

Article

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Post-Representational Transformations in Flemish Theatre

By Peter M. Boenisch

The ideological efficacy of institutionalised theatre within the dominant European cultural system relies on the spectators' unconditional absorption in the artwork, undisturbed by institutional power structures or awareness of modes and conditions of artistic production. This ideal of transparency has been shattered not least by the recent 'MeToo' and 'Black Lives Matter' movements, which brought into the open numerous cases of sexist and racist exploitation and discrimination. They revealed a structurally engrained feudal and colonial absolutism of power enshrined in traditional, hierarchical models of artistic management, direction and theatre production. The recent movements only added to the pressure on theatre institutions that had emerged over past decades from wider socio-cultural shifts, demographic changes, and the 'flat' media-economy of globalisation. In the 21st century, the once seemingly self-evident homogeneity of the bourgeois 'public sphere', in which theatres contributed and intervened, thus has given way to a post-bourgeois plurality of heterogeneous, at times conflicting, elsewhere outright hostile discourses (see Balme and Fisher 2021; Reckwitz 2019; Gielen 2013). In response, a number of city and state theatre institutions across Europe started to rethink, rebuild and also repair from within; most prominent are the relaunch of Berlin's Maxim Gorki Theater in 2013 to become a plural 'theatre for the entire city'; Milo Rau's launch of his directorship at NT Gent in 2018 with his programmatic 'Gent Manifesto' heralding a 'city theatre for the future'; actor Tiago Rodrigues's leadership of the Portuguese National Theatre Dona Maria II in Lisbon from 2015 to 2021; Matthias Lilienthal's attempt, between 2015 and 2020, to internationalise Kammerspiele München; and equally, the scandalised, short-lived tenure of art curator Chris Dercon as *Intendant* of the Berlin Volksbühne (Boenisch 2021a/b; Boenisch and Houe 2021). Rau goes as far as to locate the political moment of contemporary theatre making no longer in the capacity of performance to shape (antagonistic and other) interactions, but precisely at the institutional level (Mosse 2021; Rau 2021).¹ With this essay, I seek to address these developments of the institutional fabric of the European theatre system by proposing the notion of 'institutional dramaturgy' as an analytic concept to interrogate these systemic modifications. Instead of the above named widely debated examples, I shall in the following discuss the no less significant, yet hitherto rarely internationally reflected transformations of two quite different theatre institutions in the Belgian capital Brussels: at the Royal Flemish Theatre (KVS) under artistic director Jan Goossens (2001-15), and the relaunch of the 'Flemish Centre for Amateur Art' as diverse 'open talent house' Zinnema since 2007.

Institutional Dramaturgy: Navigating Values in Post-Representational Theatre

The current interventions at a systemic, rather than purely aesthetic level of theatre making reflect a shift towards 'post-representational theatre', to adopt a term coined by Nora Sternfeld in the museum context. Today neither theatre nor museums are able to rely on an unchallenged logic of

1) Yet, even progressive projects such as Rau's and Langhoff's seem unable to escape systemic power imbalances; allegations of abuse of their directorial powers have been raised against both directors, too (Marcus 2020; Hof 2021).

representation. These traditional institutions of European middle-class enlightenment culture are no longer mere 'sites for setting up valuable objects and representing objective values but rather spaces for curatorial action in which unusual encounters and discourses become possible' (Sternfeld and Ziaja 2012, 22). Theatres no longer uncritically affirm and reiterate the semiotic and imaginary hegemony enshrined in the Western canon of dramatic works and its corresponding aesthetic formats, including the immanent criticality of deconstructive *Regietheater*. Sternfeld envisages how these art institutions despite or even because of their ideological legacy imbued with the nationalist, colonialist and imperialist distribution of the sensible that got enshrined in the 19th century, might still be productively resituated within the changing social and cultural landscape of the present, characterised by plurality and diversity. Drawing on a notion by Mary Louise Pratt, Sternfeld suggests to turn them into cultural 'contact zones' as opposed to continue to serve as 'comfort zones' that insist on the dominance of Western white cultural capital. Theatres and museums might thereby serve to open up spaces for the renegotiation of traditional meanings, histories, and legacies, whether the dramatic canon, visual art works, or historical events. While others present the radical exodus from established institutions as the sole solution, I sympathise with Sternfeld's argument, following Chantal Mouffe (2013), for a post-representational transformation of existing institutional structures. The modernist revolutionary gesture of demanding the dismantling of any state-supported institution as precondition for political change overlooks how the late capitalist situation is permeated at all levels, including the 'free' independent arts sector, by diffused microstructures of domination, subordination, and subjection. Meanwhile, theatre managers such as Langhoff, Rau, Rodrigues, and more recently also Julia Wissert, the first Afro-German *Intendantin*, and her team at Schauspiel Dortmund follow such a path of systemic transformation from within, occupying the very site of institutional hegemony with its well established organisational, intellectual as well as material infrastructural resources in order to enforce post-representational reforms.

Their implementation, marked by prominent buzzwords such as inclusion and participation, is directly linked to the emergence of the notions of curating and 'the curatorial', which express this need and desire to realign and reconnect traditional institutions both in the visual and performing arts worlds with a changing socio-cultural environment, thereby attempting to revive the lost bourgeois 'public sphere' in new forms (see Rugg and Sedgwick 2007; Marchart 2011; Bismarck e.a. 2012; Ensslin 2015; Martinon 2015; Guy 2016; Žeroc 2018; Malzacher 2020). The notion of dramaturgy offers an additional, deeper critical lens to take into focus such transformational work in theatre with, on and against institutional dynamics. Dramaturgy is today no longer understood as the crafting of 'actions at work' within a theatre performance alone, but points towards catalytic 'working on actions' that condition emerging processes and eventually products of performance making (see Georgelou e.a. 2016). In his seminal systems-theoretical model, Janek Szatkowski describes dramaturgy as the negotiation between sets of underlying poetics values, both aesthetic and ethical, and the poietic and aesthetic 'doing' of theatre making and watching (see Szatkowski 2019). Revealing the explicit and implicit 'values in relation to what art should do and look like, when society is as it is' (ibid., p. 87), such a dramaturgic poetics of values is certainly at work at the level of producing and commissioning specific artists and productions – but not others. Following the Flemish doyenne of dramaturgy Marianne van Kerckhoven, Katalin Trencsényi calls this level 'macro-dramaturgy', and hence equally describes in dramaturgic terms the effort of a theatre 'to take care of the organisation's artistic profile, shape the institution's narrative of creating a body of work that represents its artistic values and its philosophy, and support the organisation to locate itself within the community it serves' (2015, p. 35). With Szatkowski's Luhmann-inspired

concept, dramaturgy, on the one hand, insists on and defends the autonomy of the 'art system', while, on the other hand, on the very basis of this autonomy, it necessarily interweaves theatre with other societal systems such as the economy and politics: In its poetic negotiation of aesthetic and ethical values, dramaturgy navigates precisely this dialectic of partaking in society *while* watching from the outside, proposing different sets of values, and imagining an 'otherwise' to the functional, consequential everyday world. For a theatre institution, the level of macro dramaturgy becomes hence 'the forum through which it can participate in a discourse about value and art, demonstrate its understanding of "local" and "global", and actively express where it stands in terms of outreach and education' (Trencsényi 2015, p. 32). In fact, theatre institutions have acted as key players in the assertion of new assumptions of 'what art should do and look like, when society is as it is' long before the production dramaturg appeared back stage in the early 20th century. While traditionally mostly considered from a literary perspective, an institutional dramaturgy of values is vitally evident in Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*, as it originated between 1767 and 1769 precisely from his work for the (eventually faltering) project of the Hamburg Nationaltheater, and reveals a curatorial concern for 'audience development' and 'widening participation' at the time when the bourgeoisie just emerged as new hegemonic class. The point of view of dramaturgy thus allows the historicisation of the present systemic transformations in the theatre sector within the wider context of colonial modernity as a crucial context for the present attempts to 'decolonise' the solidified institutional power hierarchies as we step into a 'post-representational' regime of arts institutions.

KVS Brussels as City Theatre for the 21st Century: Towards a New Urban Artistic Literacy

As another side-effect, establishing more sustained analyses of institutional dramaturgies within the academic discipline might counteract the perception of crucial decolonising reforms, such as the promotion of 'postmigrant theatre' at Berlin's Gorki Theater, as singular events (or, worse, 'a brand'), while furthermore saving the artistic protagonists from a need to reinvent the wheel. Already more than a decade before some of the undoubtedly pioneering institutional efforts of the present, a hitherto barely analysed, fundamental transformation took place at the Royal Flemish Theatre (Koninklijke Vlaamse Schouwburg, KVS) under the direction of Jan Goossens from 2001 to 2015. When the dramaturg, who had previously worked with Peter Sellars and Wim Vandekeybus in opera and dance, was appointed to lead the theatre, he had to notice that 'to put it simply, KVS had lost its cultural and political reason to exist in a city with which it had no connections left' (Goossens 2016, 27f.). At the time, KVS still followed the common template of a national (i.e. monolingual) theatre with its permanent ensemble of actors, who performed in typical 'directors' theatre'-productions a standard mix of canonical classics and new plays that added to the 'national' repertoire of plays. Yet, the era of modern nation building had given way to a united Europe and a globalised world, while even the Flemish minority within the hybrid state of Belgium, for whose national culture the theatre used to provide an important reference point, gained widespread autonomy in the Belgian state reform of 1993. Formerly emancipatory liberal values of freedom, equality and solidarity turned into economic neo-liberalism and an ethical conservatism that promoted an outdated 'idealised form of belonging together in an ethnically and linguistically uniform community, which often situates the origins of that unity in a fictionalised common past that never really existed', as Goossens polemically summarised (*ibid.*, p. 27). Meanwhile, the reality outside the theatres radically changed during the later part of the 20th Century; even the

traditionally bi-cultural landscape of Brussels found itself transformed into a culturally diverse, multilingual and pluricultural environment. Thanks to the immediate flow of information via the internet and social media, the city's global citizens are nowadays connecting with the world in real time. As Goossens noted, 'political trouble in Kinshasa or on the West Bank immediately leads to instability in Brussels' (ibid., p. 29).

As incoming artistic director, Goossens was hence confronted with the typical post-representational challenge, alongside a massive debt accrued by his predecessor. Together with KVS General Manager Danny Op de Beeck and the resident dramaturgs Hildegard De Vuyst and Ivo Kuyl, he turned the city itself into the principal starting point for developing a new mission that would help to reassert the legitimacy of his theatre institution within the culturally, ethnically, and linguistically mixed reality where 'as a population in this city we share no common past but have to develop a common future' (ibid., p. 28). Their efforts were helped by the fact that at the start of Goossens's directorship, the lavish historic KVS-building in downtown Brussels closed for a substantial five-year renovation. During this time, the theatre moved to the Bottelarij, a former brewery right in the multicultural district of Molenbeek with its long history of migration, with a strong presence especially of Maghreb heritage and other Muslim communities.² It is characterised by high rates of unemployment, especially amongst young people, and was by some traditional KVS audiences considered as 'no go area' on the other side of the river.

During the seasons at this interim homebase, the KVS put the concept of 'allochtone theatre'³ onto the discursive map of Flemish theatre, yet it would take almost another decade, and Shermin Langhoff's more popular coinage 'postmigrant theatre', to reset the agenda more widely across European theatre. Goossens at the time had a regular opinion column in the Belgian daily newspaper *De Morgen* and was an influential intellectual and opinion-maker in the country, and initiated wider social debates about diversity and citizenship also through his theatre's programme brochures.⁴ Artistically, he implemented significant changes. He phased out over the period of the Bottelarij residence the permanent ensemble of actors, giving over the KVS stage to a more diverse group of performers, some of whom without conventional professional training as actors. In order to build a 'new – and meaningful – Brussels repertoire' (ibid., p. 31), he acknowledged that the typical Western 'artist' model of the inventive genius – whether director, playwright or actor – not necessarily resonated with the landscape of urban creative practitioners, whose work is often created collaboratively while transgressing Western disciplinary borders of 'theatre'. Dance, music, strong visual aesthetics, and multilingual, often highly poetic textual compositions come together in works that speak to a linguistically mixed, but also at the time increasingly Internet and social-media savvy audience of Brussels's 'global-local' citizens. While nominally in charge as artistic director, Goossens envisaged the KVS as a theatre driven by artists, and not by expectations of what a play should look

2) The district made widespread international news as perpetrators of both Paris terrorist attacks of 2015 as well as the attack on Brussels airport in 2016 were traced back to this neighbourhood.

3) In Dutch and Flemish administrative terminology, 'autochtone' and 'allochtone' were from 1971 until 2016 official demographic categorisations in population statistics and similar documents. The governmental terminology refers to citizenship, whereas the everyday use often implies their ethnic interpretation, regardless of passport. Since 2016, the term *allochtoon* has been replaced in public statistics by 'migration background' (*migratieachtergrond*).

4) Present debates on diversity in the performing arts were prefigured in prominent discourses in Flemish theatre at the time, in a debate that was nuanced and responsive to the specifics of the local situation instead of importing largely Anglophone concepts and terminology (see exemplarily Jans 2006, Dienderen e.a. 2007).

like, or other institutional conventions. He established a board of resident artists to collectively decide on the programming; initially, it consisted of Goossens, the two dramaturgs, and the directors Raven Ruëll, Ruud Gielens, and David Strosberg. The work they put on was regularly multilingual, and for most shows, surtitles were introduced – again, a good decade before these innovations were popularised more widely as part of the ‘postmigrant’ theatre discourse.

Traditional drama was by no means banned from KVS, but the plays were now drawn from a more extended archive, with work by African immigrants, plays by the Berber community, and an exploration of ‘autochtone’ Flemish plays that hitherto only occupied peripheral places in the national canon (see Vanhaesebrouck 2010). These productions no longer deconstructed Flemish theatre history in the spirit of postmodern critique, but opted for a genuine investigate enquiry, for instance of plays from the popular and amateur *Volkstoneel* theatre tradition, but also of plays that addressed controversial periods of the country’s past, such as the collaboration with the Nazi-occupation and in particular the colonial history. Belgian playwright Hugo Claus had written and directed *The Life and Works of Leopold II* in 1969. At the time considered a failure and a mere minor work that had virtually disappeared for several decades, in Raven Ruëll’s direction, it launched KVS’s sustained attention to the country’s history in the Congo. In 2005, the ‘Green Light’ think tank was established, which prepared KVS-performances in the DRC as well as workshops. Goossens also initiated collaborations with artists from Kinshasa (see Jans 2010). These initiatives were instrumental in bringing the works of numerous contemporary artists from the region to wider European attention, such as choreographer Faustin Linyekula, or also Libanese-Canadian writer Wajdi Mouawad. One of the final KVS-productions under Goossens’s tenure, Alain Platel’s *Coup Fatal*, continued this dialogue of the European cultural canon with contemporary African as well as Middle Eastern art, as it performed European baroque music by a Congolese orchestra, to the dance of performers from Ramallah.

The production emblematically summarised the institutional dramaturgy that characterised the 14 years during which Goossens led the Royal Flemish Theatre: From promoting Flemish national culture, KVS turned into a postcolonial contact zone that also stimulated wider debates on diversity and global arts within mainstream Flemish theatre. The artistic director himself connected the aesthetic and ethical values of his tenure (hence, his institutional dramaturgy) with the emancipatory legacy of European bourgeois culture, and its manifestation in the Flemish national theatre as it was founded in 1887:

We have attempted to play a humble but real role in today’s struggle for the emancipation of some of the new minority communities in the city that are just as excluded from the official conversations and from official cultural life today as the Flemish used to be a hundred years ago. [...] In that sense KVS definitively doesn’t see itself as an anti-Flemish project; on the contrary, KVS considers itself to be the true heir of the emancipatory Flemish movement. (29f.)

Goossens goes on to note that with his reform of KVS, he ‘created an urban and artistic literacy’ for the city theatre institutions and the public sphere it engenders for a greater number of people – artists (or, ‘culture workers’, in the director’s preferred terminology) and audiences alike – for whom the city theatre previously had felt as ‘unknown territory’ (ibid., p. 36). Under his leadership, the number of local theatregoers rose from 25% to more than 55%, while 35% of the audience were eventually non- or non-native Dutch speakers (ibid.).

Zinnema Brussels and the Extension of ‘Amateur Theatre’: From Participation to Ownership

Another remarkable institutional transformation occurred over the past decade at the Zinnema arts centre in Anderlecht, another diverse Western Brussels neighbourhood on the other side of the river, not far from the former KVS-Bottelarij in neighbouring Molenbeek. Entering Zinnema, one is likely to run into elderly members of the long-standing Catholic amateur theatre society resident here, while hearing a multiplicity of languages spoken by young people engaging in interdisciplinary urban art forms that combine Hip Hop, visual arts, spoken word, and dance. The theatre, operated by a permanent staff of 21 employees, resides in what used to be on its opening in the 1950s, with almost 1000 seats and a large screen, Belgium’s biggest and most modern cinema. Today, the converted space, newly renovated in 2018, houses a 365-seat theatre, three smaller studios, an exhibition gallery, sound recording studios and various multifunctional artist work spaces.⁵ Since 2019, Zinnema also runs ‘Qartier’, an off-site exhibition space that is open 24/7 right within the Central Brussels metro station Beurs, curated every few months by a different group of artists.

What has been called Zinnema since 2007 used to be the Flemish Centre for Amateur Art (VCA), an association of three local amateur theatre companies who had joined forces to eventually obtain public structural support in 1979. With its relaunch, the theatre followed similar considerations we had encountered in the KVS-example and got rid of the ‘Flemish’ in its name. Yet as Jan Wallyn, Zinnema’s General Director since 2018, remembers about the time he first got involved as resident choreographer in these earlier years: ‘You stepped from a culturally very rich and diverse street into a space dominated by overwhelmingly white people, and it did not feel representative of what is around, and locally relevant’ (Wallyn 2020⁶). Under Wallyn, who had served as artistic director under his predecessor as General Director Nathalie De Boelpaep (who in 2018 joined Milo Rau in this capacity at NT Gent), Zinnema has been programmatically transformed into an ‘open talenhouse’, as it now calls itself. It introduced a ‘bottom up’ approach to its programming, where Zinnema now invites non- or not-yet professional artists to apply to an open strand, or an annual thematic call. Successful proposals receive a modest budget, space, and coaching through the theatre’s four programmers. They arrange workshop events for the artists, and also bring them together in curated clusters, which are supported by a dedicated dramaturg. Here, the artists give each other feedback and thereby help each other to develop their work further. The results are then showcased in collective interdisciplinary ‘Parcour’ events, now regularly to a sold out audience. As Wallyn explains, Zinnema attempted to turn the notion of ‘amateur’, a word associated with ‘amour’ (love) into the venue’s core value. Zinnema attempts to provide for its equally an important part. As Artistic Director Audrey Leboutte notes, today a good number of their artists say ‘I go home’ when they head for Zinnema (Leboutte 2021). Meanwhile, a good number of Zinnema-artists also transitioned into professional companies in dance and theatre.

On the path of the former, predominantly white and middle class VCA’s transformation into

5) The name Zinnema merges references to the venue’s former function as cinema, the local river Zenne (Seine) that runs through Brussels, dividing the Western districts from the political, economic and cultural centre, and the Flemish word ‘zinneke’, originally designating stray dogs living around the river, then a racist slur denigrating inhabitants of foreign heritage, but now adopted as a proud self-description of cosmopolitan Brussels, as in the annual multicultural Zinneke street parade, first initiated during the Brussels European City of Culture in 2000.

6) All quotations of Wallyn’s in the following section are from this lecture seminar for our AU research group.

the present hub for multilingual allochtonic emergent artists (while, importantly, remaining the 'home' for its previous residents, too), the theatre season 2016/17, themed 'I have a dream', was a particular milestone.⁷ As Wallyn notes, the theatre had realised an increase in project applications dealing with themes of African and Caribbean heritage, personal history, the experience of people of colour with white supremacy, and with stereotypical cliché projections of, for instance, a singular 'African' culture. At the same time, not least Goossens's KVS transformation had prepared the ground for addressing issues of decolonisation in Flemish theatre. As Zinnema's entire leadership team was white, Wallyn decided to hand over his position for an entire year to seven volunteer members of an 'Artist Think Tank', six of whom were from Afro-Diasporic background, recruited from previously supported Zinnema projects. Wallyn argues: 'We can read and learn about other experiences, but can never operate from direct experience and knowledge. White people, with their inherently colonial perspective, leading debates on decolonisation just produce more colonialism, and are really just hijacking a topic and turning it into window dressing.' The Think Tank was given full autonomy over the season's programming, but also the venue's publicity, budget, staff policy and day to day operations – for Wallyn a decisive factor of the transformative result:

If you invite people to be part of decision processes, these are usually always made within a certain framework that defines what the goals are, and where the organisation is meant to go – you can invite many people in, but will always be deciding within this framework. What we discovered during this season is the limitation if people cannot create this policy in the first place. Only on that level will you get a very different plan, which will change your institution structurally. We learnt where our defined goals were not sufficient, where our policies were outdated, and other things we were completely oblivious of, but which have now changed the way how we work – because we had the Think Tank writing the policy plan for us.

Because of the unconditional mandate, the group took full ownership and eventually transformed Zinnema beyond the directors' expectations. They developed a new PR campaign and visual identity, and sent the HR department into communities to talk to people rather than managing the theatre from within. A crucial result was the theatre's changed understanding of 'amateur art', realising that for a number of (predominantly non-white) art forms, there is no access to formal funding, training or infrastructural support in order to become professional; funding applications were frequently returned from art bodies, suggesting to apply to resources for social work instead. Therefore, Zinnema now defines 'amateur art' as any art not professionally supported.

Already during the Think Tank's six-month preparation phase, Zinnema noticed an effect. The number of applications for the 'I have a dream'-season tripled compared to the previous year, while most applications now came from the theatre's vicinity. Eventually, new and different audiences began to frequent the theatre and bar. Wallyn summarises: 'After having existed for 40 years in Brussels, the organisation discovered new partners that we had never heard of before, so our network, but also our in-house knowledge and methodology of programming and working dramatically changed.' Yet, he is also frank about the project's flaws and the many mistakes made at the time, such as underestimating inevitable frictions that would emerge between the new artists and audiences and long serving staff. Admitting that 'we were simply not prepared on an infrastructural

7) The season is documented in Dorrie Wilson's *Book of Dreams*, also accessible online, alongside other of the venue's publications and publicity, at <https://issuu.com/zinnema>.

level', Wallyn categorises these mistakes as concerning financial thresholds, identity thresholds and a safety threshold, which for him have become cornerstones in realising an inclusive art institution that invites audiences to participate:

What was most problematic about the volunteer engagement of the Artist Think Tank was that we dramatically increased our audiences, and hence our ticket sales and income – because of a group of predominantly black people working for free on their Sundays. So that was colonisation, and actually our bravery in handing over to the Think Tank was very superficial. It eventually replicated dynamics we thought we were pushing back against.

Jan Goossens equally conceded that KVS's residency in Molenbeek had a difficult start, noting 'we made a lot of mistakes in the first two seasons' (Peeters 2004). The theatre makers could barely communicate with the local residents, yet nevertheless flooded local letterboxes with their conventional advertising campaigns. With the best intentions, they invited Middle Eastern and Arabic artists to set up projects with a neighbourhood mainly of Maghreb descent, naively homogenising 'Muslim culture'. 'We paid our tuition fees', admitted Goossens (ibid.). The locals did not react with hostility, but simply ignored what was going on in the old brewery, until Goossens's team eventually managed to make contacts via local clubs, and also to local artists such as Ben Hamidou.

Practising Macro-Dramaturgies of Recognition: From Repetition to Dialogic Commonality

The initiatives in transforming KVS and Zinnema demonstrate what has become the main message of Jan Wallyn and Zinnema's artistic director Audrey Leboutte – who was, in 2016, one of the Think Tank members and then became part of the theatre's leadership – as they share their learning with other arts organisations: 'decolonisation is not a project, but a practice'. Both institutions rather than abandoning chose to build on what Mieke Bal (1996) termed the 'expository agency', to specify the authority exercised by the theatre institution. The concrete daily practising of their institutional macro-dramaturgies has assisted these theatres in instigating post-representational transformations that eventually became models for addressing conventional power hierarchies as well as exclusionary structures traditionally embedded within the theatre system. For neither Goossens nor Wallyn this meant taking given institutional formats, templates and mechanisms for granted. On the contrary, they interrupted the constant systemic repetition of what either a city or a national theatre should be and do, or what constitutes amateur theatre. Such gestures of repeating aesthetic values, artistic canons of works, or institutional orders prepare the ground for recognition that normalises these values, and eventually makes them self-evident. KVS and Zinnema prepared a significant transformation of this ground for recognition. At a time when citizens, as Goossens expressed it in the earlier quotation, have 'no common past but have to develop a common future', they shifted the ground: from a singular shared heritage towards common present-ness, from ideological assertion of dominant aesthetic and ethical values to an encounter with a plurality of voices and actions. Rather than showing (or even showing off), presenting and representing, KVS and Zinnema exemplarily opened up new spaces for plural presence. Diverse individuals can come together at these venues in the common assembly of the theatre audience to jointly reflect on the present.

At the heart of this culture of plural commonality are encounters that no longer rely on the authority of generic 'universal' templates but on a situated sharing within the respective specifics of a situational, social, political, cultural and also economic environment. The theatres I discussed

here thereby engaged in dialogue and exchange with their immediate local neighbourhoods, but also with the ever so directly inter-connected contemporary arts scene in a former Belgian colony. With their stages turning into platforms that afford plural, common visibility, they act as moderators who give the word and make a pluri-logue of manifold voices heard, while also affording the authority and recognition that an audience wants to rely on. Institutional dramaturgy has thus become a new and important dimension of both the academic and applied discipline, precisely as each institution now needs to find and define its own concrete and specific dramaturgy – its own set of aesthetic and ethical values that respond to and embed the institution within its actual situational context. The perspective of institutional dramaturgy offers precisely the necessary openness of the recursive process of dramaturgic mediation that Szatkowski defines within his triangle of poetic hierarchies – of an open process, always learning from its inevitable mistakes and well-meant blunders. The curatorial, especially where it gets all too associated with specific aesthetic values (for instance, of free independent theatre production, or a postdramatic poetics) runs the danger of replacing one abstract format (such as ‘city theatre’ or ‘amateur theatre’) with yet another normative generalisation that remains equally unresponsive to the concrete situations, and moreover the concrete people a theatre wants to address and build relations to.

The European institutionalised, publicly funded theatre system as a legacy of enlightenment *Bildungs*-culture certainly turned into an ideological project, but it can still also be activated as a transformative practice, in which the institution itself is as much (arguably, even more so) subjected to as it is the subject of providing education, art and culture. On this basis, theatre can continue to still provide its important societal function in creating narratives that relate diverse and plural individuals to a new shared common, supporting what Goossens termed a common ‘literacy’, by transforming the theatres from institutions that represent authority into post-representational contact zones between art and audiences, but moreover so between people. Rather than an intellectual exercise, theatre then, in its ‘creation of temporary communities defined by time, space and a changing set of theatrical rules [...] not only mirrors society but offers possibilities of trying out and challenging social and political procedures, of analysing, performing, enacting, testing or even inventing concrete aspects of society’ (Malzacher 2019, p. 180). The institutional dramaturgy of post-representational theatre, thus, manifests itself no longer through constative statements of cultural authority in tandem with the assertive representation of a given canon and a certain institutional frame alongside their implied knowledge by the initiated – all of which the Molenbeek locals on KVS’s arrival were very easily able to just ignore. Instead, post-representational dramaturgy curates dialogues and of gestures of invitation that turn the objects of theatre into its co-owners, and it constantly reflects on whom this theatre addresses, how it proposes relations, how it practises its own core values and not least what their impact is: it thus makes theatre accountable for its projects through its practices. Dramaturgy here provides far more than a (decolonial or other) framing discourse and much rather becomes the agent of ‘doing practicing’ at the intersection of aesthetic and ethical values – a constant working on the institutional action, too.

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