

Unsung review – sharp attack on personality-obsessed politics

Summerhall, Edinburgh

Valentijn Dhaenens takes us behind the speechifying in a compelling study of how politicians operate



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▲ All about the man ... Valentijn Dhaenens in *Unsung*. Photograph: Murdo MacLeod for the Guardian

It's six years since [Valentijn Dhaenens](#) blasted fringe-goers with his dazzling mashup of political rhetoric in [Bigmouth](#). Looking back, his dissection of the dangerous power of oratory seems prescient, anticipating the surge of far-right populism. His latest show, by comparison, feels half a step behind the times. *Unsung* takes us behind the speechifying, interrogating the psychology of politics as well as its slick statements, but it has little truly new to say about how politicians operate.

In sharp suit and inoffensive tie, Dhaenens cuts a convincing figure as a slippery, ambitious young leader. The show opens with a speech bloated with metaphors and empty of content. It's familiar stuff, eliciting wry laughs from the audience. Later, we see the protagonist talking strategy, giving statements to the media, making video calls to the family he barely sees, and sending regular, occasionally explicit missives to

his lover. Throughout, Dhaenens is alone on stage, suggesting loneliness and self-absorption.



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▲ Witty and charismatic ... Valentijn Dhaenens in *Unsung*. Photograph: Murdo Macleod for the Guardian

In a smart touch, he relegates his unnamed politician's beliefs to the background. Here is a man forever talking about change and big ideas without offering any real substance. It's an implicit statement on the emptiness of personality-obsessed politics, amplified by the huge image of Dhaenens hoisted up at the back of the stage. This kind of contest is all about the man – and it is, so often, a man – rather than what he stands for.

While some of Dhaenens' observations are painfully timely – attacks on the media, nasty insinuations about opponents – other aspects of the piece come across as strangely dated. In the wake of Trump's "grab her by the pussy" comments, it suddenly feels naively old-fashioned to suggest that a sex scandal could ruin a politician's chances of winning an election.

As ever, Dhaenens is witty, charismatic and compelling even at his most grotesque. It recalls his performance in [Ontroerend Goed's Fight Night](#), another show about how we vote for the who rather than the what. Like a true politician's campaign, *Unsung* is polished and appealing, but it's essentially an old message in new wrapping.

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