

Krokus Festival 2019

intercontinental artistic exchanges and collaborations in the framework of the project
THINK LOCAL CREATE GLOBAL

Keynote

When Gerhard invited me to write the keynote for this gathering, and we began the “ping-pong” of ideas, the first thing I did was to write a long list of very broad questions; What can we learn from each other between countries in Europe and Latin America today? How about China? What is the role of international alliances and networks in the field of performing arts in general? What are artists in the area of TYA around the world talking about today? What are the stories that are being told? Are those stories relevant to each other or are they too inward-looking and only speak about and to a specific audience and culture? Are those stories worth sharing with people in other countries? Are we interested in investing resources to generate intercontinental collaborations? Why? Do we, people in TYI sector, believe that it is worth it?

Intercontinental or cross-cultural exchanges even when narrowed down to artistic interactions, is an infinite field to explore. Literature is filled with research and case studies looking at the issue from different perspectives and each of these questions could constitute a whole new PHD thesis to add to the existing ones. Of course my intention here today is not to fully address them all or come with full answers- because unfortunately I don't have them!- but I would only like to share a few thoughts and insights that have I gathered mainly from three sources: the conversations around the subject I have had with colleagues from different countries at various international meetings, the findings of a research I carried out last summer for my MBA in Cultural Management final dissertation-which was focused in one of the questions from the list- and finally, personal experience. I hope this helps to provoke further reflection and discussion that might generate new questions, ideas, thought or inspiration for the work we do.

Over the past 3 years, while living in Paris, I have had the opportunity to observe, learn from and take part in various intercontinental artistic exchanges of different kinds. Mostly, but not only, focused on TYA. I have been involved in artistic projects that have aimed to build bridges between Europe and Latin America and Europe with China, where together with the good intentions of cultural-bridging, it has also been about trading. In the case of Latin America, it has been mainly about exports and in the case of China it has been about imports. These two terms are commonly used in economic exchanges and immediately come out when we look at intercontinental cooperation from a business perspective. Because we have been more and more pushed to apply economic and business reasoning to our domain, is that we have no choice but to learn how to master it. However, the reasons why we do intercontinental artistic exchanges should go way beyond that.

For many years, the business environment has taken advantage of organizational structures such strategic intercontinental alliances to help them expand their markets, internationalize their services and products, and economize resources. Concepts

such as intercontinental cooperation, intercultural exchanges and other notions related to collaboration, have been strategically linked with saving resources and increasing revenue. Given that in our field we are most of the time lacking in tangible assets, loaded with intangibles, desperate to keep our projects alive and hopefully increase our revenue, there is a lot for us to take from the business world. Today, performing arts organization of all sizes don't survive with just a capable administrator or a fundraiser. They increasingly need skilled managers and producers to look at ways to make the organizations more financially resilient and sustainable while maintaining the artistic quality. Their role is key in the creative chain and exploring how to make the most of intercontinental artistic exchanges and collaborations in this framework should be one of their main tasks.

The concepts of international alliance and networks in the performing art world, are still tremendously unexplored. As a result of my research study, I gathered that performing art players are willing to collaborate amongst each other to gain personal and collective benefits but are still using these forms of collaboration mainly as social interaction between peers. The possibilities ahead to use these forms of organization to expand the industrial capacity are vast. As John Newbigin reveals in his report commissioned by the British Council in 2017, Creative industries have increasingly grown in importance and impact in today's world economy¹. As part of these industries, the performing arts in all its forms is a key player. As the interested in developing the "creative factor" in humans is expanding, opportunities for development for the TYA sector also increase. There is a rising need to connect and collaborate with others outside the performing arts industry, on the search for new income streams but additionally, to discover new scenarios to impact.

As I mentioned earlier, to survive the global economic environment where we all are immerse, us involved in the creative chain have no choice but to learn how to navigate in it without forgetting that we seek international collaborations for a bigger purpose. To build a healthy artistic ecosystem we should use the organizational structures and concepts indicated here, to increase economic sustainability for sure, also as a form of social interaction as we have been doing so far but, essentially, **as a way to learn how to listen**. I believe that this is a particularly critical point in today's world that seems to be boiling with intolerance. We are led by people that claim to have the truth. Their story and the one they tell who they rule, is the only one that counts. As professional storytellers we have the responsibility to stop this, by demonstrating that the story of THE OTHER, the one I didn't grow up in, is as valid as mine and it has as much truth and meaning as mine².

Literature about Intercultural Communication reveals that the meeting of SELF and OTHER does not occur in vacuum. We are always positioned within systems of power therefore being aware of the position of my SELF when encountering the OTHER is the first step towards profound listening and understanding. Humberto Maturana, a Chilean biologist and philosopher says: the more I listen the more I see, and if I see more, I connect more things that were separated. In summary: it is a

¹ *British Council's Creative and Cultural Economy Series* (2017) Published by The British Council England
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², *Mind Self and Society from the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist* (Edited by Charles W. Morris). George Herbert Mead
Chicago: University of Chicago (1934).

disposition, it is a willingness to let something appear, without prejudice. Maturana also add that “If I listen from a competitive perspective, I will find that what the other offers is insufficient but If I listen from the collaboration, I will find that there are certain dimensions from which I could contribute. Then, it is possible to co-create and write a common story³.

When it comes to positioning the SELF within the power setups, Augusto Boal, a Brazilian theater practitioner, drama theorist, and political activist, has a compelling word.⁴ His work with the “Teatro del oprimido” (theatre of the oppressed) left us the legacy that theatre, has above all, the mission to transform, give access to, empower and fearlessly break the barriers that prevents us from encountering the other. By listening without prejudice, Boal rescues neglected people’s stories and dignifies them. The “Theatre of the oppressed” sits the oppressed and the oppressor at the same table at the same level. This is a legacy that many Latin American artists carry with them. Some of the most interesting stories told by performing artists from the region are about the marginalized. They share the wisdom of indigenous cultures and dignify the tales of the poorest and voiceless of the society that unfortunately are not necessarily minorities in number. The work of Silencio Blanco is a clear example of this.

As well as that legacy, Latin American artist have much more to share. Despite all its conflicts, political disasters, corruption and violence, the region still provides a healthy and unexplored land, a still non-contaminated territory, open, free and playful. That openness and playfulness is something that many Latin-American artists have capitalized in their practices and creations. It constitutes a methodology for many that approach their work from the intuition, from making mistakes and starting again. The idiosyncrasy relate to the landscape and is connected to cultural roots that perhaps some Europeans have forgotten or are somehow removed from. At the same time, the Latin American precariousness one way or another boost the creativity of many artist that have to be flexible and adaptable to all sorts of changes. There is a richness in creative thinking emerging from the Latin American region that its worth learning from.

In 2017 I was involved in a project where 20 Chilean contemporary dancers co-created a performance with another 20 local dancers in Holland and in France. Over 3 intensive weeks in each country, the dancers got together to create *Rito de Primavera*, a contemporary dance piece staging Stravinsky’s *The Rite of Spring*⁵. The performance was going to be shown at the Holland Festival and at the Marseille Festival that summer. For all of them it was the first time to work with a mixed cast of artists that came from totally different backgrounds. There where fears, prejudices and many resistances to overcome, but their bodies where curious to find out WHO this OTHER was. the Chilean dancers were impressed with their fellow European sense of rigor, discipline and precision and on the other hand the European dancers where fascinated by the chilean’s capacity to through themselves without thinking too much and to deeply enjoy the work they were doing. I know it sound like the typical cliché, but the truth is that none of those 40 dancers are the same anymore. After the experience they all changed and grew, in their bodies and in their minds. They

³ *El sentido de lo humano*. Humberto Maturana R. Editorial Hachette (1991)

⁴ *Theatre of the oppressed*. Augusto Boal. Pluto Press (1979)

⁵ Jose Vidal and co. <http://www.josevidalcompania.cl>

integrated a different story and witnessed what emerges from the fusion of two different ones. That is the kind of impact that I think we should be looking when seeking international artistic collaborations.

Achieving the same level of transformative encounter was what motivated me to get involved in a project working with China. Peter Manscher a Danish colleague invited me to take part on what had been a little dream for him over many years; To find a way to build profound understanding and cultural bridges between China and Europe through the development of TYI. Unfortunately, I haven't been able to experience it yet. We'll get there, but it will take time, we need to change the strategy and find partners here and there with curious bodies and open minds that are willing to be transformed. We haven't been able to move beyond the cultural colonialism were "I teach you what is good, and you copy and paste it". That's the way the business work I say to myself to decrease the guilt, but really? Do I really want to be involved in that business? What for? And the trouble is that I have to accept the fact that I do believe that what I have to offer is better than what they have to give me. So, I find myself falling into the same trap.

The goal of what we pursue as artists, creatives, managers and producers by collaborating with each other, by interchanging ideas, visions, interpretations and philosophies should be to help us realise that we are not prisoners of our story, the story we were told it was ours. On the contrary we can embrace the story of the OTHER and even better, create a new one that emerges from the blending of ours and theirs, old and new, personal and collective. Our mission is to share that realisation with our audiences. To transform fear into creativity.

We have all had to share our worlds with other people at some point. We have had to welcome others in our lives. At different levels, by chance or by choice. We know the value of that. We also know that diversity makes us richer. We know diversity makes us stronger and better human beings. Enlarge our capacity to love and therefore makes us happier people. I believe that presenting shows from different cultures and continents is a valid attempt to achieve greater diversity and cultural encounters but is not enough. The challenge is to take collaboration further and beyond the artistic trade. We have to move towards cultural fusion and that's possible when we acknowledge our position whitening the power structures, are willing to listen, and to co-create with those that don't belong to my tribe.