

○ **American Theatre in Mickery 1965-1991** **- the chronicle of a love affair**

Nowadays theatre is – generally speaking - often searching for new relations between audience and performers. Theatre ‘on location’ and ‘experience-theatre’ flower again. Can one say we relive the ‘avant-garde’; might there be a new generation of ‘conquerors of heaven’ coming up? Anyhow it seems good to rest a while at the former and authoritative moments in recent theatre history, at which the relation between audience and performers completely and definitively changed. Theater Schrift Lucifer asked permission of Ritsaert ten Cate, founder and artistic director of Mickery, to publish a recent lecture: a personal declaration of love to theatre.

Ritsaert ten Cate

When I was in New York years ago the first things I bought were the Village Voice and the Soho Weekly. I am almost 70 now and subscribe to the New Yorker – I don’t hear as much about the latest shows, but I did just read a long article about Peter Gelb at the Metropolitan Opera and learned that the Met has a yearly budget that equals all of the money spent in any given year on all the music, opera and theatre in the Netherlands. That includes the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, Het Nederlands Danstheater, De Nederlandse Opera and all the theatre groups you’ve never heard of and probably never will.

Thinking about that New Yorker piece on the Metropolitan Opera I can hear Bob Carroll, who came to Mickery with three different shows between 1975 and 1980. We were walking in downtown Manhattan, talking about his ‘Dirt Show’. He waved his arms at the skyscrapers around us and told me, “Ritsaert, someday, it will all be ours.” But Bob is dead now, he died more than 15 years ago.

Two weeks prior to this New Yorker art special there was a ten-page interview with Liz Lecompte, the Queen Bee of what’s left of the avant-garde. In this interview a former associate, Joanne Ross, recalls a moment when ‘a Dutch producer’ tried to convince Liz to travel with the Rhode Island trilogy. She cried, because she was scared of touring, but was convinced by her then partner and star actor, Spalding Gray, that it could and should be done. Thus the tour took place, and the shows came to Mickery. That was 1978, more than a decade after my love affair with American theatre had begun.

The Wooster Group was presented at Mickery with eleven different productions. Spaulding made excellent use of his time there, testing his stories in the upstairs theatre, an intimate space that held no more than 30 or 40 people. That was one of the spaces where Spaulding’s storytelling was consolidated.

These were among the roughly 120 different American productions I brought to Mickery in 25 years. These productions were embedded in a program of some 800 productions from all over the world. From Reykjavik to Tokyo, from Paris to Belgrade, from Helsinki to Rome, from Berlin to London.

It began with the first concert on mainland Europe by Nina Simone in 1965 when Mickery was located in a farmhouse in Loenersloot, about 17 kilometers outside of Amsterdam. After Nina Simone we presented Johnny Speight's *If There Weren't Any Blacks, We'd Have to Invent Them*. That was followed by Pinter's *The Dwarfs*. Then, in December of that year, came a phone call: "Hi, honey, I'm Ellen Stewart. I hear you have a theatre – so do I. We should get together because I'm organizing a tour."

I was a complete novice in the business. Joe Papp had just opened *Hair*, directed by Tom O'Horgan, and Tom also directed *Tom Paine* that La Mama was offering on tour. They came to us with Tom Paine, the first part – part two had to be ready when they arrived at the Edinboro Festival a week later. They also brought *Futz*, *Times Square*, and *A Melodrama Play*.

Eugenio Barba was one of Grotowski's first disciples, and Barba's theatre in Holstebro, Denmark was where Ellen first took the troupe. From there they came to Mickery with three Volkswagen buses and stayed for two weeks en route to Edinburg. They slept in the farmhouse theatre and with neighbors. Dutch critics didn't know what hit them, and we had 100, 120, 150 people showing up in this small Dutch village for these shows – the house was jammed with people who came to see this work. The Dutch theatre world would never be the same again, not ever.

Twenty years later I gave Ellen an anniversary gift: the handwritten contract we had for those first shows. It read something like this: "We will arrive with 3 buses, you will pay the actors a fee of \$30 for each performance, plus a per diem, and you will make sure that they can sleep somewhere. We will perform *Tom Paine part one*, and we'll perform each play two times. We will also need to rehearse. Thank you."

What a contrast that was to what the Manhattan Project demanded fifteen years later: not just their fees, per diems, hotels and travel, but also dressers and people who would do the laundry. To which we responded: "Are you mad? Can't you shine your own shoes? Button your own shirts?" They must have decided that they could – we presented them two more times.

But the relationship with Ellen and La Mama was always special, and their first shows in Mickery marked the real beginning of my love affair. And as Ellen later told the art historian Gary Schwarz, "Honey, don't let anyone in Holland tell you they knew what experimental theatre was before Ritsaert. In Holland in the Sixties there was nothing going on. They didn't have a clue... but nobody had heard of them either. We didn't even know that Holland and the Netherlands were the same place."

Over the years La Mama visited us with 12 different productions. It was never about money then. Oh yes, there were regular battles to find money to do what we did, but money was never the focus of things as it is now, 40 years later. Bums on seats weren't the issue, not then. Sometimes we got a little creative so I could find travel money... I made reports for the Dutch Radio to finance my travel in the beginning, like the time I sat poised with a microphone in front the front row of Bread and Puppet's production, *A Man Says Goodbye to His Mother*. But the show, I discovered, was 100% mime. Not a noise to be heard. And I can't, for the life of me, remember how I got around that one.

But I can remember going to see Robert Wilson's *Deafman Glance* with Rudy Engelder in the packed Municipal Theatre in Nancy. The show lasted for five or six hours and we left after the first hour had passed. We strolled to a nearby terrace and sipped wine as we discussed what we'd seen. One or the other of us would introduce another topic of conversation, a different show, but within a sentence or two we'd be back to the Wilson experience. Wine only half-finished, we looked at each other silently and, as one body rose and rushed back to that show.

I was sold forever, and followed the performance all over Europe, but not until after we paid a visit to the then-director of the Holland Festival and announced that he had to travel – *immediately* – to Paris with us to see the show. Then he had to program it. "But I have no budget," he told us. "See it first," I said, "*then* we'll find the budget." He did, and then we did, and thus Robert Wilson came to Amsterdam.

At that time Squat was called Kaz Hazak, and still had their own space in Budapest, although they weren't very much favored by the Hungarian regime of the time. So disliked were they that their next festival performance in Poland earned them a status not unlike an internal house arrest – no more travel and no more theatre making allowed. So they started performing in private homes. Then that became a problem and Maria Rankov helped them get into Paris, where they took up temporary residence on a houseboat. I brought them to Amsterdam, and they performed at Mickery.

By this time they called themselves Elephant, at which time Willie Hoffman and George Lawson in Rotterdam came to the rescue and offered them housing. They renamed themselves Squat and created *Pig Child Fire* which put them triumphantly onto the international touring map. They went on to settle in New York, and this Hungarian/American transplant, Squat Theatre, came back to Mickery with five different productions. When Squat dissolved, the founder Peter Halasz came back with two more productions under the name of Love Theatre.

Meanwhile one production after another was pouring in from Britain and elsewhere. But also a Performance Theater workshop production *The Beard* came, and I was hell-bent to have *The Saint and the Football Player* a production by Lee Breuer and Mabou Mines I had first to sell to Hamburg in order to pay for it ourselves. *Saint* was physically such a large production that I could barely fit it into the Mickery space. That was in 1976. Mickery had moved into the old Rozen Theatre in central Amsterdam in 1972 where we had a black box theatre that could hold up to 250 people if we stuffed them in sideways, plus that intimate little upstairs theatre that held 30 to 40 more – if we squeezed them in – and the all important foyer, with the very busy bar. Over the years Mabou Mines came back to Mickery with six shows.

I was reminded that for one of them, *Shaggy Dog Animation*, Lee Breuer demanded that we guarantee full houses or he would refuse to bring it. This was nonsense, of course, everyone wanted full houses but sometimes the public refused to see a show and sometimes we couldn't even give tickets away as gifts. Lacking our guarantee, Lee brought *A Prelude to Death in Venice* with Bill Raymond. And yes, that show had full houses.

Another production that comes to mind here is Richard Foreman's *Café Amerique*. He brought the show straight from Paris and used the full black box space for it. We could only use an alcove, seating 60 people for the total public who could see it any give night.

Festivals were important in helping me find productions to present in Mickery, but we had also reached a point that Mickery was bringing work to Europe that festivals in Germany, France and England took an interest in. At one point Theatre der Welt in Hamburg had seven productions that we had originally brought over the water. But this wasn't always a happy thing. I think here of Robby Anton.

Maurice McClelland was the architect who designed the International Theatre Institute Office in New York, and he invited me to an 'at home' performance with Robbie Anton. Robbie was a puppet master, working with the tiniest puppets on the tops of his fingers, with which he reenacted his ritualistic and returning nightmares as macabre little dreamscapes for his guests. He was a miracle worker with an angelic face over a fragile body that was usually dressed in black. He was also a perfect host, serving drinks and cookies to the guests who came to his 'at home' performances.

Somehow I convinced him to accept an invitation to come and perform in Amsterdam, where he performed his miracles in my office for 15 people at a time.

I should have known better, but we argued. Could his performances not be made for more people, could they not be videotaped – in my heart I knew the answers, but I argued anyway, I would so much have liked others to have seen his work as he mastered his secret terrors. After all, that's why we ask people to see performances, to share the beauty at the same time we support the further artistic development of a person or a group. It's a predicament that still haunts me. The more you're part of the machinery that creates success, the more you're also part of a process that also undercuts creative development. It's not a rule, certainly, but it's an ever-present danger.

The Nancy Festival got wind of Robbie's work and invited him to perform there. Of course he became the miracle of the festival, also when limitations of space and numbers of public were still respected. But after the festival he was somehow 'programmed' into the Chateau Vincennes, which was offered to him as his studio with Rodrigo, a deaf-mute, as his assistant. With this he was asked to create a new spectacle that would allow for a bigger sized public, as he was now the pet of whoever counted in the Paris beau monde.

Robbie performed magnificently for half a year, and then went to the festival in Cologne for a short stop. Then he went home to Vermont and committed suicide.

We should have taken care of him, rather than loved him to death for our own purposes, although to this day I'm not sure what 'taking care of him' would have meant.

By now it was the late 70's, and we were about halfway through all the Nancy Festivals. Although question of money was weighing more heavily on things, it still

wasn't as invasive as it would become. But co-productions were no longer just ideological luxuries; they'd become necessities to insure that certain productions could happen at all.

Maybe three months ahead of the next opening of the Nancy Festival I'd be in touch with Monique Lang to look at the documentation of what might be coming, so I could be in touch with groups in advance of their potential successes – several of the groups who were launched at the Nancy Festival were lifted right off the charts of what we could cope with financially – unless there was a co-production I could arrange.

Sometimes we invited a playwright, like director John Schneider from Theatre X in Milwaukee to come and stay in Amsterdam for some months as he researched and wrote a script that we eventually produced. In fact we did a whole series of productions and projects with Theatre X, with most of these productions going on to be produced in the States. A portion of this collaboration was facilitated by their managing director, Colleen Scott, with whom I fell in love. She became our liaison in the US for a time, and has been my wife for the last 20 years.

Ideologically we were still looking for moments when a little money, or even the fact of an invitation could be supportive. Hence, when Holland celebrated 200 years of unbroken diplomatic relationship with the USA, it became important to make sure that Wooster Group would be part of the festivities. They had, what Liz Lecompte in the New Yorker article, referred to as “the black-face problem” with their production of *Route 1 and 9*. The fact that this production was performed in definitely non-politically correct black face had created endless funding problems for them back home in the States.

Meanwhile, the US government offered \$10,000 as their official contribution to these official celebrations... for one year, for all the artistic activities that would take place in the whole of the Netherlands. By that point Mickery had already funded American groups to the tune of \$400,000, and I flatly refused any of this money, telling them that, “thanks, but we can buy our own stamps.”

Soon afterward a delegation of security personnel arrived to check arrangements in the theatre for the ambassador and his entourage. It was important for me that Wooster became an official element in the so-called ‘unbroken diplomatic relationship’, although after seeing the production the ambassador responded by writing a letter that proclaimed that “Not over my dead body would this production have been part of the program if I'd known what it was.” But I think he knew very well what Wooster was going to do. I think that everyone played the game, and everyone was happy insofar as officialdom was concerned. And Wooster went home again, waving the flag in black face, an ‘official’ American group once more.

But it doesn't have to be a made-up black face to make trouble for you. If, in 1985, you made a production of *Ajax* with a black 5-star general, let him perform in a set that was a recreation of the back entrance of the Pentagon, and had a chorus of more black generals, well, then, you were asking for trouble. Certainly if you performed this as a highly visible program in the Kennedy Centre, in what was called the American Repertory Company under the directorship of Peter Sellars. That show

was the end of the American Repertory Company. I went to arrange that 'Ajax' come to Europe in 1987.

"It's much too expensive to even consider," Diane Malecki, Peter's producer said when we sat down to discuss this. "Of course it is," I told her, "that was never the problem. Now let's see how to get the damn show to Europe." And we did. There was still a series of performances in California, after which the set was to be destroyed. Instead it was parked in a truck in the desert until we finalized negotiations with Theatre der Welt in Stuttgart, Gerard Mortier then still at the Opera de Munt in Brussels, and the Holland Festival. Meanwhile Peter made changes in the cast, found places in New York to re-rehearse, and Colleen and I got married. She stayed in New York to help get the show moved to Europe, and I went home to Amsterdam and the last successful negotiations, which included a VPRO television production.

Other memories of other times. From more than 100 of the groups we introduced from America Ekatharina Sobachanskaya came three times, the second time they came we produced the Troccadao Gloxinia Ballet dance gala at the Stadschouwburg, and all the great Dutch choreographers threw flowers on the stage. Medicine Show came twice, Meredith Monk/The House had four Mickery productions, and Drawing Legion made six appearances. Theodora Skipitares was there four times, as was John Jesurun, who was also the first DasArts mentor. Ping Chong and the Fiji Company came with five different shows, but Ping was not only popular for his productions, he was also in demand as a workshop leader, with occasionally hilarious results, like the time he led students from the Mime School down the Rozengracht – an extremely busy street in Amsterdam – with paper bags on their heads 'to find their inner selves'. Whether they found their inner selves or not is open to question; they certainly did find their inner complainers because those kids weren't one bit happy prancing down a busy Dutch street with bags over their heads.

We closed Mickery with the festival Touch Time. The American productions in Touch Time included John Malpede's *LAPD inspects Amsterdam*, Ivan Szendro's *Judge of Blood, Brace Up* by the Wooster Group, *Kanaka'Ole* by Nalani Hawaii, and last but certainly not least, Bread and Puppet's *Columbus: the New World Order*. Did we find what we were looking for? Did I? Well – maybe not. But after more than 100 American groups, and some 800 performances in 25 years, enough was enough.

Epilogue: After all was said and done I started a school, with which I continued the tradition of American involvement; in fact, I asked Ellen Steward to give out the diplomas being awarded to the first graduates from DasArts, De Amsterdamse School Advanced Research in Theatre and Dance Studies. So you could say that everything started all over again, only now on an individual basis, with old friends teaching others about their craft, or finally say good bye: like with Stuart Sherman.

Stuart had performed at Mickery six times, and came back to teach at DasArts twice. I left DasArts, and got a grant to work in New York for a year. Colleen and I had just returned to Amsterdam... it was September 11th, 2001, the day the twin towers came down. We got a phone call – we don't have a television, but we got phone calls telling us of the horrors unfolding in New York. At the same time a friend called on one phone to announce the start of what looked like World War III, the other phone rang – a friend of Stuart Sherman's was calling from the emergency room of an LA hospital

to say that he wanted to be in touch. Literally that, as Stuart could barely speak through the tubes in his throat. He was dying of complications from AIDS.

At first I didn't know what to say, but then told him I loved him, and thanked him for all the beautiful work he'd given us, and for the good times, and – yes, thanks for the memories, that too.

Amsterdam January 2008, Edited by Colleen Scott

Ritsaert Ten Cate was founder and artistic director of Mickery Loenersloot/Amsterdam, from December 1965 to June 1991. As director, designer and scriptwriter he made - amongst many others: *Fairground* (1975), *Folter Follies* (1976), *Vox Populi Vox Dei* (1977), *Cloud Cuckooland* (with Shuji Teryama, 1977), *Beauty and the Beast* (with Pip Simmons, 1981), *Half My Fathers Age* (1983) *Rembrandt and Hitler or Me* (1985), *History of Theatre* (part II, 1989). As a creative producer he was responsible for some hundred international (co-)productions. He is a well-known international keynote-speaker and lecturer, received two times the National Theatre Critics Prize and the Dutch Royal Honors (Ridder in de Orde van Oranje Nassau). Ten Cate founded DasArts; The National Post Academic Program for Theatre Making and was artistic director from 1993 till 2000.