



Directed by Rembrandt

Rembrandt
and the World
of Theatre

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Foreword

(Milou Halbesma)

Director
Rembrandt House Museum

For the first time, the role of theatre in Rembrandt's work is highlighted in an exhibition. *Directed by Rembrandt* takes visitors on the stage of seventeenth-century Amsterdam theatre and into Rembrandt's studio.

The Rembrandt House Museum plays an important role in the museum world. We tell the story of Rembrandt's life from varying perspectives and focus attention on the craftsmanship of his artistic practice. In addition, we invite visitors to join Rembrandt, as it were, and to create something themselves. As a result, a visit to our museum and exhibitions is bound to be an enriching, lasting experience. This also applies to *Directed by Rembrandt*: visitors are invited to take on the role of director themselves, just like Rembrandt did.

Rembrandt's former home, now the Rembrandt House Museum, was—and still is—deeply embedded in its street, neighbourhood and city. Previous exhibition and publication projects, such as *Rembrandt's Social Network* (2019) and *HERE. Black in Rembrandt's Time* (2020), focused on the artist's social and societal context. With *Directed by Rembrandt*, the Rembrandt House Museum unlocks another part of the rich story of Rembrandt's life and work, placing him in the context of his time and place of residence as a citizen, a spectator of seventeenth-century theatre, and a director of his own artworks.

To delve deeper into the relationship between Rembrandt and the theatre, a diverse team of specialists was formed. Leonore van Sloten, senior curator at the Rembrandt House Museum, took the initiative for the exhibition, devised its concept and compiled this publication. The experts she invited to share their knowledge and to work as advisors and co-authors on this project include Dr Frans Blom, Professor of Dutch Language and Literature at the University of Amsterdam (UvA) and author of the acclaimed book *Podium van Europa* (Europe's Stage) about the Amsterdam Schouwburg theatre; historians Maarten Hell and Mark Ponte; costume specialist Marieke de Winkel; art historian and specialist in the relationship between painting and theatre Nina Cahill; and Jewish history specialist Abigail Rapoport. This project would have been

inconceivable without them, so I would like to thank them first and foremost.

For this project, we also collaborated with the Amsterdam City Archives, where the Amsterdam Schouwburg theatre archives are kept. The Amsterdam City Archives has organized a presentation on the role of the Schouwburg theatre in the city, which runs simultaneously with the exhibition at the Rembrandt House Museum.

Furthermore, several institutions have contributed to this exhibition by lending important artworks, many of which are fragile. I would like to express my thanks to all lenders for their generous and enthusiastic cooperation: Rijksmuseum, Groninger Museum, Mauritshuis, George and Ilone Kremer (The Kremer Collection), Allard Pierson, National Museum of World Cultures, private collection, private collection by courtesy of the Hoogsteder Museum Foundation, Jaap Mulders (Rembrandt in Black and White Collection), Staatliche Museen zu Berlin—Gemäldegalerie, Hamburger Kunsthalle, Museum der Bildenden Künste in Leipzig, Albertina in Vienna and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.

Finally, the exhibition and this beautiful publication would not have been possible without financial support. I would therefore like to convey my sincere thanks to the Blockbuster Fund, the Cultuurfonds, the Gijsselaar-Hintzen Fund, the Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands and two partners of the Rembrandt House Museum: Kikkoman and Mastercard.

Now then, it's time to put the spotlight on Rembrandt!

Introduction

(Leonore van Sloten)

Senior Curator
Rembrandt House Museum

Special Thanks

The subject of Rembrandt and theatre has been explored by several authors in recent decades. Theatre historian Ben Albach published from the 1970s on various articles, including on the relationship between Rembrandt's art and plays by Vondel. In 1984, art historian Gary Schwartz published *Rembrandt: zijn leven, zijn schilderijen* (*Rembrandt: His Life, His Paintings*, 1985), revealing for the first time the many relationships between Rembrandt and the network of theatre professionals. Two publications on the striking actor Willem Ruyter were written by historian Bas Dudok van Heel, and by Rembrandt drawing specialist Peter Schatborn in collaboration with art historian Marieke de Winkel. In 2017, art historian Nina Cahill did her PhD on the connections between painters and theatre in Rembrandt's time. In 2021, authority on Dutch Language and Literature Frans Blom published *Podium van Europa* (Europe's Stage), an in-depth analysis of the history of the Amsterdam Schouwburg theatre. In the same year, an article by art historian Thijs Weststeijn was published on possible practices of acting in the studios of Rembrandt and Samuel van Hoogstraten. Art historian Eric Jan Sluijter studied Rembrandt's representation of passions in relation to storytelling on stage. And art historian Tom van der Molen wrote about paintings by various artists—including Rembrandt—and their possible connection with plays by Vondel. All these insights, and those of others, have been of tremendous value to the present publication, which builds on all this excellent work.

Nowadays, it is easy to find plenty of entertainment and recreation. An evening at home watching Netflix or an outing to the cinema or theatre? Thanks to a broad and affordable range of options, there is something for everyone. In Rembrandt's time, things were different. Initially, visits to the theatre were only for the elite: theatre was performed in private clubs, the so-called chambers of rhetoric. But this situation changed with the opening of the Amsterdam Schouwburg theatre in early 1638, which offered an unprecedented source of imagination for almost all citizens. From then on, performances took place twice a week and standing tickets were so cheap that most Amsterdammers could afford them.

Rembrandt, too, was interested in the world of theatre. He went to see performances, drew actors and was acquainted with playwrights and theatre administrators. Moreover, he lived in an area where an important part of the theatre repertoire originated. The island of Vlooienburg—where modern-day Waterlooplein is—was inhabited by Jewish refugees who introduced Spanish theatre to Amsterdam. Despite the fact that this type of theatre came from Spain, the nation with which the Netherlands was at war until 1648, the Dutch-language plays based on it were incredibly successful.

Amsterdam theatre audiences loved to be swept away by convincingly directed stories, and Rembrandt offered the same experience with his artworks. He was a master of visual storytelling and used directing techniques that were also applied in theatre. Theatre and painting were closely related in this respect: both drew on classical rules of rhetoric and used hand gestures, facial expressions, postures, costumes and light to tell stories.

This publication, which accompanies the exhibition *Directed by Rembrandt*, not only highlights Rembrandt's relationship with theatre. It also shows you what is needed to tell a story in a single image, in a way that is so captivating and compelling that you hardly notice that it is, indeed, directed by the artist.



1—Pupil of Rembrandt,
Theatre at the Autumn Fair in Amsterdam, 1650s
Pen, brush and ink, red chalk and white
opaque paint, 143 x 140 mm
Albertina, Vienna

When Rembrandt was born in 1606, there was not much theatre in the Netherlands: the public had little to choose from. Travelling companies would visit towns and cities from time to time and perform in tents or in the open air. During fairs, people paid to gather around a wooden stage that offered popular entertainment, including actors performing with much buffoonery and horseplay, animal shows and *quacksalvers* (medical charlatans) (fig-1).

In addition, local theatre companies performed at the posh chambers of rhetoric.¹ These Chambers, as they were called, were exclusive clubs or town associations that were only open to gentlemen of standing who had the necessary connections in order to be admitted as a member.² As keen amateurs, the 'Chamberists' staged their performances as best they could and only for fellow members, as the performances were not open to the general public.

During Rembrandt's lifetime, however, theatre in the Netherlands, and in Amsterdam in particular, developed rapidly. From the second decade of the seventeenth century, professional public theatre began to take shape. On special occasions, the chambers of rhetoric staged plays for the general public. They experimented with paid access; this was not to make a profit but for charity, as proceeds from the theatre performances were invariably donated to the city's care institutions. The same applied to the travelling theatre companies. They raised a lot of money during festive days, for instance during the fair week at the end of the summer, and were obliged to hand over a substantial part of their revenue to the city when they left.

Initially, however, Dutch-language theatre was nowhere near as good as that of visiting theatre companies from countries like Great Britain. A scene from Amsterdam playwright Bredero's play *Moortje* (Little Moor), for instance, illustrates how theatre in Amsterdam was lagging behind. Bredero was still a member of the chamber of rhetoric De Eglentier when he wrote that the general public turned up in large numbers when foreigners came to town because people preferred their plays. Audiences would marvel at the professional British actors because they 'sang and danced so lustily [...] that they felt dizzy and spun round like a top'.³ In other words, these performances were much more dynamic. In addition, they were more attractive because actors recited their scripts from memory, i.e. naturally.

According to Amsterdammers, the rhetoric theatre of the Chambers, on the other hand, consisted of no more than reading and reciting from a piece of paper—'from a roll'—by wooden actors 'reciting their lessons moodily and stiffly'.⁴ Foreign theatre companies attracted

Dutch audiences with dazzling and spectacular performances that, in a foreign-language environment, relied not so much on the texts as on an easy-to-follow plot with plenty of liveliness and visual elements. This type of theatre may best be compared to the acrobatic theatre of the international Cirque du Soleil. Although the language was incomprehensible to the audience, people thronged together 'not understanding what they said, only for their Action', wrote an English traveller about a performance in Leiden.⁵ Liveliness was a key feature of their successful shows.

§ The Nederduytsche Academie

Amsterdam rhetoricians such as Gerbrand Adriaensz Bredero and Theodoor Rodenburgh were fascinated by the large audiences attracted to the theatre shows performed in London, at the *corrales* of the Spanish Empire and by foreign theatre companies in Amsterdam. They were aware of the potential of the combination of an action plot and good acting in the Dutch language in Amsterdam. To achieve this innovation in Dutch theatre, a radical break occurred within the Amsterdam Chamber of Rhetoric. While Rodenburg remained a member of the De Eglentier in order to make changes from within, Bredero and several creative fellow members, including P.C. Hooft and Samuel Coster, followed the example of the Italian academies and founded the Nederduytsche Academie on Keizersgracht in 1617. This was the first public theatre in the Netherlands, a place where any interested Amsterdammer could enjoy regular theatre performances, in addition to literary gatherings and music.

However, the initiative of the Nederduytsche Academie was not universally well received at the time. The great promise it held was short-lived. This was not just because Bredero died in 1618, a year after its foundation, but also because of the stifling religious climate at the time. The strict Calvinism that triumphed in the period of conflict during the Twelve Years' Truce, at the expense of free spirits like the statesman Johan van Oldenbarneveldt and the liberal Remonstrant Hugo de Groot, also took its toll on the arts. According to the all-powerful Reformed state church, theatre in particular, with its false appearances and *mommerij* (disguise), was a devilish form of entertainment that needed to be banned from the public arena. In 1622, the Nederduytsche Academie shut down. Its doors were closed and its stage leased to the Amsterdam chamber of rhetoric Het Wit Lavendel. Theatre in the city had gone back to square one.

In the third decade of the seventeenth century, however, Dutch society recovered: the orthodoxy



3—Salomon Savery
Auditorium of the Amsterdam Schouwburg theatre, 1658
Engraving, 513 x 721 mm
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam



4-Salomon Savery
 Stage of the Amsterdam Schouwburg theatre, 1658
 Engraving, 515 x 733 mm
 Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

Painting and Theatre in Amsterdam - Before Rembrandt

(Nina Cahill)

Rembrandt was not the first visual artist to be inspired by theatre. It was probably Rembrandt's second teacher, Pieter Lastman, who introduced the young artist to using theatrical modes of visualization. Lastman belonged to a new generation of history painters in Amsterdam, today known as the Pre-Rembrandtists.¹ Their compositions share a choice of subject matter and an aspiration for narrative clarity. This artistic innovation mirrored the transformation happening in Amsterdam's theatre scene, where playwrights like Pieter Cornelisz Hooft, Gerbrandt Adriaensz Bredero, Samuel Coster, Theodore Rodenburgh and Joost van den Vondel broke with the tradition of the old rhetoricians. Allegorical figures were pushed into the background and instead, their plays were dominated by realistic human characters, who were often confronted with a sudden reversal of fate, a moment frequently focused on in Lastman's compositions.² And there were more connections between painters, playwrights, and actors often collaborating for the staging of plays.

Some works by the Pre-Rembrandtists were directly related to plays.³ An unusual and remarkable case in point is Jan Pynas's painting *Hippocrates visiting Democritus in Abdera*, which depicts a scene from a school play, that was published in 1603 in Alkmaar (fig—8).⁴ The play *The Wise Men's Joy of Reasoning (De Reden-Vreucht der Wijsen [...])* is based on an antique text and deals with the Greek philosopher Democritus. The inhabitants of Abdera had asked the famous physician Hippocrates to examine the philosopher whose way of living an ascetic life, studying nature, and laughing about his fellow people, they misunderstood to stem from mental illness. Pynas shows the moment Hippocrates approaches the philosopher for the first time. Shortly after the doctor will realise that Democritus was, in fact, a wise man and the Abderites were simply ignorant. The Remonstrant preacher and schoolteacher Adolph de Jager wrote the play following a dispute with the church council, satirizing the short-sightedness of his conservative Calvinist opponents, who had criticized him for letting his pupils perform a comedy by the antique Roman playwright Terence. Just like the play over ten years earlier, Pynas' depiction of the episode in 1614 has been understood as a statement against the orthodox Calvinists.⁵ Lastman and a few other painters would follow Pynas in depicting this rare but potent theme.⁶

Just as painters were influenced by the theatre, playwrights would likewise get inspired by paintings, as can be demonstrated in the case of Joost van den Vondel's play *Joseph in Dothan* (1640). In the foreword the poet cites a work by Jan Pynas as inspiration for his play and explains how he aimed to emulate with words the painter's colours, drawings, and passions.⁷ Pynas' *Jacob's Sons Show Him Joseph's Blood-Stained Robe* of 1618 vividly depicts an episode from the popular Old Testament story of Joseph, in which the protagonist's eleven brothers, jealous of their father's favourite, attempt to get rid of Joseph, first by throwing him into an empty well and then selling him as a slave (fig—9). The brothers took Joseph's multi-coloured coat, which Jacob had given him as a sign of his affection and stained it with the blood of a kid to deceit their father into believing his son had been eaten by an animal. Pynas shows the most dramatic moment when Jacob, after seeing the bloody coat, realizes that his son must be dead (Genesis 37:32-35). The painting's comparison with the play indeed shows that Vondel followed the dramatic narrative depicted by Pynas closely, taking care to match the powerful emotions the painter had so convincingly visualized.⁸



8–Jan Pynas
Hippocrates visiting Democritus in Abdera, 1614
 Canvas, 110.5 x 139 cm
 Private collection (on long term loan to the
 Rembrandt House Museum)



9–Jan Pynas
*Jacob's Sons Show Him Joseph's Blood-
 Stained Robe*, 1618
 Panel, 90 x 119 cm
 The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

§ School Theatre

The first biography of Rembrandt, written by Jan Orlers, explains that Rembrandt's parents sent their son to the prestigious Latin school in Leiden in preparation for university and a profession as scholar, preacher, doctor or lawyer.² Apart from Latin, the language of science, the curriculum of the Latin school included religion, calligraphy and drawing. From year four onwards, pupils were also taught logic (*dialectica*) and eloquence (*retorica*).³ These subjects focused on understanding and correctly applying language, and on writing and delivering arguments in debates. Part of the latter involved practising drama.⁴ In drama classes, pupils did not need to create their own text, but could focus their attention on presenting an existing text and on facial expression, posture and gestures.⁵ Since the sixteenth century, drama had been a regular part of the curriculum in Latin schools.⁶ But this was no longer true for the school in Leiden in the years when Rembrandt went to school (presumably between 1613 and 1620).⁷ In the early seventeenth century, the religious climate in Leiden became stricter, curtailing the practising of drama in the classroom. Nevertheless, it cannot be ruled out that, even during Rembrandt's time at school, pupils engaged in producing theatre from time to time.⁸

In 1620, after several years at the Latin school, Rembrandt began his studies in Literature at Leiden University.⁹ It has long been assumed that Rembrandt was a passive student who took no classes, but a recent discovery shows that he was enrolled until at least 1622.¹⁰ Although Rembrandt appeared to have no ambitions towards science, the knowledge he acquired at university was very useful to him in his work as a history painter.¹¹ After all, as a painter of stories he needed to have a thorough knowledge of key works of literature. For that reason, it seems plausible that Rembrandt must have taken his academic education fairly seriously. In addition to theology, his studies included literature, poetry, rhetoric and drama, as classical tragedies and comedies by Greek and Roman writers were considered the ultimate examples of good poetry. Besides, like the Latin school, the University had a tradition of producing theatre, which was restricted by Leiden's strict religious climate, but the Leiden city council allowed students to give occasional performances. It is alleged that, in 1617 for instance, the students successfully performed *Troades*, a Roman drama by Lucius Annaeus Seneca, for Swedish and British ambassadors who were visiting the city at that time.¹² Perhaps the young Rembrandt also acted in such a performance. In any case, a few years later he meticulously studied his own facial expressions in front of a mirror and captured his reflection on the etching plate (figs-13, 14, 15).



13–Rembrandt
Self-portrait, study of anger, 1630
Etching, state 3(3), 72 x 60 mm
Rembrandt House Museum, Amsterdam



14–Rembrandt
Self-portrait, study of laughter, 1630
Etching, state 13(13), 48 x 43 mm
Rembrandt House Museum, Amsterdam



15–Rembrandt
Self-portrait, study of surprise, 1630
Etching, only state, 51 x 46 mm
Rembrandt House Museum, Amsterdam

Rembrandt may also have seen other types of theatre in Leiden, for there were three chambers of rhetoric active at the time. These intellectual societies of writers and actors staged public performances at celebrations of important events, including the annual commemoration of Leiden's Ontzet (Relief) on 3 October.¹³ It may well be that Rembrandt went to see the festivities. Moreover, on 1 May 1617, the travelling theatre company De Bataviersche comedianten (Batavian Comedians) was founded in Leiden.¹⁴ In the 1630s, Rembrandt made several drawings of one of its founders, the actor Willem Ruyter, in Amsterdam. The two men must have been in regular contact, as Ruyter also appears in several of Rembrandt's paintings. More on this later.

§ Street Theatre at the Fair

If you look at Rembrandt's drawings and etchings, you find several references to seventeenth-century street theatre. Rembrandt captured simple street musicians, including a blind fiddler with his dog and an enthusiastic hurdy-gurdy player, who tried to earn some money by means of their modest performances (figs-16, 17). Amsterdam's annual autumn fair offered a greater spectacle. From late September to early October, the city's squares were the scene of a wide variety of entertainment, including quacksalvers. Some restricted themselves to a simple sales act (fig-18), while others pulled out all the stops to convince their audience of the usefulness of some obscure remedy whilst dressed in a theatrical costume and holding a Chinese parasol on a stage with a painted background (fig-19). Quacksalvers were often supported by actors and assistants, eye-catching monkeys or noisy parrots (fig-20).

Rembrandt was definitely at the fair in the autumn of 1637, because in that year he drew the elephant Hansken (fig-21), at that time the only living elephant in Europe.¹⁵ From 1636 to 1655, its owner Cornelis van Groenevelt took Hansken to courts and markets around Europe and had the animal do all sorts of tricks with hats, buckets, coins and rifles.¹⁶ Rembrandt seems to have been more interested in the physical appearance of the animal than in its tricks, because he didn't draw them. Shortly after, he gave the animal a role in a story depicted in an etching (fig-22). And Rembrandt was not the only person inspired by the performing elephant. Poet Joost van den Vondel featured Hansken in his play *Gysbreght van Aemstel*.¹⁷



16-Rembrandt
The blind fiddler, 1631
Etching, state 8(9), 78 x 53 mm
Rembrandt House Museum, Amsterdam



17-Rembrandt
Man with a hurdy-gurdy, c. 1631
Etching, state 1(2), 82 x 57 mm
Rembrandt House Museum, Amsterdam



18-Rembrandt
A quack, 1635
Etching, only state, 78 x 36 mm
Rembrandt House Museum, Amsterdam



32–Rembrandt
Actor Willem Ruyter in a peasant role with a study of his face and a character with a beer jug, c. 1638
 Pen and ink, white wash, on light-brown prepared paper,
 176 x 141 mm
 Victoria and Albert Museum, London



35b–Rembrandt
Study of the actor Willem Ruyter wearing a tall cap, c. 1627
 Pen in ink, 131 x 115 mm
 Private collection

Rembrandt must have been to the theatre in Amsterdam several times as well. Proof of this are his drawings of actors. One of these actors was drawn several times: he was Willem Bartholusz Ruyter, an actor with a striking appearance who excelled in comic roles (see pages 62-63).²⁶ Rembrandt appears to have been fascinated by him, for he drew Ruyter on different occasions and in various roles (fig-31), for instance as a peasant in a farce (perhaps Bredero's *Klucht van de koe*/The Farce of the Cow) who gets himself into hilarious situations whilst carrying a pouch full of money (fig-32). To seventeenth-century city dwellers, peasants were laughable figures, as shown by Ruyter's costume featuring an old-fashioned codpiece.²⁷ In another drawing, we recognise Ruyter in a serious role as an oriental ruler, possibly the pharaoh in Vondel's *Josef of Sofompaneas* (Joseph or Sophompaneas; fig-33). In yet another drawing that Rembrandt made of him and three other actors, Ruyter is engaged in a conversation: he is listening to one of the actors talking, laughing and gesticulating at him (fig-34).

Rembrandt will have made some of these drawings during visits to the Amsterdam Schouwburg theatre, which opened in early 1638, but this is not true of all the drawings. Ruyter is depicted in the middle of a sheet that, from a stylistic and technical point of view, must have been drawn earlier (fig-35a).²⁸ And who knows, some of the male figures on that sheet may also have been based on observations of actors. Another sheet, which Rembrandt used to practise drawing various combinations of figures, also includes a depiction of Ruyter (figs-36a, b). He subsequently used this group for a painting that he completed in about 1634 (fig-37).²⁹ This was four years before the opening of the Schouwburg theatre. So, Rembrandt must have seen Ruyter act in the *Amsteldamsche kamer* (Amsterdam Chamber of Rhetoric). This theatre company had been founded in 1632, and occasionally staged plays for a wide audience in a wooden building on Keizersgracht. Thanks to a new discovery, however, Rembrandt can now be linked to Willem Ruyter at an even earlier stage.³⁰ A sketch shows the corpulent man wearing a theatrical-looking, tall cap (fig-35b). Despite the sketchiness of the drawing, it is clear that the shape of the nose is similar to that of Ruyter in a later drawing by Rembrandt, in which Ruyter is depicted in a peasant role (fig-32). The watermark in the paper indicates that the drawing was made in about 1627. This means that Rembrandt must have seen and portrayed Ruyter, who was active as a travelling actor at the time, when the artist was still based in Leiden.



33-Rembrandt
Actor Willem Ruyter in the role of an oriental ruler, c. 1638
Pen and ink, ink and white wash, later additions in pen and black ink
with grey wash, on light-brown prepared paper, 177 x 131 mm
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

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Directed by Rembrandt



(Intro)

Go to the theatre with Rembrandt and discover how painters and theatre-makers in seventeenth-century Amsterdam were inspired by each other.

During Rembrandt's lifetime, theatre played an increasingly important role in the everyday lives of Amsterdam's citizens. Rembrandt, too, saw theatre and was inspired by it. He used various directing techniques to create images that tell fascinating and convincing stories: from facial expressions and hand gestures to costumes and accessories. He also made sure that he depicted the right moment: the one that provided the ultimate suspense.

This book brings the vibrant theatre world of seventeenth-century Amsterdam to life and highlights, for the first time, Rembrandt's role as the director of his own artworks.



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