

Session on internationalisation in the performing arts

Sector meeting performing arts

Netwerk (Aalst), 22 November 2018 (10h00-12h45)

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Participants

Quentin Legrand (producer), Alain van Goethem (actor, Playright, Jack & Gill talent agency), Anne-Marie Croes (general and business coordinator, Robin), Lisa Wiegel (performing arts programmer, de Brakke Grond), David Bauwens (business director, Ontroerend Goed), Veerle Mans (company manager, Peeping Tom), Bára Sigfúsdóttir (choreographer and dancer, grip), Kristof Blom (artistic director, Campo), Kurt Lannoye (managing director,

Berlin vzw), Bart Dierick (senior advisor, Departement CJM), Karen Joosten (company manager, Hiatus / Daniel Linehan), Marijke De Moor (presentation, international relations performing arts, Flanders Arts Institute), Dirk De Wit (minutes, coordinator international relations, Flanders Arts Institute)

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Context: Why are we talking about internationalisation?

Because it is a crucial part of the practice of all of you. At some point, we received signals from the field that something was changing ... The context were the growing economic pressure on the arts field (subventions), the changing international relations (Brexit, refugee crisis), awareness of power relations on the international/global level and an ecological sense of urgency ... That is when we started the trajectory 'Reframing the international' that we have been working on during the past two years. [This publication](#) is the result of a 2-year trajectory, based on an analysis of the numbers, interviews, research and inspiration sessions with the field, a kick-off and closing conference.

As Simon said in the intro, we are here to gather you input for the 'landschapstekening'. For the performing arts, we already have a lot of information. What we would like to do in this session, is checking some of the material with you, and adding elements that are not there yet, adding your thoughts and experiences, and also possible alternatives for certain frictions.

What can we learn from the metrics?

Flanders Arts Institute did a quantitative analysis of the internationalisation of the production and distribution of Flemish performing arts (2000-2016). This gives a framework to start from. (See [Cijferboek Kunsten 2018](#), pp. 41-70 and pp. 187-212; see also here for an [English summary](#) of the study *The only way is up?*)

Graph 1: Stagings of Flemish productions outside Belgium

On this graph, you can see the number of productions that were staged outside of Belgium. All productions with a Flemish leading producer have been analysed. In 2000-2001 we count 1.561 representations in countries other than Belgium. In the last 3 seasons, this number is considerably higher. The peak was 2013-2014, where the number of performances abroad was 2.715. For each year, you also see that the representations are grouped per country. The number of countries has also risen. The Netherlands and France are the most important countries. Other countries have a smaller share. Traditionally, the Netherlands was important for Flemish work. We see now that France has become more important.

Graph 2: Number of productions with exclusively Belgian partners and with at least one foreign partner (2000-2016)

This graph shows the total of productions per season in which at least one Flemish subventioned company or production house was involved as main producer or co-producer. The grey line represents all productions with exclusively Belgian partners (for ex the productions by Lazarus, de Roovers, Action Zoo Humain). In 2000-2001 we count 597 collaborations between exclusively Belgian partners. In 2015-2016 this is 559. The purple line represents all productions with at least one foreign partner. This can be about collaborations between Belgian main producers and foreign main or co-producers, such as some shows of Ontroerend Goed that are a collaboration with British or Australian partners: A game of you, A history of everything, Fight Night, or shows by Rosas to which co-producers from all over Europe are linked (En Attendant, Cesena, Golden Hours). The purple line however, also represents productions of foreign companies with one Belgian co-producer. Co-productions of KFDA often are in this case. We can see that the number of international collaborations on this level has increased.

Graph 3: Number of foreign co-producers and main producers

This graph shows that the number of foreign co-producers has increased: from 99 in 2000-2001 to 443 in 2014-2015. But also the number of foreign main producers has increased remarkably: from 34 in the first season to 148 in 2013-14. The number of co-producers of the Flemish performing arts has increased in the period that we looked at –

it quadrupled over 16 seasons. The number of main producers that collaborated with a Flemish main producer, increased less rapidly: between 50 à 55 during the last 3 seasons.

Graph 4: Number of new productions and revival of older productions

This graph covers the whole production, not only the productions who have foreign partners. For each season, we know which productions were new creations and which ones were revivals. We notice an increase in the number of revivals of older productions. In 2000-2001, one third of the production is a reprise. In 2015-2016, we see 579 reprises for 378 new creations. The number of revivals of older productions goes up. Companies focus more on repertoire. This has to do with the increase of foreign presentation. Hypothesis: if you want to cover a bigger market, you need to have a bigger portfolio to serve this market. Companies such as les ballets or Rosas have more performances at the same time on tour, and tour these in a bigger geographical region.

Graph 5: Two models of distribution

Lazarus

- Plays foremost in Flanders
- More diverse distribution within Flanders
- Follows 'seasonal logic'

Ontroerend Goed

- Plays foremost abroad
- Older productions remain available
- Larger number of stagings per production

This difference is not absolute. Also Lazarus sometimes revives older productions. But in the way the distribution is organised, there is a difference. It is because of companies such as OG that the number of reprises and the number of foreign partners is going up.

Discussing the graphs

The graph shows a clear impact of the 2009 financial crisis on international work in the performing arts: clear increase on international representation and partnerships. Compensation of the local funding decrease by international co-productions.

Revivals

- Financial needs are not the only reason of the increase of revivals: there is a growing market and a clear increase of demand for those productions. Productions just play longer so one shouldn't speak only about revival or revival: in a growing global market of the performing arts, some houses and festivals would like to see the piece first and book it for the next season or the season after (less blind programming). A production cannot be everywhere at the same time in the world, which means that programmers see the production on different continents spread in time, which attract other bookings, and makes the life of a touring piece slower and longer. revivals become a production strategy.
- This revival strategy has an impact on planning and HR of an organisations: longer periods need other type of contracts with artists which are involved in one or more productions which run more and more on a longer term.
- It is important to differentiate between dance, theatre and musical theatre in the curves and trends in international co-productions and representations.

Co-production

- The co-production fees are becoming smaller and smaller, not only for financial reasons. It is impossible to present all places where there is demand. By 'co-producing'—even when the co-production fee is in fact a higher 'uitkoopsom'—, programmers make sure that their space or festival is part of the international tour. The label 'co-production' is also used by houses and festivals to prove the international importance for local funders and it creates a strong international image which helps international positioning.
- In some countries co-productions are lesser taxed than representation fees.

- Artists and companies react to this trend of decreasing co-production fees by making a distinction between the real co-producers who contribute with a substantial fee, and those who pay a bit more than a representation fee, who are called ‘supporters’. Others fix a minimum amount for co-producers and don’t label a partner co-producer below this amount. As a company, one can be strict in the distinction between co-production and fee.
- The financial capacity and planning schemes are different in countries. In Flanders, co-production and representation fees are higher than in the Netherlands where there is a different funding system, which creates financial barriers for productions from Flanders in the Netherlands. Also planning and taste of audiences vary between countries. Work from Flanders is also less shown in Wallonia. Performing arts from the Netherlands and Wallonia is less present in Flanders. Apart from financial barriers, there is also lack of knowledge and decreasing connections and networks. Rebuilding connections and networks with the Netherlands and Wallonia could be an option.

Frictions

Numbers give us an empirical basis to speak about evolutions in the internationalisation of the arts. But as such, they do not give a clear view on the value of working internationally. To do that, we swap the quantitative for the qualitative. Based on interviews and text commissions for our magazine re/framing the international, and our blog, and based on conversations with the field in focus groups or symposia, and based on the daily practice, we understand the value of working internationally, but also the tensions it creates.

In what follows, we will explain 4 frictions around working internationally in the performing arts. The question will then be: do you experience this as such in your own practice, around you? And if yes: how does this manifest itself? Can you give examples? Or are some issues lacking? Can you think about possible solutions for certain issues?

Inequality in a growing market

The number of co-producers has quadrupled in 15 seasons. This confirms the strong attraction of the Flemish performing arts. It is wonderful that the performing arts field continues to succeed in mobilizing a broad international network. At the same time, it is worrying, as this was a way to make up for the declining co-production budgets. Artists and companies are forced to engage more and more partners, while the engagements become lighter. The international performing arts network became larger, but more vulnerable.

For some artists and arts organisations, the financial aspect is a goal in working internationally. For most, money is not the objective, but a means of making something else possible. But working internationally requires also a financial investment. The fact that a market is growing does not necessarily mean that more artists are getting opportunities. Sometimes, a small grant or subsidy can make the difference. There is a gap between big organisations with large budgets on the one hand, versus artists and smaller organisations on the other. This is specifically at stake in the visual arts, but we see a similar phenomenon in performing arts.

Here, a transnational system has evolved for the production and presentation of theatre and dance. Within that system, the position of the artists is extremely fragile. Ash Bulayev speaks of well-known artists Maria Hassabi and Trajal Harrell who are working in 4 different countries, but do not receive any structural funding in neither of these places. They have to create a patchwork of co-productions, commissions, residencies, private and public funding over several continents.

- At one hand the market is growing, with growing number of co-producers in different countries and continents, with different financial contexts. On the other hand, many places work with the same artists. Many companies have a similar list of co-producers. Also, the list of co-producers and the list of representations of a number of companies is not so different.
- Is it really a growing market for the performing arts from Flanders, or is the market growing for the performing arts from all countries? If so, then more artists from all

countries are competing globally towards the same venues and festivals. The figures show only the perspective from Flanders and do not reveal the global market in the performing arts.

- The process of internationalisation is a complex phenomenon in Flanders and in other countries. It is more than representations and co-productions abroad: artists are mobile and live and work in other countries. Companies are international on itself. The distinction between Flanders and abroad gets blurred. What is 'Flemish'? What is international? The same goes for audiences in big cities which are becoming more and more diverse.
- On the other hand, many productions and companies work and tour only locally in Dutch-speaking territories, even when their cast and audience is diverse (e.g. 't Arsenaal).
- How does the art policy deal with companies and artists who are less and less belonging to one country?
- Internationalisation is positive but it makes us also fragile: productions from Flanders are rather expensive compared with other countries like from the Netherlands (where there is more local funding). When there will be another international or global economic crisis, we will lose opportunities. When international work will decrease for one reason or another, it will have a huge impact on the business models of artists and companies from Flanders.
- This growing market is never stable on itself: governments change in different countries and make choices which have an impact on programming and co-producing performing arts from Flanders. For example the financial crisis in Brazil, less support for experimental and international work in countries with conservative governments (Poland, Hungary), changes after Brexit.
- International funding within the project-subsidy has almost disappeared. You can use a project subsidy for an international project but this is extremely competitive. The information for applicants from abroad is not user-friendly and it is difficult for them to find their way in the funding system. It is almost as if it is on purpose, to discourage.
- Countries are competing more with each other to support 'their' artists internationally, as a form of nation branding and creating visibility. Rich countries

like the Nordic countries, the Netherlands, France and Switzerland invest more money than Flanders in international export and visibility. In fairs like Tanzmesse or music fairs, countries invest a lot in national booths and focus programs. This political logic makes us less competitive in relation with companies from these countries. The national logic behind these funding systems is also in contradiction with the growing transnational logic.

- It is difficult for individual artists to follow up the international scene of development, production and presentation when you don't have travel grants for prospecting and presentation. Without these grants, one loses connections with persons, institutions and networks. Artists from countries with developed systems of travel grants are more present in the programs of houses and festivals worldwide.
- Only frictions, no solutions.

Freedom versus precarity

Many artists and professionals in our field like travelling. It is nice to be invited, to see new places, to meet new people and create works together. These experiences can enrich you both personally and professionally. It also brings prestige and recognition. Travelling is important for artistic development and research. It nourishes the work.

But there is another side to this. It is the specific way in which the market is organised that imposes an increasing pressure on artists. In the hectic and exhausting tour schedules, there is sometimes little time left for meaningful exchange. What does it ask from an artist to work internationally? What is the financial, social and human investment or price you have to pay? What does the transnational system for production and distribution demand of the artists?

I would like to illustrate by a fragment from an interview with Sarah Vanhee. She says:

“You are presumed to be exceedingly flexible, preferably young, always ready to travel, with no family and not too many commitments. [...] It is being sold as an attitude of boundless freedom, but what is behind it is an ideologically motivated demand for ultimate flexibility, one that makes your existence especially vulnerable and precarious.”

Even when there is demand in the growing global market, one has to count the high expenses, the human investment and social impact on artists' lives, and the ecological footprint. Working on other continents needs also investment in contacts and relations which needs a long-term perspective. It is impossible to make these investments in a long-term perspective in all countries and continents where there is a demand. It leads us to choices what one can do and not; and thus saying 'no'. (E.g. Robin says no to Asia at the moment).

- The competition and scarcity of opportunities creates a pressure: 'never say no'.
- Organisations who invite artists are less and less flexible.
- Residencies (rehearsal space and technical support) are offered in the context of co-production agreements. As co-production contributions decrease, residency time is offered as a compensation, but it become shorter and shorter. Artists become nomads travelling for short periods to/in different cities. Refusing residence space abroad might create problems because space and technical support in Belgium becomes rare in a scene with a growing artist community. In Belgium, we were privileged with many institutions offering work space.
- Precariousness is the result of political choices to invest more in big institutions and big companies, while the policy could also choose for a more diverse field. Arts policy seems to promote the survival of the fittest; let the market play.
- Artists are accepting more and more to work under the minimum wages.

Discussion between those who believe that one should accept the impact of international work on one's social live, with the possibility to say 'no' or set the conditions for international work by artists ('it's a choice to live as an artist and then you accept international work and its consequences'), and those who believe that the system itself, with its unspoken expectations and mechanisms needs to be discussed and changed. A transition of international work in performing arts should become a collective exercise of both artists, commissioners/programmers and also audiences.

Solutions:

- Organisations have also responsibility towards more sustainable artists' careers.
- Problems of precarious working conditions concerning fees, social security, taxes cannot be solved only on a Belgian level. Fair practice and remuneration of artists are an international concern.
- In some other countries artists are better protected.
- Co-producers work together on longer term with artist and together they could also apply for tax shelter money.
- As a company, you can set rules to balance the system with the human aspect: Berlin refuses residencies because artists have a family.
- Also on the artistic level, the different types of work and different plays also need the right mental/physical conditions to perform. This creates the need to plan and creates also a lot of pressure.

Geography versus demography

Through travelling, you do not necessarily reach another audience. Artists indicate that they are often hopping from one similar arts centre to the other, performing for the same middle-class, white audience. What is the value of working internationally if you are playing for the same kind of audiences everywhere? In Flanders and in the neighbouring countries, there is also an international diversity in the audience and partners ... (how do the international and local dimension relate to each other?)

- It all depends on the type of work and which audiences you want to reach.
- There are less and less performances in one city, which means that there is almost no time for engagement with the local context.
- Taking more time during our international work is crucial to develop local relations. You can do so much more with a show in a city, such as playing more and building audiences, meeting and working with local artists, giving lectures or workshops in art schools. How to make more time in our busy touring schedules? Spending more time in one place means performing in less cities and sometimes saying 'no'.

- One can go further and involve local histories and local artists in the production.
- Cultural diplomacy could focus more on interaction and exchange between countries, rather than focussing only on showcasing.
- The discussion leads to the value of an artist in the international scene: building long-term relations of cultural exchange and more time for co-creation.
- A better balance is needed between intercultural exchange on an international level and producing and presenting in Belgium. Why can we play and connect for two or three weeks in Chicago, and not one week in for example Ostend? Staying longer means presentations in less cities for artists and companies. Staying longer in a city creates opportunities for the institutions to deepen their programme. It would mean that institutions and festivals in Flanders make agreements about who is programming what.
- Staying longer in a city and building interesting side programmes and activities needs another financial model. Staying longer in less cities puts the existing income models of artists and companies at risk.

Hypermobility versus privilege

Much of the mobility in the arts today is economically driven. The system forces artists to work internationally. Current co-production models, networks and festivals force artists to hop from one place to the other. But what is the quality of this mobility? The image of hyper-mobility describes the situation of many artists in Western Europe. However, not everybody can be 'hypermobile'. This problem is at stake for:

- Flemish artists in a position too precarious to build on the international career
- Flemish artists or companies who have difficulties connecting to international networks
- Foreign artists who do not have the support of their government to travel or who face visa issues. They face isolation because of the lack of mobility.

There are many challenges in working internationally:

- Difficulties when an artist or company from Flanders works with artists from other continents. It takes time to arrange visa and work permits. You can only employ a foreigner when you can prove that there is no employee available in Belgium.
- working with artists from Africa and the Middle East becomes almost impossible because of the strict visa regulations in Belgium and the Schengen zone.
- The different funding systems are also a challenge for working internationally, both for public funding and for private funding regimes.
- Brexit will create difficulties for work permits for British artists and for Belgian artists working in UK. There will be difficulties for co-producing and for presentations.
- There is more and more censorship for challenging work (concerning content and aesthetics) from Europe in US and Asia. Co-producing such works is a solution because local partners engage and there is dialogue during the creation.
- Flanders should engage more with international co-productions: balance and reciprocal partnerships.
- The exchange between Flanders and the Netherlands is not in balance. Flanders blames the Netherlands that Flemish performing arts are less programmed but Dutch theatre is also less present in Flanders. Flemish programmers do less prospecting in the Netherlands and long-term relations get blurred: the strong connection between Flanders and the Netherlands is broken.
- Wallonia is a blind spot. The history of performing arts is different, the aesthetics and subvention system are different and there are less opportunities to perform. There is not enough knowledge and one should invest in mutual discovery and encounters.
- Europe instrumentalises culture: there is almost no funding for co-production and creation, everything needs to be linked with digital, value chain, audience development and working with themes. Europe could also focus more on collaboration and interactions with countries in other continents.

Some concluding remarks

- We need more showcases of Flanders arts for international buyers.
- We did not speak about ecological issues like footprint.
- Working long-term, fair, no exhaustion. More time, longer, deeper.