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PRODUCING IN THE MARGINS

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Producing in the margins

How performing arts are inspired, produced and experienced on the peripheries of mainland Europe? Tiago Rodrigues, Artistic Director at Teatro Nacional D. Maria II and João Garcia Miguel, Director at Companhia João. Garcia Miguel presented the Portuguese far-West view on producing art outside the established 'centres' of Europe. Maiken Garder, Producer at Dansearena Nord, presented the international dance scene she established in the farthest North point of Europe. Tamara Bracic Vidmar, Producer at Bunker, and Goda Giedraitytė, Producer at Fish Eye shared what it is like to work in the economic peripheries of Europe - Slovenia and Lithuania. As it turned out, there are many stimulating processes going on in the periphery and working there, along with the many disadvantages, gives certain benefits.

The session evolved around the multifaceted concepts of 'periphery', 'margin' and 'centre'. 'Periphery' was regarded as being located in geographical margins, detached from the administrative or political centre, as well as distant from the cultural mainstream, being in the economic periphery, small, vulnerable, inferior. The 'centre' was often understood as the economically, politically and culturally influential, attractive... None of this is a constant characteristic. Being flexible, versatile, open, connected, authentic, creative, 'marginal' is also powerful - a centre in its own right.

We are central where we stand

Tiago Rodrigues, the artistic director of Teatro Nacional D. Maria II, introduced the specific situation of the national theatre in Lisbon, which, in the overall European context, is in the periphery, but which, as an institution established 170 years ago and featuring about 25 productions a year, is symbolically very important in its local context.



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Ophélie Alegre, Project Manager, SITE, Sweden

João Garcia Miguel, Director, Companhia João Garcia Miguel, Portugal

Speakers:

Maiken Garder, Producer, Dansearena nord, Norway

Goda Giedraitytė, Producer, Fish Eye and PLArTFORMA International Art Festival, Lithuania

Tamara Bracic Vidmar, Head of Communication, Bunker Ljubljana & Balkan Express Network Coordinator, Slovenia

Tiago Rodrigues, Artistic Director, Teatro Nacional D. Maria II, Portugal

Working in the periphery of the global context has certain advantages. "Artists are not shaping their work so that it functions in the global system of distribution", Tiago claimed. Working in the margins, at a smaller scale and with fewer opportunities for distribution and mobility allows time for experimenting, research, all kinds of artistic exploration that is not directly

aimed at producing a piece that would be global success.

Being far from the main circuits of cultural consumption and cultural production gives the artists opportunity to be more connected with their local context and thus, to have greater impact on a local community over time. Isolation can contribute to

creating unique experiences if you keep in contact with your environment. As it happened with Portugal, for instance, artists have become the cultural mediators being in contact with the community and trying to understand the political and social context of their artistic creation. This leads to sort of a commitment on behalf of the artists, which is opposite to the globalised model of creating work in your studio and distributing it around the world, and having the distribution machine controlling your connection with the audience, the community and the context where you operate.

As a consequence, artists in the periphery create their own context and means of production. Isolation can lead to unique experiences and authenticity (in terms of being *endemic*) of the works created in this marginal context.

While the periphery does offer good opportunities and a potential that might be accomplished, the disadvantages are quite real. When you don't have a lot of neighbours that insist artistic creation is essential for democracy – and that is the case with Portugal – it is easy to diminish arts' role in society. Especially in times of crisis and public funding cuts, the public opinion, the media, and politics tend to overlook the importance of artistic creation, Tiago asserted. The symptoms are less visibility of and less public investment in the arts. Long-term cultural policies are hard to instil, when the arts are less visible and even suffer from negligence, which leads to vulnerability to political change and instability in the Portuguese cultural landscape.

Networking is the effective way to overcome geographical isolation. To illustrate how both formal and informal networks help to fulfil the potential of producing in the margins, Tiago Rodrigues provided two examples from the practice of Teatro Nacional D. Maria II.

The theatre is part of the [apap network \(advancing performing arts project\)](#), a network of 11 organisations from different European countries, where the Portuguese national theatre is the biggest organisation, but its budget is amongst the smallest. The apap network has a special care for emerging artists; so it supported [Raquel Andre](#),



a Portuguese artist working with Teatro Nacional, for touring her project, which would otherwise be hardly possible. Tiago described her performance [Collection of Lovers](#) as 'tremendously local', meaning that its existence depends on its connection with the local. Through the apap network, this piece reached global recognition that revealed its potential to stay longer and develop in each city it is being performed. Touring also helped to extend the lifespan of this performance. If it stayed in Portugal only, it would have ceased to exist because there are not many opportunities for touring.

The other success story was the collaboration of Teatro Nacional with the French festival [Terres de Paroles](#) in Normandy, who are also kind of in the margin in

their context. They were interested in a piece Teatro Nacional was creating with Portuguese teenagers who were working on its text and music. The Festival was interested in the process, so the two leading artists recreated the piece with French teenagers for the festival. "So you have this local piece that is created in the margins and is relevant in a local context, but through networking you can recreate it and show it internationally. People who work in the margins can understand each other better, because they know that local work is essential."

Formal and informal networking is vital for the margins. Working with 'the centre' gives opportunities to learn some good practices and new means of production to bring back home, but working with other

marginal countries is equally important because it helps identifying and addressing common challenges.

We are like little spiders

Goda Giedraitytė confirmed that in the Lithuanian context, networking is the path of sustaining your art practice especially if you are so marginal as the organisation Goda represents: a young artists group, an NGO, based in Klaipėda, a town that is the farthest from the capital of a small East European post-socialist country. [Fish Eye](#) and [PLArTFORMA International Art Festival](#), Lithuania, have to double their efforts to overcome the disadvantages of working in the margins. At first place, they need to develop and educate their audience. PLArTFORMA Festival is the only one dedicated to contemporary dance in Lithuania, so they have to introduce the audience to this art form, to educate and communicate. Securing media coverage, critics' interest for art events so far away from the capital, and of course, finding financial support are always challenging because "capital events are always more interesting and worth investing". But the question is how to turn the disadvantages into possibilities and develop new ways of audience engagement, fundraising, and so on.

For Fish Eye and PLArTFORMA Festival the answer is networking. They have been taking part in several networks for quite a few years, and they have become close with these networks' members. Together, they find new ways to co-produce and collaborate, to tour works, to find artists, etc. Fish Eye and PLArTFORMA Festival are part of networks like the [DNA: Development of New Art network](#); the East European contemporary dance movement; the Nordic-Baltic cooperation project [keoĵa](#).

Among all the successful collaborations, Goda highlighted [Men&Mahler](#), the Danish-Lithuanian co-production through the DNA network, which boosted the international career of the Lithuanian dancer Petras Lisauskas. He is now famous throughout Scandinavia and, as other artists from marginal areas, has achieved stability in his career development thanks to international networking.

Another fruitful collaboration was a project called [Travelling Churches](#), which took place in the city of Klaipėda in 2015 and still goes on. It answered one of the big questions for contemporary dance artists and producers working in the margins: how to attract new audiences? Due to the lack of education in contemporary art in Lithuania, many people shy away from anything vaguely different from the mainstream productions, Goda explained. The performances were taking place in public spaces, so people did not need to go to a venue to see the dance pieces. The project aimed to introduce citizens in contemporary dance and explore the city identity. After attending, many people said they "fell in love" with the city and with contemporary dance. "As a consequence of this project, we now have more audience attending our contemporary dance performances. We now have three similar projects, in other cities and in other languages, because tourists are also interested to attend," Goda explained.

In conclusion, she drafted, once again, the advantages of creating art in the margins. One can always be a pioneer in their work and find out new ways of attracting audiences, funding, touring, etc. Being in a less dense and competitive cultural landscape gives the opportunity to be an innovator and create new traditions, new city identities, new conditions of work. Networking helps to overcome most of the disadvantages of being in the margins. Coming from the periphery makes you interesting as a representative of its culture, and when you get international attention, you become also more attractive in your local context.

"We became little spiders, having connections all around Europe. All our partners from the different networks have become our friends, who help us collaborate, find new artists, make co-productions... Networking is important, please join networks.", Goda pleaded.

We like working in the margins!

That perspective towards the cultural life in the capital of Slovenia contrasts with the pessimistic views focused on the marginality and narrowness of the art scene in the small post-Yugoslavian country in the Balkans.

Tamara Bracic Vidmar from [Bunker Ljubljana & Balkan Express network](#) tried to maintain both sides of the story in her presentation. Bunker, where Tamara works as a head of communication, is a cultural NGO, established in 1997 in Ljubljana, that mainly produces and presents contemporary theatre and dance performances. Since 2004, it moved to an old power plant. "Part of it still produces electricity for Ljubljana, and in the other part our creative energy is being generated", Tamara explained. Besides producing performing art pieces, Bunker organises two international festivals: one is dedicated to younger audiences, and the other is the already well-known and established International festival [Mladi levi](#). During its 20 years of existence, Mladi levi gave stage to many contemporary dance pieces from the periphery, as marginal countries are of particular interest to Bunker. The educational programme of Bunker reflects their consistent effort to introduce contemporary arts into school curricula in Slovenia. Albeit this effort is not formalised yet, Bunker runs several [educational projects](#) for children and young people introducing them to contemporary theatre and dance.

Although many things have changed to the better in the last 20 years, the situation in the cultural sector in Slovenia is far from being favourable. Ministers of Culture change often, there is a lack of understanding of the importance of contemporary arts and a particular lack of support for the NGO sector. "Without our international collaborations and international funding, we would have to stop many of our current activities", shared Tamara, underlying once again how important networking is for maintaining the vulnerable art organisations operating in the margins.

International partners and EU funding do offer support, but Bunker believes that in the first place they need to focus on being activists locally, working on a positive change in the local cultural policies. They believe that culture plays an essential role to develop the civil society: exactly this happened in the 1980s, when student / anarchistic / artistic movements brought the change to the socialist Yugoslavia. In the 1990s, after the war, Slovenian NGOs were mostly turned towards 'the centre', seeking collaborations with established

organisations and institutions mostly from Western Europe. When the 2000s came in, Bunker was better known in Western Europe and knew more about Western European cultural landscapes than about their neighbour countries.

So, the [Balkan Express network](#) was established with the goal to create some awareness among Balkan countries about each other and collaborate more with the neighbours, to unite for improvement of the situation in the region. The network started with the support of the [Flemish Community](#) and the [European Cultural Foundation](#) as a partnership project of several organisations: Bunker Ljubljana, CUMA (Turkey), AltArt (Romania), IETM (International network for contemporary performing arts) and Expeditio (Montenegro). It also involves a large informal network of professionals that were and are involved in its activities.

The Balkan Express network develops a platform for professionals and audiences to learn about contemporary dance, and, thus, it is filling the gap in the region. It helps to establish collaborations between the members and builds on their capacity by offering meetings and artistic residences. But this network is impossible to be sustained without funding. In the Balkans, there is no institution or programme at a national level that would provide sufficient funds for a network like this. Applying for the EU funding was futile so far. Tamara shared her frustration from receiving rejection on the base that the organisations involved are 'very fragile': "Of course they are, that is the situation we deal with on the Balkans!"

Looking at the broader picture, there are a lot of challenges in working in the margins: smaller cities, smaller audiences, less funding, vulnerable organisations, it is hard to tour, it is hard to secure a bigger lifespan of the performances, there is a lack of educational options in the field of contemporary art. The political instability and constant policy changes are yet another challenge. On the other hand, there are a lot of positive things: huge flexibility, openness to other models of work, seeking for new ways of collaboration.

According to Tamara, working in the



Sisters 11 years later by Haugen Produksjoner / Anne Katrine and Liv Hanne Haugen. © Nicolas Tourrenc

margins also helps to establish specific aesthetics: "There are also some new aesthetics developed in the region because we are not attached to any of the big European circles. Artists are in their own environment and are free." Collaboration has become the common way of producing new pieces, and this brings many stunning and inspirational works to life: "It keeps us on our toes all the time."

People want to come to us

Maiken Garder from Producer, [Dansearena nord](#), Norway, spoke about what it is like working in Hammerfest, the farthest populated city in the North of Europe. Typically, one would recall the Northern Lights, reindeers and vast areas of untouched nature, but there is everyday something happening in contemporary art in Finland and Norway. In Norway, funding opportunities for creating art are favourable, but that is not the case for touring. Therefore, [Dansearena nord](#) are focused not on creating art but on helping art to reach its audiences. They promote contemporary dance in Northern Norway and give preference to companies working, living or touring in Northern Norway, but [Dansearena nord](#) have an international orientation too. Their main activities include an artist's residency programme, and promoting artists and productions through the international and national networks they have established.

When we speak about working in the margins, we should also bear in mind that having time and space to create is as precious as a striving cultural environment, Maiken insisted. She shared the example of two North Norwegian artists, the Haugen sisters, who perused their artistic career as dancers in mainland Europe. They decided to return home where they had the time and the space to create performances that are personal and interesting to people 'in their immediate crowd'. These performances ended up being quite a success and made it to a premiere at BOZAR, Centre for Fine Arts Brussels. According to Maiken, this is a result of moving to the periphery and focusing on their art. Furthermore, taking advantage of being part of the European networks and collaborating with organisations like [Dansearena Nord](#) helped to produce and tour the works.

Maiken shared her experience of how being in the periphery can attract artists to come and work in your space. Their residency space is open throughout the year, and they announce two open calls per year which collect a lot of applications from many dance and movement artists. On one hand, it is the fascination with the Far North that attracts them, but on the other hand, there are also favourable conditions for creating art – a possibility of eliminating all the distractions and focusing on their work. Maiken, as a producer, sees a lot sense in putting her time and effort in working in the periphery. She feels that by facilitating all the artists

who also want to be in the periphery, by investing a lot of her time and efforts, she gets a lot in return. She sees the long-term positive effect on the community in the periphery and the growing local interest in contemporary dance forms. She witnesses how the connections that are established bring out new inspiring collaborations.

Of course, it is not one big success story, Maiken admitted. There are financial and political struggles; sometimes securing funding is under question, but the most challenging thing of all is audiences. Reaching out to audiences, making them come and come back is a challenge that everyone in the periphery faces, especially those working in the contemporary art forms. Dansearena nord have conducted the following experiment in collaboration with DanseFestival Barents. They asked three of the staff members to invite three people who had never seen a dance performance before and to take them to two shows in one night and ask them to take part in a panel discussion at the pub later the same night. That turned to be quite an interesting experience, having in the discussion art professionals, artists, festival participants, and ordinary people who have seen contemporary dance for the first time. That proved to have lasting effect on the people involved. One of them shared with Maiken: "I am so glad that you brought me here for the first time. I have bought tickets for a performance next week, and I am really looking forward to attending it."

Maiken called on the participants in the session to try bringing one or two people who have never been in a theatre before to the next show.

What are the relations between the centre and the periphery?

João Garcia Miguel elaborated on the specific situation in which artists are producing in Portugal by contemplating on the underlying cultural predispositions and the tension between 'centre' and 'periphery' – a theme that appears in his dramaturgic work.

Making an excursion back to the country's colonial history, to the authoritarian regime

until 1974, and looking at the present days, the EU membership, João made the point that Portuguese think of themselves as "proudly alone" and of Portugal as a centre by itself, while they were connected with their colonies and were self-sustainable at the expense of them. During the Salazar authoritarian regime the country was in isolation. When in 1986 Portugal entered the European Union, it became peripheral to the main EU processes. "So, in Portugal we live between these two ideas: that we are 'proudly alone', we are self-sustained, we are a centre, and that we are peripheral to Europe as a big political centre."

So, why is the centre so important? It is a powerful state that legitimises our relations to one another and to ourselves. Everybody wants to be in the centre. Here comes the question why artists still need to move between the centre and the periphery to produce works from one place and show it at another. We need this because we have the sensation that we lose the ground. Margins are what surrounds the centre and they can be geographical but also a political figure. The centre needs the margin to define itself and to sustain itself. It needs to meet the margins because a centre that is closed becomes a void.

João believes that artists have the important role to challenge themselves and try to find a way to create a network of 'big dreams', of ideas to help getting out of the influence of the established centre of legitimation. "We need to change; we need to create other centres that could bring new ideas in art."

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The discussion brought out questions about communicating your aesthetic when it is so specific to your place. It has to be taken into consideration when touring. It also affects international collaborative projects and might depend on who is funding the work.

According to Maiken, this is a cultural difference, more than the difference between the 'city' and the 'periphery'. Also, it is often a question of scale: some performances are too big for the smaller venues at the periphery.

Goda explained that thanks to the established infrastructure in those countries they often bring works from France and Germany, but they are trying to bring Eastern and Central European projects to Lithuania too. They used to share common history and aesthetics with the ex-socialist countries and it is interesting to see how they have changed and developed now.

Tamara shared that Balkan artists are accustomed to not being understood. "We are supposed to be exotic but we are not exotic enough." In terms of contemporary performing arts, it is the independent art scene that makes new productions, and they are usually smaller scale solo or duo projects.

Tiago claimed that it is not about 'one centre', there are plenty of centres which form networks of centres. Tiago shared his concerns that at some point the network of centres becomes a huge machine for art distribution and consumption with a little time for experiment. There is also a risk to fall for creating the universal pan-European performance that can be shown everywhere. Tiago feels that people in the margins have preserved their freedom in choosing aesthetics, themes, as well as the space for artistic experiments.

And if we look to the centre, Tiago pleaded, we would see it is not uniformed at all. The centres are diverse, they are filled with people from the margins, and there is hardly anyone in the arts in Brussels, Berlin or London who does not understand what the margin and marginal is. "I think we are all working in borders. Just that some borders are more marginal, and others are more central, and we are all working in this in-between space." For those, who are in Dublin, Lisbon, Porto – which are geographically in the outer ring – the connection with the local community and phenomena is more present.