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Theatre in Times of Hyperpolitics

Issue editor: Jasper Delbecke

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'Theatre in Times of Hyperpolitics'

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HoGent



Woord vooraf.

Over theater in tijden van hyperpolitiek en de uitdagingen voor theaterwetenschappen in Vlaanderen

-- Jasper Delbecke

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Toneelstof revisited

“Wat voor soort theatervoorstellingen waren er te zien op Vlaamse podium afgelopen twee decennia”? Deze eenvoudige, zelfs naïeve, vraag lag aan de basis van dit nieuwe *Documenta*-nummer. Welke nieuwe poëtica’s werden ontwikkeld in de Vlaamse podiumkunsten sinds de start van het nieuwe millennium? Welke theatergezelschappen, theatermakers en voorstellingen hadden hier een aandeel in? Hoe sprong een nieuwe generatie van kunstenaars om met de erfenis van haar voorgangers? En hoe verhouden de ontwikkelingen en verschuivingen die plaats vonden in Vlaanderen zich tot het internationale podiumkunstenlandschap?

Foreword.

On theatre in times of hyperpolitics and the challenges for theatre studies in Flanders.

-- Jasper Delbecke

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Toneelstof revisited

“What kinds of theatre performances have appeared on Flemish stages over the past two decades and marked Flanders’ theatre landscape?” This simple, even naïve, question was the basis of this new issue of *Documenta*. What new poetics have developed in the Flemish performing arts since the turn of the millennium? Which theatre companies, directors, and productions contributed to these developments? How has a new generation of artists engaged with the legacy of its predecessors? And how do the developments and shifts in Flanders relate to the international performing arts landscape?

Met de poging om een aantal antwoorden te bieden op deze vragen treedt voorliggend nummer in de voetsporen van de *Toneelstof*-reeks die bij *Documenta* tussen 2007 en 2010 verscheen. Deze vierdelige reeks was de uitkomst van een driejarig erfgoedproject dat er kwam op initiatief van Thersites (Vereniging van Vlaamse Podiumcritici). *Toneelstof* was "het resultaat van een naïeve vraag" van jonge theatercritici die zich afvroegen "hoe het theater er vroeger zou uitgezien hebben", aldus de gastredactie in hun editoriaal van het eerste nummer (Hillaert, et al. 2007, 71). De jonge leden van Thersites kwamen tot de vaststelling dat "zo goed Vlaanderen in theater is, zo middelmatig blijkt het in de publieke bewaring ervan" (ibid). Een overkoepelende Vlaamse theatergeschiedenis moest toen – en moet ook vandaag nog – geschreven worden. Met steun van de Vlaamse Gemeenschap en het toenmalige Vlaams Theater instituut (VTi, vandaag Kunstenpunt) werd een inhaalbeweging gemaakt. Dankzij archiefonderzoek in het VRT-archief en video-interviews met getuigen van toen ontstond een genuanceerder beeld van welke ontwikkelingen de podiumkunsten in Vlaanderen en Brussel hebben doorgemaakt vanaf 1960.

In seeking to answer some of these questions, this issue follows in the footsteps of the *Toneelstof* series, published by *Documenta* between 2007 and 2010. This four-part series emerged from a three-year heritage project initiated by Thersites (the Association of Flemish Theater Critics). According to the guest editors' preface to the first issue, *Toneelstof* was "the result of a naïve question" posed by young theatre critics who wondered "what theatre might have looked like in the past" (Hillaert, et al. 2007, 71). The younger members of Thersites observed that "although Flanders is known for its theatre, it appears mediocre in its public preservation of it" (ibid). A comprehensive history of Flemish theatre had, and is still is, to be written. With support from the Flemish Community and the then-called Flemish Theater Institute (VTi, now Kunstenpunt), a significant effort was made to close this gap. Through extensive research in the VRT archive and conducting video interviews with contemporary witnesses, a more nuanced picture emerged of the developments in the performing arts in Flanders and Brussels from 1960 onward.

Toneelstof I – Route '66 (2007) onderzocht hoe het werk en de praktijk van Europese theatervernieuwers zoals Brecht, Grotowski en Artaud aanzette tot experiment in een theaterlandschap dat toen sterk werd gedomineerd door de stadsschouwburgen. *Toneelstof II – Sympathy for the Seventies?* (2008) bracht enerzijds in kaart hoe de revolutionaire geest van 1968 bleef spoken in de theaters in het daaropvolgende decennium en resulteerde in (meer) maatschappijbetrokken toneel. Anderzijds had dit nummer oog voor het jonge jeugdtheater, de festivalformule die haar intrede deed in Vlaanderen en de eerste sporen van Performance Art die een voorbode waren voor wat in de jaren tachtig tot ontwikkeling zou komen. *Toneelstof III – The Wonder Years* (2009) bracht een kritische kijk op het podiumwerk van de jaren tachtig. Het derde nummer ontkrachtte het beeld dat het werk van vernieuwers compleet uit het niets ontstond. Velen spiegelde zich aan ontwikkelingen uit het buitenland en plukten de vruchten van het pionierswerk uit de jaren zeventig. Daarnaast schonk het nummer ook aandacht aan de groeiende professionalisering en institutionalisering van de podiumkunsten die zouden zorgen voor een verdere nationale en internationale expansie van de Vlaamse podiumkunsten, die zich zou doorzetten in de jaren negentig. Centraal in *Toneelstof IV – Breaking the Wave* (2010) stonden de ontwikkelingen van het laatste decennium aan de vooravond van de eenentwintigste eeuw. Dit (voorlopig) laatste deel wees enerzijds op de verstrengeling tussen die 'wonderlijke' jaren tachtig en de jaren negentig. Het nummer markeerde 24 november 1991, Zwarte Zondag, als het moment waarop een nieuw engagement zich opdrong. De (podium-

Toneelstof I – Route '66 (2007) examined how the work and practices of European theatre innovators such as Brecht, Grotowski, and Artaud spurred experimentation in a theatre landscape then dominated by the city theatres in Ghent, Brussels, and Antwerp. *Toneelstof II – Sympathy for the Seventies?* (2008) documented how the revolutionary spirit of 1968 continued to influence theatre in the following decade, resulting in (more) socially engaged performances. This issue also considered the rise of youth theatre, the festival format, and the early traces of performance art that would further develop in the 1980s. *Toneelstof III – The Wonder Years* (2009) provided a critical exploration of the performing arts of the 1980s, countering the notion that innovations of the time sprang from nothing. Many artists drew on foreign developments and benefited from the pioneering work of the 1970s. This issue also addressed the increasing professionalization and institutionalization of the performing arts, which led to the further national and international expansion of Flemish theatre into the 1990s. *Toneelstof IV – Breaking the Wave* (2010) focused on the developments of the last decade before the twenty-first century. This final edition highlighted the intertwined influences of the “remarkable” 1980s and the 1990s. It marked November 24, 1991—Zwarte zondag—when a new form of engagement emerged. The performing arts responded to current events, both in form and content. It was during this period that the first indications of a “multicultural narrative”

um)kunsten reageerden op de actualiteit, zowel in vorm als in inhoud. Het was de periode waarin de eerste aanzetten tot een “multicultureel verhaal” (Jans, 321) in de Vlaamse podiumkunsten waarneembaar zijn. Anderzijds keek dit vierde nummer naar hoe een nieuwe generatie (al) moest opboksen tegen de alomtegenwoordige pilaren van wat ‘de Vlaamse golf’ was gaan heten. Consolidering van gezelschappen of artistieke praktijken leidde al snel tot discussies rond institutionalisering.

De ‘naïeve vraag’ die destijds de aanleiding was voor de leden van Thersites om een erfgoedproject op te zetten wordt vandaag (opnieuw) gesteld door een nieuwe generatie studenten en jonge (aspirant-) onderzoekers die de auditoria en atelier-ruimtes bevolken van de universiteiten en (kunst)hogescholen. Net zoals de jonge theatercritici van toen heeft de huidige generatie al veelvuldig gehoord en gelezen over welke kunstenaars een prominente rol hebben gespeeld in deze geschiedenis en welke voorstellingen hun sporen hebben nagelaten in het Vlaamse podiumkunsten-landschap. Mede door de oprichting van koepelorganisaties (zoals Kunstenpunt en CEMPER), robuustere opleidingen Theaterwetenschappen en de keuze van kunstenaars om hun eigen praktijk te archiveren zijn vele hiaten gedeeltelijk opgevuld geraakt. In de geest van de *Toneelstof*-reeks dragen ook de analyses gepresenteerd in dit nieuwe *Documenta*-nummer bij tot de opvulling van bestaande hiaten. Dat dit nieuw nummer niet werd voorafgegaan door een groots opgezet erfgoedproject, zoals bij de *Toneelstof*-reeks, is niet onbelangrijk om te vermelden. Waar de toenmalige redactieleden van de *Toneelstof*-reeks

(Jans 2010, 321) became visible in the Flemish theatre. The fourth issue also examined how a new generation had to contend with the towering presence of what had come to be known as the ‘Flemish Wave,’ with the consolidation of companies and practices quickly leading to debates around institutionalization.

The ‘naïve question’ that initially prompted the members of Thersites to launch a heritage project is now (once again) being posed by a new generation of students and young (aspiring) researchers who populate university auditoriums and art school studios. Like the young theatre critics of the past, the current generation is already well-versed in which artists have historically played prominent roles and whose performances have left their mark on the Flemish performing arts scene. Thanks to the establishment of umbrella organizations (such as the Flemish Theater Institute, now Kunstenpunt, and CEMPER), elaborated theatre studies programs, and the choices of artists to archive their work, many gaps have been partially filled. In the spirit of the *Toneelstof* series, the analyses presented in this new issue of *Documenta* fill those gaps that still exist. Notably, unlike the *Toneelstof* series, this new issue was not preceded by a large-scale heritage project. Whereas the previous editorial board invited specific authors to supplement their heritage project (largely consisting of interviews that are still accessible today), a general call for contributions was issued to

gericht auteurs uitnodigden als aanvulling op hun erfgoedproject (dat grotendeels bestaat uit interviews die vandaag nog steeds geraadpleegd kunnen worden) werd voor dit nummer een klassieke oproep gedaan naar theaterwetenschappers in binnen- en buitenland. De bijdragen in dit *Documenta*-nummer vertrekken vanuit lopende onderzoeken van individuele vorsers.

Lena Vercauteren houdt in “Repertoire, ensemble and internationalization in Flemish citytheaters in the 2010s” het gehanteerde discours van de drie stadstheaters rond internationalisering tegen het licht. Vercauteren verkent hoe Toneelhuis, KVS en NTGent van het tweede decennium van de eenentwintigste eeuw hun positie in de Vlaamse theaterwereld herdefiniëren onder invloed van toenemende internationalisering en globalisering. Hen bekijkt de impact van deze maatschappelijke ontwikkeling op de toen gangbare ideeën rond repertoire en ensembles. Vercauteren onderzoekt de drijfveren achter de internationaliseringsstrategieën van Toneelhuis, KVS en NTGent, met inbegrip van economische, artistieke en sociaal-politieke factoren. Wat door deze analyse komt bovendrijven is de manier waarop de afwezigheid van een Vlaams repertoire stadstheaters in staat stelde om op een ongedwongener manier in te spelen op mogelijkheden en uitdagingen die met internationalisering en globalisering gepaard gaan. Een belangrijke factor in het bepalen van hoe met deze mogelijkheden en uitdagingen om te gaan, zo concludeert Vercauteren, is de visie van de artistieke leiding—eerder dan het volgen van door hogerhand opgelegde richtlijnen.

De impact van een uitgesproken artistieke visie op de programmatie en werking van

theatre scholars in both Flanders and abroad for this issue. Thus, the contributions in this issue are based on the ongoing research of individual scholars about Flanders’ theatre landscape.

In “Repertoire, ensemble, and internationalization in Flemish city theaters in the 2010s,” Lena Vercauteren examines the discourse on internationalization adopted by the three municipal theaters. Vercauteren explores how Toneelhuis, KVS, and NTGent redefined their positions in the Flemish theatre landscape in the second decade of the 21st century in response to increasing internationalization and globalization. They investigate the motivations behind the internationalization strategies of the three city theatres, considering economic, artistic, and socio-political factors. This analysis reveals how the absence of a Flemish repertoire allowed municipal theatres to respond more flexibly to the opportunities and challenges associated with internationalization and globalization. An important determinant in how to address these opportunities and challenges, Vercauteren concludes, lies in the artistic leadership’s vision rather than adherence to top-down directives.

The impact of a pronounced artistic vision on the programming and operations of a municipal theatre is central to Lily Climenhaga’s contribution. In “German Theatres – Flemish Landscapes: Contextualizing Milo Rau’s NTGent Period,” Climenhaga reflects on the so-called innovations Rau an-

een stadstheater ligt aan de grondslag van Lily Climenhaga's bijdrage aan dit nummer van *Documenta*. In "German Theatres - Flemish Landscapes: Contextualizing Milo Rau's NTGent Period", plaats Climenhaga een aantal bedenkingen bij de vermeende innovaties die Rau aankondigde bij zijn aanstelling als directeur van NTGent in 2018. De visie en ambitie van Rau, zoals die bij zijn aantreden werd gepresenteerd in *Het Manifest van Gent*, kondigde zich aan als een radicale breuk met het verleden met de belofte NTGent op nationaal, en voornamelijk internationaal vlak, om te doen tot het stadstheater van de toekomst. Die beloftes houdt Climenhaga tegen het licht, en ze vergelijkt Rau's ambities met NTGent met ontwikkelingen die andere stadstheaters, meer bepaald in Duitsland, doormaakten ten tijde van Rau's aanstelling. Betreffende de speerpunten die Rau voorstelde in zijn programma voor NTGent – op het vlak van diversiteit, inclusie en migratie – stelt Climenhaga dat, eerder dan een radicale vernieuwer te zijn, Rau deel uitmaakt van een bredere beweging in het Europese theaterlandschap, een die gedreven wordt door een veranderende demografie en de groeiende erkenning van de noodzaak tot representatie en inclusie. Rau's zogenaamde "Stadstheater van de Toekomst", zo analyseert Climenhaga, bouwt voornamelijk voort op de inspanningen van vele anderen die zich al decennialang inzetten voor diversiteit, inclusie en maatschappelijke relevantie in het theater.

In de Portfoliosectie vinden we twee bijdrages die een blik werpen op wat de afgelopen jaren de uitdagingen waren, en nog steeds zijn, voor kleine theatergezelschappen. In "Manyone: (A) History?" geeft Natalie Gielen

when he became NTGent's director in 2018. Rau's vision, as presented in *The Ghent Manifesto*, proposed a radical break with the past, intending to transform NTGent into the city theatre of the future on both national and, particularly, international stages. Climenhaga scrutinizes these promises, comparing Rau's ambitions for NTGent with developments in other municipal theatres, particularly in Germany, around the time of Rau's appointment. Concerning Rau's program pillars for NTGent—focusing on diversity, inclusion, and migration—Climenhaga suggests that rather than being a radical innovator, Rau is part of a broader movement within European theatre, driven by shifting demographics and the growing recognition of the need for representation and inclusion. Rau's so-called "City Theater of the Future," Climenhaga argues, primarily builds upon the efforts of many others who have been committed for decades to diversity, inclusion, and social relevance in the theatre.

The *Portfolio* section includes two contributions that reflect on recent and ongoing challenges faced by small theatre companies and artist-run organisations. In "Manyone: (A) History?," Natalie Gielen shares her perspective on the creation, operation, and eventual dissolution of Manyone, a collaboration between Gielen and artists Juan Dominguez, Mette Edvardsen, Alma Söderberg, and Sarah Vanhee. In a personal essay, Gielen highlights how this quintet created a new support structure for their artistic practices. In its

len haar kijk op het ontstaan, de werking en het uiteindelijke einde van *Manyone*, een samenwerkingsverband tussen Gielen en kunstenaars Juan Dominguez, Mette Edwardsen, Alma Söderberg en Sarah Vanhee. In een persoonlijke tekst belicht Gielen wat dit kwintet bracht tot het ontwikkelen van een nieuwe structuur ter ondersteuning van de artistieke praktijk van deze kunstenaars. In haar korte bestaansgeschiedenis (2015-2023) was *Manyone* een zelforganiserend kunstenaarsinitiatief dat trachtte te ontsnappen uit de productielogica van het hedendaagse podiumkunstenveld. Gielen geeft ons een kijk op de samenwerking tussen de vier kunstenaars en haarzelf als coördinator. In haar tekst beschrijft ze de voordelen van samenwerken, maar ook de moeilijkheden, zoals de werklast, financiële beperkingen en de zoektocht naar een evenwicht tussen individuele en collectieve behoeften. “*Manyone: (A) History?*” schotelt een aantal lessen voor die geleerd kunnen worden uit korte levensduur van *Manyone* en pleit voor een betere ondersteuning van zelfgeorganiseerde kunstenaarsinitiatieven.

Rune Wittouck geeft ons op zijn beurt een inkijk in *BLENDER*, een samenwerkingsverband tussen de Vlaamse jeugdtheaters *ManOverboord*, *LARFI*, *TINT*, *KAAIMAN* en *De Figuranten*. Als initiatief beoogde *BLENDER* een platform te bieden om dialoog en kruisbestuivingen te faciliteren tussen jonge theatermakers. Door in te zetten op proces en experiment, in combinatie met een horizontale en gelijkwaardige werkverhouding, wil *BLENDER* jonge makers zichzelf doen verrassen en prikkelen. Zonder de druk van een première of een succesvol eindresultaat tracht *BLENDER*

brief history (2015–2023), *Manyone* was a self-organised initiative that sought to break free from the production logic dominating the contemporary performing arts field. Gielen, as the company’s coordinator, offers insights into the collaboration between the four artists, describing the advantages of working together as well as the challenges: workload, financial constraints, and the balance between individual and collective needs. “*Manyone: (A) History?*” presents some of the lessons learned from *Manyone*’s short lifespan, advocating for better support of self-organized artist initiatives.

Finally, Rune Wittouck looks into *BLENDER*, a collaboration between the Flemish youth theatres *ManOverboord*, *LARFI*, *TINT*, *KAAIMAN*, and *De Figuranten*. The *BLENDER* initiative aimed to create a platform to facilitate dialogue and cross-pollination among young theatermakers. By emphasizing process and experimentation, alongside horizontal and equitable working relationships, *BLENDER* seeks to inspire and challenge young creators. Without the pressure of an opening night or an expectation of a polished final product, *BLENDER* encourages young artists to experiment with various methods and processes. In addition to a unique and personal perspective on the project, Wittouck illustrates how Flemish youth theatre has gained independence in recent years. An initiative like *BLENDER*, Wittouck argues, demonstrates why youth theatre today deserves greater (financial) support from policymakers.

jonge makers aan te moedigen om verschillende creatiemethodes en -processen uit te testen. Naast een unieke en persoonlijke inblik in het project laat Wittouck zien dat het Vlaamse jeugdtheater zich de afgelopen jaren heeft geëmancipeerd. Een initiatief zoals BLENDER toont volgens Wittouck hoe jeugdtheaterwerkingen vandaag meer (financiële) ondersteuning verdienen van beleidsmakers.

Theater in tijden van hyperpolitiek

Zoals hierboven geschetst, werden trends en ontwikkelingen in de *Toneelstof*-reeks gestructureerd en ondergebracht volgens decennium. Initieel was het de wens om die artificiële indeling te behouden voor dit nummer dat er in navolging van *Toneelstof* kwam. De bijdragen aan dit nummer zijn niet representatief voor twee decennia podiumkunsten. Maar onbedoeld overlappen ze wel alle vier met een periode die filosoof en politicoloog Anton Jäger (2024) bestempelde als die van de ‘hyperpolitiek’ waarin een nieuwe verhouding is ontstaan tussen het publieke en het private. Zijn, naar eigen zeggen, “potentieel en riskant concept” typeert een maatschappelijke trend tussen 2016 en 2020 die het levenslicht zag na het presidentschap van Donald Trump en Brexit en verworden is tot “een centrale factor in het krachtenveld van de eenentwintigste eeuw” (16-17). De trend die Jäger beschrijft, het herpolitiseren van onder meer de cultuur en de privésfeer, volgt op een periode van antipolitiek (tussen 2008 en 2016), die eerder volgde op een periode van postpolitiek (1989-2008). In opbouw naar zijn concept hyperpolitiek schetst Jäger hoe de val van de Berlijnse Muur het symbolische begin is van de postpolitiek waarbij er “een verregerende depo-

Theatre in Times of Hyperpolitics

As outlined above, trends and developments in the *Toneelstof* series were structured and categorized by decade. Initially, the intention for this issue was to maintain this artificial segmentation, following in the footsteps of *Toneelstof*. The contributions to this issue are not intended as a comprehensive representation of two decades of performing arts. However, they unintentionally overlap with a period that philosopher and political scientist Anton Jäger (2024) labelled as one of “hyperpolitics.” A period in which a new relationship has emerged between the public and the private. His “potentially risky concept,” as he calls it, characterizes a societal trend between 2016 and 2020 that emerged following the Trump presidency and Brexit, and has since evolved into “a central factor in the dynamics of the twenty-first century” (16-17). The trend described by Jäger—a re-politicization of culture and the private sphere—follows a period of anti-politics (2008–2016), which, in turn, followed a post-political period (1989–2008).

In building toward his concept of hyperpolitics, Jäger describes how the fall of the Berlin Wall marked the symbolic beginning of the post-political era, where a “far-reaching depoliticization” became evident. With the Cold War seemingly resolved, ideological conflicts appeared to be settled, leading citizens to retreat into the private sphere and withdraw from political engagement. At this point, the decline of the public sphere, the

litisering” zichtbaar werd. Met de Koude Oorlog achter de rug waren ideologische conflicten schijnbaar beslecht, plooden burgers zich terug in de privésfeer en onttrokken ze zich van het politieke spel. Vanaf dat moment zette het verval van het middenveld in, de brug tussen staat en individu. De gevolgen van een afkalkend middenveld werden zichtbaar en voelbaar rond 2008 toen de financieel-economische crisis losbarstte. Zoals Jäger stelt, kwam er vanaf die crisis een periode van antipolitiek waarbij er sprake was van een herpolitisering gericht tegen het postpolitieke bestel verantwoordelijk voor de crisis. 2010 luidde het begin in van het antipolitieke decennium waarin antiglobalistische en andersglobalistische bewegingen in het Westen (zoals o.a. Podemos, Syriza en Occupy Wall Street) opkwamen tegen politieke elites en de zorgwekkende toename van sociale ongelijkheid. Maar de wind werd vanaf 2015 uit de zeilen van deze *grassroots*-bewegingen genomen door antipolitieke bewegingen op rechts. Parallel met deze linksegeoriënteerde bewegingen van antipolitiek ontwikkelde zich op rechts een antipolitieke golf (Brexit, Trump, Orbán, Salvini en AfD) die tegen het eind van het decennium “de strijd om het einde van de postpolitiek” (99) voorlopig zou winnen. Ook al vertoont hyperpolitiek opvallend veel gelijkenissen met antipolitiek, toch verschillen beide in meerdere opzichten, zo benadrukt Jäger.

De antipolitiek werd geïnitieerd en gedreven – zowel vanuit linkse als rechtse hoek – door maatschappelijke groepen die getroffen werden door de crisis van 2008. En ondanks de kloof die tussen beide bewegingen stond was er tenminste een herkenbare ideologische inslag die aan de basis lag van

bridge between state and individual, began to set in. The effects of a diminishing public sphere became visible and palpable around 2008 when the financial-economic crisis erupted. According to Jäger, the ensuing crisis triggered a period of anti-politics, characterized by a re-politicization in opposition to the post-political order deemed responsible for the crisis. The year 2010 ushered in the beginning of an anti-political decade, with anti-globalist and alter-globalist movements in the West (such as Podemos, Syriza, and Occupy Wall Street) rising against political elites and the alarming growth of social inequality. Yet from 2015 onward, these grassroots movements were outpaced by right-wing anti-political movements. Running parallel to these left-wing anti-political movements, right-wing anti-political waves (Brexit, Trump, Orbán, Salvini, and AfD) gained traction, ultimately “winning the battle to end post-politics” toward the decade’s end (99). While hyperpolitics shares many similarities with anti-politics, Jäger emphasizes significant distinctions.

Anti-politics was initiated and driven—by both left- and right-leaning groups—by social groups affected by the 2008 crisis. Despite the gap between these movements, there was at least a recognizable ideological basis underpinning both left-wing (e.g., Podemos and Syriza) and right-wing (e.g., Orbán and Salvini) anti-political movements. To varying degrees, both managed to institutionalize their an-

die antipolitieke bewegingen. Beide, zowel op links (met o.a. Podemos en Syriza) als op rechts (o.a. Orbán en Salvini), hebben in zekere mate hun antipolitiek via populistische partijen kunnen institutionaliseren en een aantal stappen tot verandering (in gang) kunnen zetten (101). Deze aspecten van antipolitiek zijn minder sterk aanwezig of ontbreken zelfs. Hyperpolitiek, aldus Jäger, is “een intensivering van de antipolitiek” (ibid). Hyperpolitiek “is dynamisch en intensief, polariseert, maar blijft inhoudelijk tamelijk diffuus” (17). De afwezigheid van ideologische gronden schrijft Jäger toe aan de toenemende versnelling en versplintering die de nieuwe eeuw kenmerkt die mensen isoleert en op zichzelf terugwerpt, met toenemende prikkelbaarheid en verwarring als gevolgen. Hyperpolitiek, zo concludeert Jäger, “is het product van een ‘harde maar holle’ omgeving; ze is een poging om de ijzeren greep van het neoliberalisme te doorbreken door over de nodige middelen daartoe te beschikken” (105). De Black Lives Matter-protesten en de bestorming van het Capitool door QAnon mogen dan elkaars tegenpolen zijn, voor Jäger zijn beide bewegingen zeen voorbeeld van hoe hyperpolitiek zich manifesteert. Het betreft in beide gevallen groepen die kort maar intens en fanatiek reageren op bepaalde stimuli, vaak op het aansturen van charismatische influencers via Facebook, TikTok, Instagram of X. Als een “marktvriendelijke variant van politiek, zowel qua vorm als qua inhoud” (22) belooft hyperpolitiek “de herbetovering van het openbare leven” voor degenen die uit de publieke sfeer waren verdwenen. “In haar versmelting van geprivatiseerde zelfexpressie en politiek enthousiasme vindt de hyperpolitiek een uitweg voor het verlangen naar een doel en

ti-politics through populist parties and initiated some steps toward change (101). In contrast, hyperpolitics, Jäger argues, represent “an intensification of anti-politics” (ibid). Hyperpolitics “is dynamic and intense, polarizes, but remains ideologically vague” (17). The absence of a strong ideological foundation, according to Jäger, stems from the acceleration and fragmentation of the new century, which isolates individuals, leaving them overstimulated and confused. Hyperpolitics, Jäger concludes, “is the product of a ‘hard but hollow’ environment; it is an attempt to break free from the iron grip of neoliberalism without having the necessary means” (105). Although the Black Lives Matter protests and the attack on the Capitol in Washington by QAnon supporters may seem like opposites, Jäger views both as examples of hyperpolitics in action. In both cases, these groups respond briefly but intensely and fanatically to certain stimuli, often driven by charismatic influencers on Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, or X. As a “market-friendly variant of politics, both in form and content” (22), hyperpolitics promises to “re-enchant public life” for those who have withdrawn from the public sphere. “In its merging of privatized self-expression and political enthusiasm,” Jäger asserts that “hyperpolitics offers an outlet for the desire for purpose and meaning” (32). In a stable, composed society, according to Jäger, a large group of isolated, lonely individuals does not pose a real issue. However, when such an over-individualized society “encounters severe

een taak”, aldus Jäger (32). In een stabiele samenleving die rustig en stabiel verloopt vormt, volgens Jäger, een grote groep geïsoleerde en vereenzaamde individuen niet echt een probleem. Wanneer dit soort van overgeïndividualiseerde samenleving “echter in zwaar weer terechtkomt, verhoogt de doorgeslagen individualisering de volatilitéit” (Jäger 2024, 110). Het onvermogen om die intense momenten van herpolitiserings om te zetten in collectieve bewegingen doet twifelen of ons hyperpolitiek tijdsgewricht bij machte is om de politieke en ecologische uitdagingen waarmee we de komende tijd mee geconfronteerd zullen worden het hoofd te bieden.

Als concept dat de “algemene atmosfeer” (101) van ons huidige tijdsgewricht tracht te schetsen biedt hyperpolitiek ons ook een lens om naar de podiumkunsten te kijken. In een samenleving waarin de herpolitiserings zich in vele lagen van het bestaan verder zet blijven de (podium)kunsten niet gevrijwaard. Integendeel, het domein van de (podium)kunsten is er één waarin die herpolitiserings prominent aanwezig is. Meer dan ooit is het een terrein geworden waarin kunst wordt ingezet om die politieke krachten te mobiliseren. Parellel met de *grassroots*-bewegingen van wat Jäger omschreef als antipolitiek zagen we de groei in activistische, politieke en participatieve kunst. En sinds het aanbreken van de hyperpolitiek zien we dat kustenaars en kunstencentra het voortouw nemen in het bieden van platformen en contexten waarin politieke krachten zich kunnen ontplooiën. Illustratief is de manier waarop de Black Lives Matter-beweging – om het voorbeeld van Jäger over te nemen – in Europa (terecht) het broodnodige debat binnen de

adversity, excessive individualization increases volatility” (Jäger 2024, 110). The inability to convert these intense moments of re-politicization into collective movements raises doubts about whether our hyperpolitical era is capable of addressing the political and ecological challenges we will face soon.

As a concept attempting to capture the “general atmosphere” (101) of our current era, hyperpolitics also offers a lens through which we can examine the performing arts. In a society where re-politicization permeates many layers of life, the (performing) arts are not exempt. Quite the contrary, the realm of (performing) arts has become one in which this re-politicization is highly visible. More than ever, the arts have become a platform for mobilizing political forces. In parallel with the grassroots movements of anti-politics, as described by Jäger, we have seen a growth in activist, political, and participatory art. And since the advent of hyperpolitics, artists and art centres have taken the lead in providing platforms and contexts in which political forces can unfold. An illustrative example is how the Black Lives Matter movement—borrowing from Jäger—rightly ignited a necessary debate within the European arts sector regarding diversity, inclusion, and the handling of colonial history. While these topics had already been high on the agenda, events in the United States underscored their urgency. However, when viewed through the lens of hyperpolitics, a warning emerges in terms of how (performing) arts have

kunstensector op gang bracht omtrent diversiteit, inclusie en de omgang met het koloniale verleden. Deze aandachtspunten stonden natuurlijk al langer hoog op de agenda maar de gebeurtenissen in de Verenigde Staten wezen op hun hoogdringheid. Er duikt echter een waarschuwing op wanneer we door de lens van de hyperpolitiek kijken naar hoe de (podium)kunsten de afgelopen herpolitiseren. Net zoals de vele recente protestbewegingen het momentum dat ze hebben niet kunnen vertalen naar concrete acties en ze kunnen verankeren in beleid, zo loopt ook het kunstenveld aan tegen de kritiek dat ze (te) trendgevoelig zijn en personen uit kans- en minderheidsgroepen gebruiken als *token* zonder wezenlijke aanpassingen in hun organisaties en denken aan te brengen.

Die waarschuwing keert ook terug in de analyses van Vercauteren en Climenhaga (ook al verwijst geen van beide auteurs naar Jägers concept van hyperpolitiek). Natuurlijk is er niks mis met stadstheaters en theatermakers die zich betrokken voelen met de wereld en de verhalen van wie in de marge van de samenleving leeft. Maar door de versnippering die de hyperpolitiek kenmerkt dreigt er ook een versnippering in het soort verhalen dat kunstenaars en kunstinstellingen brengen. Treffend voorbeeld hiervan is de terugkerende kritiek waar, voornamelijk, grotere kunstinstellingen mee te maken hebben wanneer het gaat om het dekoloniseren van hun werkingen. Degenen die vroeger aan de zijlijn stonden mogen dan nu wel een plekje hebben gekregen in de programmatie omwille van de veranderende tijdsgeest, de bestaande machtsstructuren verantwoordelijk voor uitsluitingsmechanismen blijven vaak intact. Net uit die versnippering

re-politicized in recent years. Just as many recent protest movements have struggled to translate their momentum into concrete action and sustained policy impact, the arts sector faces criticism for being overly trend-sensitive and for using individuals from disadvantaged and minority groups as tokens without making substantive changes in their organizations and mindsets.

This warning also surfaces in the analyses of Vercauteren and Climenhaga (even though both authors do not reference Jäger's concept of hyperpolitics). There is, of course, nothing wrong with municipal theatres and artists who feel connected to the world and the stories of those marginalized in society. However, due to the fragmentation characteristic of hyperpolitics, there is a risk of a corresponding fragmentation in the types of stories brought by artists and arts institutions. A telling example is the recurrent criticism, particularly faced by larger arts institutions, regarding the decolonization of their operations. Those who were once sidelined may now have found a place in programming due to the changing spirit of the times, but the power structures responsible for exclusionary mechanisms often remain intact. It is precisely from this fragmentation and individualization that hyperpolitics derives its existence, as it prevents collective projects from growing into credible alternatives to the characteristics of hyperpolitics. While Vercauteren and Climenhaga highlight the pitfalls that

en individualisering haalt de hyperpolitiek volgens Jäger zijn bestaan, omdat het collectieve projecten verhindert om uit te groeien tot geloofwaardige alternatieven voor de zijnskenmerken van de hyperpolitiek. Vercauteren en Climenhaga wijzen op de valkuilen waar de podiumkunstensector in dreigt te vallen, Wittouck en Gielen tonen op hun beurt hoe de kunsten ook het domein kunnen zijn waarin die collectieve krachten gebundeld kunnen worden om tot alternatieven te komen, ook al zorgt de hyperpolitiek voor heel wat weerstand.

Theaterwetenschappen in Vlaanderen: de uitdagingen van de toekomst

Ondanks de eenvoudige vraag die ten grondslag lag aan dit *Documenta*-nummer - “Wat voor soort theatervoorstellingen waren er te zien op Vlaamse podium afgelopen twee decennia”? - leverde dit niet de verhoopte hoeveelheid aan voorstellen binnen. Enerzijds is dit niet verwonderlijk. De regio waar dit nummer naar peilt wordt slechts door een beperkt aantal theaterwetenschappers bevolkt en bestudeerd. Theaterwetenschappers uit het buitenland tonen zeker een oprechte interesse in wat de afgelopen jaren uit Vlaanderen kwam. Minder evident is het om van buitenlandse theaterwetenschappers te verwachten dat ze mee bredere ontwikkelingen en verschuivingen in kaart kunnen brengen. En de Vlaamse theaterwetenschappers zijn vaak al overladen met onderzoekswerk en onderwijsactiviteiten. Anderzijds baart het geringe aantal voorstellen wel zorgen. De theaterwetenschappen in Vlaanderen staan anno 2024 sterker dan ooit. Sinds het academiejaar 2004-2005, het jaar waarin de Bolognaverklaring (1999) haar ingang kende in het Vlaamse hoger onderwijs, zit

the performing arts sector risks falling into, Wittouck and Gielen, in turn, demonstrate how the arts can also be a domain where collective forces can be united to develop alternatives, despite the considerable resistance posed by hyperpolitics.

Theatre Studies in Flanders: Future Challenges

The straightforward question that inspired this issue of *Documenta*—“What kinds of theatre performances have been shown on Flemish stages over the past two decades?”—did not result in the hoped-for number of proposals. This is, to some extent, understandable. The region covered in this issue is relatively small, with only a limited number of theatre scholars conducting research in the area. On the one hand, while foreign scholars do take an interest in the theatre produced in Flanders, it’s challenging to expect them to contextualize broader developments and shifts in the local scene. Flemish theatre scholars, on the other hand, often juggle a heavy load of research and teaching responsibilities, which might explain the low response rate to the call for contributions. However, this limited response is also a cause for concern. Theatre studies in Flanders are stronger than ever in 2024, having solidified their place in higher education after the implementation of the Bologna Process in the 2004-2005 academic year. Since then, institutions like the University of Antwerp, Ghent University, and the Free University of Brussels (in collaboration with RITCS) have established programs dedicated

de theaterwetenschap verankerd in verschillende universitaire opleidingen na een lange ontvoogdingsstrijd (Van den Dries 2017, 60). Zowel Universiteit Antwerpen (UA), Universiteit Gent (UGent) en Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB) (i.s.m. RITS) kunnen uitpakken met een curriculum gericht op theater alsook met expertise in de daar ondergebrachte onderzoekscentra – en groepen zoals Research Centre for Visual Poetics (Universiteit Antwerpen) en Studies in Performing Arts & Media (Universiteit Gent). Net omwille van de expansie en versterking van de theaterwetenschappen in Vlaanderen was de verbazing des te groter dat er amper reacties kwamen op de uitgestuurde oproep voor dit nummer. Uiteraard is en blijft het gissen en speculeren over waarom collega's niet bereid waren om een voorstel in te dienen. Ongetwijfeld zal de overvolle onderzoeks- en onderwijsagenda vele collega's ervan weerhouden hebben om een voorstel in te dienen. Maar wanneer we voorbij die drukke agenda's kijken kan er een andere verklaring worden gevonden in de groei die de theaterwetenschappen in Vlaanderen heeft doorgemaakt de afgelopen twee decennia.

In de verhelderende inleiding “Restating/Resituating the ‘State of the Art’” (2017) van het special issue van *Documenta* getiteld “State of the Art. Contemporary and Historical Perspectives on Theater Studies in Flanders” (2017), waarschuwde Timmy De Laet voor het potentiële gevaar van de greep van de Angelsaksische wereld op de theaterwetenschappen in Vlaanderen. Zoals De Laet aantoont, alsook de bijdragen in het door hem geredigeerde *Documenta*-nummer, ontwikkelde de theaterwetenschap in Vlaanderen zich onder impuls van

to theatre studies alongside research centres such as the Research Centre for Visual Poetics at the University of Antwerp and Studies in Performing Arts & Media at Ghent University. The recent growth of theatre studies in Flanders makes the lack of engagement with this issue even more surprising. Although the busy academic schedules of many colleagues surely played a role, beyond this, there may be a deeper explanation linked to the evolution of theatre studies in Flanders over the past two decades.

In his enlightening introduction “Restating/Resituating the ‘State of the Art’” in the 2017 *Documenta* Special Issue on contemporary and historical perspectives on theatre studies in Flanders, Timmy De Laet warns of the potential risks associated with the influence of the Anglo-Saxon world on Flemish theatre studies. De Laet highlights that Flemish theatre studies developed in response to international trends, shaped by interactions between practice and theory as well as by global academic and theatrical developments. Yet, the dominance of Anglo-Saxon models in theatre studies—and, by extension, dance studies—threatens to erase local distinctions, nuances, and traditions. In a globalized world, De Laet argues, “it might be all the more necessary to devote attention to the local complexities and subtleties of the multiple ‘states of the art’ that any given field is comprised of.”

internationale ontwikkelingen. De interactie tussen praktijk en theorie enerzijds, en internationale ontwikkelingen binnen academia en podiumkunsten anderzijds, heeft de theaterwetenschappen gedefinieerd zoals we die vandaag in Vlaanderen kennen en uitoefenen. De wijze waarop Angelsaksische modellen de theaterwetenschappen, en bij uitbreiding de danswetenschappen, doorheen de jaren zijn gaan domineren dreigt lokale verschillen, accenten en tradities uit te vlakken, aldus De Laet. In een geglobaliseerde wereld, zo besluit De Laet: “it might be all the more necessary to devote attention to the local complexities and subtleties of the multiple “states of the art” that any given field is comprised of” (6).

De beperkte interesse in het thema van voorliggend *Documenta*-nummer kan verklaard worden door deze internationalisering van de theaterwetenschappen, waarbij paradigma's uit de Angelsaksische wereld de toon zetten. In zijn verwijzing naar deze Angelsaksische modellen haalt De Laet intellectuele en theoretische referenties aan die hedendaagse discoursen omtrent theater, en bij uitbreiding dans en performance, zijn gaan bepalen. Maar even dominant, en misschien nefaster voor de theaterwetenschappen in Vlaanderen, is de competitieve fondsenwerving waar elke onderzoeker op verschillende momenten in diens carrière mee wordt geconfronteerd. *An sich* is er niets mis met de dynamiek tussen theorie en praktijk, lokaal en internationaal die de praktijk van veel theaterwetenschappers in Vlaanderen voedt. Het is één van de opdrachten van de theaterwetenschappen om tendensen in kaart te brengen en die te plaatsen binnen

The limited response to this issue's call for contributions may partly be a result of this internationalization, where Anglo-Saxon paradigms have taken precedence. These paradigms, which shape contemporary discourses in theatre, dance, and performance, may contribute to a diminished focus on local research interests within Flemish theatre studies. Additionally, competitive research funding, which many scholars must pursue throughout their careers, may discourage local research initiatives. Although the interplay between theory and practice, as well as between local and international contexts, is valuable and essential to theatre studies, the small field of theatre studies in Flanders may struggle under an academic system modelled on Anglo-Saxon principles. Criteria for research funding—such as innovation, interdisciplinarity, and international collaboration—often does not favour proposals focusing on local histories. Aspiring theatre scholars in Flanders may, therefore, feel disincentivized from pursuing research exploring local developments. Furthermore, leading academic publishers—often with a strong Anglo-Saxon orientation—can be hesitant to publish work focusing on local themes and trends.

This challenge is not unique to theatre studies. Other humanities fields also face similar pressures. However, for theatre studies in Flanders, the long-term effects of this trend are difficult to predict. Yet, as this *Documenta* issue illustrates, much of the recent history of Flemish performing arts remains

nationale en internationale ontwikkelingen, in het heden en het verleden. Maar in de kleine discipline die de theaterwetenschap is (zeker in Vlaanderen), kan in een academische wereld die gemodelleerd is naar Angelsaksisch voorbeeld snel een verschraling optreden op vlak van onderzoek naar lokale en nationale ontwikkelingen. De doorslaggevende criteria bij het toekennen van onderzoeksfondsen – innovatie, interdisciplinariteit, internationale uitwisseling – spelen niet meteen in het voordeel van onderzoeksvoorstellen die gaan over lokale geschiedenissen in het podiumkunstenveld, aangezien die worden beoordeeld door een commissie van internationale experts. Wie vandaag in Vlaanderen een academische carrière ambieert als theaterwetenschapper wordt zo ontmoedigd om onderzoekspaden rond lokale geschiedenissen uit te stippelen. Een extra barrière wordt opgeworpen door de toonaangevende academische uitgeverijen – vaak Angelsaksisch georiënteerd qua onderwerpen – die moeilijker te overtuigen zijn om publicaties op de markt te brengen die lokale thema's of trends belichten.

Deze nieuwe onderzoeksrealiteit is er één waar alle disciplines binnen de Geesteswetenschappen mee te kampen hebben. Voor de theaterwetenschappen in Vlaanderen is het momenteel moeilijk in te schatten wat de gevolgen zullen zijn voor de toekomst. Maar de totstandkoming van dit *Documenta*-nummer, zoals hier geschetst in dit editoriaal, is een signaal dat een groot terrein van de recente Vlaamse podiumkunsten-geschiedenis onontgonnen blijft. “Zo goed Vlaanderen in theater is, zo middelmatig blijkt het in de publieke bewaring ervan”

unexplored. In 2007, the *Toneelstof* editorial team observed that “as strong as Flanders is in theatre, it is equally mediocre in preserving it” (Hillaert et al. 2007, 71). Despite various initiatives, such as Kunstenpunt and archival projects created by theatre and dance companies, this preservation seems to lack urgency among Flemish theatre scholars. The team behind *Toneelstof* made impressive efforts to fill gaps in knowledge about the Flemish theatre landscape, and it would be a missed opportunity if current and future generations of theatre scholars fail to see this as a valuable research path. This new *Documenta* issue aims to stimulate debate on this topic and inspire further research on the recent history of performing arts in Flanders. The four contributions to this issue are already a first step in that direction.

In the context of the recent public debate around *De Canon van Vlaanderen in 60 vensters* (2023), it is essential to emphasize that this plea is not intended to align with any ideological agenda visible in Flemish cultural policy in recent years. On the contrary, as De Laet previously noted, this kind of research can provide a more nuanced and layered view of the performing arts in Flanders in the twenty-first century. These newly excavated histories do not lend themselves easily to recuperation by political agendas.

schreef de *Toneelstof*-redactie in 2007 (Hillaert, et al. 2007, 71). Het lijkt erop dat, ondanks de eerder vermelde initiatieven zoals Kunstenpunt en archiefwerkingen die theater- en dansgezelschappen zelf hebben opgezet, die bewaring weinig urgent is bij Vlaamse theaterwetenschappers. Het team achter *Toneelstof* leverde een indrukwekkende inspanning om een aantal lacunes in de kennis van het Vlaamse theaterlandschap op te vullen. Het zou zonde zijn mocht de huidige en toekomstige generatie theaterwetenschappers verzuimen dit als waardevolle onderzoekstrajecten te zien. Dit nieuwe *Documenta*-nummer wil alvast het debat hieromtrent aanzwengelen en inspireren om nieuwe onderzoeken over de recente geschiedenis van de podiumkunsten in Vlaanderen in de steigers te zetten. De vier bijdrages in dit nummer zetten hiertoe al een eerste stap.

In het licht van het publieke debat naar aanleiding van onder meer het boek *De Canon van Vlaanderen in 60 vensters* (2023) (zie Boone 2021; Aerts, et al. 2020) is het belangrijk te benadrukken dat dit pleidooi geenzins een oproep is om mee te stappen in de ideologische agenda die zichtbaar werd in het Vlaamse cultuurbeleid van de afgelopen jaren. Integendeel, nieuwsoortige onderzoeken kunnen net, zoals De Laet al schreef, een complexer en gelaagder beeld geven van de podiumkunsten in Vlaanderen in de eenentwintigste eeuw. Geschiedenissen die zich niet zomaar laten recupereren door politieke agenda's.

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Repertoire, ensemble and internationalization in Flemish city-theatres in the 2010s.

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There are not many elements that are as important for the reputation of an organization or institution today as internationalization, and there are not many elements that have as many artistic and economic strategies and issues. This is especially true in Flanders, a small region that often lacks enough (domestic) presentation opportunities for its artists (Janssens 2017a). It has also experienced drastic changes that have made artists look outwards, away from any purely Flemish repertoire, and brought with it a desire for more horizontal ways of creating instead of relying on fixed ensembles. If this field has one burden, it is specifically the legacy of the Flemish Wave and the theatre collectives. This has put the region's three city-theatres in a difficult situation, where they, starting in the 2000s, have felt the need to answer to the needs of the field and do something about their reputation as old-fashioned institutions. Dealing with new aesthetics, new social-political philosophies, and changes in artistic direction, all three have taken different paths to negotiate their value for the Flemish performing arts scene. Internationalization is one of the needs in the Flemish field that are most at odds with the traditional mission of national theatres but has nonetheless been an

important aspect in the 2010s for the city-theatres. Instead of serving as strong anchors in the theatre scene, they themselves have looked at an alternative way of existing in the nation. Internationalization thus becomes a way of negotiating the position of the institution in the field.

One advantage of the Flemish field is that the strategies available, even for institutions, are quite varied. While national theatres in Europe often have to deal with the demands of a big and well-known repertoire (Holdsworth 2010, 27), Flanders has a limited repertoire and a history of deconstructing what little repertoire is available. This can be seen as beneficial for artistic freedom according to some theatre-makers (Anthonissen 2019), but also means that the city-theatres cannot follow the traditional mission of national theatres, which has actually been the staging of repertoire to build the nation's cultural identity. Interestingly, all three city-theatres were historically meant to function as national theatres, with only NTGent containing a reference to the city in its name. Compared to this ideal of the national theatre, the contemporary history of the city-theatres shows a different type of institution. Additionally, the friction between the concept of Flemish/Belgian cultural identity and the actual theatre-makers and institutions has caused the city-theatres to stop being true proponents of a Flemish or Belgian civic pride. Consequently, their relationship with internationalization, globalization, and/or cosmopolitanism has developed differently from other European national theatres.

By analyzing the motivations and artistic missions of city-theatres and their artistic direction, an institutional evolution can be discerned; sometimes with many twists and turns, sometimes with the continuous building of a new reputation. In the following case studies, we will see in what ways Flemish city-theatres have institutionally constituted themselves with internationalization strategies and how these can be interpreted along the lines of cosmopolitan, global, and nationalist discourses. Each city-theatre has developed their own

international institutional dramaturgy in the face of a changed field, from an urban-cosmopolitan, to a global and a city-local perspective. KVS, as a city-theatre in the big cosmopolitan city of Brussels, has looked at the specific constellation of this spatial reality to redefine itself, moving from a traditional Flemish theatre to a multilingual hub. Through the distinct social-political visions of its artistic directors in the 2010s, the theatre has reached far beyond its walls, while maintaining its physical position as an important aspect of their institutional dramaturgy. Alternatively, NTGent in the second half of the 2010s has seemingly broken the importance of their walls, instead looking at a global community, after having been one of the last places for a more Flemish repertoire. Lastly, Toneelhuis stayed mostly loyal to their own artistic voice and opened itself to the city rather than to the global world. Looking at the world outside of its walls has led to many projects for local artists but has limited its reach. As will become clear, none of these strategies constitute strong revolutions within Flanders, but can rather be important for understanding the institutional possibilities in the field of performing arts in the face of increasing internationalization and globalization in Europe. When there is no strict repertoire to take into account, there are less rules to break and more freedom to constitute an international-institutional dramaturgy. The mission and profile of the artistic director can be crucial for the strategies an institution employs to form their own position in the field.

International waters, the Flemish Wave

When it comes to the internationalization of the Flemish performing arts scene, the most important cultural moment that comes to mind is the “Flemish Wave”. As a term it has garnered a lot of discussion, but is nonetheless often used by academics and professionals. The Flemish Wave refers to the period in the 80s where such Flemish choreographers, directors, and performers as Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, Jan Fabre, and Alain Platel broke ground and created experimental work that experienced a wave in popularity internationally. As Rudi Laermans and Pascal Gielen (1998) point out, what constituted the “Flemish wave” was mostly four or five names (330), but it was an important factor for the rise a more international reputation for the Flemish performing arts. Not only were these directors gaining ground outside of Flanders, but non-Flemish

choreographers like Meg Stuart became part of the “Flemish” Wave and working with non-Flemish performers became commonplace (331). As Janine Hauthal (2023) has pointed out when discussing (post-)migrant theatre, this has resulted in bi- and multilingual expressions, making the “Flemish” performing arts Flemish in name but not (exclusively) in language (742). This somewhat high degree of internationalization can still be seen today, which has left some professionals wondering for a few decades now how Flemish the Flemish scene really is.

In the Flemish scene, it has thus become increasingly important for artists and institutions to internationalize, meaning to tour internationally, employ international artists and/or appeal to international audiences, to be or stay part of this “Flemish aesthetic”. This paradox, of finding a connection with international conventions as part of the new Flemish scene, is what makes it hard to truly talk about a Flemish artistic authenticity (Laermans and Gielen 1998, 5). Additionally, the idea of Flemish authenticity is not neutral in social-political terms. Additionally, the renewed wave of right-wing Flemish nationalism makes “Flemish identity” a tainted concept, one that artists often want to move away from and deconstruct in more cosmopolitan ways. The internationalization that this new aesthetic movement almost required was also very different from the internationalization that was already present in the field. Big institutions such as the Flemish Royal Ballet brought in international choreographers and directors, but they still had to fit within the ruling dance tradition of the Flemish Ballet (Laermans and Gielen 1998, 334). Opera, on the other hand, has historically been quite international, with productions almost always having a wide range of nationalities (Blackwood 2021, 88). Different institutions will bring with them different strategies, possibilities, and limits to internationalization.

Before we actually analyze the degree (and strategies) of internationalization present in Flemish theatre institutions and how they relate to a historical concept of national theatre, it is important to first consider what “internationalization” entails, in which ways it influences the field and is utilized by actors in the field. The term is often used to denote various phenomena that sometimes have widely different processes or are regarded in very different ways. Internationalization is not always (just) a process that crosses borders, but

also a matter of perception (Garde and Severn 2021, 7). Therefore, the “internationalization” of a field could mean collaborations with foreign entities, the frequent presence of non-Flemish artists in a Flemish production, and even a change in aesthetic that aligns with other styles from abroad. There are also often various reasons for a desire for internationalization, some more “romantic” than others, as sometimes international tours are an economic necessity, not a desire for an international aesthetic (De Moor 2019). In various institutions, the programming and production of international artists was partly to gain more symbolic capital and connect with the importance of the Flemish Wave (Gielen 2003, 55). Economic aspects, however, are often a crucial driving force for international touring schedules and coproductions. In comparison with visual arts, it is harder for theatre pieces to break even with a domestic touring schedule. While in a museum, an artwork can be seen every day for a few weeks, theatres are less inclined to show a piece that many times. More and more, theatres are even opting for “one-shots” instead of a series of shows (Verdonck 2018). To stay economically viable, the whole field seemingly relies on internationalization (Leenknecht 2017b; Janssens 2017a; De Moor 2019). However, these forms of international collaboration, while necessary, are difficult because of the nature of theatre as an art form. International touring is expensive and recent discussions about the ecological impact of theatre have influenced international travel behavior, with supporting organizations such as Kunstenpunt calling upon artists to make their travel more sustainable (Kunstenpunt 2020). While it can be important to go beyond the borders of your home country to seek different audiences (Hesters and Tielens 2017), it also costs a lot of “human energy” for a team to be on the road for so long and so often (Verdonck 2018). All these “costs” have caused internationalization, in the form of international coproductions and touring schedules, to slowly stagnate (Leenknecht 2017a; Janssens 2017a). The 2010s experienced a more conscious outlook on what internationalization implies for an artist, an organization, or an institution, while the demands of internationalization stay strong for artists wanting to stay relevant and looking to cultivate a professional network. They have also been partly romanticized within a more cosmopolitan idea of theatre (Buyalev 2016; Verdonck 2018; Meerzon 2020, 17). Internationalization has become an economic and professional necessity in Flanders, but not one that is utilized easily or uncritically.

When we look then at the “romantic” reasons for internationalization, the international aesthetic or reputation an artist or institution might want to pursue, it is important to consider which phenomenon we are actually talking about. Notions of “internationalization” in theatre are tied to ideas of globalization and/or cosmopolitanism, with internationalization and globalization sometimes serving as mere synonyms and globalization often being used as a more philosophical concept (Rebellato 2009, 4–5; Garde and Severn 2021, 3). Complicating things further, professional discourse within Flanders uses internationalization as an umbrella term for various possible aspects (touring, performers’ national identity, professional network, etc.). Both internationalization and globalization situate themselves at a supranational level. Running next to those terms, cosmopolitanism in theatre is slightly more situated, as it often describes stagings of cosmopolitan identity within a spatial dimension (e.g., the migrant in a city) or collaborations where the festival or institution itself wants to create a cosmopolitan attitude for themselves (Meerzon 2020, 16–17). Part of the overlaps and differences can be found in the entanglement between culture and economics that some theorists, such as Dan Rebellato (2009), try to separate by defining globalization as an economic phenomenon and cosmopolitanism as a cultural one (10–11). For this article, the definition of “internationalization” as defined by Ulrike Garde and John Severn in their edited volume, *Theatre and Internationalization* (2021), will be used (7). For Garde and Severn, internationalization encompasses a broad number of connections and expectations, while acknowledging state-based influences on the workings of the theatres. The economic and cultural aspects of a theatre within a certain state can have consequences for the way internationalization can be pursued and in what way it is perceived by the audience and by the field. Perception is an especially important factor in internationalization in theatre, as a single element might remind an audience too much of another national style thus rendering it “international” in the eyes of spectators and critics (8). It also limits how much internationalization an audience will palate, as productions that are “too foreign” will not be well received, meaning a careful balance between familiar and foreign must be struck (11). For Garde and Severn, all these processes and perceptions fall under the notion of “internationalization”.

Instead of untangling the various aspects into neat parts, the history of Flemish theatre itself might actually invite us to regard its full entangled discourse. When applied to theatre institutions, another tension arises, as the Flemish city-theatres were historically meant as national theatres (Opsomer 1988). This tension is what makes it difficult for any institution to simply internationalize, as they still carry an expectation, from both the field and the funding bodies, to stay “Flemish” theatres. This does not necessarily mean that a national theatre is always at odds with a cosmopolitan attitude, it simply means that the encounter of nationalism with cosmopolitanism contains many different expectations and implications, such as the fear that cosmopolitanism comes at the cost of national autonomy (Holdsworth 2010, 68). According to Nadine Holdsworth (2010), international exchanges can actually enrich national cultural practice (79). However, Flemish city-theatres today differ from the typical idea of the national theatre. Even in popular discourse they are rarely called “national theatres”, but have been called city-theatres (“stadstheaters”) for a few decades now, or sometimes repertory theatres (“repertoiretheaters”) (Opsomer 1988; Tindemans 2011; Jans 2023). Aside from terminology, their function also sits uneasy within the definition of a national theatre as a theatre with “civic pride and cultural prominence, producing works by national playwrights and theatre-makers” (Holdsworth 2010, 27). First, the idea of “national theatre” as an art form has complicated by the division of cultural departments among the Flemish, French, and German communities. An organization or institution wishing to be subsidized will inevitably have to align itself with one or the other. This is made visible, especially in Brussels, where two separate “national theatres” are only a ten-minute walk away from each other: the Royal Flemish Theatre (Koninklijke Vlaamse Schouwburg) and the National Theatre of Wallonia-Brussels (Théâtre National Wallonie-Bruxelles). While these city-theatres have cultural prominence, the idea that they carry “civic pride” is not widely present. In discourse, this expectation is named, but most critics quickly dismiss any idea that these city-theatres actually succeed at representing the nation or Flemish community in a way that they should (Opsomer 1988; Tindemans 2011; Hendrickx 2022). These discussions do not center the expectation that the city-theatres should represent the nation’s culture and history in a traditional sense, but that they should represent the diversity present in the nation. These demands can be seen as more cosmopolitan than truly national.

A second concern when looking at the typical conception of a national theatre is that new play development in Flanders differs from the way it is stimulated in other countries. Due to the aesthetic changes of the past few decades, in the 2010s theatre lost its last true ensemble and/or repertoire pieces. Instead of classic playwright-director relationships, Flemish theatre is known for more director and/or actor-centric productions (van Schoor 1979, 269). The few authors that have built up a steady repertoire can all be read on a “lazy Sunday afternoon” (Hillaert 2013, 34). Consequently, Flanders’ repertoire and dramatic canon is actually an international textual repertoire and discussions on repertoire include various texts that are not written in Dutch, such as plays by Shakespeare, Ibsen, Goethe, Albee, and Molière (Hillaert 2012; Laermans 2019).

This issue has been intensified by the loss of the ensembles in the 2010s, with all three city-theatres in a matter of a few years getting rid of a fixed ensemble to work with more fluid models (Jans 2023). This inevitably has consequences for the possibility of repertoire, as it is always dependent on the bodies that “repeat” it (Coussens 2021). In this, we can still see the legacy of the 80s and 90s, where theatre-makers popularized the idea of working in democratic (horizontal) collectives and instigated a wave of more flexible and ad hoc collaborations (Van Baarle 2022). This reached into the city-theatres as well, which started looking more and more at the arts centers such as Vooruit, DeSingel and Kaaaitheater. These arts centers from the 80s onwards became important sites of the new Flemish-international aesthetics while city-theatres lagged behind and failed at following the dynamic theatre field (Opsomer 1988; Tindemans 2011; Jans 2023). In the 2010s this preference for horizontal ways of working further led to the declining popularity of working for big stages, the “grote zaalvoorstellingen”. Starting in 2013, KVS even set up development projects for young artists to make their way to their newly renovated big stage (Coussens 2014). Within the city-theatres, the collectives with their smaller productions won from the traditional ensembles with their large pieces.

In all this, a clear evolution towards process-based, devised theatre can be identified, where only a few artists at city-theatres continued to work with repertoire, and often still in a heavily adapted form. Here lies a key difference with other neighboring countries, where repertoire is often still an important part of a national theatre’s

artistic planning. Instead, theatre-makers for the decades since the Flemish Wave have increasingly opted for devised theatre and starting the rehearsal process without an actual text. This desire for improvisation and theatre made in the rehearsal hall has far-reaching consequences even for text-based theatre. In Flanders, playwrights work almost exclusively on commission and only rarely write full texts out of their own accord (Coussens 2018). With fewer playwrights starting their own work, it becomes even harder for a textual repertoire to flourish, or at least not in a form where it is easily transferred to other makers. While authors like Freek Mariën, Stijn Devillé and Rebekka de Wit are well-known, the chances of other theatre-makers restaging these texts are relatively low. One of the few exceptions is *Camping Sunset*, who restaged Tom Lanoye's Shakespeare-adaptation in 2019, but even that is an adaptation of an adaptation, which is—if we are being slightly pedantic—not really a staging of a repertoire piece.

This means that, in Flemish artistic planning, where repertoire would go is now a space for a variety of other works by a variety of artists. There is no requirement for directors and theatre-makers to deal with existing textual traditions, instead they can build on what has been made without necessarily having to reuse the foundation they are building upon or at least being able to select what they reuse and how. This gap can therefore also be filled with an increasingly international artistic planning, making the city-theatres a lot less “national theatre”, but also a lot more than that. Each city-theatre has continually worked on their own profile both within the field and internationally. When they finally started to shake off the “burden” of repertoire and ensembles, they developed other strategies to define themselves as city-theatres. What follows is an analysis of the three city-theatres and the ways in which they have negotiated their position in the city and in the world when they have not positioned themselves through a national canon.

Three city-theatres and the world outside their walls

KVS: The local and/as the global

In the 2010s, KVS's artistic profile was in the hands of director and writer Jan Goossens and from 2016 onwards those of actor and writer Michael De Cock. Both directors would prove important for the profile of KVS as a hub for multicultural and diverse encounters, putting themselves forward as clear opinion-makers. Like many other artists who saw the decline of city-theatres in the previous decades, Goossens' social-cultural mission as artistic director was to put KVS back on the map with innovative artistic planning. From the beginning of his appointment, Goossens tried to deal with the multicultural space KVS was situated in and the contemporary evolutions in the artistic field. While KVS had consecrated its position as a sort of "national" theatre, it was too disconnected from the artistic avant-garde, which was reinventing their aesthetics as well as their institutions (Goossens 2016, 27). In the following years, Goossens would attempt to change KVS's institutional dramaturgy into a truly multicultural, cosmopolitan theatre with a clear, beneficial presence in the city of Brussels (Tindemans 2011; Goossens 2016, 36; Boenisch 2022, 76; Jans 2023). Part of this, according to Goossens, was about realizing that KVS was more than a Flemish institution, but truly a city-theatre. Michael De Cock would further strengthen this connection with the city and further develop this urban-cosmopolitan dramaturgy.

The institutional dramaturgy of Goossens' KVS was something he clearly and explicitly articulated. Goossens had a regular column in the newspaper *De Morgen* where he voiced his vision on theatre and art. In an interview in 2011, he talks about his desire to shift attention away from typical Flemish theatre-makers, arguing that it was only interesting "30 years ago" and that now their "core business" had significantly changed due to the internationalization of the city-theatre (Op de Beeck 2011). Both Goossens and De Cock essentially argue that this institutional approach is crucial in a city such as Brussels, with its "radically mixed and multilingual" society (Goossens 2016, 29; Gielen 2016). The institutional dramaturgy of KVS has been developed under the rationale that an urban-cosmopolitan dramaturgy is the *only* way to be relevant as a city-theatre

in Brussels. Any other approach would align too much with the national theatres of old. Under De Cock, KVS broke even further from old traditions and the last members of the ensemble were asked to leave as De Cock put together a theatre of theatre-makers (Sels 2015).

Goossens tried to make his claims for diversity even more true through a clear political presence, going as far as to cut ties with the newspaper *De Morgen* after a racist column (Sels 2014). While this decision did not go down well in the press, it showed how KVS put itself within the public debate, outside the stage. Goossens ran his city-theatre not just as a place for art, but as a significant actor in the social-political field of Flanders. De Cock has also been incredibly vocal about political decisions, putting his weight behind many different discussions, both in the press and on X/Twitter, such as the rise of alt-right cultural policy during the Covid-19 pandemic and other debates on culture, education, and politics. Again, these reactions often garner significant attention, some of which is directed back at KVS itself. The institutional dramaturgy of the previous decade has led KVS to sit uneasily within the political landscape, especially in the last few years with the rise of right-wing politics.

The internationalization of KVS can be seen as a cosmopolitan process, both in a social and aesthetic sense, as the rationale for their institutional dramaturgy is focused on Brussels' social situation as a cosmopolitan city. Their artistic commitments to various artists such as Junior Mthombeni, Pitcho Womba Konga, Faustin Linyekula, and South American artists through the Proximámemente-festival show their international side. However, the focus on Brussels has also brought with it a distinctly local focus. With projects such as TokTokKnock in the 2011/2012 season and many other community projects, KVS has attempted to find the balance between the global and the local (Goossens 2016, 33; Jans 2023). The reality of Brussels as a multilingual and multicultural city opens up cosmopolitan possibilities, as, according to Meerzon, cosmopolitan theatre often leads to the staging of multiple selves, identities, and languages, which can otherwise be alienating for a monolingual audience (Meerzon 2020, 35–36). The internationalization of KVS is thus not about going past urban/local communities or purely about building a grand international reputation. Its internationalization is still rooted in the locality of Brussels. In the case of international collaborations with Congo and South Africa, it is about decoloniality. In the case

of South America, this tie is not rooted in historical ties, but in the desire to connect with Brussels' multiculturalism.

To further strengthen the locality of the Flemish city-theatre, KVS has still collaborated with various Flemish artists, such as Thomas Bellinck and Jozef Wouters under Goossens and Bruno Vanden Broecke and Valentijn Dhaenens under De Cock. With *Para* (2018), actor Bruno Vanden Broecke, director Raven Ruëll, and writer David Van Reybrouck looked at the Belgian military intervention in Somalia. The play was in line with a previous semi-documentary play, *Missie* (2007), on Belgian missionaries in Congo. While focusing on Belgian history, these plays carry a connection with Flemish culture through KVS as Flemish theatre, but also through Bruno Vanden Broecke, who has a well-known comedic TV career and has become a "household name". Furthermore, KVS connects with "Flemish repertoire" through its longstanding coproductions with Wim Vandekeybus and his dance company *Ultima Vez* and choreographer Lisbeth Gruwez. In these collaborations, KVS shows the outcome of its mission to evolve away from traditional theatre towards a city-theatre for performing arts.

The absence of traditional dramatic texts in the 2010s further strengthened the idea that repertoire would be unable to represent society at large. If the city-theatre should be a site of critical dialogue and provide "its important societal function in creating narratives that relate diverse and plural individuals to a new shared common" (Boenisch 2022), a place that "holds a mirror up to society" (Holdsworth 2010, 79), then it follows from the institutional dramaturgy of KVS that repertoire needs to make way for an urban-cosmopolitan dramaturgy that is able to address the diversity of Brussels. Looking at the position of repertoire at large, it is also easy to see that this choice was not very revolutionary. But rather a choice, perhaps, that was long past due considering the state of the Flemish performing arts (Goossens 2016, 27).

NTGent: radical changes in artistic direction

Internationalization during the previous decade at NTGent was slow to pick up and in certain ways limited to the usual neighboring countries France, Germany, and the Netherlands. It was one of the few city-theatres that still strongly relied on a collective of players

and repertoire. Especially with the arrival of Wim Opbrouck as artistic director, NTGent turned into a “theatre of actors” (Desmet and Op de Beeck 2011; Van der Speeten 2013). Despite the centrality of the actors, it is not entirely correct to call NTGent a traditional ensemble theatre, as Wim Opbrouck as artistic director tried to apply the structure of the collective in the city-theatre. He explicitly did not want NTGent to be known as *his* theatre, but as a brand in its own right (Desmet and Op de Beeck 2011). NTGent still cultivated a strong ensemble and developed a repertoire for a big stage. After five years, Johan Simons briefly returned to take up leadership of NTGent, leaving only two years later to return to Germany.

In the first half of the 2010s, the internationalization of NTGent was limited to an international touring schedule and connections with the Netherlands and Germany, some of which were established through the network of Johan Simons as a Dutch director in Flanders who had previously worked in Germany. Simons tried to keep this network, even when he returned to Ghent, combining his artistic direction with the Ruhrtriennale and even the city-theatre of Rotterdam (Van der Speeten 2015). In the end, it is this desire to maintain international connections rumored to be one of the reasons NTGent ended up in an (artistic) crisis (Ceulemans 2017). After these struggles and multiple people leaving the city-theatre, NTGent began looking for a new artistic direction, which they found in Milo Rau, in combination with Steven Heene and Luk Perceval. The arrival of Rau as new artistic director brought with it a wave of internationalization. Rau, as the first artistic director from a non-Dutch country at a Flemish city-theatre, was expected to broaden NTGent’s network and allow for both local and international projects to flourish (Sels 2017; Anthonissen 2019). While he was part of an artistic trio, he very quickly made a name for himself as *the* artistic director. At the start of his appointment, he decided to get rid of the last ensemble in Flanders. With his *Ghent Manifesto*, he tried to prescribe rules for the “city-theatre of the future”, essentially calling the previous institutional dramaturgy outdated. While perhaps revolutionary for the history of NTGent, the decision to get rid of the ensemble and deconstruct repertoire was in line with the evolution of repertoire in Flanders and with the other city-theatres. Interestingly, the perception of internationalization that Rau would bring was quite high, although his decisions were in line with Flemish theatre aesthetics, meaning again that the expectations of internationalization are not

always directly related to the actual processes behind them (Garde and Severn 2021, 8).

When we look at the creative process of Milo Rau, we can, however, see a process of internationalization and globalization through the artistic process of documentary theatre. Before he was appointed artistic director, Rau and his collaborators at the International Institute of Political Murder (IIPM) had already tackled parts of Belgian history before, such as *Five Easy Pieces* (2016), a production about the crimes of Marc Dutroux, and *Histoire du Théâtre I: La Reprise* (2018), about a homophobic murder in Liège. These pieces do not come from a distinct link with Belgian history, but rather are part of his interest in re-enactment and recollection within the idea of “theatre of the real” (Climenhaga 2021, 10). His artistic project, which is essentially applied to NTGent through the *Ghent Manifesto* (2018), looks at these different tragedies and political realities and attempt to reenact them on stage and experiment with reality through theatre. While his first piece as artistic director, *Lam Gods* (2018), took a piece of Flemish history as its central point, he has moved on to various other political situations. A number of other pieces, such as *Orestes in Mosul* (2019) and more recently *Antigone in the Amazon* (2023), very explicitly lose any national connection with Belgium as a country. While the actors reflect on the distance between their home country and the external place the tragedy is being staged, there is nothing truly Belgian or Flemish about the play. The distance could be felt from any country, the documentary theatre could have been produced in other theatres, with the biggest distance, in the case of *Orestes in Mosul*, felt between the Eurocentric theatre and acting style and the Arabic acting style, further made explicit in the piece itself (Hauthal 2023, 746). One of the rules of *The Ghent Manifesto* states that touring *needs* to happen in other countries. From the outset, these productions are created with different cultural audiences in mind, meaning it is less about how cosmopolitan individuals negotiate their divided selves and more about how global citizens tell their stories. Similarly, many of the other plays of NTGent artists work on meta-theatrical themes, such as the work of Luanda Casella and the international productions of Ontroerend Goed. One example of a series of productions that put Belgian history at the forefront is the *Sorrows of Belgium* trilogy (2019 – 2022). The trilogy was directed by Luk Perceval and borrowed its name from a novel by Hugo Claus. With its fragments

of coloniality, nationalism, and terrorism, it attempted to show the history of Belgium, but most importantly, it showed the unresolved fragmented Belgian identity. In its attempt to document this history, it ended up showing the difficulty. Its novelty also shows how little these sorts of “plays-of-the-nation” actually happen.

Interestingly, there is an unexpected benefit to the aesthetics and scenography that is usually present in Milo Rau’s pieces and that of other house artists, such as Luanda Casella. As they highly rely on the text being projected during the performance, they eliminate one of the issues that often arise when touring textual theatre across linguistic borders: surtitles (De Moor 2019). Rau has the added element of frequent multilingual theatre, which often already needs surtitles, even at “home”. This allows the play to be toured internationally, even when it utilizes a lot of text, because it already has an artistic and practical strategy to deal with the added text on stage. As an artistic strategy, this would be harder in cultural contexts where classic repertoire is still the mainstay of the artistic planning. While it is not unimaginable that a director might come up with an artistic concept for a Beckett or Shakespeare production where surtitles play an important part in visual aesthetics, a larger theatre will not program the same concept multiple times in a row. However, when the broader profile of the theatre relies on international artists, documentary and/or deconstructed theatre, a public tends to get used to the visual presence of a black bar for surtitles.

The internationalization of NTGent under Milo Rau encounters the same issue that arose in the Flemish scene in the wake of the Flemish Wave: internationalization seemingly coming at the cost of Flemish authenticity (Laermans and Gielen 1998, 5). While it is true that Rau internationalized NTGent as a city-theatre more than his predecessors, it is difficult to conclude that he internationalized *Flemish* texts specifically. In a globalized world, he put NTGent on the map and broadened its reach significantly, compared to what its international status used to be (Hauthal 2023, 748). Internally, his leadership caused some distress, eventually leading to a public discussion in 2022 between a dissatisfied Luk Perceval and other artists in the field, including KVS’s De Cock, who defended the evolution away from ensembles (Hendrickx 2022). NTGent has thus been a house of internal turmoil and significant change, moving from ensemble theatre to a director-led globalized theatre. When

comparing Rau's approach with KVS, different political strategies arise. Where Goossens and De Cock were eager to be very vocal in broader political discussions, Rau keeps many of his political statements in his pieces. In that sense, his internationalization does not necessarily seek to represent a cosmopolitan reality, but a political-global situation.

Toneelhuis: Antwerp repertoire

To talk of Toneelhuis's artistic planning in the 2010s is to talk of the artistic direction of Guy Cassiers and the many makers he attracted and supported with Toneelhuis. At the start of his time at the theatre, he quite radically decided to change from a traditional ensemble to an "ensemble of theatre-makers", a decision which was not welcomed by all of the previous ensemble (Ceulemans 2022; Jans 2023). At the time, Toneelhuis was a pioneer in deciding to rethink the traditional fixed ensemble and work on "new" repertoire by adapting novels instead of staging repertoire. In 2011, however, Toneelhuis would briefly work with an ensemble again, ahead of their collaboration with Internationaal Theatre Amsterdam (ITA), which still maintains a repertoire practice. During this time, Cassiers and other theatre-makers would again briefly work on classics (Hillaert 2011). The collaboration with ITA would become institution's most notable international collaboration in the years that followed, with repertoire pieces such as *Maria Stuart* (2014), *De Welwillenden* (2015), and *Vergeef ons* (2017). At the same time, Toneelhuis looked across Belgium's linguistic border, programming productions from Fabrice Murgia, the artistic director of Théâtre National Bruxelles-Wallonie, beginning with *LIFE : RESET* (2014). Still, it was hard to shake off the reputation of Guy Cassiers, as Murgia was compared to Cassiers in some Flemish reviews.

The biggest internationalization that can be identified with Toneelhuis is primarily in the choice of texts and plays that were adapted and performed. Cassiers drew on a large Western repertoire, often switching between American and Western European works. During Cassier's tenure, Toneelhuis's artistic planning consisted of textual theatre and theatre inspired by texts. American plays and novels like Tracy Letts' *August, Osage County* (2007) and William Gaddis's *J R* (1975) were adapted and performed alongside European texts. The makers of Toneelhuis would also tackle various Flemish and Dutch

novels, such as Olympique Dramatique's *Onvoltooid verleden* (2012), based on a 1998 Hugo Claus novel. These texts run next to each other, as if part of one, big, Western repertoire. This choice, however, was not all that iconoclastic to begin with. While the adaptations of novels have been innovative for Flemish textual theatre, combining texts from various cultural traditions is a given in a context where there is so little Flemish repertoire to choose from. Toneelhuis did not build on a "Flemish" repertoire with its textual tradition, as might be identified with NTGent in the first half of the previous decade, but it also did not follow the same cosmopolitan route as KVS. Even before the current collective artistic direction, especially with the relatively limited internationalization, Toneelhuis has employed more of a city institutional dramaturgy aimed at Antwerp's artistic scene with a focus on being an "artist-driven" city-theatre. City institutional dramaturgy is thus in certain ways a more apt term than urban dramaturgy, as the city plays a different role with Toneelhuis than with KVS. While Toneelhuis tries to recognize the multiculturalism of Antwerp and Flanders with the works of makers such as Mokhallad Rasem or the Antigone adaptation *Antigone in Molenbeek* (2020), it is not truly a cosmopolitan or international approach to the theme. This city-local approach is also distinctly present in the production *Risjaard Drei* (2017), where Olympique Dramatique chose a classic repertoire piece, Shakespeare's *Richard the Third* (c. 1592 – 1594), and staged it in the typical Antwerp dialect.

The focus on the development of local artists can also be seen in Toneelhuis's festivals. In previous decades, they developed programs and festivals targeting new productions. Cassiers put this forward as an attempt to "renew" the city-theatre and help new artists find their way to the big stage, similar to KVS's project from 2013 (Coussens 2014; Van der Speeten 2016). With LAFS, Antwerpse Kleppers, and P.U.L.S., the city-theatre has made its own space in the city and created space for the growth of urban and national talents, often new young makers, who have at times become part of the "house-makers" (Jans 2023). These "urban" projects, however, do not infiltrate the city as much as previous KVS projects, once again showing the difference between a more city-local dramaturgy and an urban-cosmopolitan one. Toneelhuis's interaction with the city is not one about cosmopolitanism or even globalization, but is almost nationalistic in its position.

Toneelhuis's innovations and position-taking in the 2010s can also be situated more strongly in the artistic field, and less in the social-political. The biggest innovation of Toneelhuis under Cassiers, compared to traditional repertoire traditions, was its visual focus, partly attributed to Cassiers' prior education in the visual arts. Although this evolution was also found across the Flemish performing arts scene (Jans 2023). Cassiers as an artistic director was focused on the artistic freedom present at his city-theatre, even in the face of economic crisis (Van der Speeten 2014). His importance and reputation are also what made his departure all the more difficult. Guy Cassiers announced his departure ahead of time, but the search for an artistic director was complex. A round of interviews led nowhere, while internal struggles made everything more difficult (Ceulemans 2019). Interestingly, two of the candidates in 2019 are now part of the collective artistic direction. It is no surprise then that negotiating Toneelhuis's position after Cassiers' departure was a difficult process. Cassiers always had the clear mission to make Toneelhuis a house of makers, in contrast with traditional theatres where the artistic director is the most important voice. Interestingly, he was never as much of an opinion-maker as the artistic directors of KVS, yet Cassiers has been as much the face of Toneelhuis as its other artistic directors.

Tindemans points to more artistic reasons for Cassiers' importance for Toneelhuis, arguing that his directing style overpowered his attempts at making Toneelhuis a "house of makers" (2011). Today, with the theatre's new collective artistic direction, internationalization can still be seen as based on their own productions and work, with less international invited artists in comparison with KVS and NTGent. While Toneelhuis would neither program a traditional dramatic canon as much as national theatres historically did nor would it truly reinstate an ensemble, it did significantly work on a new repertoire of Western textual theatre and the development of artistic talent in Antwerp. Cassiers had gathered a group of theatre-makers around him that shared his desire to work with text and adaptations of novels. However, it was never truly about pure repertoire, aside from coproductions with ITA. Even more classic pieces of dramatic texts such as *Augustus ergens op de vlakte* (2014) and adaptations of Flemish (historical) texts such as *Van den Vos* (2013) differ from a traditional concept of a dramatic canon. Under Cassiers' directorship, Toneelhuis was a city-theatre in the sense that

it supported and developed the artistic development of the people and collectives present in its city or brought outside talent to the city. The 2020s might prove crucial for a major change in institutional dramaturgy, but only time will tell how the connections between the city-theatre and the world outside its walls will develop.

Conclusion

In the interplay between internationalization, repertoire, and ensembles, the artistic style and institutional decisions of the director(s) matter greatly. Two of the three city-theatres in Flanders have seen a change in leadership, but only in the case of NTGent did this involve a radical change in institutional dramaturgy. However, in each of these cases, there was little to no true iconoclasm within the performing arts, as each “innovation” has built on a history of the fluid Western repertoire in lieu of a Flemish repertoire and collective creative processes, all of which finds their origins in earlier decades. This situation within the Flemish performing arts scene has allowed city-theatres to easily build their own strategy when it comes to Flemish repertoire and theatre. While all three have talked about breaks with tradition, it is clear that even when the choice was innovative, it was not completely revolutionary or institutionally dangerous. Due to the legacy of the Flemish Wave and the connected theatre collectives, there has not truly been the expectation from the audience and the field in the twenty-first^t century that these institutions develop a “Flemish” or “Belgian” repertoire.

Part of the reason for this situation is also tied to the social-political landscape. In Flanders, it is hard to define the local from the national from the global. As the city-theatres are tied to the Flemish government, they can hardly carry a “national” claim. Similarly, there are no real “national” plays that deal with “civic pride” (Holdsworth 2010, 27). Instead, the identity question is often skirted, except when it is addressed in a highly critical way, with little space for a feeling of the Flemish or Belgian community. The closest a play has come to saying something about a national feeling or identity is Perceval’s *The Sorrow of Belgium* trilogy produced by NTGent, which attempts to show Belgian history, moving from the colonial past to political collaboration during World War 2 to terrorist attacks, but never truly talks about a Belgian identity to feel connected to, only snippets of

its dark history. While this trilogy does not *need* to do it, it is striking that this is the closest the city-theatres have come in the 2010s to a “play-of-the-nation”. Even a full trilogy produced by a city-theatre, historically the places that have safeguarded national identity, does not succeed at displaying this pride. Instead, some city-theatres have tried a more global or cosmopolitan approach, where the city is not connected to a nation, but is connected to its multicultural community (KVS), its global community (NTGent during the second half of the 2010s), or its local artists and city population (NTGent and Toneelhuis during the first half of the 2010s).

When internationalization happens within Flemish city-theatres, it happens in steps, not all at once. The border with the Netherlands is incredibly porous, to such a degree in fact that it hardly registers as “international”, even when it technically is. The next step are the neighboring countries, with a few collaborations with France and a tighter network with Germany, as directors such as Luk Perceval, Johan Simons, and Milo Rau maintain strong connections with German theatre. In the previous century, this was the step that was the most common one to take. Other projects that connected with the city’s many ethnicities were pursued, but it was only in the 2000s and beyond that international collaborations and productions crossed over to other countries. In this regard, the city-theatres lagged behind the dance scene, with the artists of the Flemish Wave crossing oceans quite early. Even today, not every city-theatre continuously connects with other continents. KVS, under Jan Goossens and later Michael De Cock, has more long-term connections with Congo and South America. NTGent has found a broader European scope under the artistic direction of Milo Rau, which was essentially written into their production and artistic process through rules nine and ten of the Ghent Manifesto (Rau 2018). Toneelhuis has a smaller international area, except for the productions of artists like Mokhallad Rasem in the 2010s, whose Iraqi background is present in his work. Each institution and leader has tried to break with traditional theatre, by looking for a new repertoire or disavowing it and replacing ensembles with fluid, collective ways of working. This has left space for internationalization, but not every city-theatre has taken that chance or taken it in the same way.

New artistic direction brings with it new strategies. As Rau's profile was a clearly international one, the new artistic directors of NTGent might opt for other strategies: complementary, different, or revolutionary. The same goes for Flanders' two other city-theatres, where a change in leadership often still means a drastic change in institutional profile. A director, as the name implies, is never just a visitor, but a commander, even when it is a group of commanders. Internationalization strategies are therefore still reliant for the network, artistic and professional ambitions, and the cultural identity of the artistic direction. This, however, also means that actors and artists who are seen as part of the vision, are at risk of losing a certain amount of agency. An institution can carry a lot of power concerning economic stability, allowing artists from abroad to reliably create a piece. This also means they are in a powerful position to use the institution as a negotiation tool. Internationalization as a tool for open collaboration and transcultural exchange can easily be described in too idealistic terms, as the bureaucracy of mobility takes its toll on artists and might only be worth the trouble precisely because of the aura of internationalization. While artistically, the city-theatres have become open ground for experimentation, there is still room for institutional improvements that allow for internationalization to be more than a temporary act within a larger process of bolstering the institution's reputation. Meanwhile, those artists that are asked desire long-term collaborations instead of continually going from one loose project to another (Janssens 2017b).

Near the end of the 2010s, there was an increase in discussions on the sustainability of international travel, with more artists calling for green travel and new guidelines put into place. Eventually, discussions on global travel and internationalization would be halted in 2020 because of the Covid-19 pandemic, after a decade of evolutions and changes. International touring schedules and transnational collaborations have become less evident after a period of intense caution. On the other hand, the frequent online communication during lockdowns have made our world seemingly more global. Two of the three city-theatres also experienced a radical change in leadership, so their international strategies may continue to evolve in different ways. It remains to be seen how the city-theatres in Flanders will develop their international connections and in which directions.

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German Theatres – Flemish Landscapes: Contextualizing Milo Rau’s NTGent Period¹

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Swiss-German theatre-maker Milo Rau is one of contemporary Western European theatre’s most controversial and influential directors. Rau’s political, documentary-inspired theatre has been celebrated since 2008 – the founding of his independent production company, the International Institute of Political Murder – for its fearless political engagement, using different performative lenses to explore the intersection of local and transnational issues such as social justice, migrant rights, diversity, visibility, post- and decoloniality, and better integrating the theatre into the city. While Rau is often looked at as an international director, it is important to remember that he began and has spent most of his career within Germany’s theatre scene.

Germany’s theatre scene is comprised of two separately funded parts, the more project-based, unaffiliated independent scene (*die freie Szene*) and the publicly subsidized sector. While the publicly subsidized sector is also complex in the different theatre houses within it, this article is specifically interested in the highly stratified *Stadt-* and *Staatstheater*, city- and state-theatres. This article employs

the term “public theatre” to reference these German institutions as well as what is in Flemish called *stadstheater*, or city-theatre. The terms *Stadttheater*, *Staatstheater*, and *stadstheater* are used to identify the different funding sources within both scenes, with the German subsidized landscape coming from city or provincial governments, while in Flanders, these institutions are funded by Flanders’ government’s department of culture, youth, and media under the Arts Decree. The Arts Decree, different than Germany’s cultural funding, is responsible for both unaffiliated or independent artists and groups as well as both producing and non-producing institutions. These institutions in Germany and Flanders hold certain historical and cultural statuses. They are stratified institutions where historical statuses and memories intricately connect to the expectations of their audiences, critiques, funding bodies, and government. It is worth noting that Germany’s independent scene – discussed in-depth in Manfred Brauneck’s *Independent Theatre in Contemporary Europe: Structures – Aesthetics – Cultural Policy* (2017) – is extremely diverse both in terms of the theatre and performances produced, the venues that house these performances, as well as the artists working within it. This article is concerned specifically with Germany’s public theatres. Therefore, the diversity it engages with is not based on the German theatre scene as a whole, but on a specific sector of public theatres (*Stadt-* and *Staatstheater*). These institutions operate under pre-determined power structures centered around the hierarchies of the director and, on the highest level, the artistic director and have been historically exclusionary spaces for non-German and German BIPOC artists (Portmann 2023).

It is important to note that Rau began his career on the German festival circuit and smaller performance houses before becoming in-house director at larger public theatres in Zurich and Berlin. However, Rau’s work is firmly rooted in the hierarchies visible in German public theatres and he spent much of his career working to become an artistic director within the subsidized sector. Rau’s production company, the International Institute of Political Murder (officially founded in 2008) was born out of a failed application in late 2006 for the position of artistic director of Dresden’s Festspielhaus Hellerau (Climenhaga 2021, 5). While working in the German-speaking realm’s independent theatre scene (because these structures are visible in the cultural landscapes of Austria and Switzerland’s German-speaking cities like Zurich), Rau’s pro-

duction company operated under the same hierarchical structure as public theatres with Rau as artistic director and his name and political/artistic profile synonymous with that of the production company. By 2018, it was largely public knowledge that Rau was vying to be head of a public theatre (Tobler 2017). However, later that year, much to the surprise of those who expected him to succeed Barbara Frey as artistic director at Schauspielhaus Zurich, Rau was named artistic director of the Flemish city-theatre Nederlands Toneel Gent (NTGent). With this appointment, two interconnected questions emerged: “How would the Swiss-German director adapt to his new cultural and institutional context?” and “How would this new, Flemish context adapt to him?”

The City-Theatre of the Future: Of Manifestos and Futurity

Rau opened NTGent’s 2018/19 season under the moniker “*The City Theatre of the Future / Het stadstheater van de toekomst*”. For this alleged new form of public theatre, Rau and his artistic team published the highly celebrated “Ghent Manifesto” (GM), consisting of ten rules of creation for in-house artists. GM builds on a long historical tradition set into motion at the birth of the German public theatre with Gotthold Lessing’s *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* (1769) in its concern for the “role and function of the theatre in the city and in society” (Bleeker 2023, 112; Giralt 2003, 2; Bagaskara et al. 2022, 197-8). Such a theatre manifesto taps into the manifesto tradition of avant-garde movements in the early twentieth century, what Martin Puchner refers to as manifesto-driven modernism where various groups imported their political desire for revolution and historical rupture into the sphere of art (Puchner 2022, 451). *Ghent Manifesto* itself is heavily influenced by the Danish filmmakers Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg’s “Dogme 95 Manifesto,” itself a reaction against excessive editing in film, a reaction against mainstream films that “counteracted Hollywood’s illusion” (Duplat 2018; Hendrickx, Yakoub & Rau 2018). GM also taps into Flanders’ longstanding manifesto tradition: namely, Hugo Claus, Alex Van Royen, and Carlos Tindemans’ 1968 manifesto, *T68: De toekomst van het theater in Zuid-Nederland* [*T68: The Future of the Theatre in South Holland*]. *T68* also reacts against the then-contemporary non-state of public theatres, calling for the creation of a national, state-subsidized theatre with a

cohesive ensemble, an adaptation-heavy repertoire, and for theatre to regain its connection with “the problems and challenges of our time” (Vanhaesebrouck 2014, 257-60; Tindemans 1995).

For Rau, GM marks a “break with the normal way of doing things,” it identifies a very specific problem with public theatres, while situating himself as an innovator in the tradition of the authors of “Dogme 95” and *T68* (Awde 2018; Gyenge 2009, 69-70). In an article about Rau and NTGent, theatre scholars Peter Boenisch and Lise Sofie Houe (2021) explain, “the Ghent Manifesto did not prescribe a certain aesthetics, but instead sought to challenge institutional infrastructures and engrained modes of how theater is produced” (85). Janine Hauthal (2023) connects GM’s central tenants – “the casting of actors and non-actors (rule seven), collaborative modes of production, and the democratizations of authorship (rules three and four)” – with Rau “step[ping] away from the Western European tradition of working with a fixed local ensemble to realize what he calls ‘global realism’ and a ‘global ensemble’” (744). Looking at GM within a larger history of European theatre manifestos – even in the limited scope provided here – helps us understand Rau’s intentions. Martin Puchner (2022) describes the manifesto as an act of *futurist performativity* “geared towards successfully accomplishing the act that is to create a zero point in history [...] the present act of revolt is the beginning of a new future” (452). The manifesto as a form of response, while a gesture to the future, is rooted in the past. It looks back at both the establishment it responds against and the past manifestos it draws upon, engaging in a process of simultaneous replacement and repetition (Puchner 2006, 258-62). Although GM is significant in its articulation of an institutional critique concerning the exclusionary nature of public theatres (but here we must also question how much Rau really opened NTGent during his tenure), the manifesto does not stand at a “zero point” in Flemish, Belgian, or German theatre history. Instead, it builds on over twenty years of changes and innovations in both countries’ subsidized institutions. Rau uses GM to situate NTGent as a contemporary alternative to the institutional dramaturgy of the European city-theatre model, directly responding and incorporating the socio-political and socio-cultural transformations of globalized existence to both the city and global supply chain. Cultural journalist Matt Trueman (2018) described Rau’s intentions in 2018 as “want[ing] to completely reshape the way his theatre works – if not European theatre as a

whole.” He paraphrases Rau’s description of European *Stadttheater* as “lavishly funded organisations with in-house acting companies playing productions in repertory,” which systemically fail to reflect the multicultural realities of globalized European cities. Again, we see the director positioning both manifesto and theatre as a reaction to a broader, monolithic European city-theatre. However, Rau is not responding to the specific politics and problems of Belgian, French, or Dutch city-theatres, nor those further afield in Scandinavia, Eastern Europe, or the United Kingdom – all institutional structures and funding models with their own systemic problems. Looking at the rules of the manifesto in detail reveals that, more than any other, Rau is responding to the German system: a system with a long, distinct history and significantly more funding (and arguably more cultural status) than other European theatres.

Rau explicitly critiqued his predecessor Johan Simons for running NTGent like a German public theatre and references the German system (and his experiences within it) in GM’s preamble (Hendrickx, Yakoub & Rau 2018; Irmer 2019, 16):

it is an unspoken rule at almost all German city theatres that productions (if at all) are not toured across language borders [...] This also applies to content: The classics of the bourgeois era are always the same [...] Newly developed or even non-European plays, such as non-professional or foreign-language actors, activists or free groups, only appear in side programmes and on studio stages. [...] even if you choose the local model: The city itself is consistently excluded from the work of the “Stadttheater” by a set of implicit rules. (Rau & NTGent 2018)

In contrast, Rau’s ten rules propose that the theatre move away from repertoires of classic texts (rules 3 and 4) and fixed, primarily white ensembles (rules 2, 6, 7) to instead engage with real world conflicts both globally and locally (rules 1, 5, 9) by integrating the community into its productions (rules 2, 6, 7). However, the public theatre is not a monolith. While Rau paints national and city theatres across Europe with the same brush, the concept of a monolithic *Stadttheater*, visible in the GM’s preamble, is a strawman. Vastly different funding and subsidy structures (and massively different

access to funding) across Europe means subsidized theatres look drastically different depending on national and cultural contexts. Rau responds to the highly stratified and established structures and norms of German public theatres, which are for various historical, linguistic, and financial reasons drastically different than Belgian – more specifically Flemish – city-theatres.

City-Theatres and Public Dramaturgies: The Tale of Two Systems

German public theatres have a specific and stratified institutional setting unique to the German-speaking realm. These institutions are recognizable for their large ensembles, repertoires, and charismatic artistic directors, which, when we look at Flemish institutions, are largely absent (Balme 2023, 16; Heskia 2021, 32). Jonas Tinius (2023) notes that German public theatres are symbolic and cultural spaces where the complex relations “between institution, state, and professional artists become visible” (16). These institutions are spaces that bring contemporary social interactions together with ideological and cultural traces of the past in what is still in Germany described in the cultural-historical concept of *Bildung*, which is often translated as cultural education but is more precisely described by Tinius (2024) as a “tradition of critique and self-formation through artistic practice and thought,” or self-cultivation through arts. In a 1998 assessment of German public theatres, Jürgen Hofmann describes German public theatres as such:

The German theatre is a bourgeois and petty bourgeois institution. The support of, care for, subversion of, visits to and the appreciation of theatre have an extraordinary amount to do with image, prestige and cultural status – but also with higher values, humanity, the search for meaning and religion [...] In the German tradition, theatre is a site of poetry more than of spectacle, of literature, rather than performance or theatricality. [...] The programming of contemporary drama is insignificant. Of the ten plays in repertoire only one on average will be a living German-speaking author. (240-1)

While these institutions through their subsidies can produce “outside of commercial market logics and state influence,” this does not mean they are totally free or unregulated in their output. Instead, as Tinius (2015) points out, they are “dependent both on municipal politics and the cultural bourgeoisie” (71-2). While Germany in comparison to many other European nations has what appears to be a comparatively stable funding model, German public theatres exist in a state of perpetual crisis. Institutions across the country continue to be run primarily by middle-aged, male, and white artistic directors “whose leadership can be defined more by artistic performance and charisma than by management skills and entrepreneurial thinking” (Canyürek 2019, 401; Heskia 2021, 33; see Zimmer & Mandel 2021). As of 2019, only 22% of German artistic directors were female, although this is now (as of December 2024) starting to change (Karabulut 2021; Sharifi 2019). Already in 2014, German playwright Ulf Schmidt predicted that, should things remain as they are, public theatres in Germany would die out within the next decade. While in 2024 – looking back on the last decade of crises – of which the 2024 cuts to Berlin’s cultural subsidies is, at the time of writing, just the most recent – public theatres are not dead, they are again in danger. For over thirty years, a debate has raged within the German-speaking realm about these institutions’ structure (Tinius 2015, 71; see Woolf 2021). With the rise of initiatives and organizations such as Die Vielen, Theater.Frauen, Bühnenwatch, and Staub zu Glitzer in recent years, there is a call coming from inside the house to transform the hierarchical system and leadership model, making these public theatres more transparent – which is also reflected in rule 2 of GM (Sharifi 2019).

Because of existing linguistic divisions in Belgium, the concept of a national theatre never really came to fruition. Only after World War II were the theatre groups in Flanders that would become city-theatres given theatres, ensembles, and (politicized) structures (Tindemans 2011). Like German public theatres, Flemish theatres – which are historically, economically, and structurally different from those of French-speaking Wallonia – survive not commercially, but through the support of the Flemish government’s Arts Decree (Van den Dries 1998, 76; Leenknecht 2020). However, in comparison to Germany’s 153 public theatres, Flanders has only three: Brussels’s KVS (Koninklijke Vlaamse Schouwburg), Ghent’s NTGent, and Antwerp’s Toneelhuis. These three institutions have traditionally stood at the

top of Flanders's cultural subsidy pyramid. Although even this can be complicated, bureaucratic, and with its own social and political agenda (Caron 2022; Dewinter, Rutten & Bradt 2020, 96-111; Loots 2019, 274-90). Nowhere is the complicated nature of Flemish subsidization of cultural institutions clearer than Toneelhuis nearly losing its subsidies in 2022 amid governmental cuts and a change in artistic management. The allocation of subsidies for 2023-2027 period was, despite an increase of €25.3 million, fraught, and in spring 2022, one in four Flemish culture houses were in danger of losing their subsidies (Huyghebaert 2022; Van den Broek 2022; Vergeyle 2022). In May 2022, it was announced that Toneelhuis, Flanders' largest city theatre, had received a negative evaluation, placing the theatre in serious jeopardy of losing its government funding with the city of Antwerp unable to provide financial assistance to help the theatre (Verstuyft & Marien 2022; Vergeyle 2022). Ultimately, despite the negative evaluation, it was announced that Toneelhuis would receive €2.6 million annually, still significantly less than either KVS or NTGent's €3.4 million annual subsidy (Tielens 2022; Marien 2022; Paelinck 2022; Van Schoor 2007). Part of the complicated and political nature of Flanders' subsidy model is that the Arts Decree, which is responsible for all of Flanders' cultural funding, has a more open framework than funding for German public theatres², including both short-term and multi-year subsidies – effectively combining what in Germany would be bookmarked for public theatre funding with that of the independent scene (Leenknecht 2021). This matter is further complicated by the uncertain role city-theatres have held in Flanders since the foundation of the first Nationaal Toneel in Antwerp in 1853, bound to a concept of repertoire in a linguistic community without an established canon (Opsomer 1988; Vanhaesebrouck 2010, 466).

German public theatres historically served as *Bildung* institutions linked with language, national identity, and cultural heritage, and continue to be regarded as “structurally immobile, less innovative, and more committed to the preservation of cultural heritage” (Slevogt 2018, 13). Considering the troubled history that links the birth of Flanders' national theatres with nationalist movements and wartime collaboration with National Socialism, Flemish city-theatres – while part of a cultural landscape internationally renowned for artistic diversity – sit tenuously with the social, political, and cultural expectations placed upon such institutions.³ In *Theater der Zeit's* 2012

retrospective on Dutch and Flemish theatre, Karel Vanhaesebrouck (2012) notes Flemish city-theatres “have ceased to be the bourgeois, inaccessible and fixed bastions they once were” (12-13). Ingrid Vranken and Sylvia Botella further explain that Flemish city-theatres “have transformed into open houses with very diverse artistic approaches, organizing themselves in different ways and taking on a unique position towards the changing urban societies in which they are embedded” (Vranken & Botella 2017, 10).⁴ Toneelhuis has opened itself as a producer for a diverse selection of artists. KVS supports an open ensemble of theatre-makers, performers, directors, choreographers, and authors in long-term partnerships with the house. Prior to Rau’s arrival, under the direction of Johan Simons and Wim Opbrouck, NTGent was a house of actors, the “only theatre in Flanders to have an elaborate ensemble of Flemish and Dutch [actors] that is steadfastly used in in-house productions” (10-13).

Rau’s major change to NTGent was the elimination of this ensemble, replacing it with project-based contracts for actors rather than full-time employment (Awde 2018). Rau’s elimination of the ensemble, considering the cultural landscape and Flanders’s other city-theatres is not particularly radical. From 2001 to 2005, KVS under Jan Goossen gradually downsized its former ensemble to free financial and artistic space for collaborations with artists and independent companies (Goossens 2016, 32). In 2006, Toneelhuis, under artistic director of Guy Cassiers also eliminated its actor ensemble in favour of one of in-house creators (Jans 2023, 20). Kristof van Baarle (2022) notes that dissolving ensembles in favor of a short-term, project-based model – the *flexibilization* of the arts – makes actors vulnerable to the precarity, individualism, and competition of neoliberalism, frequently described more positively as creativity, flexibility, and self-organization. Rau’s response to critiques mirrors this positive language, stating: “We are convinced that our model of an open, diverse ensemble gives many more opportunities and freedom to the makers, and the space to actors, than the small and exclusive ensemble we had until 2018” (Ceulemans 2022). Actors and artists are in this process transformed into *culturpreneurs*, which further marginalizes actors from already marginalized communities (Van Baarle 2022, 3; see Loacker 2013). More positively, the elimination of the ensemble can be connected to actionable changes within the system to increase diversity and better represent the demographics of the cities that house these institutions, to become representative

of the heterogeneity of the migratory European city (Boenisch 2022, 72; Boenisch & Houe 2021, 86-7). Considering the concept of a global ensemble, an ensemble representative of the cultural makeup of contemporary cities, Boenisch explains that under Goossens, KVS “turned the city itself into the principal starting point for developing a new mission that would help to reassert the legitimacy of his theatre institution within the culturally, ethnically, and linguistically mixed reality where ‘as a population in this city we share no common past but have to develop a common future’” (Boenisch 2022, 75). Hauthal (2023) suggests that the success of Rau’s multilingual, intermedial, and intercultural NTGent productions is not “altogether unexpected in the Belgian context,” tracing Flemish interest in *migratory aesthetics* back to the multilingual productions of independent theatre and dance groups in the 1990s (e.g., Dito’Dito and Les Ballets du Grand Maghreb, Victoria, Hush Hush Hush, Needcompany) and the subsequent generation of artists and collectives (e.g., Thomas Bellinck and Action Zoo Humain). She highlights how post-millennial artists shifted multilingualism from the mark of a trilingual state to an acknowledgement of Belgium’s complicated historical and colonial intertwinement with Central Africa, as well as a globalized present marked by “(forced) mobility and (post-)migration” (741-48).

Looking at these two systems, we find a theatrical landscape in Flanders more prepared for Rau’s reformatting of NTGent, with changes to the institutional dramaturgies of the region’s city-theatres preceding the Swiss director’s arrival, than German public theatres were for Matthias Lilienthal’s reforms at Münchner Kammerspiele (see Michaels 2021) or Chris Dercon at Berlin’s Volksbühne (see Boenisch 2021) prior to Rau’s arrival in Ghent. However, Rau likes to speak in absolutes, stating in GM’s preamble: “All attempts to open up the model of the city theatre, to combine, national and international modes of production, a continuously cooperating ensemble with openness to guests, have failed because of the implicit limits of the ‘city theatre’ system” (Rau & NTGent 2018). Boenisch and Houe (2021) similarly note Rau “regularly polemicizes [...] against [the] elitist ‘bourgeois theatre’” he works within (86). In his rhetoric, Rau does not consider the history of the Flemish theatrical institution or the differences between it and its German counterpart. His relatively straightforward critique of German public theatres and his institutional response is part of a larger history. Rau entered NTGent at a moment of reformatting within German public theatres,

when, because of the innovations of numerous artists working within them (frequently artists from or connected with migrant and postmigrant communities) spent decades fighting for. The following section explores four of these innovators, whose hard-won successes Rau (and others) builds upon. Often, these institutional changes and innovations are inseparably intertwined with a localized engagement with themes of diversity, inclusion, and migration.

Institutional Agitation: A Postmigrant Theatre of the Future

According to Theater an der Ruhr's (TadR) quasi-manifesto, "Konzzeption" on the theatre's website, by artistic director Roberto Ciulli and his German dramaturg Helmut Schäfer the debate surrounding German public theatres' structure has been ongoing for over thirty years (Tinius 2015, 71). TadR (founded 1988) participated in this debate by instituting a theatre that responded to the public theatres' alienation and bureaucracy (Tinius 2023, 88-9). Under Ciulli – who migrated from Italy in the 1960s – TadR offers an early example of an instituting response to the public theatres' set structures, an alternative flexible enough to adapt to the needs of the work it produced and the artists it housed (Sharifi 2017, 337). Like Rau and NTGent nearly four decades later, TadR can be connected to what would be called *postmigrant* and migratory aesthetics. TadR housed the exiled Roma theatre *Pralipe* and, after the group's dissolution, many of its actors joined Ciulli's ensemble (Tinius 2023, 3). Unlike Rau, Ciulli emphasized a stable ensemble, while similarly encouraging process-based work, touring shows, extra-performance community engagement, transnational exchange, and portraying "other views" (125-7).

TadR is indicative of the institutional shifts and reformatting German public theatres are undergoing, particularly with the ever-increasing place of representing, reflecting, and responding to the immediate crises of the real world in their programming – what Christopher Balme (2023) calls the *postfictional* (16). With this shift, public theatres increasingly incorporate additional, alternative programming, frequently in dialogic formats – lectures, conferences, workshops, interactive installations, and online forums – aimed at knowledge acquisition (25). This alternative programming, which

Ulf Schmidt named “die fünfte Sparte”, makes up around 20% of annual programming and is nearly inseparable from discussions of (post)migration, diversity, and inclusion (Petersen & Nielsen 2021, 2; Balme 2023, 16; Schmidt 2014). However, inviting the outside world into the German theatre is destabilizing for such an established institution and has received significant pushback and criticism from audiences and decision-making bodies (Balme 2023, 28). It is important to understand that this shift to *postfictional* programming fits within a larger history of the institutionalization of socially engaged art within the public theatre’s curatorial turn, transforming theatres into agents of exchange and mediums of communication for larger societal discussions (Orel 2017, 221, 227; Petersen & Nielsen 2021). This history is perhaps most visible in the non-theatrical programming of dramaturg turned artistic director Matthias Lilienthal at the Volksbühne (1992 -1999), Hebbel am Ufer and Theater der Welt Festival (2002-2014), and Münchner Kammerspiele (2015- 2020). Through their non-theatrical programming, Lilienthal and his successors sought to connect theatrical programming to the city by engaging and adding to societal debates (Sellar & Lilienthal 2014, 73).

German public theatres (like Flanders’s three city-theatres) still operate under a *white norm*: (mostly) white actors performing a white, Western canon for (mostly) white audiences (Sharifi 2018, 337; Truman 2018; see Sharifi 2019, Bergmann 2016, Perumal 2013). Although artists of colour and migrant artists have been active in Germany since (at least) the 1960s, until relatively recently they were frequently relegated to the margins of both theatres and theatre studies as irrelevant or amateur (lacking “quality”). Even in 2023, BIPOC artists and actors are underrepresented in public theatre ensembles and internal structures (Sharifi 2023, 79-81). As Azadeh Sharifi (2023) points out, we cannot separate this historical and contemporary underrepresentation and the phenomenon of postmigrant theatre from the “historical, political, and cultural circumstances of Germany in the twenty-first century” (79-90). Specifically, German citizenship law did not change from right of blood to right of soil until 2001. This means that it wasn’t until 2001 that the descendants of the so-called guest workers who re-built the country after WWII were granted citizenship (79). Likewise, it is only in the last two decades – thanks to the efforts of Jewish, Black, migrant, and PoC scholars, artists, and activists – that the conversation around race, racism, and cultural diversity shifted to

consider structural racism as an analytical frame (81; see El-Tayeb 2016, Steyerl & Rodríguez 2003, Alexopoulou 2018).

It is thus no surprise that accompanying the noughties' socio-political shifts, "promoting cultural diversity has been one of the primary focuses of the cultural policy discourse in Germany" (Canyürek 2019, 399). Migration researcher Mark Terkessidis (2008) has pointed to the need for a comprehensive reform of the public theatre system, which includes diversifying the staff, audience, repertoire, and programming (49-50; see Terkessidis 2010, Canyürek 2019). Since the 2010s, one in five Germans fall under the bureaucratic category of migration background (more in cities like Cologne). So when we talk about the transcultural and postmigrant in an institutional frame, we find an explicit, top-down interest in connecting the theatre with the city beyond the white norm (Canyürek 399). The most famous historical example is that of Schauspiel Köln from 2007 to 2013 (see Sharifi 2011). In a heavily publicized project (in retrospect considered a failure), the institution's then-artistic director Karin Beier sought to have the theatre's onstage reality reflect Cologne's social reality, where approximately one third of the population has a migration background. The theatre recruited actors of *Migrationshintergrund* to make up 30 percent of the ensemble and commissioned several plays from *Migrationshintergrund* directors and playwrights (Stewart 2021, 98). However, this initiative was dissolved after a single season (2007/8), and many of the diverse members of the previous season's ensemble saw their contracts terminated. When asked about the de-diversification of the ensemble, Beier responded they would hire those BIPOC actors who were good, but there weren't many who were, which she labelled a "social problem."⁵ Beier is emblematic of an institutional interest in representing heterogeneity in public theatres that can be quickly abandoned when the work proves more difficult than simply placing BIPOC employees into white structures. However, this interest also marks a transitional moment for BIPOC artists, who use such institutional opening to move from the short-term engagements of the independent scene into the long-term commitments of public theatres (Sharifi 2017, 372-374).

Beier's project in Cologne was not unprecedented, building off Turkish-German director Shermin Langhoff's earlier success at Ballhaus Naunynstraße. Langhoff, having previously worked in film and television, began her theatre career in 2006 when she was

commissioned by Matthias Lilienthal at HAU to curate “Beyond Belonging: Migration”, a festival for young Turkish-German artists. Following the festival’s second iteration in 2007 and the founding of Kultursprünge e.V. in 2008, Berlin funded the private performance venue Ballhaus Naunynstraße under Langhoff’s artistic direction. Ballhaus Naunynstraße differs from the public theatres discussed throughout this section, because – while receiving modest government subsidies from the city of Berlin – the theatre acts as a production house and touring venue, without an in-house ensemble (one of the key features of German public theatres). The theatre encouraged young and Turkish-German productions, marking the opening of a space envisioned to operate in “contrast with already established theatres as an exploratory concept with respect to the artists involved and their narratives and aesthetical aspirations” (Sharifi 2018, 495-7; Wilmer 2018, 195). Coining the term postmigrant theatre – a moniker Langhoff brought with her to her next appointment but also remains firmly entrenched in Ballhaus Naunynstraße’s foundational narrative – Ballhaus Naunynstraße became a space to dramatize experiences of migration, displacement, and life in diaspora while critically examining past and present German society (Sharifi 2018, 498-9). This postmigrant project became even more pronounced in 2015 when Langhoff was named artistic director of the Berlin public theatre Maxim Gorki Theater – Germany’s first PoC artistic director (501).

Langhoff’s arrival at Gorki marked a transition for postmigrant theatre in Germany: a move from the *freie Szene* to public theatres, from experimental spaces to one of “high culture” (a placeholder of accepted cultural values), and ultimately to a more permanent home with a less precarious budget (Landry 2021, 10). With Gorki, more marginalized groups became engaged both onstage and on an institutional level. These collaborations – including the founding of an Exile Ensemble in 2016 – brought more BIPOC voices onto the stage, to create their own stories, to define themselves, and to shift the institution away from the hegemony of a white, European canon of texts and representations, and the regulation of BIPOC actors to the roles of refugees, pimps, sex workers, trash collectors, cleaning staff (Thiele 2010, 80). With their *fünfte Sparte*, Gorki also staged activist interventions and engaged in societal debates (Sharifi 2018, 335; Wilmer 2018, 195-6). Like Beier, Langhoff’s theatre directly references the city. The theatre’s “About Us” section of their

website (which reads like a manifesto) proclaims: “Gorki is for the whole city, and that includes everyone who has arrived in the city in the last few decades, whether in search of asylum, whether in exile, whether they be immigrants or simply people who grew up in Berlin” (Gade & Rotondi 2020, 521; Wilmer 2018, 195; Maxim Gorki Theater 2024). This mission includes producing new works, reimagining classics in the globalized present, and furthering the *fünfte Sparte* to better integrate the theatre into the city’s debates. However, major cuts to the budget of Berlin’s vibrant cultural sector announced in late 2024 endangers the progress made by postmigrant artists and institutions, with diversity initiatives often the first to fall victim to cuts as the city cuts 130 million euros from the cultural sector. As Maxim Gorki Theater loses €1,000,000 from an €18,987,000 annual budget, the cover offered by the public theatre has become notably less stable (Nachtkritik 2024).

Spurred on by the Refugee Crisis, since 2015, German public theatres increasingly found themselves engaged with the city’s socio-political shifts. Such shifts and discussions within and around German public theatres are indicative of an interest in representing a migratory and diverse reality. Within this environment, once-acceptable theatre practices were called into question: In 2011, the group Bühnenwatch staged a public protest against the use of blackface (a long-standing and slow to die practice in German theatre) in Michael Thalheimer’s *Unschuld* (Dea Loher) at Deutsches Theater Berlin. This protest ultimately led to a public debate hosted by the theatre about the practice (see Sharifi 2018). With the 2015 Refugee Crisis, public theatres across Germany took a political stand, opening their doors to incoming migrants and founding “Refugees Welcome” projects (see Nachtkritik 2015). However, this momentary opening did not lead to significant changes to the institutions or their policies and these forced migrant actors remain largely limited to documentary performance or modern dance (see Micossé-Aikins & Sharifi 2016, Marschall 2023). Here German stages continue to reproduce an Othering image of the migrant that places “the responsibility to arrive, integrate and assimilate on refugees”, only allows migrant artists to participate in “refugee” projects without the possibility of stable employment, while fundamentally failing to understand racism as a structural issue that transcends political affiliations (Marschall 2023, 565-6). At this historical moment – for better or for worse – Rau was named artistic director of NTGent.

We cannot talk about Rau's NTGent without discussing Lilienthal's 2015 to 2020 tenure at Münchner Kammerspiele. Lilienthal is an influential figure in Rau's theatrical career, attending premieres of early projects such as *City of Change* (2009), participating in talks and talkbacks, and contributing to Rau's 2020 *Why Theatre?* Lilienthal has also been linked to postmigrant theatre (bringing Langhoff into theatre), the diversification of theatre houses, and connecting the theatre with the city. As Hebbel am Ufer's (HAU) artistic director, Lilienthal placed "an emphasis on bringing the local neighbourhood and the sum of diverse cultures into the theatre. For the HAU, this meant first of all the residents of Berlin and/or Kreuzberg with a Turkish or Arabic background" (Stewart 2021, 155). HAU, like Ballhaus Naunynstraße, is not a public theatre in the same stringent and stratified sense as the Kammerspiele. This venue has a much looser structure and, under Lilienthal, operated without a fixed ensemble (156).

At the time of GM's composition, MK's board of directors and city government had turned on Lilienthal and his radical reimagining of the theatre. Lilienthal's Kammerspiele was a stark departure for Munich's audience from the era of his and Rau's common predecessor, Johan Simons. Critics and season ticketholders were immediately dubious of the appointment of someone who was neither a director (rather a dramaturg) nor had ever led an ensemble theatre. Lilienthal moved away from a repertoire of classic texts, brought in actors from Munich's (and Berlin's) *freie Szene* aesthetics into the public theatre, and discounted tickets for younger audience members (Tholl 2015). The controversy around Lilienthal's focused on his apparent relegation of MK's beloved ensemble to a marginal role while featuring new performance rather than text-based works frequently staged by outside groups (Balme 2023, 27). Alongside these new works and artists, Lilienthal – whose *Wohnungen X* interrogated Berlin's changing urban demographics by facilitating audience encounters – curated a series of nonfictional discussions (lectures, artist talks, conferences) and political actions, even tapping into current events with an Open Border Ensemble (Goldmann 2018; see Garde & Mumford 2016).

Conclusion: Migratory Interests and New City-Theatres

In theatres across Germany and Flanders, we see a clear interest in finding theatrical and non-theatrical ways to connect and respond to current events while involving the local community. We again hear traces of this vision in Rau's opening speech for NTGent's 2022/23 season, where the director describes a diverse city-theatre that "brings together names, that are part of the pantheon of Flemish and World theatre with others that are seen for the first time on a stage. [...] creates debates, campaigns, festivals, together with our local and international partners. [...] A] city theatre is [...] the blueprint for an ideal republic in the making – with all its conflicts, its diverse opinions, its dreams and hopes" (Rau 2022, 172-3). The rhetoric of innovation imbued in NTGent's supposed status of a *city-theatre of the future* implies a *city-theatre of the past*. Yet, as Thomas Fabian Eder and James Rowson point out, "innovation in the arts is by no means a new phenomenon," which is not to say that the relationship between institutions and innovations – changes to established ways of doing things within subsidized institutions – is easy (Eder & Rowson 2023, 334-6).

Attempts to innovate the institutional dramaturgy of German public and Flemish city-theatres occur extensively in response to societal conversations concerning issues of migration and mobility as they intertwine with politicized questions of diversity, integration, and inclusion within the institution. Through a variety of – albeit often public-facing – changes to programming, casting, employment, and creation processes, we see subsidized institutions in both places seeking to actively participate in their own political and social agenda (Boenisch 2022, 73). With the implementation of GM, Rau – on an institutional level – applied the socio-political agenda of his previous ten years of work as an independent theatre-maker to NTGent. It is significant that beyond the elimination of the ensemble, GM's other rules – new works over classic texts, collective/collaborative working processes, community engagement, and a touring model – were accepted with little, if any pushback. Both Michael De Cock, artistic director of KVS, and Alexander Devriendt, artistic director of Ontroerend Goed, even voiced that GM (accompanied by Rau's continuous breaking of it) and NTGent's city-theatre model under Rau (one that merges the house's profile with that of its artistic di-

rector) were old-fashioned. De Cock even went so far as to say that Rau's is a *postdramatic repertoire* theatre, with the term repertoire linking Rau to the Flemish conception of German public theatre, a repertoire system, *Repertoirebetrieb* (Ceulemans 2022; Zimmer & Mandel 2021, 2; Mandel 2021, 246). The repertoire is connected to comparatively secure funding that allows for long-term contracts and long creation processes, not to mention notions of a shared national culture, identity, and language. This funding has historically allowed the public theatre to remain outside the precarity of the *freie Szene's* "post-Fordist working modalities and project-based temporalities", which is increasingly present in Flanders' neoliberal city-theatre model of short-term contracts (Tinius 2023, 129-30). The risk that accompanies a shift towards a city-theatre with a contract-based model like at KVS, Toneelhuis, and now NTGent – which does also allow for more diverse and flexible onstage representation – is an exacerbation of neoliberal precarity among actors and artists that mirrors that of Germany's *freie Szene* that can be summarized as *diverse but insecure*. In both Flanders and Germany, we see this danger of compounding precarity where precarious cultural work meets the systemic marginalization of cultural workers.

Public theatres, city-theatres, and many Western European subsidized theatres find themselves taking part in the same discussions of migration and diversity as cities in which migration – in various manifestations – is increasingly the norm. Rau envisioned NTGent as accessing both the security of the repertoire system (drawing in season ticketholders) as well as the freedom and flexibility of the *freie Szene*, mirroring Belgium's diversity by placing an older generation of familiar white, Belgian actors alongside an emergent generation of BIPOC actors.⁶ Looking at the artistic directors named throughout this article, we see an interest in creating space for a more diverse group of actors and better representing the society the theatre finds itself within. However, we also see the difficulties of sustainably institutionalizing these changes, particularly for the white, European directors working within these institutions. In Flanders, Rau did not face the same structural resistance as his predecessors in Germany, artistic directors Rau is certainly aware of, if not inspired by. However, when looked at in context – of which this article only offers a brief snapshot – the institutional changes proposed by *The Ghent Manifesto* and the theatre's moniker of *city-theatre of the future* are, in truth, not radical within the already

structurally diverse Flemish city-theatre landscape. Public theatres in both landscapes find themselves in a paradigm shift, albeit at drastically different paces. As they are, these structures struggle to negotiate their historical mandates of preserving a cultural legacy and their contemporary role of representing their public. So, when we arrive at the elusive question of the city-theatre of the future, the possibilities are diverse, endless, and plural.

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Notes

- 1 This article is based on research for the article "Globalized Theatre | Tokenized Performance: Milo Rau's German Intercultural Theatre in Belgium" published in December 2024 in volume 60, number 4, of *Seminar: A Journal of Germanic Studies*.
- 2 According to a 2018 German cultural financial support, in 2015, state and local authorities in Germany earmarked 3.7 billion euros of general budgetary resources for theatre and music, with 35.7% of total public expenditure going towards culture (Berghausen 2019)
- 3 For more information on the link between the history of Flemish nationalism, National Socialism, and Flemish theatre see Cleen 2013 and Vanhaesebrouck 2010.
- 4 Although it is not the focus of this article, as of 2023, the Flemish cultural sector continues to have significant problems with racism, diversity, and inclusion within its institutions, which it frequently fails to recognize or make meaningful change to address (Joye 2020). There is a more nuanced conversation taking place within the Flemish performance landscape about the interaction between "independent artists" and larger performance houses, and how subsidy distribution often favors larger institutions over smaller companies and artists (see Van Baarle 2022).
- 5 The direct quote from Karin Beier is as follows: "Wir würden jeden [Schauspieler*innen mit Mitgrationshintergrund] engagieren, den wir gut finden! Aber es gibt da nicht so viele. Das ist ein soziales Problem!" (qtd. in Sharifi 2016, 337).
- 6 Eberhard Spreng, "Milo Rau am NTGent. Das 'Stadttheater der Zukunft' im Praxistest," *Deutschlandfunk Kultur*, 29.06.2019, <https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/milo-rau-am-ntgent-das-stadttheater-der-zukunft-im-100.html>.

PORTFOLIO

Anyone: (A) History?

-- Natalie Gielen

Ten years ago, the artists Juan Dominguez, Mette Edvardsen, Alma Söderberg and Sarah Vanhee started dreaming about a way of organizing their artistic practices differently. In 2015 their artist-run structure Anyone started as a subsidized organization. Now it no longer exists. Why does an artistic organization come to an end? What lessons can we draw from its existence? What traces does it leave?

Perspectives

The artist-run organization Anyone no longer exists. But what remains?

I am not merely asking these questions from an objective journalistic perspective. I am writing this text as a cultural worker who has always been interested in alternative ways of (self-)organizing, as an art critic, and as a co-initiator and former employee of Anyone.

Together with artists Juan Dominguez, Mette Edvardsen, Alma Söderberg, and Sarah Vanhee, I started dreaming, thinking, and talking about Anyone in 2013. The artists had asked me to work for them as the structure's coordinator, supporting each of them in the organization of their artistic practices. In 2015 Anyone received structural funding for two years and I was hired full-time. Only a few months later, the artists and I had to start writing a new dossier for funding for 2017–21. We had no other option, because from then on you could only apply for structural funding in Flanders every five years instead of two. This meant, as it does for all small organizations, more pressure to apply for subsidies and a lot of extra work. For Anyone this also meant planning for the longer-term future even though we were just getting started, while also starting to

work out how Manyone could function. It put a lot of pressure on our organization, but we received the structural funding. Manyone was lucky, but at the same time, we did not receive the requested budget amount – lucky but struggling. I left the structure in the summer of 2016 but kept following the company from a distance over the years. When the artists asked me to write a text about the traces Manyone has left behind, I felt we had come full circle. Our reflection on what an artistic structure can be continues, although the context has changed: from dreaming and planning, to working and trying to make it work, to reflecting on what Manyone has meant and still means.

Manyone has held many perspectives as a structure, and so does this text: I'm combining my own reflections with those of the four artists and board members Helga Duchamps and Steven Op de Beeck, and Eva Wilsens, who coordinated Manyone from 2017 to 2023. And of course, there's your perspective, dear reader. What do you make of this history? How do you organize your work? How can we learn from each other?

One body of work

If we consider an organization to be a functioning system, we might as well consider it a body: pumping blood through all the parts, making them pulse, contract, digest, think, and speak. Manyone: a body of work of four artists, supported by a coordinator. Quite a unique body, carrying five hearts within it.

Juan: “I missed a sense of community, having people around you who care about you. Having a structure is very empowering. The commitment was very strong. The principles and the ethics were very good: against isolation and individualism, against a market-driven way of working. Also, the idea of something different, not sharing a brand but a structure, like a scaffold”.

When Manyone first came to life, five hearts were beating for the same ideas and principles. Five people came together to experiment with a different way of organizing the work of four artists.

Mette: “I needed something practical and, at the same time, I wanted to maintain my integrity and freedom”.

In my conversations with Juan, Mette, Alma, and Sarah, they each expressed their enthusiasm for the ideas underlying Manyone. We wanted to make a difference with the way management bureaus were then working—starting from a group of artists instead of the artists being selected by a pre-existing bureaus. We didn’t want to take a percentage from the income of sales and touring—the business model for most artist-run and driven organizations—because then we would fall into a production-driven logic in which more sales means more income. We wanted to build a structure that arose from the needs of the artists themselves without building a company structure around one individual artist. For some, like Berlin-based Juan, who was working more and more in Brussels, and Alma, who had just moved to the city, it was also a chance to further connect with the international community of artists living there. But what was in it for the person who had to coordinate this structure, to support four artists in their work, and to run the organization on a daily basis?

Eva: “I found the idea of working with a small structure and four artists interesting, a nice experiment. And I had a good connection with the artists”.

Eva’s words echo my own enthusiasm when I started to coordinate Manyone. I felt a close affinity with the artists and their practices, and I really liked the idea of experimenting with a different way of (self-)organizing. I collaborated closely with the artists and got to know their way of thinking and working, learned the needs of their artistic practices, worked with diverse, hybrid art forms that were often resistant to a routine way of producing and distributing. What’s not to like about that?

From my previous work experience, I also enjoyed the steep learning curve that comes with working for a very small organization, and I was looking forward to expanding my professional skills.

Togetherness

Juan: “There was the excitement of a new beginning, of finally belonging, of building something together”.

Manyone started out with a strong sense of “togetherness”, as Juan puts it, and great integrity. The artists emphasize how much they appreciated the strengthening aspect of mutual solidarity, belonging to a community instead of being alone with the work, and the exchanges that took place among them.

Sarah: “It’s a privilege to look into someone’s daily creative life and to learn from that”.

As a coordinator, I felt motivated by, as Sarah puts it, “the dedication to the work and one another”. Together, we were learning by doing the work.

Mette: “There’s a place to go to”.

Manyone had an office space that we shared with other artist-run organizations. There, the coordinator met with the artists individually to talk about the work. Juan enjoyed working with one person and building something together over time instead of having to explain his artistic vision and way of working again and again to somebody new.

Most of the time I was alone in our office, but the moments when all five of us met were crucial. We also gathered outside the office, in the living rooms and at the kitchen tables of the artists based in Brussels: Alma, Sarah and Mette. The essence of Manyone not only lay in the individual talks between the coordinator and the artists, or in the office hours during which the coordinator carried out tasks for the artists. The structure felt most alive during the conversations we had together, creating a vibrant space of dialogue where the work could be shared.

An ongoing sharing

Eva: “Doing production work brought me closer to the artists and their universe. It’s important if you spend a lot of time alone behind your laptop”.

For me, as a coordinator, these in-person conversations motivated me to discuss the ethics and Manyone’s way of working. I also agree with Eva when she stresses the importance of doing production work and occasionally travelling with the artists. It is a direct way of learning more about the artists’ daily artistic practices, their way of working and thinking, and their needs.

Juan: “Sometimes I felt like we needed to excuse ourselves from the board, but I liked it very much: they questioned the budget, our ideas, etc.”.

Manyone was blessed with a small, highly committed board. For the artists, this was something new since they previously hadn’t been part of such a structure. The board acted as a critical sounding board. For a small organization, having the support of a group of people who listen carefully is very precious. These were people who challenged the ideas that are on the table, who proposed new ways of thinking and operating, and who were there when needed.

Steven: “I don’t know if the artists realized that I wasn’t just ‘helping out’ as a board member. I found Manyone truly inspiring. Especially in the beginning, when the structure was defining itself. I felt something new was happening”.

Although Manyone wanted to operate as a flexible scaffold structure and not a brand, we started organizing live presentations with art organization Viernulvier at De Vooruit (Ghent), Buda (Kortrijk), Museo Reina Sofía (Madrid), and Skogen (Göteborg). During these events, the four artistic practices and some of the conversations between the artists were shared with an audience. “Putting our practices together felt relevant, it was clear that they were related somehow”, says Juan. The public moments were an interesting exercise in maintaining the artistic and organizational integrity of Manyone, because it opened it up to an audience. The artists curated

their own works, which was a nice opportunity to test things out. Simultaneously, a lot of time and effort was put into clearly communicating the needs of the artists to the collaborators at organizing institutions: resisting the branding of Manyone in communication, emphasizing the different artistic practices while creating a space in which the affinities could organically become visible to audiences. Those common presentations were also an opportunity to present some of the small experiments the artists were exploring within Manyone, particularly as the original focus was not supposed to be on the production of big projects. “There was an agility, an organic approach to the artistic process”, says Sarah about some of the works made possible by Manyone.

The basis for sharing the work was, as Alma puts it, trust.

Alma: “There was trust from the people in Manyone towards my work. In other kinds of organizations, it’s not necessarily a matter of trust, but of “Will this be good enough?” I think Manyone helped me to cultivate this idea of trust in my work”.

How to keep five hearts beating

And yet ...

Alma: “Instead of lightening the workload, Manyone was making it heavier. Having an organization takes energy and time. We underestimated that”.

As a coordinator, I felt perpetually inadequate. Not because I was unqualified for the job, but because I could never be enough, never fulfil the four artists’ very specific and diverse needs. If I focused on one or two artistic projects, there were several others I couldn’t devote the same amount of energy to simultaneously. For our subsidizers, we listed the work that Manyone could potentially carry out for the four artists. This list went on and on, showing the incredible potential of the structure. However, there was a huge workload, and a coordinator only has two hands and a certain amount of time (although I often worked far more than the hours I was paid

for). The coordinator's tasks included: financial management of the structure and project budgets, managing dossiers and reports for the structure and for different projects or development trajectories, preparing board meetings, representing the organization within the professional field, taking care of the mountains of paperwork that come with a legally established not-for-profit association (vzw) in Belgium and with funding by the Flemish Government, planning and production work for the artists, booking travel and accommodation, meetings with the artists, and much more.

Alma: “There was sometimes confusion among our artists: who attended board meetings, who went to meetings with the arts council, etc. This involved some negotiation as to what the artists did, and how much responsibility we assumed. This could be a source of comfort or imbalance”.

The artists had to attend meetings, to discuss the activities of *Man-yone*, the planning, ethics, and common issues, but they also had to meet individually with the coordinator to discuss their artistic plans, needs, dossiers, budgets, etc. Then, of course, there were a lot of meetings to discuss dossiers, reports, board meetings, etc. An artist-run organization, inevitably and by definition, demands a lot of time from the artists. Sometimes, there was also an imbalance there as some of the artists spent more time in Brussels and were therefore more available. Also, only one of the artists spoke Dutch and was thus the only one able to comment on certain texts or attend certain meetings. And then some of the artists had more financial stability and able to spend more time on *Man-yone* than others—even though there was a strong sense of responsibility and togetherness.

Mette: “As a group, you are responsible for the group. It's not about distributing time and effort equally, but about taking care of that time and that responsibility”.

As a group, we were responsible for a lot of administrative and artistic needs without having the means (and thus paid hours!) to fulfil them all. It is important to note within the local context that the administrative workload for small organizations funded by the Flemish Arts Decree is huge.

Helga: “You spend so much time on dossiers and administration that there’s not enough time for the essence of the work. This is something that often comes back in informal conversations with cultural workers from other artist-run organizations”.

There is no difference in the administrative requirements for small and big institutions, creating an imbalance between the work that supports the artists and the work that supports the organization itself. Another time-consuming aspect of *Anyone* was what could be called the downside of an upside: the flexibility of a scaffold structure that is, as Sarah puts it, “a mouldable thing with an empty centre”. When formulated like that, it sounds less like a positive quality. Instead it seems to underline the lack of a firm basis. Without such a basis, the work method needs to be discussed over and over again, which is problematic when there is never enough time to come together for in-depth conversations.

Checks and (im)balances

There was a sense of imbalance in *Anyone* that grew stronger over time: between the ambitions and the means, the lightening of the workload versus the workload growing heavier, between the work being done for some artists and consequently not for others, between the project-driven reality and the development focus of *Anyone*, between artists living in and outside Belgium, and between the artists’ unpaid work and the coordinator’s paid position.

Sarah: “In smaller and artist-run organizations, the difference between the “work” and a paid “job” is often unclear. In that sense, working with a bigger organization can sometimes be a relief, as I can also think of my work as a job. In organizations like *Anyone*, there is simply too much work for the job frame. There’s also very little reward in the work the cultural worker does, because that person also wants to grow”.

The artists didn’t feel less overworked, they weren’t compensated for the work put into the structure, and sometimes they weren’t

even better supported in their work. As a paid coordinator, I felt enormously overworked. Most of the time I was alone behind a desk, unable to fulfil the needs of the artists because of the immense workload. As the only paid worker I felt lonely and perpetually guilty because of the discrepancy between my paid job and the lack of remuneration for the artists. Because of this guilt, I found it hard to set boundaries within my job. This led to frustrations, and not only on my part. What did the artists get out of Manyone as unpaid and overworked members of an organizational structure? What did I get out of Manyone as a paid but overworked coordinator?

As time went by, Manyone was never enough for any of us—or always too much for all of us. Because of a small financial reserve built up over the years, my successor Eva could employ herself on a 4/5 basis and briefly hire a part-time assistant: Cillian O’Neill helped her with productional work and the time-consuming work of booking travel and accommodation. But even with that help, Manyone could not fulfil the needs of the artists. This wasn’t because we were overreaching our ambitions, as Mette emphasizes, we always knew that our potential to-do list was, as is often the case, too long. “We were aware of the fact that not all our needs could be taken care of by Manyone. A to-do list is there to lay the foundations”, Mette explains, “but then you need to prioritize what you want to do with the available resources”. This is not a story about artists without limits, but a story of too few financial means.

Eva: “Back then, I was angry with the subsidizers: how could we do the work with the given amount? We should have become a bigger structure with more employees and a substantial amount of funding”.

Everyone involved agrees that Manyone could have worked with more funding. The coordinator could have been supported by another paid colleague and by a fixed network of freelancers, so that more work could be done properly. That way the never-ceasing demands of projects (and production) could have gone hand in hand with the actual focus of Manyone: development. And of course, the artists could then be paid for the work they put into the structure. Not all properly functioning artist-run organizations put their artists on the payroll, but I think this needs to be an option. Certainly for those artists not substantially employed elsewhere, which is often

the case with (performance) artists who are constantly travelling due to the nature of their work.

Sarah: “Manyone wasn’t given a serious chance as a model in the performing arts field, not artistically, economically, or ideologically. We were lacking the tools to feed an analysis, but economically it could have been an interesting case study: How can we make artist-run structures more generative?”

I believe that more funding and fair pay for all artists and cultural workers involved can solve most of the imbalances. This can create the time and space needed to guarantee the necessary in-depth and transparent conversations about the ways of working, ethics, and the context in which the work occurs on an economic, political, and personal level. There is no magic formula for making an artist-run structure work, but if we want these kinds of structures as a society—going against a production-driven, streamlined, profit-making logic—we need to free up sufficient budgets for them and reduce the administrative workload. Since this is currently not the case, it is no wonder there is such high job turnover in small, artist-run organizations.

The beginning of an ending

Steven: “Manyone was a difficult balancing exercise. If you start weighing up everything, that’s the end of it”.

Juan: “Little by little, we became less generous towards the structure. We wanted to be generous, but it was a dilemma: what are you giving and what are you receiving?”.

Then came the pandemic, two artists moved abroad, the imbalances kept weighing on the structure, and expectations began to differ. And then it was time to start writing a new dossier for structural funding for 2023–27. This not only meant dreaming, but also a lot of hard work: planning, discussing, and coming together.

Sarah: “Anyone was starting to take too much of a toll: mentally, physically, psychologically. When you’ve been too long on a small budget, frustrations start to grow towards a situation instead of towards people, but it still creates tensions”.

Mette: “When things become personal, something gets broken”.

Even though everyone involved in Anyone emphasizes that there were still close affinities and a lot of warmth, both on a personal and artistic level, the artists started thinking about another way of working for the organization before finally deciding to end the structure. “It got too draining”, Alma summarizes. In the end, there were too few means to keep five hearts beating.

But what happens when an organization is no longer there? The faltering of Anyone’s structure says something about the flaws in the larger artistic ecosystem. It says something about the means that a government is willing to free up for organizations that are not just production-based but about experimentation in artistic (self-) organization. In a system that is constantly pushing for output, it is difficult to remain in the invisible process of development and to resist the logic of continuous production. Are there lessons that can be learned within the arts field from Anyone?

Learning from an ending

Eva: “To be together in real-time. That’s the basis”.

Anyone’s strength lay in togetherness, while the lack of time to meet collectively was one of its biggest weaknesses. The artists still cherish the ongoing dialogue, the sharing of their work, the insight into other practices, and the feeling of connection while still working as an individual artist.

The agility of the structure’s scaffold structure, which allowed a more organic approach to artistic processes, is also something everyone still firmly believes in.

Instead of having to start over and over again from the beginning, the artists still firmly believe in the benefits of working with one fixed coordinator in the development of an artistic and practical dialogue. For some, this collaboration with the coordinator was an incentive to organize and structure their work, to better articulate the content and needs of the work. For others, it drove a critical reflection on the work while simultaneously doing it. There was a sense of relief knowing that someone was ‘on top of things’. Other artists learned to better understand how to dose work and manage the workload entailed by certain questions.

Alma: “The combination of coordinator and production assistant works really well for me. It heightens the potential of the structure, makes it more useful, gives it more of a flow. Even though we resisted a continuous production mode, we tried doing things differently—with less focus on the market and more on artistic development”.

Sarah: “Manyone was a learning practice with a steep learning curve: how do I organize myself? It wasn’t an easy process, and I also learned a lot about how I didn’t want to work. It also taught me to respect even more how other people work”.

As a former coordinator, I completely agree that too much experience and knowledge are lost in our arts field because of the lack of continuity in collaborations between artists and cultural workers. At the same time, I learned that one cultural worker is not enough for a group of artists. Even with fair pay for everyone, I think an organization supporting several artists would be more balanced with at least two cultural workers who complement each other in terms of skills, dividing tasks and sharing the many responsibilities that come with supporting a group of artists with diverse practices and needs.

Some advice

- Juan:** “Organize yourself together, share resources and solidarity. But make sure you share the same work ethics and ambitions. Be transparent, communicate a lot, meet a lot”.
- Eva:** “You must be able to think along with the people you work with and for. To be close together. As a cultural worker you have to understand that the organization is not the artistic work but rather supports that work”.
- Alma:** “Be aware of the tremendous involvement that is required, know that a structure doesn’t necessarily lighten the workload. Divide resources and time between different collaborators. Try out different models that maintain equality”.
- Mette:** “You have to think in really practical terms: what do you want the structure to do? Be hands-on. Understand the amount of work an organization takes. See what means you have and what you can do with them. And keep this important question in mind: how can you stay close to what you’re doing?”.
- Sarah:** “Know the amount of time and energy you are willing to invest. Don’t start without discussing things in depth, so that you don’t begin with unclear roles, expectations, and limitations. And appreciate the life lessons, because organizing with other people is extremely precious”.

What remains

What happens to the knowledge built by the artists and cultural workers that were part of *Manyone*? On a personal and professional level, I still cherish the experience of co-initiating *Manyone* and working for the structure. *Manyone* entailed a very steep learning curve for everyone involved, but I’d do it again, even if it was hard. To this day, I still carry with me the lessons I learned during my time working for *Manyone*.

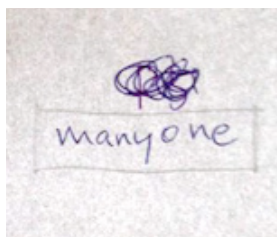
Juan: “Manyone is history, part of what I did. It was real and valuable”.

Alma: “The connections between us, the artists, remain. And I know Manyone still exists as a reference”.

Sarah: “I got to know people, on a human level, and sharing a path is something intimate. And of course, the work remains. The agility in Manyone made a more organic approach possible during the artistic processes of some smaller works”.

Mette: “The togetherness, solidarity, affinities, and sharing—this was real, and an important part of why Manyone was worthwhile. I don’t think of Manyone as a great but unrealistic plan. Our ideas about the structure still make a lot of sense today”.

Apart from the valuable lessons, what remains is this: a cherished experiment with self-organization that still resonates in the way all those involved work and how it fit within the larger artistic field. I hope it inspires other artists and cultural workers to self-organize and that it inspires our policymakers to optimize support for self-organizations.



BLENDER.

Een onstuimige ode aan ontmoeting en experiment: *5 theaterwerkplaatsen, 5 jonge makers en 25 enthousiaste jongeren door de blender*

-- Rune Wittouck

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blender noun [C] (MACHINE)

an electric machine used in the kitchen for breaking down foods or making smooth liquid substances from soft foods and liquids;

blender noun [C] (CREATOR)

a person or company that blends (= combines) different ingredients or types of something to make a product such as wine, tea, or perfume;

blender noun [S] (PROJECT)

a research process of 5 young theatre makers, who enter into a dialogue with each other and with 25 youngsters, organized and supported by 5 theatre workspaces for young people. The project ran from September 2023 to July 2024.

Theaterseizoen 2023-2024 schoot uit de startblokken met een theaterproject dat een weerspiegeling is van hoe het jeugdtheater zich de afgelopen twee decennia emancipeerde. In BLENDER, een samenwerking tussen ManOverboord (Antwerpen), LARF! (Gent), TINT (Brussel), KAAIMAN (Turnhout) en De Figuranten (Menen), kwamen tijdens vijf weekends en een finale vierdaagse in juli 2024 vijf jonge makers, vijftwintig jongeren en vijf theaterhuizen samen om artistiek met elkaar in dialoog te gaan. Elke organisatie werkt al jaren met jongeren en jonge makers binnen de podiumkunsten, ieder met zijn eigen unieke handschrift. Ze sloegen voor het eerst bovenlokaal de handen ineen, gedreven door een gedeelde honger naar meer verbinding met gelijkgestemden uit het theaterlandschap. Vanuit deze unieke samenkomst wilden ze ervaring uitwisselen, elkaar weer hernieuwde energie geven voor de komende jaren, en zo een steviger draagvlak creëren voor theatermaken met en door jongeren. Het proces, het onderzoek en de kruisbestuiving stond centraal in BLENDER. Het doel was om ruimte te creëren voor experiment zonder de stress van het eindproduct, en verrijkende ontmoetingen te faciliteren tussen de betrokken partijen. Elke theaterwerkplaats bracht één jonge maker naar voor. Voor deze eerste editie waren dit Ferre Vuye, Bas Van Hoeck, Kato Cornil, Arthur Decock en Stefan Gota. Via een open oproep werden vervolgens vijftwintig enthousiaste jongeren gesprokkeld om met hen aan de slag te gaan.

Dit artikel kwam tot stand op verzoek van en in nauwe samenwerking met de organisatoren van BLENDER. Vanuit zes korte groepsinterviews met de jongeren, makers en organisatoren, alsook extra documentatie, mailverkeer en enkele bijkomende reflecties zal gereflecteerd worden op hun eerste editie.

Gebruiksaanwijzing (fasen)

Elk weekend was de hele groep te gast bij één van de theaterwerkplaatsen, die hen een werk-, eet- en slaapplek aanbood. Het artistieke proces per weekend omvatte vervolgens telkens vier fases: voeding, werk, presentatie en reflectie. Steeds opnieuw werd min of meer aan datzelfde stappenplan gehouden.

Als **voeding** voor de blender presenteert de jonge maker van het huis een stuk uit eigen artistiek onderzoek, bepaalde vragen of fascina-

ties, als inspiratie voor de hele groep. Elk weekend vormt zich een nieuw, abstract thema met bijhorende vragen als denkkader om vanuit te werken:

In het openingsweekend bracht Ferre Vuye (via LARF!) in Gent het idee van *klimaatmelancholie* naar voor, in lijn met zijn komende voorstelling *Het gemis van wat nog is*, dat die vreemde emotionele toestand van de postmoderne mens en zeker de jongere generaties met een onzekere toekomst voor zich wil onderzoeken. Kato Cornil (via MOB) wilde in het tweede weekend in Antwerpen dan weer het transformerend effect van *schoonheidsidealen* op onze samenleving en het (menselijke) lichaam behandelen. Bas Van Hoeck (via Kaaiman) zou tijdens het derde weekend in Turnhout vervolgens dieper inzoomen op het idee van *grenzen*, de fictieve lijnen op kaarten, verbonden aan culturele verschillen en bepaalde regelgevingen. Arthur Decock (van De Figuranten) nodigde in Menen de deelnemers uit om na te denken over romantische *liefde* en het onmogelijke verlangen om samen te smelten met een andere persoon, naar wat dit verlangen precies is en waarom. En hoe zet je een dergelijk abstract gevoel om op het podium of in een tekst? In het laatste weekend in Brussel stelde Stefan Gota (via TINT) vragen over *vrijheid*. Als je niets anders dan aangeleerd gedrag kent, wat is vrijheid dan?

Vertrekkende vanuit dezelfde inspiratiebron schiet de spreekwoordelijke blender in gang en stuurt in de **werk**-fase de overige vier makers elk een groep jongeren aan om deze voeding verder te onderzoeken, elk op hun eigen manier. Dat kan gaan over spel- of bewegingsimprovisaties, schrijfoefeningen, maar ook het afnemen van straatinterviews, het maken van kostuums of poppen, et cetera. Een constante in deze werkfase is het beginnen met een groepsgesprek over het thema. Terwijl elke groep vervolgens goed aan het werk is, komt de ‘voedende’ maker in deze fase bij elke groep langs en mengt zich zo ook in het proces, als observator of meer actief. Trouw aan de functie van een blender (machine) worden elk weekend de deelnemers opnieuw gemixt, zodat ze in die fase altijd met andere jongeren en makers kunnen samenwerken.

Daarna volgt de **presentatie** waarin het verzameld en verwerkt artistiek materiaal kort met de andere groepen gedeeld wordt, in een ‘toonmoment’ (dat later zou evolueren naar ‘deelmoment’). Op die manier kan iedereen proeven van waarmee de andere groepen





Figure 1. MOB @Stormkop te Antwerpen, (19.11.2023). © Michiel Devijver

bezig waren en wat bij hen ontstond. De verschijningsvormen zijn heel uiteenlopend, van absurde beelden, tot abstracte bewegingen, tot concrete theaterteksten met bijhorende enscenering.

Tot slot is er een gezamenlijke **reflectie**, over wat iedereen vanuit diens positie heeft beleefd, en wat dat deed ten opzichte van het centrale thema. Hoe hebben de anderen het aangepakt? Hebben ze het thema op een andere manier belicht?_

Na de vijf mixer-weekends, gestructureerd volgens dit recept waarin elke maker zijn onderzoeksvraag ter voeding kon voorleggen, volgde een intensievere vierdaagse in Brussel, waar vijf nieuwe groepen werden samengesteld en er rond één centraal thema werd gewerkt. Deze keer werd het thema niet door één maker, maar met iedereen samen gekozen. Het werd 'De bezette stad'. Ze werkten toen voor het eerst naar een finaal en publiekelijk presentatiemoment toe, waarbij het artistieke onderzoek van het hele jaar als voedingsbodem kon dienen en waarbij ook geïnteresseerde externen mochten komen kijken.

Combinaties uitproberen (experimenteren)

Zoals een blender (machine) verleidt om te experimenteren in de keuken, met soms verrassend lekkere resultaten uit bizarre combinaties van ingrediënten, stond ook in BLENDER (project) het **experimenteren** centraal. Zonder te veel verwachtingen over hoe het eindproduct zou gaan smaken, werd er de ruimte gecreëerd om recepten en ingrediënten uit te proberen. Met dezelfde basisingrediënten kon op diverse manieren gewerkt worden.

Dat onderzoek startte vaak vanuit dat eerste gesprek met een vraag zoals 'wat is missen voor jou?' 'Wat mis jij van dingen dichtbij of veraf die er wellicht nog zijn, maar waarvan je weet dat ze straks verdwijnen... of die nu al anders zijn?' En hun gevoel van missen werd dan bijvoorbeeld beeldend onderzocht, of door de ander beschreven in zelfgemaakte teksten, of op andere theatrale manieren in beeld gebracht. Vaak probeerden ze verschillende vormen uit, om er zo achter te komen wat ze samen het sterkste vonden, of waar ze een gemeenschappelijk taal deelden enzoverder. (Soraya, MOB)

Met Bas zijn we de stad ingetrokken, hebben we er in stilte een observatieoefening gedaan, elk met een eigen focus. Wat we zagen, hoorden, roken, voelden zijn we dan gaan opschrijven of filmen, gaan vastleggen. Daarna zijn we opnieuw samengekomen, hebben we dat gedeeld met elkaar en hebben we vanuit dat verzameld materiaal allemaal scènes gemaakt. (Mette, jongere)

Het doorschuifstelsel tussen groepen, makers en huizen zorgde ervoor dat de jongeren doorheen het traject konden proeven van diverse methodes om theater te maken en hun (smaak)palet aan artistieke mogelijkheden te verbreden. Elke nieuwe combinatie van mensen zou iets anders opleveren, en de sfeer, omgeving en voorzettingen van elke nieuwe plek brachten hun eigen unieke dynamiek. Hun comfortzone werd telkens opnieuw uitgedaagd en ze konden kijken naar wat hen smaakte.

Er was minder het idee van dat je op het einde iets mega groots moest neerzetten. We hebben in de weekends vooral onszelf leren kennen en hoe we het liefst werken. (Merel, jongere)

In Menen gebeurde er totaal iets anders op de vloer dan bijvoorbeeld in Antwerpen. De energie van de omgeving had steeds zijn invloed. In Menen was het rustiger en werd het wat 'poëtischer', in Antwerpen werd het juist rauw, speelser en gekker, door de havenomgeving en industrieel sfeer waarin gewerkt werd. (Soraya, MOB)

Ook voor de betrokken makers was deze mix verrijkend. Op hun beurt kwamen ze in aanraking met de diverse aanpakken van hun collega's, met elk hun verschillende genoten opleidingen en achtergronden. Zeker tijdens het weekend van hun eigen onderzoeksvraag, waar hun artistieke onderzoeksvraag of fascinatie door collega's en jongeren onder handen genomen werd. Zo konden ze zien hoe de andere theatermakers werkten met dat thema, vanuit tekst of beeld, vanuit improvisaties op de vloer of observaties en interviews in de stad.

Tijdens het weekend waar ik mijn onderzoeksvraag moest voorstellen, had ik de vrijheid om langs te gaan bij alle groepjes. Dan zie je hoe de anderen daarmee beginnen en het aanpakken, zowel in methode als vanuit welke invalshoek ze aan de slag gaan met het onderwerp. Dat heeft voor mij heel inspirerend gewerkt. Wat Stefan bijvoorbeeld in Turnhout deed... Ik begin meestal met een gesprek, maar toen

was dat gesprekje bij hem redelijk kort en gaf hij direct een tekst om mee op de vloer te gaan. Daarin kan ik mijzelf ook uitdagen. Of de langere bewegingsimprovisaties die Kato doet, liggen minder in mijn manier van werken, maar dat neem je wel mee. (Bas, maker)

Naast die verschillende werkmethodes van de collega's, vielen de diverse invalshoeken op de aangereikte thema's in de smaak. De verschillende associaties en andere focuspunten binnen het thema brachten nieuwe perspectieven binnen. Hoewel elk weekend vanuit één gezamenlijke voeding gewerkt werd, kwamen daar inhoudelijk bij elke groep enorm verschillende dingen uit. Over welke vorm van 'liefde' willen we het hebben? Hoe brengen we 'grenzen' in beeld? Wat betekent 'vrijheid' voor ons? Die inspirerende verscheidenheid creëren vanuit de onderzoeksvraag van de jonge maker was dan ook één van de opzetten van het project.

Ik vond het interessant hoe dat specifieke groepje, die combinatie van mensen, dan net zoiets neerzette. De groepjes vertrokken steeds vanuit eenzelfde thema, maar de uitkomsten waren nooit dezelfde. (Malak, jongere)

Doorheen de eerste drie weekends kwamen er wat patronen naar boven inzake hoe de makers artistiek werken, welke stappen zij telkens opnieuw in hun zoektocht ondergaan. Doen ze eerst een lange brainstorm of gaan ze direct de vloer op? Werken ze vooral vanuit beweging of eerder vanuit theaterteksten? De makers werden daarom vanuit de organiserende werkplaatsen gestimuleerd om nog meer te gaan experimenteren met verschillende methodes, te 'experimenteren met experimenteren' als het waar.

Wij werden door BLENDER uitgedaagd om telkens andere werkwijzen te proberen. Het eerste weekend heb ik volledig vanuit The Viewpoints gewerkt, en het derde weekend had ik enkel en alleen teksten mee om vanuit te vertrekken. (Kato, maker)

Ik had tot nu toe wel geëxperimenteerd, maar altijd op mijn manier. Nu experimenteer ik ook met dat experimenteren. (Stefan, maker)

Het viel op dat gedurende de eerste drie weekends er plots een vaste vorm en ritme rond 'het presenteren' van de zondagmiddag was ontstaan. Schijnbaar was het toonmoment zo belangrijk geworden, of

gaf het zo'n druk, dat de meeste makers al vanaf het eerste moment naar daarnaar toe begonnen te werken. Het experiment en 'het geluid' van de jongeren in dat onderzoek ging daardoor wat verloren. Na een gesprek met zowel de jonge makers als de jonge spelers, hebben we samen wederom het experiment gretig omarmd. (Soraya, MOB)

Als je lang met theater bezig bent, denk je dat je het ongeveer wel weet. Maar dan kom je hier en besef je dat je eigenlijk nog niets hebt gezien. (Sam, jongere)

In lijn met de drang om te experimenteren werd vanaf dat moment ook samen met de jongeren en de makers gekozen om bewust bij de presentatiefase te spreken over 'deelmomenten' in plaats van 'toonmomenten', om de druk om iets kwalitatiefs neer te leggen te verlagen. Dat werd een belangrijke shift in het proces van BLEND-ERs eerste editie. De mindset kon zo opnieuw gesteld worden naar het gewenste experiment. Het applaus na iedere presentatie werd zelfs even in vraag gesteld, maar ze kwam snel spontaan terug als teken van appreciatie voor elkaar.

We kwamen erachter dat zo'n weekend eigenlijk veel te kort is om een performance af te hebben, maar dat dat ook niet per se hetgeen was waar die weekenden om draaiden. (Mette, jongere)

Omdat er geen première in zicht was, of gewerkt moest worden naar een afgewerkte performance, kon er echt tijd genomen worden om breed te zoeken, te experimenteren én te leren experimenteren. Er was plaats om impulsen te volgen, het spelplezier opnieuw op te zoeken, of om net tegen de eigen impulsen in te gaan en zichzelf te pushen het net iets anders te gaan doen.

Soms vind je iets wat makkelijk is om op verder te gaan, maar dan laat je dit even vallen, je laat het even los, om echt te kunnen experimenteren. Dat geeft heel veel ruimte en brengt je altijd weer op nieuwe ideeën. (Stefan, maker)

Dat is anders dan bij een 'eigen' voorstelling, waar je eerder zal zeggen dat iets niet goed genoeg is. Je bent dan veel strenger. Je wil hier (bij BLENDER, red.) ook de energie van de jongeren behouden, dus je volgt de flow. Dat is wel iets anders dan bij de dramaturgie van een voorstelling. (Ferre, maker)



Figure 2. De Figuranten @De Figuranten te Menen, (19.11.2023). © Michiel Devijver

Binnen de podiumkunsten wordt er de laatste jaren toch snel te gericht of eind-productgericht gewerkt. Helaas ook omdat de budgetten, de middelen en werkplaatsen – plekken waar mensen mogen groeien, rijpen en dus ook kunnen falen – steeds minder en minder worden. Je moet al bijna klaar zijn of weten wat je handschrift is op gebied van maken, van regisseren en al helemaal op het gebied van werken met jongeren, dat er geen ruimte meer is voor de zoektocht. Met BLENDER hebben we (de huizen, red.) geprobeerd de kracht van dwalen, vallen en weer opstaan en dus groei, te promoten en weer op de kaart te zetten. Dit is zo'n belangrijke functie van huizen tout court die weer meer ter discussie mag worden gesteld. (Soraya, MOB)

Er was daarom ook een grote hoeveelheid aan dingen die nooit getoond werden. Er waren uren van 'dingen proberen' waar de andere groepjes nooit iets van hebben gezien en enkel in woorden beschreven werden tijdens het gezamenlijk eten. (Sam, jongere)

Hetzelfde gedachtegoed gold bij de publieke presentatie na de finale vierdaagse. Ze zouden wel iets creëren 'met een begin en een eind', maar dat hoefde ook niet 'perfect' te zijn. Voor dat deelmoment werd tijdens het proces bovendien spontaan gekozen om de vijf groepen toch opnieuw samen te brengen en te verweven, om enkele krachtige scènes of beelden aan elkaar te monteren om zo tot één smoothie te komen, in plaats van vijf losse stukken. Dit gaf opnieuw het onvoorspelbare karakter en experimentele doel van BLENDER mooi weer. Deze zaken tonen ook aan dat het recept telkens in vraag gesteld kon worden. Het durven blijven bevragen van de eigen methodieken stond dan ook centraal in dit project.

Wat het BLENDER-project verder bijzonder maakte was dat, naar die inspirerende cocktails onder de makers en jongeren, ook de vijf theaterwerkplaatsen elkaar elk weekend beter leerden kennen door elkaar kritisch te bevragen tijdens tafelgesprekken. Door middel van de zogenaamde Balinth-methode – een gestructureerde intervisiemethodiek met één centrale casus – werd elk weekend een zorgvraag van de ontvangende organisatie besproken.

Tijdens zo'n gesprek met de vijf huizen aan tafel werd bijvoorbeeld gesproken over hoe één van de organisaties kampt met financiële uitdagingen binnen een lopende samenwerking met een cultuurpartner. Doorheen de gestructureerde dialoog werd vervolgens geopperd

om meer autonomie te zoeken en eigen fondsen te werven, terwijl die samenwerking vanwege faciliteiten en zichtbaarheid wel van belang blijft. Zo merkten de organisaties toen ook dat huizen die al geruime tijd gesubsidieerd en andere weer jaren vechten voor structurele erkenning, elkaar konden ondersteunen. Op die manier werden de ‘grotere’ werkplaatsen op hun beurt gewezen op het belang van de wendbaarheid om klein en soms zelfs nomadisch te blijven.

Voor het eerst konden de organisaties – die vaak al jaren bezig zijn met kwalitatief en diepgaand werken met jongeren binnen de podiumkunsten – zo bewust uitbundig en diepgaand hun missies, visies en werkwijzen – hun geheime ingrediënten en huisrecepten – met elkaar delen en elkaar ‘wakker houden’. ‘Jezelf in vraag durven stellen, levert immers altijd groei op,’ was de onderliggende gedachte. Zo bleef het bij BLENDER niet alleen bij uitprobeersels tussen de makers en de deelnemers, maar ging echt iedereen en alles door de blender!

Smaken in evenwicht brengen (werkverhoudingen)

Bij uitprobeersels in een blender (machine) gaat het vaak over het evenwicht vinden in smaken en texturen, wat overheerst of net mooi samenkomt. Je kan wel gaan beginnen te mixen en experimenteren met ingrediënten en recepten, maar wie bepaalt de blend?

In Vlaanderen, Brussel en Nederland is al jarenlang veel ruimte voor professioneel jeugdtheater mét jongeren, sinds pionier Eva Bal (1938-2021) in de jaren zeventig, als de artistiek leider van het toenmalige Speeltheater Gent (tegenwoordig KOPERGIETERY) de bakermat van het professionele theatermaken met en voor kinderen en jongeren. Ze werd geprezen voor haar nieuwe manier van theatermaken met kinderen vanuit improvisatie, dat in de jaren negentig aan populariteit begon te winnen (Van Steenberghe 2010).

De werkverhouding die door deze methode vanuit improvisatie ontstaat tussen de jongeren en de maker kunnen we aanduiden als “semi-directief”, een begrip door socioloog Rudi Laermans, uit een studie van creatieprocessen in de hedendaagse dans in en rond Brussel (Laermans 2013). De semi-directieve werkrelatie houdt kort in dat er samen met de dansers via improvisaties, opdrachten





Figure 3. MOB @Stormkop te Antwerpen, (19.11.2023). © Michiel Devijver

en gesprekken materiaal verzameld wordt, maar de structuur van het creatieve proces en de artistieke eindbeslissingen louter bij de choreograaf liggen. Deze werkvorm zweeft daardoor tussen de sterk verticaal, hiërarchische stijl gekend in het klassiek ballet, en de horizontaal, vlakke samenwerking kenmerkend voor hedendaagse danscollectieven. Datzelfde soort samenwerkingsverband en zijn unieke sociologische dimensies werd intussen ook onderzocht binnen het zogenaamd sociaal-artistiek theater, wat opnieuw een andere kijk op de praktijk gaf (Wittouck 2023). Zonder daar te diep op in te gaan, zouden we kunnen stellen dat ook in het theatermaken met jongeren, en dus in BLENDER, zo'n werkverhouding wordt aangenomen.

Een belangrijk criterium bij het selecteren van jonge makers voor BLENDER was dan ook de goesting hebben om werkelijk samen met jongeren te onderzoeken en hen een serieuze stem te geven in het proces. De centrale functie van de makers is de jongeren tools aanreiken hoe je dat kan doen. Het zijn makers die de energie en de ideeën van de jongeren naar voor willen halen, in dialoog treden, en hen niet enkel gebruiken als uitvoerders van hun eigen ideeën. In zekere zin kunnen we het BLENDER-project linken aan die 'semi-directieve samenwerking', aangezien er vanuit de voeding (fascinaties, vragen, ideeën, ...) en het kader (opdrachten, begeleiding, gesprek, ...) van de jonge, professionele makers actief samen met de jongeren gecreëerd wordt.

Toch bevindt het project vanuit hun specifieke visie op die emancipatie van de jongeren, zich net meer op de horizontale, collectieve kant van het spectrum. De organisatoren van BLENDER stellen namelijk dat het jongerentheater waarin jongeren echt zélf de (mede) makers zijn nog te vaak onderbelicht blijft. Hoewel even legitieme werkvormen, staan jongeren vaak nog te veel op het podium louter als uitvoerders van de ideeën van professionele makers, en zelden als makers zelf. Dat willen de vijf theaterwerkplaatsen in hun eigen werking én in dit nieuwe project veranderen, meer naar de voorgrond brengen. Door de jongeren de verschillende talen van theatermaken aan te reiken en de zoektocht van de makers bloot te leggen, bieden ze een platform waarin het proces voor hen zichtbaar en tastbaar wordt, er daadwerkelijk naar hen geluisterd en nog meer vanuit hun ideeën gewerkt kan worden. Die transparantie activeert en motiveert hen tot dat maken. De emancipatie werd in BLENDER duidelijk doorgetrokken. Anders dan bij het genoemde 'semi-directieve' – in

zijn niet-bestaande strikte zin – was het nemen van (eind)beslissingen en sturing in het BLENDER-proces een collectief gegeven. De begeleidende maker oppert een start of een openingsvraag, maar de jongeren kunnen meebeslissen hoe het vervolgens effectief verloopt. Zij gaven zo niet enkel hun input ‘binnen’ het gegeven kader, maar hebben ook net invloed op dat kader. Wanneer ze eens iets wilden uitproberen, kon dit. Elke maker had min of meer een plan of kader, bepaalde opdrachten, maar was heel flexibel over wat de jongeren willen uitproberen. Rollen worden soms ook omgedraaid, waarbij de maker meespeelt of zich even op de achtergrond houdt, en de jongeren regisseren; wat ook opnieuw dat experimentele karakter mooi weergeeft. Ook de eindbeslissingen over het materiaal lag niet louter bij de maker, zoals wel eerder bij het semi-directieve.

Aan de andere kant kunnen we echter door de specifieke verschillen in verhouding niet hélemaal spreken over effectief ‘collectief werk’, zoals bij volledig professionele theatercollectieven. De dynamiek van een jongerenproject, vaak gepaard gaande met een zeker educatieve meerwaarde, brengt andere sociologische verhoudingen met zich mee. Niet per se qua leeftijdsverschil – want dat was niet altijd zo groot – maar door het verschil in ervaring met theatermaken hadden de jongeren een zekere nood aan sturing door de makers. Hun ‘expertise’ bracht hen op weg. Sommigen jongeren wilden ook niet altijd het initiatief moeten nemen binnen het samenwerken en vonden dan hun comfort in het volgen. Tegelijk was het de taak van de begeleidende maker om te bewaken dat voor jongeren die de ruimte wel willen, maar niet durven te nemen voldoende aandacht is (tevens een dimensie van het semi-directieve). Het grootste ‘onevenwicht’ ging schuil in de voorgaande voorbereiding, informatie over praktische zaken en de verantwoordelijkheden die bij de makers (en de organisatoren) kwamen te liggen. Hoewel de jongeren wel een invloed hadden op het traject, ‘ondergingen’ ze meer, terwijl de makers een sturende rol op zich namen. Bovendien hadden de makers, net als de organiserende partners, een zekere verantwoordelijkheid over de groep jongeren, waaronder enkele minderjarigen. De weekends waren inclusief samen eten en overnachting, wat direct een verdeling in verantwoordelijkheden teweegbrengt. Toen een jongere tijdens het groepsinterview vertelde dat hij doorheen het onderzoeken mee het verloop konden bepalen, vulde de begeleidende, jonge maker van hun groep dan ook lachend maar gemeend aan: “Op de vloer wel, niet in de avond”. Het gaf die specifieke verhouding mooi weer. De





Figure 4. TINT @Zinema te Brussel, (19.11.2023). © Michiel Devijver

makers hebben doorheen het weekend, en al zeker ‘naast de vloer’, een verantwoordelijkheid op het fysiek en mentaal welzijn van de groep. ‘Op de vloer’ is er dan weer een zekere verantwoordelijkheid om het spelplezier te bewaren. Op die manier kunnen we spreken over enige (semi-)directieve dynamiek in de werkverhouding, die doet denken aan wat we kennen in andere kunsteducatieve projecten en jeugdwerkingen, zonder gelijk te spreken over een klassieke docent-leerlingverhouding, maar over ‘coaches’. Daarbij, hoewel de makers zo ook een zekere coachende rol op zich namen, mochten ze doorheen het BLENDER-project wel echt ‘makers’ blijven. Door hun artistieke zoektocht open met de jongeren te delen, ontstond een kruisbestuiving die voor beide partijen artistieke groei bracht.

Ik vond het ook interessant om eens in een groep te zitten die zelf minder initiatief nam, om zo te voelen hoe een maker dit dan probeert te sturen naar een evenwichtige samenwerking. Specifiek kon dit zijn door tijdens improvisaties in het begin meer te sturen tot de groep loskwam, om het dan terug aan de groep te geven en ons deels los te laten. (Sam, jongere)

Bindmiddel van het mengsel (sociale effecten)

Tot slot, BLENDER was naast een artistiek gebeuren een heel sociaal gebeuren: in vijf weekends en een vierdaagse, telkens met eetmomenten en overnachtingen, werkte iedereen nauw samen, in een veilige toch uitdagende setting. Toch moet gesteld worden dat deze sociale component en bijhorende effecten als sociaal contact, zelfvertrouwen, spelplezier en trots, niet vooropgesteld werden als beoogde einddoelen. Het artistieke parcours van de jonge makers en het samen theatermaken vormden de kapstok en de drijfveer van BLENDER, waar die sociale meerwaarde automatisch bij kwam kijken. Zonder een oordeel te vellen over bijvoorbeeld kunsttherapie of projecten waar het sociale aspect wel de drijfveer is, is dit een belangrijk onderscheid om te benoemen bij wat BLENDER voorop had gesteld. Een theaterwerking met ‘andere’ doelgroepen anders dan professioneel opgeleide acteurs hoeven niet in het louter ‘sociale’ circuit te vallen. Eenzelfde misconceptie heerst bij het eerdergenoemde ‘sociaal-artistiek theater’, wiens artistieke legitimiteit nog steeds in vraag wordt gesteld. “Het is via het artistieke dat de voorstelling sociaal wordt, niet omgekeerd. Het is via de liefde voor spelen, be-

wegen en taal dat we dat sociale aspect kunnen creëren,” vertelde regisseur Michaël Vandewalle nog eerder over zijn sociaal-artistieke wijkwerking in Antigone (Kortrijk).⁴

Het sociale volgt uit de professionele en consequente aanpak, de overgave en passie die we steken in het artistieke – het zoekproces van de makers – en niet omgekeerd. Het uitgangspunt is niet theater als middel maar theater als doel, waarbij de sociale aspecten als vanzelf hun werk doen, zeker in zo’n intensief gezamenlijk proces. (Soraya, MOB)

Elk huis blijft daar in de sector toch steeds weer op botsen, toch zeker op beleidsniveau. Het ‘sociaal-artistieke’ wordt soms nog te veel als ‘side-ding’ gezien, als goede tijdsbesteding of therapie. Omdat wij dan met jongeren werken, komen we als organisaties ook vaak wat sneller in de vrije tijdsfeer terecht. (Elke, TINT)

Het slagen van de eerste editie van BLENDER is bij uitstek vooral een belangrijke oproep naar beleidsmakers toe, om meer ruimte te creëren voor dit soort projecten. De gezamenlijke activiteit van het blenden, levert namelijk soms meer op dan de uiteindelijke smaak van de mix.

Besluit (conclusie)

BLENDER bood een diepgaande ervaring van de podiumkunsten, waarbij proces, onderzoek en kruisbestuiving centraal stonden. Het project gaf zowel de jonge makers, de jongeren, als de huizen zelf hernieuwde energie, inspiratie en goesting om te groeien. Het bevorderde ontmoeting en uitwisseling van methodieken, en bood tegelijkertijd de nodige ontwikkelingsruimte aan de jonge makers. Het was bovendien een unieke kans om als organisatie van elkaar te leren. Het werd een unicum in het huidige landschap, een rijke ervaring voor alle betrokken partijen – en voor herhaling vatbaar!

Geciteerde werken

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Author's biographies

Jasper Delbecke is an art scholar whose academic work attests to a curiosity about how the (performing) arts deal with past events and the politics of representation of personal, local, national, or global histories. From this interest, he has a scholarly fascination for innovative forms of documentary theatre, new modes of storytelling, the format of the lecture performance and the conceptualisation of (semi-)fictive exhibitions or museums. Since February 2024, Delbecke has been appointed as doctor-assistant at LUCA School of Arts, the associated Faculty of Arts of KU Leuven. As a member of LUCA's Research Unit *IMAGE*, Delbecke is conducting postdoctoral research on the notion and potential of the "essay exhibition" in his postdoctoral project *Stretching the Essay-Exhibition* (2024 – 2027).

Lily Climenhaga (PhD, University of Alberta/Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, 2021) wrote a dissertation about Milo Rau and the International Institute of Political Murder and is currently completing the FWO-funded post-doctoral project "Institutionalized Resistance: Milo Rau's NTGent Period" (1290323N) at Ghent University. Lily is a dramaturg, researcher, editor, blogger (<https://lostdramaturgininternational.wordpress.com>), and translator.

Natalie Gielen is a member of the editorial board of performing arts magazine *Etcetera*. She also works freelance as an editor and outside eye in the arts. She is co-founder of Letterveld, a loose-fixed writers' collective.

Lena Vercauteren (they/them) is a doctoral researcher at the University of Ghent and the University of Amsterdam, where they research institutional dramaturgy in Flemish and Dutch city-theatres. They are a dramaturg, writer and editor interested in repertoire, textual dramaturgy and intersectionality. They work for *Etcetera*, a Flemish magazine for contemporary theatre and performance, and *Kluger Hans*, a Dutch-speaking literary magazine.

Rune Wittouck

Rune Wittouck is a dramaturge and a teacher of theatre. In 2023, he graduated in theatre studies at UGent with a thesis on the semi-directive work relationship within socio-artistic theatre, after which he obtained his educational master's degree at KULeuven.

Forthcoming Issues:

Documenta XLIII (1) - Milo Rau: Comparative Lenses -
Summer 2025

Documenta XLIII (2) - Natural Contract Lab With Zenne
River - Winter 2025