

Regeneration / IETM: An Interview with Nan Van Houte

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(published on: "<http://www.iltamburodikattrin.com/>", 04/23/2015)

What do you expect from the IETM meeting in Bergamo?

It is always hard to tell what we can expect from an IETM Plenary meeting. The Bergamo meeting brings a broad cluster of working sessions on interesting and topical subjects, several inviting formats for meeting international colleagues and a great offer of performances and artistic itineraries. The programme is conceived in close collaboration between the Brussels office and the local organisers team of Etre, who know the Italian context very well. And at the same time we are totally dependent on our members, our participants: they make over 50% of the success of the meeting. If they are in a good mood, if they contribute in the discussions (and why shouldn't they) we are very confident it will be a great meeting with many happy participants strolling through the lovely uppertown of Bergamo.

Which are the ietm's goals for the future? What would you like to achieve in the next years?

IETM aims to strengthen the contemporary performing arts in its daily practice, supplies opportunities for international collaboration/ artist's mobility, and is an ambassador for the contemporary arts on several platforms. Our members are facing a lot of challenges these days, so strengthening them has many more aspects to it than ten years ago. We try to help companies to adapt to the austerity measures and budget cuts by providing information and workshops on creating new management structures, business models and finding alternative resources.

We bring to the surface best practices in the application of digital arts as a companion for the live arts, while we research the impact of the digitalisation on the behavior of our audiences etc.

We discuss and report on the threats to democracy and freedom of expression, while drawing attention to the positive social impact of arts practices involving communities/groups that are threatened by nationalist tendencies, protectionist policies, or religious fanaticism.

And meanwhile we try to influence the policy makers to acknowledge the value of the arts in an era that expects economy to be the main driver and saviour of mankind.

We commission research and publications, we offer training programs and first of all we bridge, we match, we bring people together; because we are convinced that international gatherings are the best way to make people move, both physically, mentally and in their activities.

(and in the end of course we would like to see the contemporary performing arts being recognised in all parts of Europe as an extremely human art form, that helps society to learn to value the unexpected and to better deal with it).

How many organisations in South Europe participate in ietm? Is it more difficult for them to take part in the network than the organisations in North Europe?

It definitely is more difficult to participate in an IETM meeting if you are living on a very small budget. This difficulty is not necessarily connected with a region, but of course we have witnessed that the crisis hits harder in the Mediterranean area than in the North West of Europe. To compensate with the budget cuts IETM is trying to organise one of its two annual Plenary meetings in a low cost country. Besides we have a travel grant scheme supported by the annual fees of our members and Creative Europe subsidy, which allows us to help members that cannot afford travel and accommodation costs to participate in the activities. And for several years already we get support from the French Institute Belgrade to support people from the Balkan region.

At this moment we have 85 member organisations from the Mediterranean/Black Sea area (out of 500 world wide). During the last years we organised meetings in Greece and Bulgaria where we reached far more organisations than just our members. Same will be true for our meeting in Italy.

From your particular point of view, how the financial crisis had an impact on cultural organisations?

The crisis has hit the arts sector unevenly hard. And I guess that within the arts sector the contemporary performing arts did receive the hardest blows. In some countries where the contemporary arts are only represented by the so called “ independent” sector, the contemporary companies lost all their public support. It is great to witness that, to our records, audience numbers are not falling down. But they don’t compensate for subsidies lost and smaller budgets of course have an impact – both artistically and in the management of the organisations: we witness costs reduction in more solo pieces, more collaborations with non-professionals, more performances in public space (which have the aim to reach a new audience – not only to reduce costs, of course). And, on the level of human resources : more burn outs.

Do you have any expectation about the Italian theatre you’re going to see in Bergamo?

I am thrilled to get an opportunity to get to know this arts field a bit better.

I must admit I have lost track of many companies during the nineties. except for the few very well known companies/artists.