

ETC European Theatre Academy 5 - 9 July 2017, Avignon

Introduction

July in the South of France: the heat begins to intensify as the small medieval city of Avignon prepares for the 71st incarnation of its annual Festival d'Avignon, which showcases many acclaimed international artists and companies. The old town's peripheries swell with crowds and innumerable posters advertising shows, while new theatre venues are just springing to life as part of the main Festival as well as the Festival OFF – a fringe accompaniment to the main international affair.

Here lay ripe opportunity for new encounters, for spaces to be formed in which artists and audiences might share a feeling of community, and a chance to learn more about the world we live in. What better setting could we have asked for to gather as a group of theatre practitioners from different parts of Europe (and beyond) to discuss the processes of international collaboration? On the eve of the Festival's opening, participants and facilitators met in the courtyard of the restaurant numero 75 to take part in the European Theatre Academy – a four day programme of talks and workshops aimed with the overarching theme of International Collaboration and Theatre Management. Among us were participants from Germany, Belgium, Romania, Croatia, Austria, China, Italy, Australia and the UK.



Group discussion over the ETC welcome dinner in the Restaurant numero 75 courtyard

Getting collaborative

Following the welcome dinner and an introduction to the European Theatre Convention, we reconvened the next day in the salle de réunion 2, part of the ISTS (Institut Superior des Techniques du Spectacle) overlooking the Cloître Saint-Louis, home to the Festival's box office and an open air performance space for free talks and debates that run throughout three-week programme.

During the course of the next few days a movement emerged that would describe an important notion when thinking about collaboration; a line being traced from introspection towards a more outward-looking vantage. The first two sessions of the academy began by tackling the subjects of International Collaboration and Coproduction head on, with talks from ETC President and Vice-presidents, Dubraka Vrgoc and Serge Rangoni. Each gave an insight on their personal experience working within their own countries and the European theatre landscape more widely. For Dubraka, this centred on expanding the contexts in which Croatian theatres and artists could engage with a wider artistic community. A key example was demonstrated from her initial work at the National Theatre of Croatia, in which she saw the historical institution shift from its previous attachment to an "iron repertoire," by literally opening the theatre out onto the surrounding square with outdoor performances involving other nearby cultural and educational organisations.

Going on to comment more specifically on the process of making work, Dubravka then related her experience of facilitating opera co-productions in Zagreb. She described the process of coproduction as being like that of a relationship between two people (even if there are in fact more than two people involved!); it begins with a spark – a certain chemistry that unites artists/directors/producers through an urge to create something together. This then develops over the course of time into something more long-term...there are power dynamics to consider, as well as finances, and barriers to overcome such as communicating long distance, possibly in a second or third language. A gradually unfolding process, then, which will inevitably throw up challenges – as well as, perhaps, other seeds of inspiration – before the project finds its eventual realisation in rehearsal and performance. As a result, the final production/performance unveils not only the rehearsal process, but the longer collaborative effort which preceded it.



The glass doors leading into Salle de réunions 2; inside participants set up for a presentation



A sense of difference – diversifying perspectives

ETC vice president Serge Rangoni then elaborated on his own experience as a theatremaker in Belgium, and in particular taking his practice as an actor and director with a touring company to working in the more institutional setting of the Theatre du Liege. Serge suggested the marked differences between the types of theatres that exist in Belgium alone, divided between French and Flemish-speaking audiences, finding that the French-speaking part of the country was especially attached to a more conventional style of theatre. This led to an interesting question: How do you go about changing this focus on self-reflection, especially in programming of cultural institutions? Can you alter the perspective of a building and its community to have a greater European (or more worldwide) view and ambition? By comparison, the hierarchical structure of theatre arts in France made evident by different tiers of artist-directors, companies and even styles of performance, shows that there is still a need to diversify/democratise much of Western Europe's politics of theatre-making and presentation. Embracing a sense of difference could be key here, with collaboration and communication as a means of doing so. But how to communicate effectively when working with co-producers in another country, perhaps speaking a different language? As Serge suggested, one approach is to assume the place of the interlocutor when engaging in decision-making together. He added to this a call for 'real' conversation above all else, wherever possible, especially when email or phone communication is not enough.

We were fortunate to then be joined by several guest speakers over the course of the four days in Avignon. The first was Marc-Hector Vanderhagen, from the Creative Europe Programme, part of the EU Commission, talking through the ins and outs of financing collaboration through the EU's funding strands for 'cooperation' projects. In fact, one of the key issues, particularly for young theatre-makers, is where and how artistic collaboration might be supported. Marc-Hector gave an overview on how the Creative Europe programme operates, and then detailing the more complexly layered process that an application for EU project funding is subject to – the selection criteria, tied in with priorities of the European Commission (such as cross-border mobility, developing audiences and building capacity), and assessing what the *European* value of the work may be. He also informed us of the plans for the upcoming 2018 European Year of Cultural Heritage with an extra budget that will see a call for more projects to be funded under these strands.

The end of the first afternoon then culminated in further discussion about how best to use the pan-European networks and residencies, many including the ETC of which we have now become a part as a resource for developing international connections. This was rounded off with the coordinators pointing participants towards the ETC's tips on successful international collaboration, which would be integral to an exercise prepared for the following day's session.

Performance 1: Antigone by Satoshi Miyagi, presented at Cour d'honneur du Palais des Papes

Another key part of the group activity was attending several festival shows together. Late on the Thursday evening we made our way to the Palais des Papes, for an aesthetically stunning version of Sophocles' play *Antigone*, in a new rendering presented by Japanese director Satoshi Miyagi. The stage of the Cour d'honneur, suitably right at the heart of Avignon, provided a grand setting for this very sensory piece, with a dark pool of water across the entirety of the stage across which the members of Miyagi's company appeared to float. The production focused on divided subjectivity through movement and voice, as well as incorporating shadow play and an impressive percussion orchestra that enveloped the last part of the two-hour show.

From local to global: where are you coming from?

The following days gave way to three more engaging speakers covering various perspectives across European theatre: Tobias Velt from the Schaubuhne (via a filmed presentation), as well as Christian Holtzhauer from Kunstfest Weimar and Giles Croft from Nottingham Playhouse. Within each of their presentations they reflected on the themes of going from local to global, and back again. This was a particularly strong theme in Tobias' overview of the Schaubuhne's work on tour, where the theatre becomes a product of its local environment and people, both where it originates and the places to which it travels. In turn, the artistic programming of the theatre responds to audience demand, and as a result some productions stay in repertoire for several years, travelling to other countries and returning home to Germany. He showed footage from the Schaubuhne's production of 'An Enemy of the People [Ein Volksfiend]', directed by Thomas Ostermeier – which toured worldwide – a show whose aims were specifically to adapt a modern classic play by Ibsen, in order to tell stories of human beings *in these*

times. This was especially poignant when the play and company toured to Chile, where its open forum for debate at the end of the play sparked highly charged responses from members of the audience, as they seized an opportunity to have their voices amplified within an institutional structure.



A filmed encounter with Tobias Velt from Schaubuhne theatre giving his presentation on 'Going Local: Schaubuhne on Tour'

Maintaining this 'sense of difference' and a diverse perspective on how to 'do' theatre in other countries was likewise addressed by Christian and Giles, with Giles' talk focusing on access the theatre market in the UK during times of change and some of the challenges that face both UK and other European theatre-makers wishing to present work within a post-Brexit Britain. Again, the emphasis remains on what theatre-makers and programmers value; currently in British theatre there is a strong push towards inwardly diversifying work forces, performers and funding streams, with a greater improvement on access for disabled or socially disadvantaged artists and audiences. At times, however, this may be at the expense of less investment in artistic experimentation.

Christian likewise remarked on a dichotomy that exists between the local and the international, between insularity and looking outward to what others are doing. He posed the question: where are you coming from, not just artistically speaking, but also geographically? And how does this effect the kind of work you wish to create? For him as an artistic director, this has been a crucial thought in the context of programming future work for the Weimar Arts festival.

Another feature of the group's shared experience was to present individual work and projects for collaboration. The structure of presentations was fluid throughout the first two days, with discussion of participants' different work contexts coming in at various points relating to other themes or points of discussions during the speakers' presentations. Each participant reflected on the context in which they have been working to date, as well as introducing to the group individual projects for feedback on how they might be best developed for either co-production or collaboration. These included past and future productions of shows, an artists' network, and a festival for young theatre directors.

Performance 2: Scena Madre by Ambra Sentatore, presented at Lycee Mistral

The second of the group theatre outings took us to a more intimate venue, one of the city's *lycee* gymnasiums (college sports hall), which had temporarily transformed into a festival space. *Scena Madre* was a clever piece of

contemporary dance performance that touched on ideas of repetition and habitual movement, and a scene that gradually grows out of another, and another, rehearsed and revisited continuously. The smaller ensemble of six or seven dancers created a hypnotic tableau of their characters' short yet startling journeys through space.



Both groups come together on the courtyard's makeshift stage to compare findings from the scenario given to Academy participants

Practice what you preach: group theatre management exercise

Ensemble work took on a slightly altered meaning for our third session on the Friday, when participants were presented with two different scenarios related to practicing theatre management in an international collaboration context. This was a good opportunity to apply some of the points that had been reflected on the previous day, keeping in mind the highlighted 'tips' on managing international relationships, through experiential learning. We split into separate groups to tackle each problem scenario, moving from the salle de réunion out to the shaded areas of the Cloître Saint-Louis. In my own group we dealt with a situation in which we as a project leader were faced with a collaborator who was not responding to communications about the project; how can we re-engage this partner theatre/artist and what else should we take in consideration in our approach? We thought about how each member of this co-production team might be contributing, and whether there could be more commitment on one side, what tools could be used to improve shared schedules, language barriers, and ways to build trust and remind other collaborators about the positive outcomes of the project to provide incentive. When combined groups again it was revealed that the second theatre team had been given the other side of the story, as the collaborator under time pressure and stresses of different projects being asked to respond to our demands. Face-to-face with the interlocutor, how could we re-imagine this scenario from their perspective? In order to do so we each drew on previous work experiences, how we responded and ideas for communicating more effectively. Resonating with Serge and Dubravka's comments the previous day, it came back to an understanding of this relationship as one between *people*; conversation is almost always the solution to knowing each other better.



Participants talk through their ideas for collaborative projects

Performance 3: Die Kabale der Schienheiligen, by Frank Castorf, presented at Parc des Expositions

After so much metaphysical journeying from inner to outer perspectives, we then departed for a last group excursion, this time venturing literally beyond the borders of the city to the Parc des Expositions – a large industrial style venue. This may possibly have been the most extravagant production programmed in this year’s Festival, with the German director’s mammoth six hour-long exploration of authoring and censorship using video technology and a huge renaissance set to present narratives within narratives.

Conclusion

On the whole, my personal experience of the academy was one of experiential learning; as a group we encountered many of the identified principles of collaboration through borders of physical and cultural differences, behaviours, and linguistic barriers over the course of our four days together. This was a rehearsal of small frustrations or miscommunications overcome by a common need to meet and collaborate with one another. The programme met its aims of encouraging shared learning, networking, and developing new professional and social relationships. And certainly it felt as though this was a platform for future involvement through the ETC’s wider network, which as we learnt offers further opportunities for theatre professionals to engage through peer-to-peer learning, so that we may address the need to embrace difference, talk to each other, and perhaps plan further visits abroad in search of real encounters (and good coffee).



Participants and ETC coordinators pose for a group photo in the Cloître Saint-Louis

Summary by Joanna Lally
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