



IETM REPORT

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ARTISTIC CREATION OUTSIDE THE URBAN AREAS

Report from the IETM Porto Plenary Meeting, 26 – 29 April 2018

by Vassilka Shishkova



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Artistic Creation outside the Urban Areas

This session added new examples of artistic creation and community arts in the rural areas to those that were presented at IETM Brussels 2017, in the [Meanwhile in the Countryside](#) session. Thus it confirmed the outcome of the IETM Brussels 2017 session: the point is not to bring culture to the countryside, because it is already there; and that one undertaking artistic work in rural areas has to openly listen and interact with the local people, and be receptive to their stories, creating art together with them, not for them. The IETM Porto session added new aspects, such as: local authorities' understanding of the importance and support for arts in rural area is crucial to achieve sustainable results; it is counterproductive to underestimate your audience.

Henk Keizer, director of Rural Forum Network, Denmark, and moderator of the session, outlined the situation in rural Denmark, where he is working now, claiming that the picture across Europe is mostly the same: huge industrialised farms, villages get depopulated and even demolished because people don't want to live there anymore. Yet 40% of the population in Europe still lives in rural areas. And the question is what we are going to do and how do we – the artistic community - connect with them. Is there a need for a network of those who work in rural areas?

He quoted the architect Rem Koolhaas: *"The countryside is now the frontline of transformation. A world formerly dictated by the seasons and the organisation of agriculture is now a toxic mix of genetic experiment, science, industrial nostalgia, seasonal immigration,*



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Moderator: Henk Keizer, director of Rural Forum Network, Denmark

Speakers:

Karine Décorne, Artistic Director & Chief Executive of Migrations, UK

Magda Henriques, Artistic Director of Comédias Do Minho, Portugal

Bas Van Rijnsoever, Creator of art projects and actions in public space, Company New Heroes, the Netherlands

Ondrej Hrab, Director of Archa Theatre, Czech Republic

territorial buying sprees, massive subsidies, incidental inhabitation, tax incentives, investment, political turmoil, in other words, more volatile than the most accelerated city.

The countryside is an amalgamation of

tendencies that are outside our overview and outside our awareness. Our current obsession with only the city is highly irresponsible because you cannot understand the city without understanding the countryside."

Programming the work you like

Karine Décorne presented the work of the non-for-profit company *Migrations* as an example how to show and tour contemporary art in the countryside.

Back in 2004, Karine, the Artistic director of *Migrations*, saw an opportunity to fill in a gap and to fulfil her personal dream by bringing high profile international artists in North Wales, a rural area which is quite challenging in terms of touring and showing productions. The information she gathered initially was a kind of discouraging: an under-developed contemporary art scene, no audience for international contemporary dance, and low-income population, lack of suitable venues, long distances to cover... “None of the patterns and methods I knew were relevant there”, Karine admitted and shared what lessons she learned while trying to open space for *Migrations*. First, it was in the company’s values and beliefs to approach this new place and its people with curiosity, humility and to offer uncompromising artistic vision and extraordinary artistic experiences. According to Karine, it is wrong and counterproductive to be patronising towards the audience and to bring ‘accessible’ art i.e. lower quality art, with lowered expectations. Instead, it is feasible to propose art that allows many keys to approach it. People have their own culture, their journeys and knowledge, their own references that can quite well relate to with the art pieces *Migrations* are bringing to them. The shows were contemporary and challenging, but Karine’s message to the new audiences was: “You don’t have to be an expert to come and enjoy the show”.

So, *Migrations* managed to establish connections with strong strategic partners: venues that shared their vision and saw the mutual benefits. Together, they presented a number of existing works, commissions, co-productions. Contextualisation is key for successful programming, Karine revealed. The art pieces that are presented in Wales should have connection, common ground with the local context. One such example is a piece by Eszter Salamon, a contemporary dance choreographer of Hungarian origin. She brought to North Wales her *Magyar Tancok*, a project reminiscing her childhood



The Store project ©Migrations

in Hungary where she used to attend traditional dance classes (which she hated back then) and revisiting these practices from the perspective of her contemporary dance practice now. Traditional dancing is quite popular in Wales too, so many people could relate to her project.

The turning point for *Migrations* came in 2008, when the venues they have established working relationships with, started to close – either for refurbishment or due to the economic crisis and the funding cuts in the arts and culture sector. Again, Karine sought solution out of the trotted track. Inspired by the beauty of the Welsh nature, she invited choreographers to stage their works outside. Rural landscapes became their stage. A project by a team of a choreographer and a local historian *Locator 20* by Simon Whitehead brought the audience outside the urban areas.

Another set of opportunities was inspired by urban architecture and the unfortunate trend of closing shops due to the growing crisis. In 2010, *Migrations* presented a project called *Store*, which envisaged multiple works being staged in an empty shop in the main a street. The project provoked strong positive response that exceeded the expectations. People were proud about artists visiting their town in those hard times. All

sorts of people from all sorts of background were attracted to the project.

“Just brilliant to have this kind of performance in Bangor! Forget about cutting edge experimental things not working here! IT DOES. People love it and keep on coming back for more.” A local audience member

Going to the streets brought new challenges and lessons to learn. A big responsibility comes with working in public spaces. You are not separated by the black box that a venue offers; all sorts of people can come; they can be just passing by. And if you want to gain their attention and open them up to your art piece they witness, engagement is as important as artwork itself. *Migrations* proved they can attract and retain audiences, even in the streets, with challenging contemporary dance pieces – through engagement and consideration, taking responsibility and showing open-mindedness. People started coming and looking for their work.

“There is always a story. All you have to do is to look, and if you look hard and smart enough, you’ll find a good one.” - Carmine Gallo

Five mayors in a cultural coalition

Magda Henriques told the story of the Portuguese *Comédias Do Minho*, an initiative started by five mayors from the Minho River valley, Northern Portugal. In 2003, this network started as a result of the investment and collaboration of five municipalities - Melgaço, Monção, Paredes de Coura, Valença and Vila Nova de Cerveira.

As Magda Henriques defined it, this was a political gesture – in an honourable sense. A gesture that restored fairness too, because it helped re-distribute access to the arts. It was also an utopian gesture, in the sense in which Robert Musil thought about it: “Utopia is a possibility that can take place when the temporary circumstances that prevent its realisation are removed”.

Comédias Do Minho comprises of several departments, each designed with a specific purpose in mind but aiming to blend and interrelate their functions.

Companhia De Teatro (The Theatre Company) has set the goal to bring theatre to the rural area of the Minho River valley, presenting performances in unconventional venues: parish council headquarters or local associations, civic centres, salons, cafes, private homes, outside in nature. The relationship with nature and the surroundings is of great importance to Companhia De Teatro. Whether they set works in the beautiful landscapes of the Minho River valley, in a public space or in people's houses, building trust, giving generously and accepting what comes your way are essential.

Projeto Pedagógico (the Educational Project) started with the mission to bring the five municipalities closer together through art. Now it continues to offer a regular and diversified artistic/educational programme for various audiences. It aims to offer learning and leisure opportunities that foster the development of cognitive, critical, creative, affective and social skills. *Projeto Pedagógico's* initiatives are inter-related with the work of Companhia De Teatro and *Projeto Comunitário* in an effort to broaden the access to the arts.



UIVO Encenação Gonçalo Fonseca 2014 ©Comédias Do Minho

Projeto Comunitário (the Community Project) is aimed at achieving stronger involvement of the population by putting emphasis on the local: be it by setting artistic interventions in public spaces, heritage sites and cultural spaces, in nature or by recreating artistically folklore traditions in a contemporary key.

To illustrate the interrelated work of the departments of *Comédias Do Minho*, Magda Henriques presented various projects of the centre throughout the years. “Dialogue is what interests us”, she concluded, “The flavour of the apple is not in the apple or in the mouth but in the moment they meet...”

Working in rural areas: the creator's view

Bas Van Rijnsoever, creator of art projects and actions in public space at Company New Heroes, revealed his approach to making art in rural areas.

Company New Heroes is situated in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, “quite an urban place”, as Bas defined it, and while working from the city they are escaping it all the time. Making art in the city for the countryside is not an easy task too, Bas remarked. Indeed, 40% of the population lives in rural areas while 90% of the

subsidies for arts and culture go to the cities. Yet in the cities, 90% of the funding goes to the few. Therefore Company New Heroes decided to be as flexible as possible. They do not own a venue or a big office. Typically, their creative process starts from a certain theme and topic, then they go out in public space for a research. As they define themselves on their website, New Heroes are storytellers who choose any possible genre or discipline as a medium for their narratives: theatre shows, performances, visual art installations, light installations, TV shows, film documentaries, music, and apps.

Amongst their flagship ‘rural’ projects is the performance *We, Pig Country – Solo*, by Lucas de Man / Nieuwe Helden. This performance is based on interviews with pig farmers and on *We, Pig Country 2012*, a creative research about the identity of West Flanders, that encompassed a tour of the performance along with a short film and a huge multimedia pig in eight West Flemish municipalities.

Those municipalities are known to have more pigs living in their area than humans, hence, the main theme of the project, that it is a pig country.

In the beginning of the project, Company New Heroes did not know much about

pigs, as Bas acknowledged: "Sometimes the farmers laughed at our pig that its tail is totally wrong and such." Through their research among – and together with the pig farmers New Heroes collected stories to build and develop the performance. They rarely staged it in conventional venues. More often, it was presented in city halls or in the farms. "With over 230 partners, over 20,000 visitors and over 30 media reports this has been the biggest project New Heroes has realised so far." It was continued in for years till 2015 and the *We, Pig Country* – Solo performance is touring in 2018 as well! Henk Keizer, who has witnessed some of its numerous presentations, shared: "People were literary crying. People who have always thought that theatre is not for them now have attended a show celebrating them, their life, their problems. They said: finally, somebody hears us and tells our story! And they were exhilarated!"

Here is the English trailer of the show: <https://vimeo.com/174352010>

"I was often asked: isn't it weird to make a performance about pigs and present it in farms?", Bas revealed, "I can tell you what's weird to me: when you make a theatre performance about theatre for the theatre people and present it 25 000 times at the same place. That's weird to me."

Working outside the box

"We have a venue but why we are going out all the time?" This question opened up the presentation of Ondrej Hrab, the director of *Archa Theatre*, Prague, Czech Republic. It is their desire to work outside of the box that drives them to venture new unconventional spaces for more than 10 years.

"Urban audiences are liberal and usually they are prepared what to expect when they go to a theatre. On the contrary, people outside the big cities don't feel comfortable in a theatre. They don't identify themselves with the big stories from classical theatre..." So bringing them to a performance calls for unconventional methods and for working outside the box. People outside the big cities want to be heard and acknowledged. "We have witnessed too many populists rise because they



© Company New Heroes

take advantage and say they listen to those people in the countryside", Ondrej remarked. To meet this need, to make those people being heard, the Archa Theatre moved in their art practice from site specific to socially engaged projects.

In 2003 – 2005, Archa Theatre made a work about the refugees in the Czech Republic. The project *At 11.20am I Will Be Leaving You!* was set from a series of smaller performances which took place at various refugee camps throughout the Czech Republic and at the Archa Theatre. The creators went to refugee camps and collected stories. Documentary theatre and bringing on-stage actors and real-life protagonists are core creative methods of Archa. They implemented this approach in the refugee camp project as well. The audience did not know who was the actor, and who was the refugee. *At 11.20 am...* was presented in Prague and other big cities and in small towns close to the refugee camps.

Other Archa Theatre's projects on immigration are *Lost and Found* (2014) and *New Bohemia* (2016). The projects explored the real stories of the old and recent immigrants to the American Midwest. The *Lost and Found* project involved new residents of Pittsburgh: immigrants from Congo,

Burma, Bhutan, Sudan and Iraq, who recently obtained asylum in the United States. Again, the project was based on their personal stories. Local musicians joined the Allstar Refjúdží Band that was taking major part in this project.

The other project, *New Bohemia*, set the focus on a photography studio in the New Bohemia quarter of Cedar Rapids, USA where the photographer shoot portraits of his neighbours, including descendants of Czech migrants and immigrants from all over the world.

Ondrej insisted that the crucial skill for the artists working in the field is to know how to listen to the people and how to make their stories heard. That knowledge Archa Theatre decided to spread, so they established an International Summer School for Theatre in Social Context for young artists. This year's call has been announced.

Some points

- We don't have to bring culture to the countryside – there is already a culture there. And a perfect starting point to create contemporary art.
- Artists who work in a participative way need extra skills: they need to understand the art of listening. They come as interns: they have to learn.
- People want to be heard: be open to their stories. Make their stories the backbone of your work. Work as a journalist: bring your skills of writing and composing an article: know that you only can write it based on the content the locals give you.
- Stepping outside the theatre venue is also stepping outside of the system. And into the world.
- When working with any audience, but especially one that is in the 'countryside', it is important to involve them, to be accountable, and to be clear about the process and its end; and this comes more natural in smaller communities.
- Audiences differ a lot – choose your approach accordingly. It is like learning a new language each time.
- Being sincere is more substantial than being polite.
- Don't be afraid to fail or misunderstand - because this can start interesting conversations.

What's next?

In 13 - 16 September 2018, [IETM Satellite Wales 2018](#), a dedicated meeting on the topic of creating in rural areas, will be held in Wales, UK. Eluned Haf, director of the Arts Council of Wales, introduced the forthcoming meeting and the specific features of the Welsh countryside: a place of just two major cities, the rest being considered rural, a bilingual country of geographic, economic, social, and contrasts, a place rich in stories to be heard.

This forthcoming satellite will put on discussion the idea of establishing a network of artists who work in rural areas. As Henk Keizer reminded, there is a growing informal network that connects artists with farmers' organisations, with funders, politicians, citizens, and refugees - anyone who has "an influence on life in the rural districts". The development of this network will be supported by the IETM office and the launch of the network will be announced through IETM's communication channels.