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Dutch Practice-Based Theatre Experiences

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Part I: The Teachers' Perspective

Henk Havens: Who are we?

Bert Luppés belongs to a select little group of great actors in the Netherlands and Flanders, on stage as well as in film and on television, and is a very appreciated colleague in Maastricht. He is an actor of the theatre company NTGent in Ghent, Belgium, and also a member of the actors' training staff of the academy in Maastricht.

Lieke van der Vegt is a graduating student of the bachelor's performance course, and Emma Buysse is a third-year acting student. I asked them to come with us because they put the issue on the agenda of our institute to inform all first-year students of every year to come about safe working and studying conditions during their stay at the theatre academy in Maastricht.

I am Henk Havens. I have worked as a staff member in Maastricht since 1991. I am a scholar of theatre and performance studies, and defended my PhD thesis in 2015.¹ My research project relied very heavily on the notion of postdramatic theatre as framed by Hans-Thies Lehmann in 1999.

Our story is twofold, as we will explain.

Introduction

In May 2019 I received a mail from Beata Szczucińska from the Warsaw Academia Teatralna. She invited us to come to a conference as part of the ITSELF Festival. She asked, among others, her PLETA partners² to submit their experiences with democratization, collective ways of working, and changing models of working in rehearsal rooms and theatre schools. The conference theme was about new models for teaching and practising theatre. They decided to create the conference because of a huge need for discussion in their environment. My first associative thought was: these are the themes Bert and I have lived during our

¹ Henk Havens, *Theater en het Performatief Spectrum. Transitie in het contemporaine theater van de Lage Landen [Theatre and the Performative Spectrum: Transitions in the Contemporary Theatre of the Low Countries]* (Maastricht: Maastricht University Press, 2015).

² PLETA is the Platform of European Theatre Academies, with theatre school partners from Brussels, Helsinki, Maastricht, Munich, Oslo, Riga, Salzburg, and Warsaw, and three associate partners, in Ljubljana, Madrid, and Thessaloniki (<https://pleta.eu/>).

working lives of the past forty-something years. Almost immediately I had associations with the more or less recent history of the Dutch and Flemish theatre scene: to be precise, the so-called Tomato Action (*Aktie Tomaat*) of 9 October 1969 and the period after that moment. Young theatre students were trying to debate with leading figures at the top of Dutch theatre companies for months, about repertoire, engagement, and political statements, with no result. Artistic leaders and directors did not want to talk with them, did not want to hear the voices of these young people standing up for a better world. And then a few Dutch theatre students threw tomatoes at the actors onstage, thereby forcing the theatre establishment to talk with them. It was a shock, but a game-changing moment in Dutch theatre history.

A few months after the tomatoes in Amsterdam, and after some serious debates in theatre venues and in boardrooms about repertoire, ways of working in rehearsal rooms, power structures and so on, one of the results was a decision by the Minister of Cultural Affairs at the time, Marga Klompé (the first female Dutch minister ever), with far-reaching consequences. She provided a grant to a group of young actors, without any restrictions and conditions, to work for a year on new ways of rehearsing, defining repertoire, etc, in order to find ways of making the theatre more relevant to the spirit of the times: relocation of the established order of power, bridging with social, cultural and political movements of the time.

Klompé's decision opened the gates to a period of large-scale state funding of experiments, artistic research, new kinds of performing arts structures, the emergence of collective ways of working, and other emancipating developments. The actual situation of the Dutch theatre landscape today is a direct result of those initial events in the early 1970s. The game-changing young people of those days, out of their mindset based on equality and collectivity, are now the mainstream in the Netherlands and Flanders.

Meanwhile, last spring, Bert played the show *Orestes in Mosul* of NTGent, directed by Milo Rau, at a festival in Warsaw in June 2019. Talking with him about Beata's invitation, he suggested that he should talk to the people of the Aleksander Zelwerowicz National Academy of Dramatic Art in Warsaw, as he would be in Warsaw in June anyway. So, he did. He had a conversation after the show with Agata Adamiecka, and after that the two of us decided to go to Warsaw in October to tell our story of the artistic emancipation of the Dutch theatre.

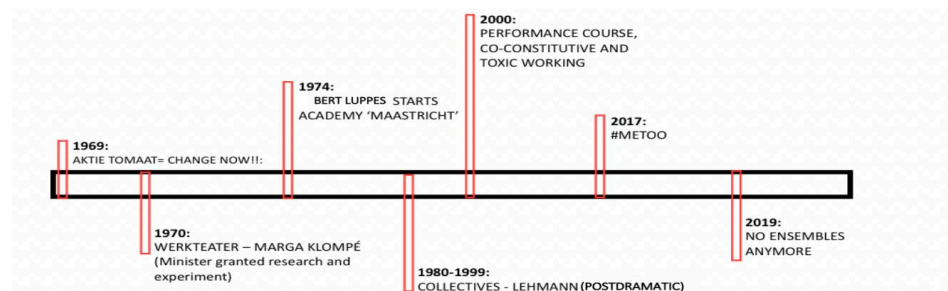
But then, in August 2019, we got another email from Beata with further information about the conference. The title of the conference had become 'Change – Now!' Bert and I understood there would be an important emphasis on, let's say, #MeToo themes, as suggested by the conference text: 'A special context of this process is the theatre's relation to the #MeToo movement, which raised questions about sexual abuse, including the model of a master-genius artist whose limitless freedom used to be treated as an ultimate value of the creative process.'

Bert and I realized a few things. After reading this for us more or less new emphasis, we saw ourselves standing in Warsaw in front of an audience talking about our 'splendid' emancipating theatre history. What would that be like? We, white, grey, in our sixties, in influential

positions at our school, looking very much as if we belonged in the group of the usual suspects.

We did not consider ourselves to be the best representatives to say something of the #MeToo dynamics of the last two years. It seemed simple: different generations, different perceptions. We figured we had to give way to perceptions of the current situation by young students. So we asked two of our present students to look at the invitation from Warsaw and make up their minds, which they did. The four of us talked about the themes, and we discovered that Bert and I seemed to have naïve blind spots in our perception of nuanced educational relationships between teachers and students, up until today. We concluded that dictatorial leadership in the Dutch theatre has very much decreased over the last fifty years, but there are still a lot of situations which can be related to bad behaviour or archaic old-fashioned mindsets (gender issues, diversity) of those in power. And where there is still work to be done by all of us.

So, after these talks, the four of us decided to go to Warsaw and give a sort of group presentation. At the same time, we, and especially the students, concluded that it would be good to evaluate our ‘adventures’ in Poland afterwards and share the feedback with our students and colleagues in Maastricht. The four of us more and more had a combined story to tell, a story that was twofold. One side was about the artistic emancipation since the Tomato Action of the late sixties, the growing importance of the collectives in the 70s and 80s, in the end becoming mainstream common practice in the 90s and after 2000. The other story was centred around the question of how our school in Maastricht was dealing with #MeToo dynamics and the questions raised by the Change Now! conference in Warsaw. The two stories are intertwined, entangled so to speak, because part of our reflections now are definitely historically determined.



Practice-based experiences

Bert started studying at the Maastricht Theatre Academy in September 1974, five years after the game-changing moment of revolt in the Amsterdam city theatre. For Bert, the ambition to become an actor was from the beginning something slightly different than starting an acting career based on the wish for pure individual development as a well-known actor to be.

After the tomatoes of 1969, Bert's creating theatre was very much connected with the new paradigm of being a theatre professional based

on social issues and political engagement. Small theatre companies of young people started to work as collectives, more than an ambition to work in the traditional big ensembles. They were working collectively, putting a lot of time and energy into meetings and discussions, doing their own research, making hard decisions on artistic, political, and organizational issues, building their own sets, hiring small trucks to travel around with shows, finding places to play shows, and the like. Groups played at schools, houses for elderly people, factories, soccer stadiums, scrapyards, prisons, rehab centres, greenhouses, and small theatres.

Bert's own experiences were very much influenced by his history of co-designing methods of what was going to be a new tradition of 'site-specific theatre'. As far as their repertoire was concerned, these small new companies often played at special requests, for instance at congresses or for specific organizations (education, healthcare, governmental waste departments) and so on. At first plays were often based on improvisations, then they asked playwrights and journalists to write for them. In the course of time, they took on for instance the Greek tragedies and other plays from the Western canonical repertoire.

These numerous little state-funded companies, with their self-developed working methods, were very influential on the theatre landscape as a whole. Not only because they made theatre in this new way, but also by designing a new category of stages and venues. From that moment on, the established theatre venues, with an average of 600 to 800 seats, also had to deal with this new scale of 100 to 250. Even the larger state-funded companies could not ignore these developments, but were forced to deal with this new method of making theatre and generating new audiences. This development changed traditional relationships between performer and audience in the Netherlands.

During the 70s and 80s, Bert and his comrades experienced first-hand this development of new production methods for theatre. Somewhat later, some of these little companies not only made their own theatre, but also assumed important positions of guiding and even leading the big companies and stages – more and more they were asked to do so. For Bert and his fellow performers, this meant changes in working levels, in the sense of scale: from site-specific venues in small Dutch communities, via big-city theatre venues, towards the international stages in the whole of Europe, including television and film. This experience of Bert's is shared by a great part of his generation. In fact, a lot of the outcomes of his working life can be categorized under what Hans-Thies Lehmann termed 'postdramatic theatre' in his 1999 book of that title.³

Hans-Thies Lehmann's postdramatic theatre

In 1999 the German scholar Hans-Thies Lehmann described theatre developments between 1970 and 1999 by introducing the new paradigm of 'postdramatic theatre'.⁴ With this term, he implied that at the end

³ Hans-Thies Lehmann (1999), *Postdramatisches Theater* (Frankfurt: Verlag der Autoren, 1999) (*Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. by Karen Jürs-Munby (London and New York: Routledge, 2006).

⁴ Ibid.

of the twentieth century, Western theatre was beyond traditional dramatic dimensions. It was relying more and more on principles of construction different from those of literary drama. Broadly speaking, the lyrical dimension became more important than the dramatic dimension, whether or not in combination with innovative performance techniques, principles of cinematographic form, and increasing employment of the possibilities of digital media. Instead of theatre characters, the body and personality of the actors themselves came more to the foreground. In many cases, 'presentation' took the place of 'representation', and instead of the *mise-en-scène*, editing and juxtaposition started to play an important role. The theatre repertoire and theatre production methods took on a substantially different character. According to Lehmann, the postdramatic teaches us to understand developments in our world and properly define them, and this in a way co-created together with the performers.

According to Lehmann, purely dramatic theatre ended when theatre ceased to be regulated predominantly by literary dramatic elements, but by more and more possibilities in a broader idea of what theatre is or could be. This deconstruction of the dramatic, or this growing distance between drama and theatre, between presentation and representation, between text and other theatre means, gives Lehmann's study a philosophical dimension.

Lehmann concluded that we had entered an era in which coherent stories, which were previously deemed necessary, seemed increasingly less important. He observed a living theatre culture, but one without hierarchical structures and without an aesthetic based on a fixed set of rules. He based his findings on a comprehensive analysis of Western theatre between 1970 and 1999. Besides a lot of other names out of theatre from the Anglo-Saxon and European fringe, important Dutch names in Lehmann's book are those of Jan-Joris Lamers, Jan Lauwers, Maatschappij Discordia, Het Zuidelijk Toneel, Suver Nuver, Paul Koek, Ivo Van Hove, Theatergroep Hollandia, Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, Toneelgroep Stan, and Theatergroep Victoria.⁵

From Lehmann back to the Netherlands again...

In the last fifty years, artistic freedom, and funding for it by the Dutch government, has resulted in a great diversity of production methods and organizations in recent decades. This increased offer can also be seen in connection with the exponential growth in the number of art courses and other channels through which young people are brought to work in artistic professional fields.

These results are to a great deal seen as positive results – the more art the better, one might think. Dutch and Flemish performers, directors, scenographers, and the like, were and are respected throughout Europe nowadays. They are mostly appreciated for their openminded attitude and freedom in rehearsal processes. So we could say that the laboratory of Dutch and Flemish theatre is working at its best.

But these developments also have their dark side, disadvantages. Experiments paid off especially in the professional sector, and were

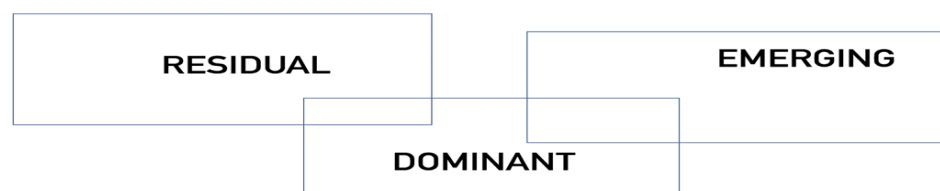
⁵ Havens, *Theatre and the Performative Spectrum*.

eagerly consumed by their specialized audiences, but the big audience of what is often called the ‘mainstream’ lost contact. They did not catch up.

So now national theatre discourse is dominated by questions about, and possible solutions for, this big problem. There are a number of small, niche theatre companies and collectives, serving a number of small audiences. But the audience for large-scale theatre events, with artists who have the ambition to make an impact on the public sphere, is decreasing. Besides that – and we know this may sound strange and shocking for those in more traditional theatre cultures – in the Netherlands and Flanders we no longer have any theatre companies structured as traditional ensembles, with role-playing actors on the payroll. The way of ‘working as collectives’, the heritage of the 70s and 80s, based on equality, is now incorporated into all the companies across the entire profession, especially in the state-funded segment.

We are not sure if traditional ensembles must come back, but there is certainly a need for directors, actors, performers, and other professionals with an ambition to serve larger audiences, thus working for larger venues, than they encounter in their current practices in smaller, exploratory and experimental companies and venues.

For all our students, as well as for all the students of other theatre schools, this is one of the major challenges for the years to come. How to gain an impact again in the public sphere? How to connect again with bigger audiences than within the niches of artistic research practices? In this regard, I am always inclined to look at what the scholar Raymond Williams said about the dynamics of the relationship between canonical works and current events. He said that cultural events and literary developments are never strictly consecutive. He looked on cultural dynamics as the simultaneous occurrence of ‘residual’, ‘dominant’, and ‘emerging’ phenomena. They are very dynamically related, and residual repertoire always remains as an important heritage. In every historically determined period, there are cultural processes and products dominant for that specific period, and there are cultural phenomena still to come, suspected or predicted by specialists. These relations can be considered intertwined and moving, not static or strictly consecutive.⁶



Raymond Williams - 1977

The above is a brief formulation of the background of the point in history where we are now in the Netherlands, in the perception of us, Bert and Henk, two somewhat older teachers at a theatre school. They have their history, and look back with a certain pride at the results achieved by

⁶ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

a revolutionary moment, and a much longer evolutionary development of slow artistic emancipation.

For young students, the perception of recent times is not just a lot shorter, but a very different one.

Lieke and Emma have prepared their part of our contribution to the conference in Warsaw.

Part II: The Students' Perspective

Lieke van der Vegt: How Am I Safe?

As Henk told us, theatre in the Netherlands has changed a lot in the last decades. In the Netherlands there aren't any hierarchic structures or dictatorial environments anymore. But, still, we have problems with our safety. Nowadays we're talking a lot about this subject: How am I safe? As a student? To give you an impression of our daily thoughts as a student at the theatre academy:

- How am I safe in an environment which is really focused on a free artistic way of working?
- What are my personal limits?
- How should I behave?
- How do teachers like me?
- Who is telling me what's right and what's wrong in school?
- Is there a code of conduct?

To be honest, we cannot answer all of those questions. But we think it is important to share our thoughts with you to find the answers with you. Together. For me it's really important to be here. To speak here as a student, to open my mouth.

Two years ago, our school was in the middle of a case all about intimidation and the relationship between teachers and students. Since that case I've learned a lot. I've seen this situation from my perspective, the perspective of a student. That's totally different. The students are in between everything, and for that reason, it's really important to share our thoughts and experiences at places like this. So, thank you for having us! Thank you for having students, young people. Because we are the future. And we can change it. We can change now.

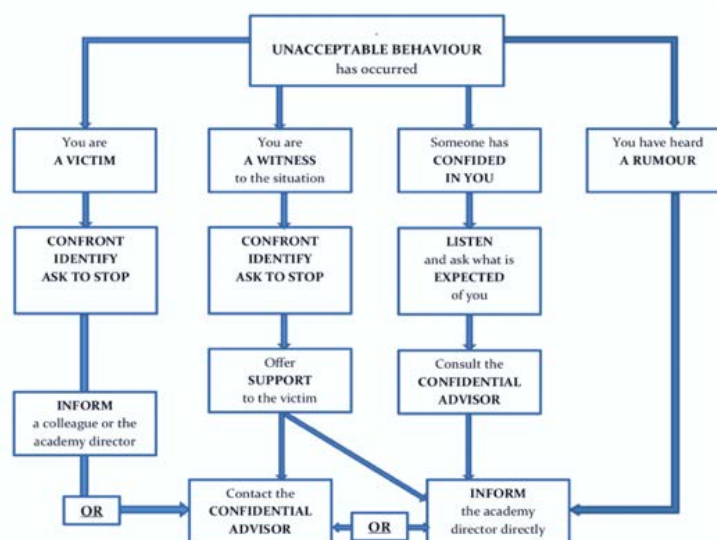
Before we kick off, we would love to start this talk with a personal story/example. A few weeks ago, Emma won the fringe award at a festival in Amsterdam. In the Netherlands, that's an honoured prize as a co-creator, performer. The next day this news was published in a pretty famous nationwide theatre magazine. This was the front page [picture on screen; despite the questions to the authors, we have not obtained the cover or bibliographic description of the newspaper - ed. note]. Of course, we were really proud of Emma, but she was as it were 'exposing' her buttocks. A few days later, Emma and I were talking about this conference and I asked her: 'You were okay with that picture on the front page?' At that moment, Emma realized she had not even thought about it. She did not ask for the picture. The picture was published without her permission. And when Emma saw the picture for the first time, it was already published everywhere. How far can you handle your own safety as an actor in this kind of situation? That brings us to the main subject.

Can I say 'NO'? Without putting my career in danger? Can I say 'NO'? If someone exceeds my personal limits? Can I say 'NO'? If I don't want to undress on stage? Can I say 'NO'? If the role I have to play is against my principles? For example blackface, a play that disrespects woman, social inequality.

What we are doing in Maastricht

We have developed a **code of conduct**.⁷ Every teacher is obligated to sign this paper before starting the job. If you don't want to sign the code, you're not allowed to teach at our academy. This code was renewed after the #MeToo discussion. Students and teachers created this behaviour code together. Every individual student has a personal **mentor**. You have meetings about your work and your educational path, but the meetings are also really important for sharing personal thoughts.

MENTORSHIP AND CONFIDANTS



We have **peer-students**. That means that every first-year student will get a 'mom' or 'dad'. That means that you get connected with another student from a higher class. This is an initiative from the students to protect each other, to create a safe environment for the first-year students – not only 'in' the school, but also 'out' in the new city where they're living. It breaks open the classroom.

We also work with a **confidant**. This is a person in school you can contact if you're feeling unsafe or uncomfortable. I can contact this person personally or anonymously. Every single day you can contact the confidant to talk, make an appointment, ask for help. The confidant will make a plan with you and try to solve the problem together. The confidant has a pledge of silence.

In our school we have **public assessments**. That means that teachers and students discuss together the educational progress of the student in public. It's not about points or levels; we just talk, write

⁷ Code of Conduct, Toneelacademie Maastricht institute of performative arts (Maastricht 2018).

things down, and start a conversation together. For us it is a safe place to be critical and honest with each other. So we prevent miscommunication or intimidation. In this way, there's not one truth. There are several truths.

Emma Buysse: But is it enough?

I think all the things Lieke just mentioned are important and help us to create a safe learning space. It's a way to enlarge the consciousness about teacher-student relations. The awareness that these relations are inevitably based on power.

But is this awareness enough? Is signing policies enough? I think the #MeToo movement created an easier way of speaking up about clear harassment. But then we still have this grey area of unacceptable behaviour. This grey area, which is about small words, a strange sentence, that could have been a joke, completely innocent, but that still makes the student feel awkward. Unacceptable behaviour is in the details. And therefore, the solution is not ONLY in signing big statements and policies. The solution is also in the details. That is very difficult – but not impossible.

I think it's about taking great responsibility for each other. Responsibility from students to students. But even more important, from teachers to students. I think this responsibility has everything to do with vulnerability. It should be based on vulnerability – a mutual vulnerability. I will clarify what I mean.



A student is automatically vulnerable in a school situation. You are a first-year, you are super excited to enter, and you want to pass your first year. In the classes you do your utmost best to become a good actor; therefore you are super vulnerable to the power of a teacher. We can make this more equal, and thereby safer, if the teacher also shows vulnerability. The vulnerability of the teacher is about being aware of the vulnerability of the student.

So, for example the teacher wants to make a free adaption of *Spring Awakening*,⁸ by Frank Wedekind and wants to work with personal stories of the first sexual experiences of the students. If the teacher would

⁸ Frank Wedekind, *Frühlings Erwachen [Spring Awakening]* (play, premiere 1906).

just say, 'Tell me your experience,' it would be intimidating. But what if the teacher would say: 'I can imagine this might be awkward or too personal. Only share an experience if you feel comfortable doing this.' By saying this, the teacher admits that it might be too personal a topic, and shows empathy in his acknowledgement of this. Or even better, he first shows his empathy, and then says: 'So therefore I'll start with telling one of my own experiences.' That brings him to the same level as the students.

I think we should not aim for a world without nudity or sex scenes, without talking about taboos, because art should be about these things. But we should aim for a world in which the conversation is not awkward anymore. Talking about it. Opening the conversation. By mutual vulnerability. Showing that teachers are also in doubt sometimes. That they question themselves if their method is okay. By showing doubt, we do not show weakness, but show power in speaking openly. And that is beautiful and human.

In the example of my partly nude picture in the newspaper. What if the newspaper had called me to ask if I was okay with publishing the picture? They would have showed themselves vulnerable in considering my privacy; they would have showed empathy in putting themselves in the place of my possible values. But since we don't want to make ourselves dependent on teachers, newspapers, directors, and other people in power, we think there should also be more space to share thoughts with students on these topics.

This year Lieke and I will develop a few lessons for the first-years to talk about safety, speaking up, and their borders. We think it's important that you start with this in your first year, because you have no idea what to expect when you begin, and what is normal. You are vulnerable to peer pressure and opinions. And we think it's good to be taught this by fellow students/young people, who you do not have a relation with based on power. We want to share our experiences, so that you are not shocked when something inappropriate happens to you. And you can react more easily. Or recognize it as 'inappropriate' instead of being intimidated and think, 'This is just how this school or the art scene works. I should adjust my boundaries.' I think it's important to realize that everyone's boundaries lie somewhere else.

This raises a number of questions for us to consider. Now I wonder if students here had lessons or talks about exploring their personal boundaries? What should these lessons look like? I think it helps students to trust their fellow-students and teachers, to believe in their own power as an artist and their ability to speak out their thoughts openly. But still, is it enough?

After the warm bath of school, you enter the professional world, where it's not always as 'professional' as we communicated in school. Of course, you hope to implement the power you felt in school to speak up in the professional world. And I think it will help when you talked about this a lot in school. But I think it could maybe help if the school would still be visible in your first years of graduating. In creating a statement or safety mark like: 'You should treat students of our school like this....' Question: What could schools do for their students after they graduated, to continue in practising safety values? How can we implement the values we learn in school in the professional theatre world?

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ABSTRACT

Emma Buysse, Henk Havens, Bert Luppés, and Lieke van der Vegt
Dutch Practice-Based Theatre Experiences

From the early seventies on, we were in fact living the transition from a Dutch canonical theatre tradition (hierarchical structured companies, dominance of traditional textual repertoire, connections with changing society were few) towards an international performing arts practice (more or less emancipated, more and more diverse, dominance of traditional theatre ensembles is gone, emerging importance of collectives, changing training programs for actors and performers, reflective studying). We would like to share our experiences with the public of the conference in a duo-presentation. We will be on stage together and we will interview each other about our track through recent Dutch and Flemish theatre history as far as the above mentioned transition is concerned. We have in mind to explain some dots on a timeline. It will be a track, our track in fact, that is well known and generally accepted as an established part of recent Dutch history. We will interview each other on the basis of a few marking points, we both experienced as game changing in the direction of a more open, a more equivalent, performing arts field.

Keywords: theatre school, community, good practices, safety.