

THINK LOCAL CREATE GLOBAL - thoughts on mutuality, export and import'
Gerhard Verfaillie, march 2019

Some years ago I was abroad, attending a festival TYA. One afternoon there was a symposium on internationalization. Two local companies were invited to present their experiences as they had been travelling to Mexico and Nigeria, supported by the government and different art councils. The result were some videos on adventurous travelling and meetings with nice local artists. It was also mentioned that the companies had performed in the schoolyard and it was highly stressed that they had given workshops to local artists. On my question if those workshops were mutual and if the European artists had also been given workshops by those local artists, the answer was that I had to understand that our theatre was much more developed and of higher quality.

In my first emotional reply, I believe I have used term 'artistic colonialism'. Later I started analyzing the situation more carefully.

The main question is: why do we talk about internationalization in the arts and also in the arts for young audiences 'only' / 'mostly' in terms of export from the west to the 'other'? And why is this definitely the case in my own region, in Flanders (in Belgium)? Why are we so eager to present our work in foreign countries, for a long time mostly European, now more and more on a global scale? And why are we so reluctant / hesitant to invite foreign companies and artists to present their work here?

Can we find the main explanation in practicalities and/or finances? Or is there more at stake, e.g. aesthetical an artistic norms, quality and excellence? If so, this leads us to the question if excellence / quality is culturally determined? Is it regionally defined? And again, if so, how important are aesthetics and the prejudices often linked to them? Or

does the explanation even transcend the artistic field into the ideological, political or market-oriented business reasons?

Is the import side of internationalization in Flanders neglected? I admit, I cannot give you exact data nor numbers because they don't exist. Flemish Kunstenpunt (ex Flanders Art Institute) has given a lot of attention to data research and debate on internationalization. In their fact and figures I find useful information on the presentation of Flemish shows abroad and about coproductions but nothing about import, about how many international shows for young audiences are presented in Flanders, which shows, from which companies, from which countries nor where they are presented (festivals, companies with a venue, cultural centres). As there are also no data about international artistic exchanges and laboratories. But an incomplete personal research makes clear that, next to a number of Dutch shows – less than before, in the old days – there are “very very” occasional presentations of international shows in cultural centre, “very” occasional in companies with a venue and some more in festivals, Krokusfestival being the exception with 17 foreign companies.

Assitej Belgium has just started a Belgian year of TYA and plans a workshop on internationalization. The announcement of that event states (translation from Dutch): ‘In this workshop Belgian professionals will exchange experiences about the organization and financial aspects of international work in TYA.’

I hope, I sincerely hope, this is more than once again a one-sided focus on the export side.

Looking for explanations, three of them are situated within the artistic TYA field: competence, organization and finances. Presenting international shows requires prospection opportunities for presenters, bring along a lot of practical issues (flights, transport, visa, accommodation, catering, technics) and, often presented as the argument, costs a lot. All of them are 100% true. All of them are at the same time 100% excuses. Once made the decision to present

work from abroad, all of this is part of that choice, part of that determination, part of the job. Building up networks, connecting to international colleagues, sharing experiences about organization, splitting travel and accommodation costs: the solutions are remarkably easy to find.

So why does it not happen? Maybe it is indeed more about that 'why' than about 'how'. That raises questions about the necessity of presenting foreign performances. Is there a necessity to present them?

Let me tell you another story. Four years ago I was attending a meeting on internationalization in Brussels. Almost at the end, I asked, you guess, the question on import. I will always remember the answer by a well-known artistic director of a TYA company that there was not that necessity to spend so much Belgian tax money on that as the quality of all the foreign shows he had seen was far less than 'ours'. So, to prove there was no necessity to present international shows, the argument of excellence was used.

In my first emotional reaction terms like 'artistic protectionism' came to my mind. Later, indeed, I started to reflect on those words.

And I started reflecting deeper on quality and excellence.

Who defines "excellence"? Is it the critics, the researchers, the artists themselves, the cultural policy makers, the educators, the funders, the audience or the so-called experts?

The latter are often recognized as the definers, but whoever defines excellence in art also ultimately holds the power of interpretation, of censorship, of criticism, of what gets produced and of what is in their turn regarded by audiences as excellence.

But, and this brings me closer to the so-called lack of necessity of presenting foreign shows, if we allow a certain cultural grouping to

define excellence, we are in danger of excluding, marginalizing and alienating others and other forms of excellence.

In my opinion excellence can be seen as culture-dependent, such as ethnic culture, community culture, linguistic culture, and even childhood culture. I don't believe that we can consider excellence to be a static concept, but rather it needs to be understood as being intrinsically subjective, and context-dependent. Rather than one kind of excellence, there are in my opinion, many diverse excellences. What is excellent in one cultural environment might be experienced differently in another context. Differently, for sure, but not less in excellence as was told around that meeting table in Brussels because that expresses a narrow-minded and even rather protective projection of quality.

Allow me one step further. The origin of our appreciation seems to be our western aesthetics, very much linked with our concept of "contemporary arts". But why do we continue to call an art form "contemporary" only/mostly when it's related to the "western" arts history?

One of the reasons is probably that the most people doing that belong to the "progressive" part of the leading well-to-do middle class, with a politically liberal mindset, and rooted in post-industrialization capitalism. In short, contemporary art is merely a privilege of middle-class liberated and educated prototype-westerners.

Reflecting on that meeting in Brussels, I now think that, next to the practicalities and finances I already questioned as excuses, the lack of international TYA shows in my region is due to this idea/feeling/status that makes us all think / watch / feel in one major aesthetical way, even in such a way that it prohibits an open eye to different excellences from different cultures.

At this point we have met with four reasons not to present international shows, not ,having mentioned the ecological questions. Those environmental issues challenge us to dive even further and deeper into our argumentations. What reason can justify the footprint of a company or a festival director being annually tens of times in planes to watch or perform shows?

Answering this complicated but intriguing question, I have already mentioned the artistical and aesthetical openness in formats and themes, the experience of culturally-defined excellences and the interhuman culturally diversified dialogue.

I would like to add a fourth reason: communication with audiences and audience diversity facilitation. Diversity is indeed an important issue in our arts field. Theater and dance for young audiences out of school is a mainly white middle-class event. To diversify the audience, it is often said, means to diversify the actors and dancers. The stage as a mirror of society. True, without doubt, though in my opinion diversity can be much more layered. It is also the stimulation of open-mindedness by the challenging experience of the unfamiliar, the less or even unfamiliar. It is the confrontation with another world in another form and giving proof of another excellence, it is that confrontation that pushes audiences, and 'par exemple' young audiences, out of their comfort zones into an openness for the 'otherness'.

That can be done by presenting shows from different cultures with different dance styles and different themes and different acting methods, all different excellences.

Some of you could think by now I am against export, which is not true. My point is that internationalization should be a balance

between export and import, my point is that internationalization should go beyond shows and performances. The plusvalue we should aim at is a mutual artistic exchange. Exchange in it's purest form of 'A Meeting between the 'Self' and the 'Other'. Exchange as a inspirational artistic bubble freed from productional logics and market-driven pressure.

That mutual artistic dialogue is a two-way exchange energy between artists, between artists and different audiences. It means time and space for reflection, for input in balance with output, for questioning one's artistic frameworks, for openness and thus for different excellences.

Let's make more space and time for intercultural, international, intercontinental exchange. Let's have more laboratories, safe gardens heavenly places where artists from different cultures and excellences can inspire each other and in doing this, open eyes, minds and hearts of much more diversified audiences.

Let's, to end where I started, at a festival TYA abroad, give more workshops and mutually be given more workshops / ideas / inspirations / excellences.

I would like to finish with this summarizing thought. Everyone has their own sense of what excellence is. It can be found in the classical canon or in wild anarchy, in elegant theatres or railway arches; it can be accessible or obscure, aimed at a tiny audience or millions. It can be costly or cheap to achieve, last half an hour or a hundred years. It is just getting more challenging if we keep our aesthetic faculties open to the unfamiliar and the puzzling. To the 'other'. That is the challenge of us all, both artists, presenters and audiences. That could be internationalization in the purest linguistic meaning: inter-countries/continents, inter-cultures, inter-artistic languages, in such a way that inter becomes 'hybrid' in the sense of creating a new excellence over the existing ones.

In that sense we might not need internationalization but hybridization.