

Theatre and Museums in Times of Diversity. Intercultural Processes in the Arts in the Netherlands

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Abstract

Intercultural organisations in the arts first occurred in the Netherlands in the mid-1980's. They were able to establish an intercultural practice and formulate the first features of what interculturality could mean. They took profit from the discourse on integration that was at stake in the Netherlands: integration by preservation of one's own cultural background. This discourse changed during the nineties and provoked a growing debate on how the Netherlands is coping with its minorities. Two discourses became apparent. Parallel with this debate some art organisations with an intercultural agenda were able to deepen their practice. They shaped two possible perspectives. In the theatre field there is a search for an integral intercultural concept for arts organisations. Museums are more dispersed. They focus on one issue of the intercultural spectrum at a time. I will conclude on elements that might be transferred from the Dutch situation into other contexts.

Keywords

Intercultural processes, Diversity management, Theatre, Museum, Audience development

Introduction

'Art is an arena of struggle', Joost Smiers says in his book on cultural diversity in the age of globalization (Smiers, J. 2003).

A struggle between mainstream established ways of producing and perceiving products of art and sub-streams, which want to bend the concepts and practices to their own will.

I am researching intercultural processes in the arts in the Netherlands. Organisations composed of members of different ethnic groups form a sub stream that want to bend cultural practice to their own intentions.

In this paper I will discuss the development of organisations with an intercultural agenda in the arts in the Netherlands. These organisations first occurred in the Netherlands in the mid-1980's. There they were able to establish an intercultural practice and formulate the first features of what interculturality could mean. The Dutch context was marked by the cultural policy of the Netherlands, by the waves of immigration and by three integration discourses stemming from this situation.

The intercultural organisations took profit from but were also influenced by the dominant discourse on integration that was at stake in the Netherlands in the eighties: integration by

preservation of one's own cultural background. This discourse changed during the nineties and provoked a growing debate on how the Netherlands is coping with its minorities. Two discourses became apparent. On the one hand a 'new realistic' view of integration is discussed: integration with an emphasis on shared Dutch commitment. At the other hand a discourse influenced by international turbulences appeared: integration by developing a shared set of democratic values and trans-national loyalties.

Parallel with this debate some arts organisations with intercultural agendas were able to deepen their practice. They shaped two possible perspectives. In the theatre field there is a search for an integral intercultural concept for arts organisations. Intercultural or bi-cultural theatre companies are able to return every four years in states funding and are professionalizing.

Museums are more dispersed. In the beginning of the nineties they set the intercultural agenda. But being such a broad and diverse sector it seems certain strategies fit better to certain museums.

Lastly I will conclude on elements that might be transferred from the Dutch situation into international contexts.

New Perspectives in the Shadow

Recently I saw the performance of the Turkish-Dutch theatre-group RAST. Theatre companies with an intercultural mission in Dutch society first occurred in the mid eighties. RAST, founded in 1999, is already a second-generation intercultural theatre group.

RAST performed a play based on oral history called 'In the shadow of my Father'. Its subtitle says 'from Byzantium to Atatürk camp, the whole history in a nutshell' (Purveur 2003). Atatürk camp used to be the housing for Turkish immigration workers in the seventies in the North of Amsterdam. The text is from the Belgian playwright Paul Purveur. It is a new play written and performed in Dutch.

Purveur seeks -according to the director of the piece, Saban Ol- a new psychology fitting post-modern subjects. He no longer believes conflicts and developments stemming from them, are intrapersonal nor that just one main character can carry the gaze of the spectator. He portrays characters that each have their own development due to and despite of conflicts with their antagonists. The text is written in close collaboration with Saban Ol, who knew from personal experience the life of immigrants in the seventies and eighties in the Netherlands.

The characters Purveur puts on stage are: Miss Byzantium, who changes during the play into Miss Blessedness; Miss Europe 2003 (who in fact was a 'Turkish' girl born in The Netherlands, who won for Turkey) becomes Miss Pitiful and later changes into a second-generation Turkish girl. Then there are the male roles: three first generation men who migrate from Turkey to the Netherlands each carrying his own dream, such as becoming a hero, getting a blond woman, or becoming rich. These three characters switch during the play into second-generation men living in the Netherlands.

By using the mix of characters - some based on allegory and other more on anecdotes-, Purveur makes the story of the Turkish emigration abstract. He scratches more than just one Turkish perspective by the stories of the three men or Miss Europe.

Repetition of the same text is often used. The play is written more like poem than like a dialogue. The cast plays it partly telling a story to the audience, partly in dialogue and they also react to each other at the level of the actor. Each has his or her own territory. They never move out of their area on stage and do not ever touch each other in the play.

Their cast, their director, their scenographer, all are Turkish-Dutch. The playwright is from Belgium and the manager of the company is a Dutchman.

Their audience is quite mixed: second generation Turkish-Dutch, all-Dutch, and other minorities. Compared to the modal Dutch Theatre visitor (who is female, over fifty, well educated and financially-comfortable) RAST reaches out to a more diverse audience: less-educated people, younger, and more Turks, together with an average Dutch theatre audience.

So what parameters are used here to define the intercultural aspects of this theatre group? The cast, the director, the theme, and a target-group in the audience: Yes, obviously, these are intercultural aspects, but there is more.

There is the offering of a Turkish perspective not just to a Turkish audience, but also to a Dutch audience. There is the innovation of the theme by offering more perspectives, by taking in history, by developing a new view on psychology of modern human beings, by repetition of the text, by presenting seemingly grotesque but also human characters.

Not only the hardware of the theatre is changing, such as cast and theme, but also the 'software': the way theatre reflects immigration experiences. In this specific reflection they used elements of the Dutch and the Turkish culture. The use of the Belgian play writer with his abstract approach particularly opens up the history to the all-Dutch audience. He tells a story of travel and sorrow, but avoids making the characters pitiful. In case of the most pitiful character he emphasises it, to make the longing for the spectator's pity harmless.

So not just the theme but also the way the theme is considered and performed is essential to the intercultural quality of this performance. Companies such as RAST think this quality can only derive from an organisation that is striving for diversity at all layers.

Dutch Context

Every nation has its own formation of diversity. In this chapter I will introduce the core values of the Dutch cultural policy. These values interfered with three waves of immigration, the Netherlands met after the Second World War that changed the demographic make-up of the Netherlands completely.

Until then the Netherlands was a rather homogenous country, with a long democratic tradition and the notion of freedom of religion. The state is not secular as in France. There are consultative governments based on about nine political parties, some with religious backgrounds, and others based on left or right wing ideology. Within this political play I distinguish three discourses of integration that shape an own surrounding for the cultural field.

Dutch Cultural Policy

Many social organisations in the Netherlands are initiated either by secular or religious entrepreneurs. The government provides the means as long as these organisations meet the standards.

In the area of art, all initiatives can apply for a four year budget, provided by the state. A council of peers, appointed by the ministry of culture, makes the shortlist and in most cases the minister follows this advice. During this post-war period two items stayed central in the cultural policy: participation and quality. Firstly, art is seen as a good that should be available to all members of the Dutch society. Secondly, the government takes care of the quality of art. That art that can pay one's way is left over to the market. The Dutch governments strive to offer diverse art of good quality. This art may depend on state support.

Waves of Immigration

After World War Two the Netherlands held three colonies: Surinam, Indonesia and the Dutch Caribbean. In colonial times, the Dutch empire was already declining. The Dutch empire was one of trade, including slave trade, not one of plantations.

In the fifties, when Indonesia became independent (1949) a wave of Moluccan and Indonesian people affiliated with the Dutch domination came to The Netherlands. The second wave was in the beginning of the seventies when Suriname became independent (1975) and all people from Surinam had the choice of which passport they preferred. For the first time lower class people of Surinam immigrated to the Netherlands. The brain-drain of high potentials was common, as Surinam didn't have its own higher education system. The third wave was not based on the post-colonial past but on labour migration. In need of a cheap working force, Northwest Europe imported guest workers. The Netherlands imported from Turkey and Morocco men with dreams, as mentioned above: to become a hero, to get rich or get a blond wife. This immigration started off in the sixties, but the wave swelled in the seventies and eighties. In the eighties it became clear that these guests couldn't return home. From then on immigration through family reunion started to happen. The Dutch government and the societal centre field started to wonder how to integrate all these ethnic groups.

Integration Discourses

At first the Netherlands choose for a strategy of 'integration through preservation of one's own culture'. Guest workers were not required to learn Dutch. Schoolchildren were educated in their parents' native language parallel to an introduction to Dutch. Ethnic organisations were enhanced. Entering the Dutch culture was supposed to happen naturally.

In the field of arts with its participatory aim this discourse led to the introduction of workshops and experiments for people with an ethnic background to develop their 'own' culture. The Netherlands had until then very few performers and very few acknowledged artists from non-native backgrounds. These 'white doves' promoted their otherness or were promoted as other for a general, all-Dutch audience. Parallel to the discourse of integration through preservation of one's own culture, the art world started to develop non-native art. Many leftist artists went to look for the enrichment non-western or pre-modern cultures could offer them.

In the beginning of the nineties, when Europe was integrating more, it became obvious that the Dutch identity would become part of a European dynamic. Europe itself was also not a closed system both due to its postcolonial heritage and to immigration from outside.

Until then integration focused on preservation of the 'other' culture. It became clear that this Dutch identity was not very well-defined or protected. Strangers couldn't easily fit in. Lack of participation (through labour) of minority groups was growing. The debate on integration

strategy was re-opened in the Netherlands. Two different discourses on integration occurred. Integration should be made possible by defining the cultural values of the Dutch identity and introducing or demanding 'the others' to get acquainted with it. Personal responsibility is a central concept. The advocates of this discourse claimed to be 'realists', who dared to say the truth and opposed political correctness. Prins called this new realism in the integration debate (Prins, 2000). This discourse got passed by the turbulence on the international level: nine September (2001), the war on Iraq and two political murders in the Netherlands: Fortuyn (2002) and van Gogh (2004). This led to a second approach: an internationalisation of the Dutch integration debate. In the international discourse on integration, a 'Dutch national identity' seems to be a thing of the past. Some inhabitants prefer to connect to trans-national loyalties and identities. Religion has become part of the ideology again: secular democracy and religion seem to need a re-balance. Although this discourse of integration has not yet set its agenda, main influences will be: international dynamics, shared underlying values and rights for every inhabitant and identities based on several geographical loyalties.

Theatre in Times of Diversity

Within this imbalance of the policy of the Dutch government concerning integration, some arts organisations are able to develop their intercultural agenda. First I will discuss the theatre field, second, the world of museums. I distinguish two phases in both fields. The first phase parallels the discourse on integration through preservation of one's own culture. The second phase corresponds with the reopened debate between the two other discourses.

Phase One

In the theatre world, Rufus Collins, an Afro-American, was brought in in 1981 to teach Dutch performers with a diaspora background (Meijer and Buikema, 2004). Collins collaborated with Surinamese director Henk Tjon and founded in the middle of the eighties the first multicultural theatre company in the Netherlands: DNA, The New Amsterdam. His aims were: diverse cast on stage, themes that touched the 'new' Dutchmen, audience that was not Dutch-born or well-educated. Collins tried to introduce new makers in the theatre field and was inspired by the American racial dignity movement. He taught them to be proud of their skin colour and of the lives of their ancestors. His appeal was very effective for the Afro-European in the Netherlands, but it connected less well to the descendents of labour immigration or the Asian minorities. His approach fitted very well with the discourse of integration through preservation of one's own culture. He was able to influence the standards for participation. He set the standard for diversity in the Dutch theatre. After him, the definition of artistic quality included ethnic diversity. Every shortlist of the peers advising the minister had to carry at least one theatre group with themes interesting for ethnic minorities, with a diverse cast, and artistic leaders from a non-native background, reaching out to non-traditional theatre audiences.

The DNA Theatre group first received state funding in 1988. An intercultural production house (Cosmic) was added in 1992. In 1996, 'Made in the Shada,' new urban theatre group entered the scene. In 2000, RAST, the Turkish-Dutch bi-cultural theatre company, and DOX, a many-coloured youth theatre group, increased the variety. All survived the last 'Cultuurnota' (Culture Bill) and will have basic funding till 2008. So starting with one multicultural theatre group in 1988 the Netherlands now funds five, not taking into account intercultural theatre groups for children or educational projects.

Phase Two

Where in the first phase ethnic diversity was limited to a diverse cast, themes connected to the experiences of immigration, and post-colonial experiences, artistic leadership and reaching out for one's 'own' target groups, in the second phase new ambitions develop. These ambitions concern diversity in all layers of a cultural organisation, mixed audiences and pronunciation of artistic style.

To collect information on these new ambitions I interviewed as well the artistic leader as well the art-manager of both RAST and DOX.

I noticed three ambitions besides the ones they inherited from Rufus Collins. One is at the level of organisation, the second, regarding audience- development, and the third relates to their tribute to the theatrical diversity.

- *Diversity in all layers of a cultural organisation:* Front stage cast in intercultural groups is diverse, but back stage cast often is not at this point. RAST and DOX want to develop a more mixed organisation back stage. They are willing to reconsider the structure of organizing and decision-making to open up the organisation for diverse personnel.
- *Mixed audiences:* Stemming from specific target-oriented audience approaches, both companies want to broaden their impact on the Dutch theatre landscape without losing their diverse target groups. They strive to mix them with a general all-Dutch audience. RAST decided to leave Turkish as a language when entering state funding. They lost their main impact on the first generation Turks. The ambition to mix audiences has consequences for the approach of the themes. Both emphasize ensemble play and offer in the performance more than one perspective. By doing so they try to avoid fixed oppositions in the integration debate. They reflect the integration debate in the Netherlands, but show internal discrepancies. They dare to make jokes on both sides. Accessibility gets more approaches than just an educational offer for youngsters. Accessibility for different groups that might each attach a different significance to the performance has implications on the style and content of the performance. Both groups invest in long-lasting contact with their audience.
- *Pronunciation of artistic style:* Both companies feel they develop new aesthetics and want to pronounce their artistic style. Critics often don't analyse the theatrical style of intercultural companies. They focus on the themes but seldom on the aesthetical experiments or the interaction between those two levels.
For DOX the search is about how to mix dance with storylines. In reviews they are either seen as a dancing company or as a theatre company. Their interdisciplinary style and the extra value it brings to deepen the performance on the level of the story are seldom discussed.
RAST is a more traditional company. By comparison, they are text based. For five years they did not get any reviews in the national papers. This despite the fact that they played all over the Netherlands and had sold-out houses in the case of 'In the Shadow of my Father'. As described above, they are developing their own theatrical style, which, in its abstract form, makes themes of Diaspora recognisable for natives. For both styles - DOX and RAST- there are still too few instruments to discuss the innovation and quality of the work. Festivals and debates could help to find the right language. Both companies feel the need but focus on their immediate task, namely, to produce.

RAST also develops a trans-national performance. They cooperate with companies in Turkey. These performances are shown in the Netherlands and Turkey. This project has run only once so the mutual influence is not yet to be determined.

In the Netherlands, intercultural theatre-groups are increasingly developing an integral intercultural approach by including different levels of organisation in their search for diversity. They were able to start new organisations because the funding system in the Netherlands is open for small-scale entrepreneurial theatre companies. In these new organisations, fundamental tasks such as artistic leadership are already in the hands of people with bi-cultural backgrounds. By growing in number, they have the potential to create an own segment of the theatre scene, in which they are able to define their profile and influence the standard of participation and quality (the two core elements of the Dutch cultural policy).

Museums in Times of Diversity

Where as the theatre field became deeply influenced by the integration of newcomers, how did museums react?

Compared to the theatre field, the concept of being proud of one's own cultural background was less present in visual art. Most visual artists preferred a neutral connection between cultural background and the work of art. There were experiments such as 'Double Dutch' (Tilburg 1991) where Dutch and non-native artists worked together, but there was a big hesitation to pinpoint on cultural background. It was often felt as if it diminished one's professional quality. The impact of the discourse of integration through preservation of one's own culture in the world of museums was less but nevertheless led to experiments on fitting strategies

Phase One

In the eighties, Museums for ethnology and museums founded by missionaries (the Netherlands had five such museums), had to reposition themselves. They were confronted with changing demography, with new definitions of ethnic groups and national identity. Being long-standing institutions, their staff wanted to democratise the organisations and their aims.

At the level of content, they noticed that they gave only an image of 'the other' without discussing the image of 'the self.' The other was strange, positioned in the past, not in the modernity, not yet developed, and exotic. They observed that they took the perspective of the establishment for granted and did not give exposure to other voices. They observed that their audience was rather one-dimensional and that museums reached out too little for the newcomers in the Netherlands. They experimented on new approaches in these areas.

Four strategies can be distinguished in these approaches:

- Access for newcomers to Dutch museums (as part of their access to the Dutch society)
- Promotion of new artists with diverse educational and esthetical backgrounds
- Re-evaluation of the existing collection and adding new sources to open up other perspectives
- Discussion on the view of 'other' art or artists

The experiments on these four issues started up in the late eighties and continued until the middle of the nineties. They took place in museums for ethnology and in independent galleries.

For art museums diversity became accepted after 1989, after the exposition 'Les Magiciens de la Terre' (Martin, Centre Pompidou, Paris, 1989).

As museums were older art institutions when compared to institutions in the Dutch theatre landscape, and as starting a museum requires considerable means (collection, housing), no new intercultural museums were founded.

Phase Two

At the end of the nineties the Dutch culture government decided to reshuffle its museum portfolio. A process was started to let museums become independent foundations. State funding can be involved but will in the future be related to the numbers of visitors. This causes a process of organisational change and re-positioning in the world of museums and influences the priorities in the world of museums.

In the nineties the Netherlands Museum Association was able to get two projects funded to develop these four strategies. One project focuses on collecting the cultural heritage of the newcomers in the Netherlands. At the same time, 'Imagine Identity and Culture', a centre for the visual representation of migration and cultures, has been opened in one of the most mixed neighbourhoods of Amsterdam. The concept of heritage used here is not just material from the past, but is also understood as immaterial (stories) and contemporary. For archives and historical collections this shift has great impact and is still being discussed.

The other project, (Intercultural Projects, 1998-2004) has been developing expositions as examples of good practice for museums. Along with these good practice examples, training has been offered. With this project it became clear that interculturalisation in museum was not such an easy task for all institutions.

Change may come from inside, from the personnel, but the artistic and commercial leadership continued to be people of all-Dutch heritage, often over fifty years of age.

An outside force for change is change in audience. *Historical museums* are sensible for the demographic change in the Netherlands. Traditionally they are stakeholders in education. Historical museums in the big cities took up the quest to open their doors for 'other' audiences. The lower ranks of the staff are becoming more mixed but higher regions are still all-Dutch. The need to change the composition of these ranks is seldom felt. A neutral concept for leadership with regards to content is preferred. (The Netherlands does not have a legal act on equal representation). Opening doors for new audiences was translated into changes in exposition policy, seldom in organisational policy

Art Museums often oppose the idea of diversity by playing the card of quality. Most say the main task of their museum is to accommodate artists. They claim that if a curator is not free to develop a project completely guided by his professionally formed taste, the quality of the expositions and the position of Dutch art museums in the international world are no longer guaranteed. Most curators have roots in art history. In art history education, diversity and effects of globalization are just starting to play a role (Kitty Zijlmans, 2005).

The third group of Museums are *the museums of ethnology*, which started the discussion of diversity in the eighties. Their main goal is to define a new task within this overloaded offering of museums. In the eighties they became breeding grounds for visual artists from non-western backgrounds. Their second aim was to approach new target groups in the audience.

The international introduction of new artists is currently often taken over by Biennales or international curators that have themselves a background in diverse cultures. For successful artists this globalisation has been cultivated in art museums. Their innovation of audience-development is accepted by the historical museums.

The three main museums for ethnology focus again on the heritage of the colonial past and the consequences for the present and are profiling between each other. The Royal Tropical Institute focuses on international exchange, the museum for Ethnology in Leiden on history of the colonial areas, and the World Arts Museum Rotterdam on Islamic Art and on the contemporary art of other cultures that are relevant for the Netherlands. So far they have not yet developed an integral intercultural concept including organisational and artistic changes. Their main focus seems to be the audience development in which target groups are mixed with the general museum public.

Conclusion

The focus in the integration discourse in the Netherlands on one's own' culture was in the eighties a fruitful soil to develop organisations with an intercultural agenda in the arts. The combination with the dual system in which the cultural field is invited to propose projects for state funding helped new organisations to emerge and existing organisations to set an intercultural agenda. Cultural organisations translated one of the core elements of the Dutch cultural policy, participation, into access for minorities. Enrichment ideology motivated artists and cultural organisations to seek experiments. When in the nineties the tide changed, a certain amount of cultural organisations had enough experience to keep on developing an intercultural mission. They were able to fight mainstream ways of producing and perceiving art products.

In theatre, independent companies that are developing an integral intercultural program foster the intercultural mission (concerning audience development, diversity policy in organisations, and innovation of style and content of performances). In this integral intercultural concept the second pillar of Dutch cultural policy, quality of the art, has to be discussed. Neither the groups nor the surrounding field of critics and academic researchers are yet equipped to do so.

In the world of museums the organisational structure of the field is limiting intercultural change. I noticed intercultural development in historical museums and in museums of ethnology. Museums with an intercultural agenda tend to focus on one aspect of the intercultural spectrum and are reluctant towards organisational change. Audience development drives the process. Translation into exposition policy, artistic leadership, innovation of style and themes often function disconnected from one another. In the intercultural process museums tend to focus on one-issue approaches. Questions of reframing quality conceptions pop up too incidentally due to the dispersed approach.

International collaboration could deepen the way cultural organisations position themselves in the debate of participation and quality in times of diversity.

Any intercultural process in the arts starts by becoming visible through cast/exhibited artists, artistic leadership, themes and diverse target audiences. Organisations do position themselves to the outside world and make a field accessible to new audiences.

In the next phase reframing becomes important. Reframing at an organisational level, at the level of content (style and themes) and on the level of quality concepts.

Some cultural organisations take the quest integral, others go step by step. Both are at the start of a journey. A journey that starts with 'I'll go' as Paul Pourveur has his male characters say:
One day I say 'I'll go'
'I'll go'
Once said, my decision is made. (Pourveur, 2003:14)

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