing to show for it at my departing speech in early May. If that happens, it will probably be my fault. Or maybe the students’. But I think we can come up with something great. Anything is possible: building, writing, poetry, films.”

Cabaret? “Yes, why not? I don’t know if there is anyone in the group who wants to do that. I don’t know the students yet. All I’ve done is read their letters. Along with the rector and three others, I’ve chosen 20 students. I find it hard having to reject people.”

You never went to university and only completed junior general secondary education via a roundabout route. Can you empathise with students? “I think I can. When I was 18, I moved out of home. All my friends were studying. I lived as they did. I just didn’t do exams, but cabaret instead.”

In Groningen, you were well known for going to the student discotheque De Blauwe Engel after performances. Do you still do that?

Cultural professor

Since last year, the traditional guest writer has been extended to include new disciplines. From now on, the guest lecturer will spend two months as cultural professor. Artists, composers, filmmakers and photographers will be invited as well as writers. Last year, photographer Vincent Mentzel was the very first cultural professor.

On 8 March, Youp van ’t Hek gave his inaugural address as cultural professor. Fifty students applied for his master class. Only 20 were ultimately selected. On 10 and 11 March, the students were in Barcelona with Van ’t Hek. His main aim was to visit the Dalí Theater-Museum in Figueras, a 90-minute train journey from Barcelona. The students will have seven seminars with Van ’t Hek. On 11 May, he will give his departing address and present the results of the master class.
‘I think that texting and email cause lots of arguments, because people respond to each other too quickly’
Who is Youp van ‘t Hek

When Joep van ‘t Hek (Naarden, 1954) left primary school, he knew what he wanted to be: a priest. He went to a seminary, but did not complete the first year. He then spent nine years gaining his secondary school qualifications, at a variety of schools. He joined the cabaret while at school. In 1973, Joep changed his name to Youp, after a girlfriend wrote the ‘P’ on his shirt with the words: ‘We help you.’ Since then, Van ‘t Hek has worked in theatre. His breakthrough came in 1983 when he appeared in the TV programme, De Alles is Anders-show. In 2011, Van ‘t Hek took part in the year-end cabaret review (oudejaarsconference) for the seventh time. He is a columnist for NRC Handelsblad and the Vara guide and has published many books. Youp van ‘t Hek is married, with three children and one grandchild.

“That was fun. I ended up on the bar at Albertus (sister association to Virgil, ed.). Sadly, I don’t do that any more. Youtube and Facebook have taken all the fun out of it. It used to be great if you were just there by chance. Then you were part of it. Now, 300,000 people watch it on the internet.”

One of our readers asked: what would you like to have invented?

“So many things. The paperclip. That’s something I find beautiful: that man who sat twisting that bit of wire, just wonderful. Or the wheel. But I think it’s the computer that has brought about the greatest changes in recent years. Personally, I’m not at all technical. Sure, I can mend a puncture or put up a shelf. But if I want to switch on my computer and it doesn’t work, I have to call someone to sort it out. My father would have been 100 this month. God rest his soul, if he existed. All the changes he saw in society have been 100 this month. God rest his soul, if he existed.

Put up a shelf. But if I want to switch on my computer and it doesn’t work, I have to call someone to sort it out. My father would have been 100 this month. God rest his soul, if he existed. All the changes he saw in society have been 100 this month. God rest his soul, if he existed.

“Both. Nowadays, if you move house, you just open your laptop and carry on. Computers and mobiles make everything so much faster, but sometimes slow can be beautiful, too. In the past, if you were in love, you would write a letter. You would put it in an envelope, write your name on it and stick a stamp next to it. You’d go to the post box and then decide not to post it after all. Nowadays, you’d just send a text straight away. I think that texting and email cause lots of arguments, because people respond to each other too quickly.”

In your shows, you satirise bourgeois existence, a humdrum life and the loss of the ideals of youth. Will you be warning your students about this?

“Students are often very bourgeois, especially if they are members of a student association with those age-old traditions. Everything has been thought out in advance, based on precedent. Sons do what their fathers did. And of course, they love seeing their sons wearing silly trousers like they used to. That’s why I often prefer students who are not members. Be original. After graduating, take a trip around Australia. Why do people all have to do the same?”

What is your view of people who personify your nightmare scenario?

“I think people are funny, precisely because they are so predictable. In the evenings, I hardly ever go to the pub now. Because when I do, someone nearly always comes up to me and starts talking. Every time, without fail, it is tedious. Or take Het Gooi, the area I come from. All the men there play golf. Is it because golf is so much fun? I’m not convinced. They do it because everyone else does. Because then, they don’t really have to talk to each other, because it’s good for business. Or all those people who have a baby and buy a transporter bike. Or funerals. They’re always the same. Why don’t they ever tell stories about why the person was such fun, with some good anecdotes? People stick with clichés, because it’s safe.”

And can your performances change that?

“My sermon only lasts two hours. People laugh and then go back home. Of course, I hope that something sticks. Recently, a psychologist told me that I have changed the Netherlands more than I think, that there are people who have quit their stressful jobs to retire and go travelling. I’m not sure if it’s true, it’s just one person’s opinion.”

Have you always done your own thing?

“Yes. People don’t always like it. That I don’t go to a certain party, for example, because I don’t feel like it. That I don’t feel obliged to spend Christmas with my in-laws. I don’t understand why people do that every year. ‘Otherwise my in-laws would be hurt,’ they say. Dare to make your own choices, regardless of your parents. As a child, it’s also your job to raise them. My children really don’t have to visit me out of duty. Maybe that’s why they actually come so often. My parents never forced me to do anything and I have also never told my children what they should do. All that matters is that they are happy. That’s hard enough. Keeping your relationship fun when you’re busy with work and children. It helps to do what you really want to do. Dare to make your own choices.”

That’s easy for you to say. You have talent and the money to buy freedom.

“In the first ten years, I earned very little, you know. For me, it was never about the money. I think that’s the secret of my success. I’ve had plenty of failures in my personal life. That’s something people are scared of: failure. They stay in their comfort zones. Every Friday evening, millions watch ‘The Voice of Holland’ and find an excuse for it: they say they’re only watching it with their children. That programme: I’ve seen a bit of it and read a lot about it in the press. It’s so manufactured, and the way they extort texts from people - terrible.”