



IETM REPORT

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INTERNATIONAL PRODUCING ORGANISATIONS



soon the end of the competition (?)

Report from the IETM Munich Plenary Meeting, 1 – 4 November 2018

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International producing organisations: soon the end of the competition (?)

Introduction: the tip of the iceberg

This session brought together performing arts producers from different countries to explore how they could combine forces, share knowledge and move forward in this competitive world. Led and conceived by representatives of three organisations in France (LA MAGNANERIE / MAG.I.C International cooperation), Spain (AGENTE129) and Hungary (SÍN – arts and culture centre), the session attempted to explore three main topics, namely: hierarchical models within producing organisations; the relationship between the artist and the producer; and stories of success and failure regarding international cooperation.

In general, the overwhelming turnout of attendees (some 60 participants), as well as their feedback, was a positive reflection of the willingness to communicate and collaborate in taking this profession forward. While perhaps the large numbers prevented the possibility to explore the topics in as much depth as was wished, the results were certainly optimistic, and a consensus was reached to establish regular communication to continue this discussion as this one session served to explore barely the tip of the iceberg of a certainly sought-after profession and skill.

It was interesting to note that the majority of the participants were women. A representative of the producer workforce? Or perhaps simply the artistic community in general.



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Moderators:

Victor Leclère - La Magnanerie, France

Anikó Rácz - SinArts, Hungary

Vicens Mayans - Agente129, Spa

In the middle of the food chain

This discussion took off with a short introduction by Victor Leclere who, encouraged by the “laidback feeling [and] the simplicity of exchanges at IETM sessions”, noted the need to explore the international realm of the role of the producer. The practice is certainly evolving and attention needs to be paid to the independent producer who plays a vital

role in this evolution. “Although the artist may be at the centre, the producer is often on the side, at the periphery of the action,” commented Leclere, who went on to add that “producing organisations are in the first row of reshaping habits in production, funding and touring”. Leclere quoted IETM Project Manager Victor Mayot who had noted that producers “are not at the end of the process – the food chain – but right in the middle”.

Now, while in many countries, the role of the producing organisation is more clearly defined, according to Leclere, the situation becomes hazy when it comes to defining the role and identity of the producing organisation when one moves beyond a national spectrum, and turns to a European and international level.

He said: "I feel that in some countries, more and more people, from artists to art students, directors of cultural affairs to programmers, can name the missions and roles of producing organisations [...]. But on the European and international level, what is the reality of the producing organisation? Who knows who we are and what we do?"

It was from this question that the discussion drew its focus: to firstly dig deeper to understand what producers from other countries do, and, following that, to see how producing organisations can combine forces and share knowledge in this "competitive world".

Not enough producers

A pre-session questionnaire had been sent to participants. With 23 replies, this was not a representative survey although it helped the moderators and participants get an initial glimpse of the international producers scene. Aniko Racz, who reported on the survey, commented that it would be good to map the profession in the future. A number of interesting results emerged; perhaps most revealing was the fact that the producers themselves did not regard other producers as competitors but rather potential partners, the reason being that there are currently not enough producers to create a competitive environment.

Some highlights of the results of the survey include:

- **Location:** The respondents were predominantly from Western Europe: Germany, Spain and France, two were from the UK, two from Belgium, one from Denmark and one from Australia



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- **Artist representation:** The majority (15) represented between one and 10 artists; surprisingly one producer worked for 10 artists
- **Years active:** The majority were young organisations, most having been established within the last 10 years, and only seven for more than 10 years
- **International vs domestic:** 17 work internationally (by touring); seven just work on a domestic level; four mentioned some specific international regions, e.g. from Germany to Turkey, Germany to the UK and Belgium to Eastern Europe
- **Activities:** These include production, distribution, giving artistic advice, consulting, advocacy in cultural politics, marketing, communications, fundraising and financial administration. Of note is the fact that hardly any organisations perform only one activity and the few that did would do touring
- **Finance:** Only five have direct state or local subsidies for their work. Finances come mostly through artists' budgets and subsidies. Only four receive an annual fee for their services – most work on a project and service basis, receiving percentages from tours and projects
- **Business model:** This is very much demand-driven and evolves organically without a specific initial concept
- **Competition:** There is generally a friendly feeling among competitors: producers feel there is so much work to do that there is hardly any room for competition and that other producers are seen as supporters and potential partners, rather than rivals
- **How the producer is seen:** A difficult question to answer, results revealed a strong need for production specialists, mainly in terms of dealing with complex funding situations, networks, legal issues, tax problems and mobility issues; but on the other hand, production often gets a bad reputation as producers are seen to be "taking over things" and "controlling" artists. Finding a balanced relationship between the artist and the producer and one that is based on trust is certainly difficult, but key.

Approach

Following the general introduction, the session took the form of three breakout sessions in order to tackle the three main topics, with attendees deciding themselves which area they wished to discuss further. Each session was led by one of the three moderators¹.

Topic One: Hierarchy and collaboration within the organisation: which models are at stake?

Led by Vicens Mayans, this working group was the smallest, with around eight participants. It attempted to answer the following questions: Do we need a hierarchy to work successfully? Do you know of other models? What do you think will be future of organisation structure?

In general, most spoke about going beyond the hierarchical model and building new models. Unfortunately, however “we don't have solutions” commented Laura Artoni, a producer from Italy as she reported back on her session. While many agreed that the idea of a hierarchy is an old-fashioned one, it is still the one that is in place. Also, the consensus was that some form of hierarchy is needed in an organisation – speaking about a horizontal way of working was not quite the right term – but this does not necessarily mean that the work needs to be organised in a hierarchical way. Perhaps the approach should turn to “good and bad leadership”.

The upside of failure

This working group spoke about new ways to collaborate together as producers and rather than see each other as competition to work together. “It's just a mindset,” noted Artoni. Indeed the way producers looked at themselves was an important issue and this group reported how “we are an artistic movement, but we are also a business and we need to see how we can find a balance between this”.

¹ Since the three sessions were held concurrently, the reporter could only follow one session (she chose the relationship between the artist and the producer). The documentation of the other two sessions are therefore summaries as reported in a wrap-up session by the spokesperson for each group

Looking to the future, a recurring theme was to talk about unsuccessful projects, rather than simply always adopting a “marketing” approach and only discussing good examples. This could serve as a great way to learn from one's failures.

Topic Two: The artist and producer relationship

Led by Aniko Racz, this working group saw the largest attendance by far with some 30 participants from Edinburgh, London and other parts of the UK, Berlin, Paris, Italy, Denmark, St Petersburg, Switzerland, Germany, Bulgaria and Denmark. The majority were independent producers, although there were some observers who wished to listen to the session rather than participate, and at least one non-independent producer who works for the Tovstonogov Bolshoi Drama Theatre, St Petersburg.

This session attempted to answer the following questions, however, due to the large turnout, they were barely tackled, and indeed, as with the session in general, there was general consensus to re-evaluate the questions in the future.

The questions were as follows:

- How do you make your services visible?
- How transparent is the process of artist selection?
- What are your considerations other than artistic when accepting to represent an artist?
- Do you represent artists or projects, and how do you find a balance between the artists you work with?
- What form of agreement do you have with your artists? (formal, written, oral, duration)
- How do you know what to do and what your responsibilities are?
- How does this relate to the building of trust?

- How do you evaluate your work?

- How much are the activities or your organisation driven by the artists or by yourself?

Risk, responsibility and trust

A core theme that emerged from this discussion was that the relationship between the artist and producer revolves around risk, responsibility and trust. Both artist and producer take a risk as they enter into a partnership with one another. One participant noted how “artists come to you like a shop. You become responsible for the aspects that are not sexy such as admin work, for instance. It is hard to find someone to fulfil these roles”, adding how “there is an element of risk involved” when taking on a new artist because neither the artist nor the producer know how the relationship will pan out when they first start out.

Even from the participants present it was evident that there are different types of producers – some become a ‘family’ with their clients, while others prefer to keep a distance, following a more structured approach. Related to this, it was concluded that it is OK to say no to some artists. “It's a liberating feeling and they will probably be happier anyway with another producer,” observed Racz.

This aspect is related to responsibility and further questions arose relating to what the expectations of the artist and the producer are of each other, and who is responsible for what. In the end, it boils down to who takes responsibility for what, and certainly, the notion that ‘you do the show and I do the rest’ is a mistaken one from the artist's point of view, who must take responsibility in the leadership of their own career, as do producers of their own business.

Concerning trust, many agreed that each relationship between artist and producer is different and that building a trustful relationship usually takes time. Indeed, some producers had contracts with their artists; others did not, or created them far later on into the working relationship.

Advertising your services

How does and how should the producer advertise their services? This, said Laia Montoya, manager at La Intrusa in Spain, largely is “about having confidence with the artist and with knowing what the artist needs and what [the producer] can do for the project.” This, for instance, means that an important part of the work of a producer is knowing the artist well enough to have the confidence and liberty to advertise the artist as they deem fit.

Producers advertise, or do not advertise their services, in different ways as these very much vary on the project in question. One participant, who liaises between Taiwan and the UK commented:

“My role with my artists is about supporting what artists need and what they can do for themselves. I don’t write their funding application. I do their marketing and their finance. I develop their work and then we go for the funding. I ask my clients how they prepare for their funding application and once this is successful, then I start working with them. I don’t have a list of services I offer, but I ask what the artist needs.”

Topic Three: The success and failure of already existing organisations

Moderated by Victor Leclere this working group saw a turnout of some 20 people and although they did not tackle the primary subject, they reported to have exchanged a lot of ideas about the situations in different countries:

While there is certainly a lack of producers, there is a fear of losing independent producers as they are going back to working with institutions. This raised the pertinent question of “what do freelancers actually get back out of being freelancers?” A poignant issue that arose here was also a political one in that there is a problem in some countries in starting international co-operations, which is hindering the emergence of producers in an environment where they are very much in demand.

Conclusions and observations

Positively too big

Having not anticipated such a great turnout, the moderators concurred that they will need to reevaluate the questions. Contacts were collected from those who wished to continue the discussion further on perhaps a more regular basis.

The role of the producer: an unavoidable question

The question regarding the role per se of the producer was deliberately avoided in the producer-artist relationship working group, as perhaps this would take up too much time. However, the participants in the “artist/producer” group often found themselves going back to what this really was. The success/failure group, on the other hand, did explore this question and reached a hypothesis that drew comparisons between a project manager and a producer. While the producer is “someone who is there before the money comes in and who initiates the project itself”, the project manager “is there when the money comes in”. Is there an opportunity for the two to start a project together they asked? Perhaps, but certainly there is a need to define the role of the producer further.

Getting stuff done

A guiding topic for the way forward could be the answer to the question “How does stuff get done?”. “Focusing on how we do stuff, how we produce is the way forward,” commented one participant. The question is not what you call yourself, but the way you work. Do you work on an operational or a strategic level? Are you trying to develop a project or a company? Is this a long-term or a short-time collaboration? This, he said, will help reach a commonality of understanding the process and better defining the role of the producer.