WG A1: I Speak Through My Programme
The Politics of Programming
May 16th 2008 – 14.30-16.30

Moderator: Jan Ritsema (Performing Arts Forum - www.pa-f.net)
Speakers: Priit Raud (Kanuti Gildi SAAL - www.saal.ee) , Ursula Cetinski (Slovensko mladinsko gledali__e - - www.mladinsko.com) , Mark Murphy (REDCAT – CalArts - www.redcat.org)

Report by Brina Stinelhelfer (brina.kate@gmail.com)

Moderator Jan Ritsema opened the discussion with a question to the audience: What do you expect or want from this discussion?" There was a slight murmur of embarrassment before the topic suggestions started shooting out.
-"How much of your decision is based on personal taste?"
-"In relation to the community your theater serves, are you a leader or a follower?"
-"How much does your ideal program change based on other circumstances, such as politics?"
-"What do you consider to be your relationship to your audience? Would you even use the term ´my audience´?"
And finally, a question which I think skirted around the one that was really on many people's minds:
-"Do you have to know programmers personally in order to get your work booked?" (Or, how do I get my work booked?)
At this point, a story was told about a young theater company at a meeting who offered massages to all of the programmers there. And did it work? "It worked."

The panel consisted of three programmers who use the platform of their professions to champion artists, encourage the development of new forms, and hopefully, to influence an audience and thereby, a culture. Each shared his/her biography and history within the field, and some of their main aims and ambitions as a programmer.

The discussion opened with REDCAT Artistic director Mark Murphy. REDCAT is an acronym for the Roy and Edna Disney/CalArts Theater, which is used both as an independent venue for cutting-edge performance and art, attracting artists from around the world, and a sometime laboratory for students of California Institute of the Arts, a private university which provides progressive and experimental training for students in all areas of the arts.
Mark Murphy was the Artistic Director of On the Boards, a contemporary performing arts center in Seattle, where he developed a unique model for combining the disparate acts of producing and presenting - helping emerging and established artists to create and tour new work, and also serving as a leading host of major international and national productions. Murphy helped arrange the first U.S. performances by many international artists which would otherwise never have the opportunity to present their work in the US.
Mark stressed the importance of supporting contemporary art which challenges not only traditional forms, but also social norms, and considers his work as a programmer a vital role in not only enriching his community, but also challenging it. "I always ask, is this something that my community needs to see?" he said. "The one thing I will not support is a work that is overtly racist or sexist." If discrimination exists, there must be a purpose for it. This is not only a personal choice, but a feeling of responsibility to the community- which is not to say that nothing provocative passes through the doors of REDCAT, quite the contrary, but the selection of work keeps a watchful eye on inadvertently supporting or perpetuating discriminatory views in a culture which is already very much a heated powder keg where such issues are concerned.

The panel then turned to Ursula Cetinski, one of the founders of the progressive City of Women festival, who also worked for the major and influential Slovenian venue, Cancarev Dom, and now runs Slovensko mladinsko gledali_ce, the resident company based theater house which was also the platform for many interesting performances during the IETM meeting. Ursula proudly announced that she comes from a strong history of punk and feminism, and that background continues to influence her choices even today. She got her start in one of the only independent radio stations in the area, pushing the boundaries of what was acceptable in that medium, and giving new opportunity to a generation of future artists.

The Association for the Promotion of Women in Culture - City of Women was founded in 1996 in Ljubljana, and aims to raise the visibility of high-quality innovative creations by women artists, theoreticians and activists from all over the world, thereby provoking debate and raising awareness regarding the currently disproportionate participation and representation of women in arts and culture, as well as in society as a whole.

Ursula stressed the importance of the programmer's role, not only in the artistic community, but in society in general. By asking 'What kind of an audience do I want?' one is also asking 'What kind of a society do I want?', and the programmer's role in influencing an audience can in turn influence the society. "Perhaps art cannot completely change or reverse people's minds," she admitted, "But it can influence people on the fence of an issue." And that is certainly a start. Ursula's call to arms is a provocation of culture to fight the encroaching capitalism and consumerism which is becoming embedded in and controlling of every facet of our lives. And the way to fight is through art. Good art keeps people coming back, but it needs strong will, and a responsibility to give an audience it needs, rather than merely what one's personal preferences may be.

Priit Raud is the artistic director of the Baltoscandal festival, the first international theatre festival in Baltic States, held in Rakvere, Estonia. He is also responsible for setting up an organization called 2.tans, originally created to spread information about what was happening in the dance scene, and now a production and receiving office which provides touring management for most of Estonia's independent choreographers and dancers. His venue at the time of its inception was the only one for alternative theater in the nation. Priit told artists who were potential guests of the theater, "If you can do it somewhere else, do." He is responsible for kick starting the contemporary dance and theater scene in Estonia, and is arguably the main organizer, catalyst and publicist for the art form in the nation.

It is nearly two decades since Estonia regained it's independence from the Soviet Union, and the subsequent strong and sudden influx of support and funding for the arts has created some exciting developments, and new opportunities for artists to develop and express themselves. Indeed, the alternative performing arts scene in Estonia has developed at an impressive rate in such a short time, and Priit stressed the value of the personal approach to programming, saying that above all, he serves the artists, through residencies, career development and development of the art form through long term support. "Don't count the number in the audience" he said, "count the mark on history"

Moderator Jan Ritsema queried each of the panelists as to what percent (out of 200) they seek to serve:
Themselves
Politicians
Artists
Audience
Sponsors

The responses differed slightly, but the overwhelming response was an adamant support of the audience and the artists; in essence, the community. A heated discussion ensued amongst members of the discussion audience regarding the comparison of state versus national funding for the arts, and the constraints that each put upon the possible percentage allocations of their service through programming. It seemed that every city and venue had different struggles and advantages, based on the source, amount, and regulations of its funding. At this point the conversation digressed into so many accounts of personal experiences dealing with the frustrations of meeting requirements, fighting to maintain a voice for the artist, and attempting to meet the particular needs of the community, that it became clear that programming is, after all, quite a personal issue. Because every situation is so unique in terms of not only how they can survive financially, but what the community needs in terms of exposure to new forms and challenges to social norms, that it seems almost impossible to compare them.

The programmer's role is indeed an important one, for they are the gatekeepers to a platform which can shape the life of an artist, an artistic movement, a community, or indeed an entire culture. After the two hours discourse on topics ranging from favoritism from national governments in their allocation of funds to particular cities, to the nearly forced presentation of a sexist homophobe (who also happened to be black) in an effort to meet the requirements of representing ethnic diversity, nearly all of the subjects requested in the initial forum suggestion box were touched upon:
-Personal taste is, of course, always a factor in determining programming.
-In relation to the community it is encouraged to be neither a leader nor a follower, but rather an educator, and instigator.

-There are always extenuating circumstances which may inhibit or prevent the realization of the "ideal program", mostly revolving around the two things which are intrinsically linked both to the business of the arts and to each other: money and politics.
- The relationship to the audience is ideally a very personal one, for we are all, programmers, producers, artists and the like, there because of them, whether that means educating, challenging, or simply sharing, those who dedicate themselves to the performing arts (almost) always have the audience in mind.
And "How do I get my work booked?"
Be what the community needs to see at that particular moment, what the financiers are willing and able to support, and the programmers know and enjoy.
Easy, right?