



IETM REPORT

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MAKING OUR VOICES HEARD

*Advocacy for the contemporary performing arts
on the local and national levels*

IETM Zurich Plenary Meeting, 6 – 9 November 2008

Moderators: Nevenka Koprivsek, Henk Keizer
Speakers: Bertrand Wert, Lorraine Herbert, Ondrej Hrab,
Rarita Szakats, Mary-Ann DeVlieg



Report by Brina Stinehelfer



IETM is supported by



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This working group was a sharing of experiences regarding approaching and negotiating with politicians and policy makers so that the needs of the cultural sector are recognized and met. It was an in depth and interesting discussion, which went on for much longer than even the moderators expected. It seems that sometimes discussions regarding the importance of the relation between politics and support (in policy and finances) of the cultural sector are somehow overlooked or avoided- because of, as with so many things, intimidations and misconception of the system, based on misunderstanding.

The speakers of this group comprised a very diverse panel, in terms of profession, location, and relationship to the political or governmental sector. Nevenka Koprivsek is the founder and director of Bunker, a private non-profit cultural organization in Ljubljana, Slovenia (and our gracious host for the last IETM meeting), which has had great success in gaining the permission and means to transform abandoned buildings into performance arts centers (among other things), thereby establishing the institution as an important platform for contemporary artists in Slovenia. Henk Keizer is the manager of the new cultural program Vrede van Utrecht (Treaty of Utrecht) in Utrecht, Netherlands and a former manager of successful theater companies and festivals. Both have made great accomplishments in dealing with the oft feared political sector, and were happy to share their achievements and mistakes, to be of use to those who are currently struggling with the establishment of their own institutes and programs.

The main question of the day: What and how can we communicate with those who have the power to grant us and our organizations the funding and support we

need to do our work? "There is always a resistance to `experimental shit`." The discussion began. And this resistance of course comes from a misunderstanding of what exactly it is we, as artists and promoters/facilitators of art do. How can we find new ways of communicating, so that our needs are met, and we are not misidentified, overlooked, or misunderstood?

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They began with a brief introduction and opening statements by the other panelists. Lorraine Herbert has for 5 years been the director of Le Regroupement Québécois de la Danse (The Coalition of Quebec Dance), a non-profit association in Quebec, Canada that represents and defends the interests of over 500 professionals in the dance scene on public policy, both nationally and internationally. She stressed the importance of having a strategy plan, and preparing a study, doing research so that any argument can be backed up with evidence, facts and figures- the language of many politicians. She also advocated the establishing of allies early on; advocate, right from the beginning, don't wait until things turn bad and a crisis arises to become involved in the political sector. She has found success using the voice of famous artists to create a bridge to policy makers, who are very often concerned with so-called "photo opportunities" in lending their support. She also used Facebook as a successful tool to spread knowledge and gain support in reaction to negative activities by policy makers. And she brought up one very important truth which is also often taken for granted when undertaking an exchange with politicians, a truth which would be again and again reiterated over the next 3 hours' discussion- you are not alone. "How can you unite with others,

both locally and internationally, to speak to the government?" she suggested as a very useful starting point. Often, the voices of many can end up being clearer and stronger than a single cry.

"You can lobby together when the critical mass is big enough." agreed Ondrej Hrab, Director of the Archa Theater in Prague for the last thirteen years. He said the goal should be not only to make progress for ourselves, but also for the overall situation of arts and culture in politics. He has managed to make a name for Archa Theater on an international level, working from the ground up to become respected as home for exciting new works of contemporary stage art, as well as a public forum and a place for international collaborations. But it was not an easy battle- it took 15 years for the Archa Theater to receive 3 solid years of sufficient government funding and support. Their struggle was often fought using rather extreme techniques, such as a team locking themselves inside of the cultural minister's office. But he says that the situation is not as simple as good guy/bad guy, that the misunderstandings and misrepresentations which cause difficulty for the cultural sector can occur on both sides- not only on the side politicians, who are incapable of distinguishing show business from art, but also on the side of the artists, who are incapable of clearly defining their role.

Rarita Szakats, director of AltArt Foundation, suggested the development of a new practice, indeed, a new profession, to speak on behalf of the private cultural center. "We need an intermediary platform," she said, rather than relying on artists to self train themselves as cultural managers. The Cluj, Romania based AltArt Foundation promotes innovative art forms based on new technologies, and carries out mainly interdisciplinary projects involving new media, film, photography, animation and performance. It also lobbies on behalf of the cultural sector. Ms. Szakats again stressed the importance of unity among artists, to encourage real policy change. All artists, not just artists of the performing fields, should get together to support the endeavors of cultural institutions in their exchange with governmental bodies. Even foreign artists can be great allies. "International pressure works," she said, and recommended the use of the EU as a successful negotiating tool.

After these thorough and informative presentations, (and a brief cigarette and coffee break) the discussion was opened up to the entire group, many of whom were quite eager to share their own obstacles and strategies for feedback from the group. Many engaging, frustrating, and sometimes humorous truths about the struggle between art and policy came up, including an exchange with the cultural minister in Prague, whom, when asked about where he sees Prague in terms of culture and the arts in ten years responded, "That's not the question for me, I am only elected for four." This antidote illustrated a very important need for long term strategic planning regarding the health and growth of artistic cultural policy. Henk Keizer suggested the formation of a succession plan for lobbying organizations, so that the knowledge gained from previous experiences can be passed on to

others who are beginning to engage in the same battle.

There is also a need to educate politicians, so that there are no further misunderstandings about who artists are and what they do. Many politicians do not distinguish between artists and entertainers, and therefore wonder why the wealthy celebrities they see on TV should be deserving of government funding. A successful means of battling this is by inviting politicians to performances, and making them aware of successes and triumphs in terms of earning money and international recognition (two always important bargaining chips in the eyes of politicians) so that they can see what it is we do first hand. Henk Keizer even recommended inviting them to dinner, as he did with a quite successful outcome, so that politicians can relate to those in the arts on a more personal level, and perhaps their struggles and obstacles will be less easy to ignore.

Unfortunately, it is still a very difficult battle to get others to understand the importance and relevance of art as a part of a healthily functioning society. It was suggested that if someone thinks culture is a waste, there is little you can do to change their minds. Mary Ann DeVlieg, the secretary general of IETM who joined us for the second half of the meeting, shared with us a quote from Margaret Thatcher, "If the arts are important, and I'm sure they are, then the people will have no problem paying for it themselves." This is perhaps to say that the arts are not necessarily unimportant, but merely that they just cannot be categorized alongside healthcare, education, and other sectors of a society which vie for government support.

So the attention then turned to ways of linking the arts directly to the commu-

nity in a way in which it is seen to have a value, in the eyes of the politicians. Art can bring to public awareness issues of local and global concern, such as environmental issues. Art also has great power in instigating growth in industry, especially in the industries of computer sciences and technology, which very often get models for marketable inventions and programs from creative theatrical innovations. Then on the other side, it was said that squeezing art into other forms so that it can benefit from a symbiotic relation to another, more broadly recognized sector is a danger, and that we should instead focus on advocating art as a valued element of society which is not questioned in terms of production value. Like healthcare and education, art is vital to a well balanced existence, and good in and of its own sake.

In the end, however, the same lesson was found to be true in this discussion as was also found in other meetings of the IETM, and, dare I say, in nearly every situation of the human existence- it's all about communication, which is, of course, the root of all misunderstanding. It's not always what you say, but how you say it. Finding the right language to communicate with different people in a way that they can understand is a vital struggle. "I would rather go to a workshop with psychologists," one member of the discussion said. Because in the end, success in this, and nearly every other venture, is all based on finding the right words, and the right means of saying them, to get through to another human being and get from them what you want, whether it is a politician, an artist, a waiter, a janitor, or a lover. It is about understanding the way they see the world and finding the means to use their own methods of interacting with it, in order to avoid misunderstanding.

Notes

By Henk Keizer

Conditions for good strong advocacy on a local or national level

1. Leaders: people who know the cultural field well and are also recognized in other sectors as persons of a certain importance because of their experience, who are good organisers. They are necessary to speak with one voice, to keep the 'group' together, especially when the first successes are booked.

2. Access to power, to politicians, administrators. When an advocacy group is formed be sure you have somebody with a direct line to power. It can be one of the leaders, it can be someone who stands behind your plans / questions. Without a direct line it will be hard to make your voice heard. An altruistic approach is much more helpful!

3. All members of the advocacy-group must be willing to work and fight for the interest of the others. When you work for others you will meet more sympathy. Powerful people will listen better when you explain that you are not only talking about yourself.

4 - Make critical analyses about your position, make clear that you understand the surroundings you work in, formulate clear aims, that are shared by all members of the advocacy group. Solidarity is a key word.

5 - Create a platform for meetings, invite people from outside your group and host them kindly. If you invite politicians treat them as you would treat a friend. Cook a nice meal for them, make sure the moderator of the meeting is really great, explain the working process of a performance, arrange a meeting with performers...

6 - Get in the media, make sure you have planned time to communicate, inform them well and clearly. Provide them with tickets, good info, special interviews etc. Make sure you have 'trained' translators; people who can explain in common language what you want. Don't forget (a lot of) civil servants / politicians / reporters / and even your mother know nothing of art and do not understand you.

7. Perhaps most important: organise a critical mass. Make sure you talk for a big group of organisations / artists the politicians cannot adore. The mass has to give politicians a reason to agree with you because you are representing a serious part of society.

THE DANGEROUS THINGS WERE ALSO MENTIONED

1. Burning yourself down by putting too much and too long energy in advocacy with not enough people

2. Satisfaction: you got what you wanted, losing focus, losing attention and sharpness, innovation stops.

3. Being used by local authorities / governmental services to write for them. In some cases they made the cultural sector work for civil servants. So keep responsibilities clear.