

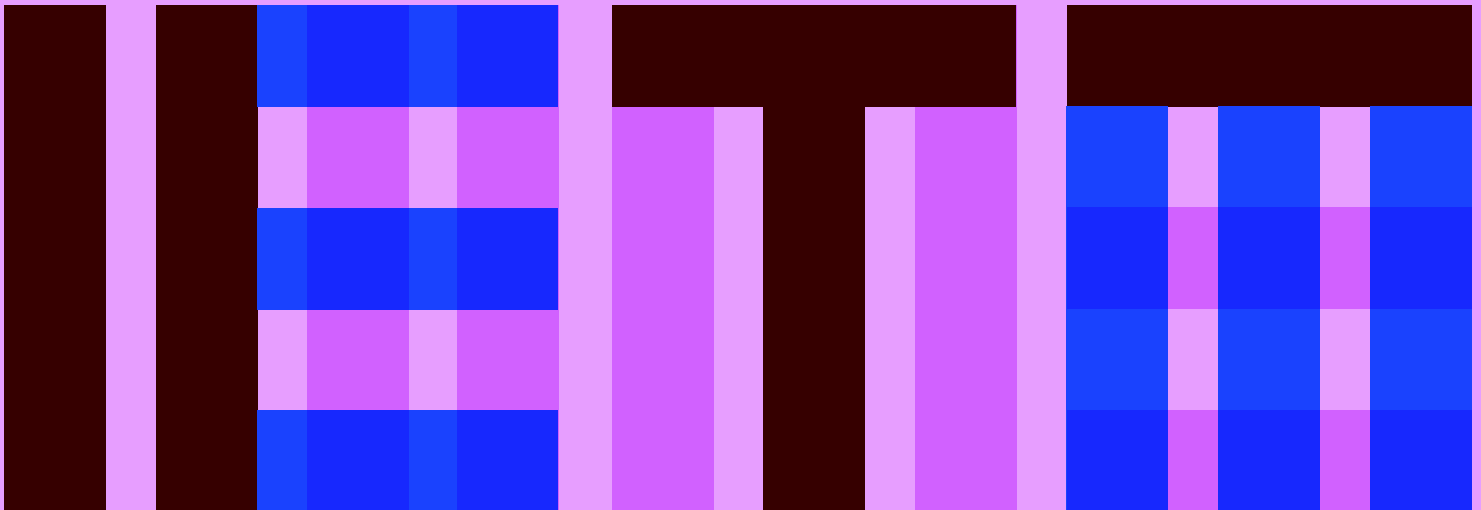


Report

# *Feminist leadership*

from the IETM Belgrade Plenary Meeting

By Lian Bell



**IETM Report**  
*Feminist leadership*  
by Lian Bell

**Report from the IETM Belgrade  
Plenary Meeting, 29.09 — 02.10  
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## Summary of the report

This report gives an overview of the session, the topics raised and discussions with the panel and the audience. It was a very animated session which introduced a topic for IETM to visit in future meetings.

The session took place in one of the cinema venues in MTS Dvorana, the main location for the IETM Belgrade meeting. It was a panel discussion in front of an audience of approximately 50 participants.

The overview of the session as given in the IETM programme was:

*How can a position of power influence our ability to make changes? Are we ready to give up the position of power in order to create something democratic, diverse, participative? What are the alternative models of management in culture, and how can feminist theories guide us into finding a new approach?*

# Feminist leadership

90 MINUTE PANEL DISCUSSION

SATURDAY 1 OCTOBER 2022

BY LIAN BELL

**Panel:**

**Isa Köhler**  
nrw landesbuero tanz, Germany

**Ksenija Đurović**  
Bitef, Serbia

**Lisa Marie DiLiberto**  
Theatre Direct Canada, Canada

**Moderator:**

**Markiza de Sada**  
Independent curator and Drag Artist, Serbia

*Isa Köhler is a Berlin based producer and co-director of the [internationale tanzmesse nrw](#). With a background in dance and theatre studies, Isa has worked for Pact Zollverein, Tanztheater Wuppertal Pina Bausch, Pina Bausch Foundation, Tanz im August and Dance On Ensemble. Currently, she is also a jury member of the multiannual dance funding programme by the State of North-Rhine Westphalia.*

*Ksenija Đurović is the Programme Producer of [Bitef festival](#), Belgrade and a cultural worker focusing on production and organisation models of the independent scene in Serbia and the region of Yugoslavia.*

*Lisa Marie DiLiberto is the founding Artistic Director of [FIXT POINT Arts and Media](#) and the co-creator of [The Tale of a Town – Canada](#), a multi-year theatre and media project that has toured to every province and territory. Inspired by stories from [The Tale of a Town](#), Lisa Marie co-created and directed the first season of [Main Street Ontario](#), an animated series now airing its second season on TVO. Her past positions include Playwright-in-Residence at Theatre Passe Muraille, Associate Artistic Director at Jumblies Theatre, and Education & Audience Development Coordinator at Canadian Stage. Lisa Marie holds a Masters of Arts in Theatre and Performance Studies from York University and is currently pursuing her PhD. She is an Artistic Advisor for the National Arts Centre of Canada, a graduate of George Brown Theatre School and École Philippe Gaulier in Paris, France. Lisa Marie is an advocate for artist caregivers, a Dora-nominated director, and the proud mom of two children.*

*Markiza de Sada is the [drag alter ego](#) of Vladimir Bjeličić, an independent curator/performer. Throughout a decade of her presence, she has written dozens of texts, including a radio drama, hosted numerous public events, and even did a major fashion multi-brand campaign. Markiza is a founding member of [Ephemeral Confessions](#) collective, co-creator of the [Queer Respirator](#) project, and often collaborates with her peer [Dekadence](#) with whom she organizes an influential Belgrade-based show, [The Last Chance](#).*

While welcoming the audience at the beginning of the session, the moderator - glamorous drag artist Markiza de Sada - used a humorous tone and interviewed the panel in an irreverent and provocative manner. With a series of striking powerpoint slides to punctuate the conversation, she divided the session into three chapters and built a number of quirky halts into the debate, including a quiz moment and what would prove to be a triggering 'gossip break'. She drew a parallel between the discussion and this year's Bitef Festival theme focusing on arts and labour, and with the protests currently happening in Belgrade and in Iran on the status of women. The panelist, Lisa Marie also underlined the connection with the production *World Without Women* that was programmed in the Bitef Festival.



IETM Belgrade Plenary Meeting © Dragan Mujan

## The matter of class privilege and cultural labour issues

Panelists and participants shared signs of structural change around them: funding frameworks, production models and touring practices that raise the bar by enhancing the visibility of disabled artists and audiences and centering their needs. Examples included:

Markiza asked the participants how this related to the topic of Feminist Leadership. Lisa Marie started the discussion with the role of parents and carers in the arts, and the right to be an artist while having family. "Why does it so often have to be a choice?" She referred to the [Balancing Act](#) in Canada, an organisation that aims to increase equality, accessibility, and inclusion for parents and caregivers working in the performing arts.

Isa mentioned that she is relatively new in her leadership role at Tanzmesse, since she started sharing the Director role with her colleague Katharina Kucher a year ago. They are the first women, and the first co-directors, to run the festival. They have put a group of co-curators in place to create a new team for making decisions : Julia Asperska (Poland), Quito Tembe (Mozambique), Natacha Melo (Uruguay), and Dan Daw (UK). This was a choice to move the decision making conversation to a diverse group with many voices.

Markiza asked Ksenija about her thoughts on the gender wage gap. Ksenija responded that it is easy to keep such information hidden in the arts, and it can be difficult to know what the gap even is. She made the point that Bitef is a champion of equality among the theatre organisations in Serbia, but it also has one of the smallest budgets. She referenced a Serbian saying: '*Little woman, little stage*' – echoing the kind of arguments that are often heard around women's stories not being 'big' enough or universal enough to belong to big stages and big budgets.

There was a discussion about the background of those in leadership roles. Isa said that in Germany it is only slowly being addressed. Many leaders are academics, and there is a system of unpaid internships that only allows those with some financial security to take part. How can someone enter this professional field without any money? It's rare for people from lower classes to be seen in leadership roles.

Lisa Marie indicated that there is a rise of female leaders in organisations that have smaller budgets, rather than those with bigger budgets. There is also the issue of partner's support and access to childcare if a female worker is also a mother. Single mothers have little or no chance to access these leadership roles, and single mothers of colour are the most excluded. It is common for women working in the theatre to give up their job to be the carer, because they earn the least.



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Ksenija referenced a research project 'Gender Equality for Cultural Diversity' which tackles the factors that create gender inequality in the arts, and aims to contribute to fairer access to culture and better working conditions for women. As part of the research, Ksenija explained the case of an actress working in one of the smaller city theatres. This actress said that despite having a salary (a privilege, compared to many other female cultural workers), she was unable to be as involved as she wanted because the working conditions were not suitable. Because of the lack of childcare, she had to bring her child to rehearsals. She also mentioned women delaying motherhood because of the difficult housing situation in Serbia.

Lisa Marie stressed that it is possible to introduce flexible hours at rehearsals and childcare provision at events. Organisations should pay more attention to childcare's needs.

While showing a photo of American comedian Amy Poehler from the film *Mean Girls*, Markiza asked the panelists and the audience to share hot gossip. This was followed by a slightly uncomfortable silence.

## The notion of gender in a broader sense

Markiza introduced the question of collective management. Isa stressed that in Germany, feminist thinking is still quite binary. She mentioned a mentorship programme for female leaders, and noted that women do not want to be educated only among women. In terms of programming, Tanzmesse is currently discussing guidelines to support diversity. Indeed, the programmers want to reflect the diversity of the audience on the stage.

Lisa Marie stressed that it is important to notice who is in the room and who is missing. Being inclusive is important because it creates richer art and conversation, and it is in the DNA of theatre creators to be collaborative. Isa mentioned a comment she received while evaluating the recent Tanzmesse activities, where someone complained that the programme focused more on politics than quality. She agreed that it is political because it is in her interest as a programmer. She is making specific decisions informed by her politics about supporting artists, including giving those who may not have the opportunity the room to develop their practice.

Ksenija commented that Bitef is not run under collective management (like Isa's new management structure of Tanzmesse) but has two men in power, and two women who execute their decisions. She explained how collective decision making is more emotional. According to her, you invest more time and care in the team when you have a collective feminist leadership. Ksenija also noted that when there are many people representing an organisation, there is a branding issue, as it is less clear who is the 'face' of the organisation.

Markiza then moved to a 'quiz time' section, which also created a slightly awkward silence in the audience, until one participant (Terri Brennan of Inclusive Voices, Canada) stood up from the audience to make a comment. She first explained that she was feeling very uncomfortable with the tone of Markiza's moderation of the conversation. (There was a palpable tension in the room.) She felt that Markiza was portraying an offensive representation of women, and that it interfered with a very interesting and vital topic. The discussion should not reinforce stereotypes about women gossiping, but rather focus on the important topic of the session. Other members of the audience also felt offended.

Markiza was clearly taken off guard by this comment. Ksenija stressed that the decision to structure the session this way, and to present it in a light-hearted manner, was taken collectively between Markiza and the panelists, not just by the moderator. She was sorry to hear that it was seen by some as offensive. Another member of the audience noted that this unconventional approach did not work.

Isa explained that they had decided to discuss serious topics while using a joyful tone. She was particularly happy to have a drag artist as a moderator, and not have drag only featuring in a party context. It was also important to bring a queer artist on stage. Markiza made the point that drag has a history of being subversive, and this is how they wanted to structure this session.

There was a comment from the audience stressing that they do not need jokes for this kind of debate. Others agreed that in this context it may not be appropriate to use jokes. Discussion also focused on the fact that drag artists are often only being used in a humorous context. When discussion calmed down, Markiza moved to Chapter III, which was, ironically, titled '**Polarisation in feminist discourse**' and provoked a few laughs. Markiza continued her moderation with a more subdued tone.

Before moving on, Lisa Marie wanted to make the point that comedy has the power to provoke political thought and that it takes courage to find that space.

She discussed the issue of women not being enough in positions of power as often as they should, and that systems are often built by and for cis white men. Within these systems, the role of women is often to be a carer, and men are the ones who work. She concluded with a quote from a song by American songwriter Ani DiFranco "*Some guy designed these shoes I use to walk around. Some big man's business turns a profit every time I lay my money down. Some guy designed this room I'm standing in while other ones built it with their own tools. Who says I like right angles? These are not my laws. These are not my rules.*"



Isa talked about how she and her co-director at tanzmesse did not want to highlight that they were co-*female* directors. They wanted to use their position to change the whole structure and bring more people along with them. They wanted to go beyond male and female and focus on intersectionality. She mentioned the current levels of hatred towards trans artists, when they were presenting work by a trans artist from Norway on the same day that a young trans person was killed at a Pride parade in Munster in Germany.

Ksenija brought up the word 'emancipation', explaining that there is still a lot to be done in this field. It will be achieved through 'deschooling' in the sense that people need to 'unlearn' systems supporting the patriarchal model - and that we still have a lot to do on a very basic level for the future to be conceptualised differently. .

Markiza also brought up the issue of sexual harassment and the behaviours of some male directors. Ksenija replied that this year was very important in Serbia for the artistic field to demystify this issue. It was not specifically a Me Too moment, but there has been a series of stories that came out about men in positions of power behaving badly. After a third man, a famous actor, had allegations made against him, Ksenija mentioned this to her grandmother, who implied that the alleged victims must be lying. Ksenija encouraged her to think back through her own life as a saleswoman in a shop in socialist Yugoslavia, and the behaviours she had seen. Together they realised that violence and aggression were so normalised that it has become invisible. She also mentioned the recent protests following the release of a serial rapist who claimed that he would resume his actions. All organisations, she stressed, must put in place procedures to deal with sexual harassment.

Markiza asked how women and nature are often seen as intertwined, in a way that can be reductive. She wondered how this materialised in the theatre.

Lisa Marie stressed that the world of activism must intersect with the world of care. That female-identifying people are the ones predominantly putting more of their daily time into that. Isa responded to Markiza's question that often stereotypes that we see on stage can be reductive, and that they can be created by women too.

There was a discussion about how having the opportunity to care is a gift, and how men should have a chance to take care too.

Markiza asked what would be the ideal female leadership? According to Ksenija, what is happening in Tanzmesse is a good example, as there is an atmosphere of respect, team working and support.

Isa thought that time and resources are key, and new male role models on stage are needed. Lisa Marie explained that we need to hear new leading voices and most importantly a continued system change.

Markiza asked for reactions from the floor. One comment suggested to work less, and how those who have the capacity to slow down need to be leaders, and model this kind of behaviour. Another comment stressed the need to pay attention to invisible labour and identify it. A third reaction was from Milena Dragičević Šešić, sharing her experience of going in front of an all-male jury at her entry exam at the Faculty of Dramatic Arts in Belgrade 50 years ago, and how it humiliated her. This year, she noted that there were only female professors on the jury. We have to thank generations of women for the work that they have done in this area, she concluded.

Isa mentioned that power can also be abused by women and we need to always be aware of how power works, and not fall into old traps.

#### Additional note:

*At the "Talks and Listens session" later, this session was brought back up and discussed. In general, the feedback was very positive. People said that the fact that there was a point of tension and challenge is perhaps a good indication and something IETM could look at discussing in the future. There might be a need to create a space to discuss and deconstruct moments of tension and challenge in the future.*

