

# The Financial Times

## *‘Looking for Paul’, Edinburgh – review*

By Matt Trueman

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One of the biggest public art fiascos in recent years, Paul McCarthy’s Santa Claus now stands in Rotterdam’s Eendracht Square after years of legal wrangles. The US artist’s huge bronze statue cost taxpayers €180,000 and today it is unaffectionately known as “Kabouter Buttplug” – “the buttplug gnome” – a remarkably accurate description. Little wonder that it has enraged locals such as Inez van Dam, a bookshop owner who lives and works on Eendracht Square.

When Dutch company Wunderbaum won a residency with a \$20,000 commission from a theatre in Los Angeles, they took van Dam with them, hoping to confront McCarthy and stage a public debate on the ethics and aesthetics of public art. Instead their creative process went awry, thanks to a tangle of egos, assumptions and insensitivities and, at the last minute, with nothing to show for their time in LA or the theatre’s money, they opted to read out an edited version of their email trail, which details that problematic process.

What emerges is a picture of five individuals all pulling in different directions. One company member wants to make a McCarthy-inspired staging of *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* – not least as a showcase for local casting directors. Another grows adamant that the show needs Lady Gaga’s involvement. Van Dam becomes sidelined as the emails betray various backstage alliances, sexual desires and an indulgent lifestyle of swims, gyms and rooftop parties.

Part making-of documentary, part self-admonishing *mea culpa*, *Looking for Paul* is a fascinating thing to watch. Its narrative is as gripping as any soap opera, but it airs a host of knotty questions about the possibility and efficacy of arts funding, social democracy and cross-cultural values.

To finish, Wunderbaum enacts the work that would have been without the bolt of inspiration that led to staging the emails. It’s an almighty mess of McCarthy references, Edward Albee and assorted condiments, during which company members apparently even wallow in their own excrement for half an hour.

Occasionally, *Looking for Paul* overplays its hand and so strains its own credibility. This is, you realise, an elaborate fake – and if you feel cheated by that, it also increases your admiration for the conceit, even as, fittingly, it betrays the ego of the company.

