Certainly among young makers, it is an increasingly popular phenomenon: theatre that works as a decompression room, as a separate place where you can just ‘be’, away from all the hustle and bustle. A place where things move slowly, meanings are rare, and details take centre stage.

It culminates in performances that require the audience to breathe differently, and to rediscover the uniqueness of actions that do not amount to anything special. How can you keep this non-tension exciting? It seems to be the question on every maker’s lips at the moment. Brought up on *Big brother*?

In *Portrait* by Thomas Ryckewaert, we watch a girl (Erika Sainte) in her flat. She climbs out of bed, makes herself a coffee, cuts up some carrots, waters her plant, wipes away the excess water, watches cartoons, has a shower, stands on her balcony and goes back to bed. She’s hanging about.

She could have been Hedda Gabler. A deep sense of boredom is coursing through her veins, which, like magma, is ready to erupt at any time. As there is nobody else in the room, she directs this imminent power cut back to herself. Suddenly, she’s clutching a knife, or her laugh is stuck in her throat. She touches her mirror image like a deep, black sea in which she would like to drown. *Portrait* represents a mental waiting room, or indeed, isolation cell.

Ryckewaert himself refers to Hopper’s painting *A woman in the sun,* on which a naked girl is frozen in thought. She is moving here on stage. With the same esoteric lightness, but also as if she were involved in a psychodrama without the action, without the dialogue or indeed, without conclusion. What you see is what you don’t see who she is. She’s undergoing a self-cleansing metamorphosis. Dark becomes blond.

Add to this the threatening soundscape, the fading light on the gauze curtains, the invitation and deception of the eye: once again, Romeo Castellucci emerges as the big source of inspiration of young, visual directors. Particularly Erki De Vries’ refined set is reminiscent of an Italian home setting. Its familiarity is but a semblance, though.

Ryckewaert is more like an impressionist, however, for his theatre straddles the vague divide between the quiet picture and sudden outburst of meaning. This makes *Portrait* a meticulously planned *tableau vivant*, theatre on a diet. After 75 minutes, it leaves you with a wonderfully cleansed feeling, yet it also leaves you yearning for more. Decompression accomplished.