

By Alexander Karschnia

**Radical budget cuts in the cultural sector of the Netherlands have caused disquiet and debates about high culture even in Germany. However, do we really need what the German punk poet Rainald Goetz once sneeringly called “Kulturverteidigung” (“defence of culture”)? Or should we rather develop a whole new concept of culture? A new term that is guided by questions of production and cooperation, rather than antiquated needs of representation? Such questions are asked by independent theatre maker Alexander Karschnia in his article on protests in the cultural arena in Italy and Holland. His performance group andcompany&Co. has resided in the Netherlands for many years. Together with Dutch and Belgian collaborators they are going to present a new piece on the topic early next year, entitled: *The (Coming) Insurrection According to Friedrich Schiller*.**

#### CULTURAL COUNTERREVOLUTION GAINING GROUND

“Through car-free streets I walk to the Odéon. A young man in the centre aisle of the theatre is leading the discussion. An amazing experience, still: Someone is speaking from one of the golden boxes, handsome and serious faces, finally no longer bored, turn into that direction, arguments are streaming back and forth in the world’s longest dialogue, which has now been going on for days around the clock. (...) Never again, not even when this will be past, will this theatre be a ‘normal’ theatre for me, because this scene is unforgettable.”

Paris, May, 1968, described by Cees Nooteboom for a Dutch newspaper. For several weeks, revolting students had occupied the Théâtre de l’Odéon and used it as a gathering place. Rome,

June, 2011, a similar scene: Rome's most ancient extant house, the Teatro Valle, was occupied by *Lavoratrici e Lavoratori dello Spettacolo* (male and female workers of the theatre: actors, directors, designers, stage callers, light board operators, sound engineers) demanding to preserve the famous theatre house. Founded in 1727 as a concert stage, it saw the first performance of Pirandello's *Six Persons are Looking for an Author* 90 years ago. The play's experimental dramaturgy laid the founding stone for a new era of Italian theatre. For 60 years, the theatre had been controlled by the national authority Ente Teatrale Italiano (ETI), which had ultimately opted for privatisation, prior to its own dissolution. In June, it was taken over by its staff: "All of them together keep a theatre going which has not had any official managing director since the beginning of June," Spiegel online wrote. Protests were voiced by more than 8000 citizens and international theatre makers, including Thomas Ostermeier from Germany. In the course of summer, nearly the entire cultural establishment of Italy joined the protest: it is ironical that precisely on the 150th anniversary of Italy's national unification, a theatre that would be eminently suitable for a 'national theatre' is for sale. Occupants and their supporters demand a publicly funded house with transparent operating structures, dedicated to developing contemporary dramaturgies and to teaching and training, which is capable of realizing international co-productions, like the Royal Court Theatre in London, the Theatre de la Colline in Paris or Berlin's Schaubühne. An 'ecological principle' is wanted, "between small and big productions, training and guest performances; fairness of wages, including fixed minimum and maximum wages; an affordable and progressive policy with regard to admission fees; independent supervisory bodies, transparency and legality through online publication of balances; drafting an ethical codex as a model for all theatre houses and groups in Italy." And – hopefully – beyond!

Italian civil society had already rejected nuclear power as well as the privatisation of water and the legal special treatment of politicians this year; now Roman theatre workers declared culture a ‘common wealth’, and “free access to culture, knowledge, freedom in distributing ideas and the strengthening of critical thinking an essential component of civil rights.” In principle, we may agree with this, yet we need to ask whether the theatres they mention as examples really achieve this. The *Art Workers’ Document* by another group of Italian curators, artists, and activists goes further. Attempting to analyse their situation within the framework of general transformations of the welfare state, which after all was also a ‘cultural state’, they warn against the widening gap between the public sphere and the sphere of cultural production. Their demand to reform this state goes far beyond the demand for state-funding and de-privatisation: it is this cooperative and collective dimension of their work which must be respected and actively protected, instead of mechanically reciting the neoliberal harangue of self-responsibility, creativity, flexibility, and mobility. This is precisely what is happening at Teatro Valle every night, when its doors open for meetings, discussions, and performances, partly by prominent artists such as Bernardo Bertolucci, Nanni Moretti, and many more, who declare their solidarity. Occupants were delighted during the summer: “Already, we are over Berlusconi...”

This is what occupants of the Odéon were thinking back then, too: after many nights of fighting on the barricades, overwhelming mass protests by students and workers and a wild general strike, which had brought the country to a halt for almost a month, nobody would have imagined that the ‘General’ (de Gaulle) who had fled the country would score this high in the elections a few weeks later. But the points of departure in

France, 1968 and Rome, 2011 are very different: while l'Odéon was chosen as a meeting place during a whole series of occupations of universities and businesses, the occupation of the theatre house in Rome is a singular event. An event, however, that could be the prelude to a new social cultural movement – in all of Europe and beyond. For the field of culture is as fiercely contested as never before. We are indebted to the Italian Antonio Gramsci for his concept of 'cultural hegemony', which implies – in short – that the (non-material) superstructure has its own dynamics, which acts upon the (material) 'basis' (relations of production). While the activists of 1968ff. followed this realization with Mao's slogan of a 'cultural revolution' and Situationist phrases on their lips, today, however, we are facing a 'cultural *counter*revolution' – where the basis immediately affects the superstructure: anywhere in Europe, whether in England, Hungary, Italy, Slovenia or the Netherlands, cultural expenses are slashed. The Netherlands are an extreme example: a right-liberal minority government, which can only remain in power with the support of extreme right-wingers, decided budget cuts by 20% of 200 million Euros (from 900 to 700 millions). The performing arts are hit especially hard: here, the cuts amount to more than 50%, in dance, music and fine arts over 40%. While big, representative houses and groups are protected, funding of the middle sector is dropped completely: free production houses and alternative festivals no longer figure in the governments' calculations. Usually, such scenarios are familiar only from economy or hostile takeovers. Or from wars. Irony of history: not until German occupation was state-funded theatre introduced to the Netherlands.

The government's culture struggle is not directed against the model of German theatre, but against the model which emerged from the protests against the former – by two tomatoes being thrown: *Actie Tomaat* was the name of a student campaign

against a performance by the Nederlandse Comedie in 1969. More tomatoes followed, as well as a stink bomb and three months of heated discussions after – and sometimes during – performances. Successfully: the minister of culture back then reacted with reforms, and immediately changed the funding system. From then on, not only big, existing institutions were supported, but also groups and theatre collectives such as “werkteater” which closely collaborated with young dramatists such as Judith Herzberg. During the following four decades, a completely distinct cultural landscape evolved, with independent ensembles, free production houses, new university courses, and an institutional infrastructure that had given rise to the “miracle of Dutch theatre” (Hans-Thies Lehmann). Thanks to this campaign, Dutch theatre came to be the model for all “iconoclasts” of the stage/theatre ? - a structural reform Germany is still waiting for! As every independent theatre maker knows: the municipal theatre of a small provincial town has a larger budget than the so-called ‘independent scene’ in Germany. Only during the past few years, cautious steps were taken towards a convergence of the ‘independent scene’ and the system of municipal and state theatres.

In Germany, the revolt of ‘68 led, above all, to the establishment of a so-called ‘director’s theatre’ (‘Regietheater’), where directors in their productions emancipated themselves from the idea of a ‘faithfulness to the original’ as well as from the author’s ghost. The Netherlands, in contrast, saw the emergence of a series of collectives creating their own repertoire. Thanks to state-funding and public recognition of their work, these groups were able to operate for extended periods of time, some of them for more than thirty years.

In Germany, such independent groups usually disappeared after a few years only. They were either dissolved or absorbed into

the existing system. The latter remained an exception, for the municipal and state theatres are part of a closed system caught between nationally recognized educational establishments, hierarchically organized institutions with a large number of unwritten laws, and an extensive bureaucratic administrative body. The Dutch theatrical landscape is now heading towards just such a closed system. Thus, already in 2009 – exactly forty years after the first tomatoes being thrown – BIS (basic infrastructure) was created, connecting eight theatre houses with eight training institutions. If it were for the government's plans, this infrastructure would be the only thing to remain of Dutch theatre. Those 21 independent production houses which saw the rise of an extremely heterogeneous, innovative and, above all, a productive theatre and dance scene, should no longer have a place in this cultural landscape, which is merely concerned with issues of representation. (In comparison: all of Germany has only one-third of Holland's number of comparable independent houses, one-third of which are in the neighbouring county of North Rhine-Westphalia).

This is an irony of history, too: while the German system of municipal theatres is struggling for reforms inspired by the Dutch model, the Dutch system is being restructured according to the German model. At the same time, the big shining lights of German municipal theatre are Dutch and Belgian, respectively: Johan Simons (director of the Munich Kammerspiele since this year) and Luk Perceval (director of Thalia Theatre, since last year) – both of whom owe their artistic careers to this very model. Many prominent artists of the German state and municipal theatres have pointed out this fact in an urgent letter to the Dutch minister of cultural affairs.

Worlds turned upside down! However, haven't relations between the Low Lands and Germany always been – let's say: complementary? Or how come one country succeeds in

revolution, while the other only produces classical drama about it? I am talking about the Eighty Years' War, which in the rest of Europe is known only as the Thirty Years' War (since it lasted only thirty years everywhere else apart from the Netherlands, because the Dutch had taken up arms against the Spanish superpower fifty years earlier). And about Schillers *Don Carlos* and Goethes *Egmont*. While Germany was completely devastated and depressed after thirty years of war, the Dutch were finally independent and autonomous after eighty years of war, as the first country in Europe! Later the Dutch rejected Greater Germany's generous offer to revert those 400 years of error which had caused both countries to grow apart from each other, when they decided not to gratefully integrate into the "Thousand-Year Reich" as blonde blood brothers. They merely examined and took over the fully finalised funding plans for theatres, which Germans had left on the desks of their office of culture and propaganda – and were firmly resolved to ward off any exertion of influence on the part of the state: season tickets, permanent positions for actors, social insurance etc. The social protection of artists in the Netherlands was on a level that performing artists in Germany (like ourselves) can only dream of (Berlin is currently trying to reinforce minimum wages).

And yet: in the Netherlands, we nowadays frequently hear that an entrenchment of theatre, i.e. a cultural mandate, had never existed in the consciousness of the people here as it did in Germany. On the contrary: people prove to be quite receptive to the new populism. Obviously, art and culture are considered "leftist hobbies", not only by the extreme right-winger Geert Wilders. According to Johan Simons, artists are met with "downright hatred": "there is an atmosphere where you better don't mention that you're an artist or have read more than 100 books." The slashes in culture have not diminished but rather increased support for the government. And thus, even the *Raad*

*voor Cultuur* (Dutch Council of Culture, the government's independent advisory body) had to acknowledge that it was not about necessary limitations - *Noodgedwongen Keuzen* – but about something entirely different. All constructive suggestions proposed to the government of how to arrive at savings in the least harmful way were wiped off the table (a singular event). Instead, a *Cultuuromslag* (cultural turn) was pronounced: 'Cultural Counterrevolution.' This clear-cutting of culture is part of wider campaign. The government has discovered artists as a new social group to back up populist politics: "subsidy-eater" (analogous to the "petrol-eating" car) is one of the kinder terms which are presently heard on the part of the government. The horrified liberal public helplessly speaks of a 'new vandalism' - a new "iconoclasm". On the part of the government.

The tragedy that is currently unfolding in the Netherlands should be a lesson to the rest of Europe: in the motherland of liberalism, its Janus face appears, i.e. the ugliness of the second face now becomes all the more visible. The process is reminiscent of the changes in migration politics. Within a short period of time, the previously most tolerant immigration country became the most repressive. All of a sudden, the so-called 'Holland-Test' consisting of a list of perfidious questions which each immigrant has to pass, became a model for all authoritarian right-wing parties in the EU. By and by, all liberal achievements are collected: artists are only good for gentrification (such as the dissolution of the red-light district in Amsterdam), foreigners are no longer permitted to buy soft drugs in coffee shops (only if they present a European passport are they allowed to buy hash), while residents can buy them only in prescribed amounts. Once more we can see: the slim state is the string state – and neo-liberalism is the real-existing anti-socialism. Many artists are waking up only now that their own lives are affected. Why have we refused for such a long time to show solidarity with



other social groups who do not have job security either, the authors of the *Art Workers' Document* are wondering? After all, we could perhaps be the ones to develop a new model that would help to overcome the antagonism of freelance vs. permanent position in favour of a completely new structure that is simultaneously creative and cooperative. Theatres have always been excellent gathering places: OCCUPY A THEATRE IN EVERY CITY, Italian cultural workers are calling out to us. On November 11, this call was followed by Greek practitioners (Mavili collective) who occupied the deserted EMBROS theatre in Athens. To be continued...

P.S. In 1977, Noteboom wrote: "Sometimes, when I walk past the Sorbonne or Théâtre de l'Odéon, I can hardly imagine that May 1968 happened right here in front of my eyes, - the masses of people, the tension, the banners, the sense of humour, the hopes and disillusionment." Finally, once again, the theatre had become what he had not considered possible anymore: a 'normal' theatre. What Noteboom felt was – nostalgia, "not about barricades or police attacks, not about interminable explanations and political chicaneries, not about all the excitement, the news that happened right in front of one's eyes, or fulfilled prophecies of doom, but about that inexplicable tingle in the air, the almost tangible expectation, everyone's complete, touching openness towards everyone else, the mixture of hope, naïveté, strategy and honesty, all of that which has become invisible now that the world looks like the world." What we do need are neither monologues of power, nor dialogues between power and those who claim to represent us, but a dialogue – amongst each other: Brecht called it "the Big Discussion", which was the precondition for the 'Big Production'. Cultural workers of the world – unite! Let fantasy rule! (written on the walls of the Sorbonne).