



**Speech for the opening  
of the 45<sup>th</sup> Poetry International Festival  
10 June, 2014**

*“The aim of this protocol is to contribute to a correct, responsible and effective operation. The activity may only be performed within legal boundaries and in relation to relevant procedures. If there are urgent reasons to deviate from the actions described, one must use the policy of the organization where one is employed formulated for this purpose. Inform the client about what will happen. If necessary, the procedure can be adapted to the individual needs of the client. If in doubt regarding the implementation of this directive or in situations not covered by this directive, consult your direct superior. Deviation from this directive may sometimes be necessary, however deviating from this directive must be justified at all times. This directive is only an aid. It cannot and should not take the place of one’s own thoughts and actions. The management understands and accepts its own responsibility in applying this directive. This directive is not intended for private use. The actions may only be conducted in a legal context and in relation to relevant procedures, and are intended for any skilled person who has the consent of the management. Observe and note down the client’s responses to the procedure. Make written agreements about the execution of this treatment. In the file (or an agreed place) make a note of why, when, by whom and under which circumstances the activity was performed.”*

Ladies and gentlemen,

Welcome to the 45<sup>th</sup> Poetry International Festival. The text I just read out was taken from a medical website with guidelines for nurses. These specific guidelines relate to helping a patient clean their teeth.

Every morning as I cycle to the Poetry International offices, I pass an artwork by Job Koelewijn. Perhaps you know it. It's a quote from Samuel Beckett, written in tiny air bubbles on the surface of the water of the Westersingel: *No matter. Try Again. Fail again. Fail better.* Guidelines for failure.

The theme of tonight's opening programme is protocol. Texts that tell us how to behave. Texts that tell us about the consequences if we don't behave. That keep us from making mistakes.

Poetry may be called the most conscious form of language, but the competition from protocol, rules and regulations, laws and statutes, has increased considerably due to our fear of the unknown. We use linguistic constructions to ensure our safety. We shift responsibility away from ourselves through fear of the other, fear of being sued, fear of everything we cannot predict. We write protocols for beached whales, freed criminals, for the royal family, bank directors and swimming instructors. We dig ourselves in with bullying protocols, secrecy protocols, management protocols, integrity protocols, aggression protocols, care protocols, honey protocols, muzzle and leash protocols. We shelter behind a wall of language.

Don't labour under any delusions. You too, even now, at this very moment, are part of a strictly defined protocol. You are now halfway through what is called the *Customer Journey Map*: a flow sheet developed by theatre marketing personnel which closely describes what you do and what you feel, but most of all what you must do and must feel from the moment you even think about going to the theatre. The *Customer Journey Map* tracks you from the moment you put on your coat at home to the moment you take it off again at home afterwards. Everything is laid out, everything is orchestrated. The song on the radio as you drive to the theatre. The smell in the car park. The light in the foyer. The nod of recognition from the person taking your coat. The music in the auditorium as you come in. When you clap. How long you clap for. When you don't clap. How long you remain sitting when the light goes on again. The complimentary chocolate with the coffee. The exact time actors come into the foyer afterwards. How long you stay and chat and with whom. The way you'd most like to be rewarded for your attendance. Whether you are someone to approach pro-actively in the future.

Tonight we'll be exposing the language of protocol to you through poetry, image and sound. We will embrace “*a woof of unforeseeable elements where it is difficult to recognize the golden threads*”

*of the embroidery,”* as our Algerian guest, Habib Tengour, expresses it. You see, poets love protocol. They love the word itself, like in Tranströmer’s dying wood where decay reads the bark beetles’ protocols through glasses made of tree sap. They love the imperative – the task asked of the reader or the task asked of oneself.

Think, for example, of Kouwenaars’ *“One still has to count one’s summers, pass / one’s sentence, snow one’s winter.”* Poets like ritualistic actions, the constraining shape of protocol that saves them from the horrors of the empty page on which everything still can and may happen. They love *“the cadence and purpose of verse (floating rigs with rudders, pennants slip-streaming the wake).”*

*“Henceforth a quatrain”* as our guest Charl-Pierre Naudé writes, will be *“as prescribed from Above / will plough with syll-a-bles / and be four-sided like a village plain.”* And a little further on: *“And the double-jointed couplet? / Still a goat with horns intact / who yet will step within the lines / and diligently abide the civil pact.”*

Another guest at the festival, Alfred Schaffer, once took the guidelines from a government leaflet on what to do after a terrorist attack and used them for a poetry collection. It made for a perfect ready-made piece which he regularly performs, as he will this Thursday in the programme ‘*Signs of the Times,*’ on poetry and current affairs. *“If you are not seriously injured, help as many other people as possible. / Do not go and look at the site of the attack. / Don’t gather in groups\*. / Another bomb may go off. / We have to ensure that networks are not overloaded.”*

Our guest, Micha Hamel, whose poetry forms the basis of the composition which is about to be premiered, wrote in his poem ‘At Breakfast’: *“Troubled by feelings / of powerlessness and recklessness we build – no, elves won’t manage – / a church to children with obscure as much as irreplaceable rituals.”*

In tonight’s programme, you will encounter the language of protocol in many different ways. The language of etiquette and of ritualized proceedings. The written and unwritten agreements, not only relating to poetry, but also of going to the theatre. It is language that is intended to move you all. But please note, ladies and gentlemen, to paraphrase the teeth-cleaning protocol quoted at the start: *“This programme is only an aid. It cannot and should not take the place of one’s own thoughts and actions.”*

I am convinced that over the coming week, but certainly over the weeks and months after that too, you will need poetry. *“This random language about to shoot sparks,”* as the recently deceased poet, former programmer and friend of the festival, Erik Menkveld, once put it. Poetry as a sometimes-unclear but irreplaceable ritual that helps us to face up to all the rules and regulations, laws, statutes

and decrees, all the protocolistic language that wants to keep you in check and prevent you from making mistakes or associative, irrational and impulsive decisions.

*No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.*