

Operatie Muziektheater - Münster: 7 & 8 december 2011 an exchange between Dutch and German professionals in music theatre

On December 7 all participants arrived, visited *TIMESHIFT... oder Die Zeit ist ein Vogel* by Fonds Experimentelles Musiktheater (NRW) (GER) in Städtische Bühnen and had dinner together. *Project Wildeman* by Project Wildeman / PmP (NL) was performed on the 8th at 14.00 hr in Städtische Bühnen and the show *BANG* by De Veenfabriek (NL) was seen in Enschede on the night of December 8. This report focuses on the meeting on December 8.

1) Welcome by

- **Lex Bohlmeijer**, moderator of the day.
- **Bernd Scholtz**, head press and cultural department of the Consulate General of the Netherlands, Düsseldorf
- **Wolfgang Quetes**, director of the Städtische Bühnen Münster, who gives a short introduction about the history and the function of this theatre.

2) Short presentations by all participants

- **Annemarie Reitsma**, director of the **Kameroperahuis** in Zwolle (NL)
The Kameroperahuis is a production house for young makers (directors, composers, stagedesigners etc) who can experiment and create new productions in a small setting. The production house provides coaching and productional support. Video: *Penthesilea / Het vlot van Medusa / La Princesse Jaune*
- **Flora Verbrugge**, artistic director of **Sonnevanck**: youth theatre company in Enschede (NL)
Produces 3 to 4 music theatre shows a year for young people/children, by adults, with new texts and compositions. Many of her plays have been restaged in Germany, for example in Oldenburg.
- **Thomas Myrmel**, **composer**, Amsterdam (NL)
Works and has worked with several music theatre directors. Video: *A Chair on two legs*, about tightrope walking, with professionals and an amateur choir, directed by Matthias Mooij.
- **Thomas Witzman**, **architect and composer** (GER)
Thomas does a short inspiring percussion improvisation using the speaker's desk.
- **Dörte Wolter** of **Novoflot**, Berlin (GER)
This young independant opera company just finished a trilogy about emotions, entitled *Was wir fühlen* ("How we feel"). Their next production will be *La Vie Parisienne* by Offenbach, in 2011. Video: photo's of the trilogy.
- **Guy Coolen**, artistic director at **Operadagen Rotterdam** (NL)
Rotterdam has no operahouse; instead the city wanted to create an opera festival. Since its first edition in 2009 it has developed as an international festival that presents opera, music theatre and more. Nearly all cultural organisations in Rotterdam are involved and everybody sees the advantages of participating in this festival.
- **Ina Karr**, head of artistic staff at **Oldenburgisches Staatstheater**, Oldenburg (GER)
The theatre presents opera, drama, dance, theatre for children and youth, classical concerts at four different venues. Contemporary music theatre is programmed in all four halls. The theatre coproduces with for example Sonnevanck to present youth music theatre. She organizes a symposium on music theatre in 2012, from 22 till 24 November.
- **Bjorn Jansen** of **Project Wildeman**, Amsterdam (NL)
Bjorn works at the Paradiso Melkweg Productionhouse (PmP). PmP creates productions on the edge of (pop)music, theatre and multimedia. A showcase of 30 minutes of the *Project Wildeman*, one of the productions of PmP, will be presented live in the afternoon.
- **Katriena Wiersma** of **Orkater**, Amsterdam (NL)
Orkater ('Orchestra and Theatre') is one of the oldest music theatre companies (over 40 years) in the Netherlands. The company presents about seven new productions a year. Also the organization coaches young makers in creating new productions. Video: *Pjotr*, music theatre for youth, on location.
- **Oliver Proske** of **Nico and the Navigators**, Berlin (GER)
Founded in 1998 by artistic director Nicola Hümpel and setdesigner Proske. Since 2008 the company is focusing more on making music theatre, with *Anæsthesia* in 2009 and Händel's *Orlando*. In 2011 the ensemble teamed up with conductor Nicholas Jenkins, 12 singers and 3 pianists to take on Rossini's *Petite messe solennelle* (Video).
- **Leo Dijsselbloem** of **MCN** (Music Center the Netherlands), Amsterdam (NL)

MCN is the Dutch national institute for all professional musicians and all music genres. Its main objectives are: information, promotion and documentation. The organisation also helps beginning artists or composers with their career. Due to the budget cuts of the Dutch government the institution will no longer exist after 2012.

- **Laura Berman** of the **Bregenzer Festspiele/Kunst aus der Zeit** (AUSTRIA)

The Bregenzer Festspiele present a wide variety of musical and theatrical events in several venues. In 'Kunst aus der Zeit' it produces every year a music theatre production with focus on contemporary music. Next summer a project with Ben Frost. From 2012 Laura will also be working in Berlin as an agent/'enabler' for music theatre.

- **Krystian Lada**, dramaturge of **Studio Minailo**, Amsterdam (NL).

Studio Minailo creates music theatre productions with the focus on social networks. For example Lada and artistic director Sjaron Minailo created *Container*, with soprano Elena Vink, a performance including film, music and visual arts. Video: *Dead Class* inspired by Kantor's *The Dead Class*. (Composition: Benedict Weisser)

- **Nico Schaafsma**, head of the music theatre department at the **Fonds Podiumkunsten**, The Hague (NL).

The national fund for all professional performing arts (dance, theatre, music theatre, music and festivals) in the Netherlands annually distributes a budget of around € 60 million of public money. Due to the cuts of the government this budget will be reduced to around € 40 million in 2013.

- **Lotte de Beer**, director at **Nieuw Nederlands Opera Front**, Amsterdam (NL)

The ambition of the 'New Dutch Opera Front' is to create opera by a new generation of singers, makers and musical leaders for a new (young) audience. This turns out to be a challenging task. The next production will be an adaptation of *La Bohème*. Lotte works also in German opera houses where she gets the opportunity to learn (more about) the profession of directing opera on a bigger scale.

- **Anja Krans**, senior programme manager of **TIN** (Theater Instituut Nederland), Amsterdam (NL)

TIN is the Dutch national service organization for all professional theatre and dance makers. The organization documents, supports and promotes Dutch theatre, both in the Netherlands and abroad. Anja is also project leader of the Matching Fund, a fund to stimulate collaboration between theatre makers from NRW and NL. Due to the budget cuts of the Dutch government the institution will no longer exist after 2012.

- **Romain Bischoff**, artistic director of **VocaalLAB**, Amsterdam (NL)

This innovative music theatre company creates productions with other partners, and with an 'out-of-the-box' mentality. With a high artistic level they want to reach a new (young) audience. With ISH, a Dutch urban dance company, they created *MonteverdiISH*, based on the opera *Poppea* of Monteverdi which attracted a large mixed audience. Video: *MonteverdiISH*.

- **Uwe Sommer**, dramaturge Musiktheater und Konzert of **Theater Bielefeld** (GER)

The Bielefeld Theatre presents 5 or 6 opera's each season. The theatre has no small hall, so it is difficult to program youth theatre and contemporary opera.

- **Ton Fiere**, managing director of **M-Lab**, Amsterdam (NL)

M-Lab is a 'laboratory' for musical theater. M-Lab focuses specifically on developing new Dutch musical repertoire in collaboration with writers and composers. It is a platform for wellknown, but also for beginning artists and groups. M-Lab produces about seven productions a year and is also a small venue. Video: *Spring Awakening*, a musical based on *Frühlingserwachen* by Wedekind.

- **Volker Hormann**, manager of **Kaleidoskop**, Berlin (GER)

This young Berlin string ensemble started as a chamber orchestra and now wants to break with traditional musical forms, for example by organizing 'guerilla performances' in the streets. They want to produce with other partners, from other disciplines. Video: *Polytop für Yannis Xenakis*

- **Yvonne Franquinet**, artistic director of **Festival Grenswerk**, Enschede (NL)

Festival Grenswerk is a new festival in Enschede that includes 6 partners of performing arts and 6 partners of visual arts. The main goal was to make the festival visible and to involve the inhabitants of the city as much as possible. In a huge "Lego-church" many (not only artistic) events took place during the festival. Also a performance was created based on texts by 270 inhabitants with different nationalities and music composed to each text.

- **Tobias Kokkelmans**, dramaturge at **RO theater**, Rotterdam (NL). Also a journalist, Tobias publishes in TM (Theatermaker) about music theatre.

3) Presentation by **Ursula Sinnreich** of the **Kulturstiftung NRW** and **Christian Esch** of **NRW KULTURsekretariat**

In 2005 the NRW KULTURsekretariat and the Kunststiftung NRW have founded the "Fonds Experimentelles Musiktheater" with the objective to bring together theatre makers from the

independent scene with the big opera houses in North Rhine-Westphalia and to develop new music theatre productions. By the end of 2011 nine world premieres have been realized, with the full spectrum of different aesthetics, formats and modes of experimental music theatre - with many young, some still relatively unknown composers, writers and directors. Together with the venues NRW selects ideas for productions in which music, language and space are integrated. The budget is € 80,000, financed by the National Lottery. The operahouses supply infrastructure, such as stage technology, equipment as well as workshops and local public relations. The KULTURsekretariat provides dramaturgical and organizational support.

The "Fonds Neues Musiktheater" promotes contemporary music and dance productions at the operahouses in North Rhine-Westphalia. In order to counterpoint the classical music repertoire the NRW KULTURsekretariat subsidizes the theatres with an annual amount of € 250,000.

Video: a.o. *Moses and Aaron* (Ruhr Triennale) / *Bathseba* : Kunststiftung NRW productions.

4) Keynote on German music theatre by Laura Berman

In the second half of the twentieth century a gradual break down of borders in music and music theatre in Germany can be observed on many levels in a kind of dialectic process. It is important however, to understand that in New Music the border between the German-speaking countries and the rest of Europe could still be strongly felt into the 90s – and that those working in this field in Germany tend to have different criteria in judging music from colleagues in other countries. This border therefore, can still be felt. Where did the borders break down? Between musical genres (influence of improvised music scene and electronica), between performing arts genres (Neues Musiktheater-Kagel, Heiner Goebbels, increased use of music and vocalizing, live DJs in dance and drama, currently: changes in programming, increased presence of music theatre in festivals, off venues, municipal and state theatres, as projects of new music ensembles). Institutions with opportunities for creators of music theatre from outside Germany: Fonds Experimentelles Musiktheater, Projekte der Bundeskulturstiftung, Hauptstadtkulturfonds, Schloss Solitude, ITI competition Music Theatre NOW.

5) Keynote on Dutch music theatre by Tobias Kokkelmans

Tobias talks about the emancipation of Dutch performing arts and music theatre in particular. But where is the soul of music theatre? After 1950 the Holland Festival brought exotic performances that were crucial in emancipating the old ethics and aesthetics. In the sixties an emancipation from the established theatre companies and orchestra's ('actie tomaat' and 'actie notenkraak') followed. The seventies, not only the authentic approach towards baroque music but also a new development in music theatre by De Appel (Erik Vos), OT and Orkater emerged. In the eighties Hollandia (Johan Simons/Paul Koek) helped the emancipation by moving from venues to site specific performances, while in Belgium people like Jan Fabre, Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker, Alain Platel and Josse de Pauw came up. After 1990 music theatre has emancipated and is incorporated in all forms of performing art, like opera and dance. In the 21st century musical is also being emancipated by M-Lab and a real infrastructure for music theatre is established in The Netherlands by Fonds Podiumkunsten, Operadagen, Yo Festival, Reisopera and others. Tobias concludes his speech with some questions. The Dutch music theatre scene is largely formed by independent groups. Given the fact that these will have to knock on doors of bigger institutions in the near future, does this mean that they have to give up their independence? And what could the Dutch learn from the German situation in this respect? One could also argue that 'the soul', the essence of Dutch music theatre, in the second half of the 20th century proved to be its emancipating force, in terms of content, form and methodology as well as audience approach. However its experimental achievements were institutionalized and conventionalized and 'music theatre' has become a household name for many genres, ranging from avant-garde to sheer entertainment. This blurring of boundaries contributed to a loss of clear discourse on what music theatre actually stands for. Did the music theatre lose its teeth, its emancipating force, its 'soul'?

6) Discussion

Lex Bohlmeijer opens the discussion by mentioning 4 significant themes he perceived in the presentations:

The tendency to seek for (any form of) collaboration

- Guy Coolen explains how he managed to involve all the institutions of Rotterdam in the Operadagen Festival. Important is that every partner is contributing financially and that all the marketers work together. Also the whole city is behind the festival. Because of the success he has gained more artistic freedom in programming.

- A good coproduction has to start with an artistic connection or even friendship; it is personal.
- If you come from a different tradition it can take time to develop a good collaboration; but you can always learn from each other.
- Sometimes, if an independent group wants to work with a big house, it has to bring its own money; this can be problematic.

The need to reach and address a new (and young) audience

- A production should always be of a high artistic level; the age of the audience is not important.
- Audience development is important, but we should not only focus on young people
- *MonteverdiSH* by Ish and VocaalLAB reached young and older audiences, because of the successful combination of Monteverdi and hip-hop
- Each venue should have an education department
- You have to build a relationship with your audience (e.g. in Belgium venues have babysitters for young parents)

The mentality needed to make music theatre

- There are many ways of making music theatre; we should embrace this diversity.
- It is crucial to 'leave space for the other' in the process of music theatre making ("1-1 = 2")
- Sometimes you need to battle about issues in the process; you even need to battle with the audience.
- We should accept that making (music) theatre is a fragile process.

The loss of discourse in the field

As Laura and Tobias pointed out, music theatre doesn't need to emancipate any more: it is a successful and 'booming' discipline. Therefore there is a loss of discourse.

So "what is the soul of music theatre today?" Lex asks.

- Not only focus on form.
- You have to put the music in focus.
- You have to know and to stand by what you make! Making concessions to the audience is not the right way.
- Follow your own artistic intuition; make what you think important, but you have to communicate.

7) Closing

This was the 6th and last meeting of *Operatie Muziektheater*. Christian Esch thinks it is worth continuing the exchange. He and Anja Krans will see if the Matching Fund of TIN and NRW KULTURsekretariat could finance this. Lex considers this a promise.

Nico Schaafsma thanks all participants for the openminded and fruitful meeting. He hopes the exchange will continue. The funding and form will have to take shape but the content is definitely there.