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New Audience = New Energy and Inspiration

by

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Ladies and gentlemen,

I have the honour today of speaking about a phenomenon in the Netherlands called 'Spectators Revolution'.

First of all I would like to introduce myself. My name is Doro Siepel and I have been the Zuidplein Theatre's managing director for the past four years. I have over 20 years experience in the theatre business. Prior to getting into this line of work, I worked for various advertising agencies and research organisations for 10 years. I believe that theatre is a mirror of our society. From that perspective I strive to create a theatre that is the bustling heart of its environment.

I have been invited to speak because 10 years ago the Zuidplein Theatre also faced a 'Spectators Revolution' and, as a result, was forced to re-assess its company policy. Therefore I would like to share my experiences with you.

For the next half hour at most, I will illustrate my views on the basis of a study conducted by the Dutch government in 2009. The objective was to find out why most of the government-funded institutions in this country do not adapt their policy to the changing world around them. Why do these institutions keep the 'Spectators Revolution' at bay? The study also listed a number of recommendations which I will discuss. I will then apply these recommendations to the daily practice of the Zuidplein Theatre.

At the end of this presentation, I will take some time to answer your questions or comments.

I will start by discussing the government's survey.

Theatre attendance in the Netherlands

The Netherlands is densely populated, with 16 million inhabitants living in an area of 41,000 square kilometres. We have 154 theatres that are members of a trade association. Only 5% of these venues are actively involved in attracting a new audience: one that reflects the people for whom the productions are meant. The remaining 95% follows existing policies and keeps focusing on the same groups that they have been targeting for the past 30 years, namely, for the most part academically educated people of 45 years and older with a traditional Dutch background. This target group is not only the primary focus of theatres, but also of many theatre producers and theatre companies.

Last year, due to the economic crisis, 80% of the accredited theatres were faced with a 10 to 20% decline in audience numbers. Many became nervous. What to do? Change current policy or pray for the crisis to blow over so that everything can remain the same?

Set up of the LAgroupp study

This was the situation when Dutch consultancy agency LAgroupp was commissioned by the Dutch government in 2009 to investigate the cultural diversity among 50 leading cultural institutions in the four largest cities in the Netherlands. What was their objective? Particularly in the major cities, the population had become increasingly diverse. However, this diversity was barely or not at all reflected in the visitor profiles of the studied theatres. The study focused on the following areas: programming, audience, partners, staff & management, and quality. LAgroupp defined the term 'cultural diversity' as 'non-Western migrants and their cultures'.

Only 20% of the theatres/theatre companies claimed to incorporate cultural diversity in their policy.

The conclusion of the report, which was appropriately titled 'The Elephant in the Room', stated that 90% of the respondents considered cultural diversity to be an important theme for the cultural sector. Mainly because of the priority given to this issue by the Dutch government. All theatres believed that cultural diversity

provided opportunities for artistic programming. In fact, 60% considered it important for their own organisation. However, only 20% of the venues referred to themselves as 'active' in this respect.

Why only 20%? Because it lacked a sense of urgency.

The report showed that the respondents exhibited no or little sense of urgency for cultural diversity. According to some respondents, it was only a matter of time before cultural diversity would automatically be included in their theatre's policy. These respondents preferred to wait and see how other theatre companies and producers would respond before optimistically following their lead. Others believed new culturally diverse theatre makers and producers better equipped to deal with these new target groups would appear on the scene.

Theatre institutions also had a wait-and-see attitude because cultural diversity was not an agenda item for trade organisations and sector institutes.

If cultural diversity was at all on the agenda, it was in the form of remote activities organised far away from the organisation's core. In other words: activities outside the institution, mainly at grass root level in local communities.

If any activities were organised within the organisation, this was done by partners who knew the new target groups, such as schools.

Some theatres did feature culturally diverse productions, but these shows only attracted a traditional Dutch audience.

In short, all theatres felt that encouraging cultural diversity was someone else's responsibility. Preferably, the government's.

Was cultural diversity part of the core business? No, unfortunately not. Cultural diversity only received incidental attention.

Cultural diversity was seen as a temporary or additional theme. In any case, it was not considered to be core business. This is underlined by the fact that culturally diverse projects were generally not financed from regular funds. Most of the time, separate project subsidies were applied for. If these project subsidies were not granted, the projects were cancelled.

One of the respondents said: "It is not a question of being unwilling, but being unable to." Someone else said: "We are aware of the problem. First we didn't know we were incompetent, now we're aware of the fact that we are."

What is keeping theatres from playing an active role with respect to the 'Spectators Revolution'?

According to the LAGroup: "Dutch theatres, theatre makers and theatre producers aim at staging top quality productions. Quality is considered an absolute concept that can be judged by experts." In the case of the Netherlands, these experts are mainly people with higher education and a traditional western background. However, due to developments such as globalisation, internationalisation and increasing population diversity, the concept of quality has taken on an entirely different meaning. Each country, (sub)culture and community perceives the matter in a different way. The study showed that many respondents felt that their quality standards did not allow for cultural diversity.

For example: At sector meetings, I am often 'praised' for being culturally diverse. I have been told: "How brave of you to tackle cultural diversity. Rather you than me. I would not like to be associated with those types of events."

I have also heard colleagues talk about a performance at our theatre and saying: "I don't think it's any good, which means it isn't any good". Or: "If the populace likes it, it's commercial."

Which theatres are more likely to be culturally diverse and why? What are the conditions?

Theatres that ask themselves what quality means to them, to a new or an existing audience, and to new and existing theatre makers, are more likely to be involved in culturally diverse activities. This is confirmed by Belgian research. Theatres that are introspective, innovative and think about the continuity of their cultural organisation within a changing society are more likely to foster diversity than organisations that aren't. The respondents in the LAGroup research were not very introspective. The concept of cultural diversity was not applied to their own organisation. The respondents also lacked an innovative spirit. In addition, there was not much continuity with respect to cultural diversity. And the results of previous activities had not been measured.

If you intend to engage in culturally diverse activities, special attention for staff and management is essential.

If cultural diversity got any attention at all, the focus was on developing a culturally diverse programming and attracting a culturally diverse audience. Very little attention was paid to culturally diverse employees and culturally diverse management. The Dutch government does not demand anything in this respect. The staff

composition, let alone management composition, of many of the organisations interviewed did not reflect the racial mix of the areas they operated in. This topic was seldom debated internally.

There was mainly a lack of knowledge and time.

The LAgrou’s report showed that many institutions in the Netherlands are in search of knowledge and direction when it comes to non-Western art forms. Many claimed to lack the right networks to bring diverse programming and the time to invest in building new ones. In addition, the fact that there are not enough theatre makers from non-Western backgrounds was also often mentioned.

Situation in 2010

In 2010, I must say the sense of urgency has increased. One reason for this is a sharp decline in audience numbers in 2009. This has increased the chance of introspection.

In addition, in 2009 our minister of Culture put pressure on the theatre sector by demanding that each theatre draw up their own Cultural Diversity Code by September 2010.

Theatres that have already made a start with incorporating cultural diversity in their policy say: “It’s easier than you fear, but more difficult than you think.”

LAgrou concluded that a sense of urgency should be given to incorporating cultural diversity into the organisational vision. The Zuidplein Theatre endorses this recommendation.

We also saw a systematic decline in audience numbers, especially in the 1990s. Even to such an extent that the survival of our theatre was at stake. It was high time for introspection. Even though Rotterdam was changing and becoming increasingly multi-cultural, our theatre retained its traditional programming and marketing which was geared towards a traditional Dutch audience. Meanwhile, this target group was moving out of the city in droves to new, clean residential communities in surrounding towns.

LAgrou also stated in its report that many cultural institutions believe that the government should take the lead in stimulating cultural diversity. This also applies to the situation in Rotterdam. The City of Rotterdam played a leading role in our Spectators Revolution by instructing us to put performances specifically aimed at immigrant target groups on our programme. At the end of the 1990s, we took on this challenge.

Our main conclusions after six years experience were:

1. Too little identification with the programmed performances:
After six years of experimenting with performances from all over the world, we concluded that a large part of the new programming insufficiently matched the perception of immigrants in the Netherlands. Immigrants could not identify with the theatre productions we offered.
2. Fear of loss of quality
We did not programme events organised by the culturally diverse Rotterdam communities out of fear of compromising on quality (seen from a Western, better educated perspective) and possible financial repercussions. That is why we rented out the theatre to interested parties at a commercial rate. Only a few multi-cultural organisations were able to afford this.
3. Nickname ‘Immigrant Theatre’
In spite of the above, the Zuidplein Theatre developed into a theatre that immigrant communities felt was theirs. In those years, mind you, we also programmed for a traditional Dutch audience. But as it turned out, many of these Dutch people felt less and less at home due to the foreign theatre productions and foreign visitors. The theatre was dubbed ‘Immigrant Theatre’ by locals, and traditional Dutch audiences stayed away.
4. Theatre’s surroundings remained unchanged
Even though the programming changed, the district where our theatre is located still had a bad reputation for safety due to limited property supply, low income communities and little social control. The area became run down. This also caused a growing number of traditional Dutch people to stop coming to the Zuidplein Theatre.

After six years, the City of Rotterdam deemed the new programming experiment too expensive. The Zuidplein Theatre was asked to re-examine priorities and contemplate its future direction.

This is how we went about it. We took the following three essential steps as part of our restructuring plan.

1. Internal and external analysis

First, we analysed our strengths and weaknesses in terms of programming, marketing, finances, staff, partners and management.

We then performed an external analysis of a range of demographic details, assessed other venues, in particular those of our competitors, and examined the theatre's accessibility as well as social challenges in the area served by us.

2. New positioning of Zuidplein Theatre

Based on our findings it became clear that the existing policy had no future. However, Rotterdam was in need of a people's theatre. This target group, which no other theatre in Rotterdam was serving, comprised 75% of Rotterdam's citizens. While other theatres focused on academically educated audiences, we dedicated ourselves to being 'the bustling people's theatre of Rotterdam'.

3. Social foothold vitally important

We also formulated three social mission statements to support the municipal policy.

In the first place: be actively involved with municipal developments in the area served. In our case, an area which faced great social challenges associated with its lower educated residents. Secondly: be responsible for safety in the area. And thirdly: be responsible for the education and job opportunities for immigrant youths. In short: the Zuidplein Theatre aimed to be synonymous for participation, active theatre, different cultures, talent development and empowerment of minorities.

What did this new positioning mean to, for instance, our target group policy?

The following two pragmatic changes:

1. Target group segmentation

Firstly, we segmented our target audience into distinct groups. Cultural background (Turkey, Marocco, Surinam, Netherlands Antilles, Cape Verde Islands, China, Russia), level of education (primary, secondary, high school), age (kids, young people, adults, elderly) and income (low, medium, high), religion (Muslims, Christians, Hindoes, Atheists) and crossings of these groups are factors that have a major impact on the kind of theatre or music people fancy.

One of the most striking conclusions we drew is that a lot of second and third generation immigrants claimed not to be very interested in music or theatre from their country of origin. They claimed that because they live in the West, they would rather focus on their future here.

We therefore started working with guest programmers from various cultural background and ages who were better able to translate the needs of our potential visitors.

2. Extensive attention for young people

There are many youngsters in Rotterdam with a double cultural background. Most of them have a relatively low level of education and are from weak social backgrounds. We found that quite often they could not identify with our youth programming, which was mainly compiled by traditional Dutch theatre makers. That is why we started looking for different theatre productions for youths that did strike a chord. But we also focussed on talent development, because talent development builds self-esteem and therefore provides a positive contribution to Rotterdam.

New programming policy

We also reviewed our programming policy and made the following five pragmatic changes:

1. Unique programming for Rotterdam

We stopped working with theatre makers and musicians whose shows were also booked by other venues in Rotterdam in the same season. Our programming had to be unique.

2. Goodbye to top artists

We said goodbye to traditional Dutch theatre makers whose productions pulled crowds of less than 55% of our auditorium's capacity, while in the rest of the country they put on sold-out performances. Even though they were among the Netherlands' most popular artists, their shows were not something our target groups were interested in.

3. Partnership with the Rotterdams Wijktheater

We decided to partner up with the Rotterdams Wijktheater (Rotterdam Community Theatre). This professional theatre company has been making socially-engaged theatre for 20 years, produced for and by less educated people from the Rotterdam community. The programming includes multi-cultural as well as mono-cultural performances, and performances for different age groups. The Rotterdams Wijktheater is leading in the field of community art in the Netherlands and abroad. Its popularity and rapidly increasing visitor numbers provides the living proof that theatre can in fact reach new target

groups. The RWT does this by staging shows that their audience can identify with. This is something other theatre companies have not succeeding in doing, because they keep focussing on people with a higher education.

The RWT has been the Zuidplein Theatre's permanent theatre company since 2008.

4. Search for new theatre makers

We also started to collaborate with theatre makers who wanted to stage performances for less educated target groups. Most academically trained theatre makers in the Netherlands don't do this. In fact, they don't think about their target audience at all because their emphasis is on making autonomous art. That is how they have been trained. They also assume that their theatre productions are suited to all target groups, while in practice their work does not strike a chord with less educated audiences. These audiences cannot identify with the subject matter or form.

On the other hand, young, mostly immigrant, self-taught theatre makers can make theatre that resonates in our communities, but their knowledge of dramaturgy and direction, and their theatre-technical skills are often limited. Where possible, we bring them into contact with professionals.

5. Lower hall rent rates

Immigrant theatre makers told us that they often stage popular events for their communities. As they have limited access to professional venues, these performances are organised in non-professional halls. At the same time, we also heard traditional Dutch theatre makers complaining about a lack of high-quality venues in Rotterdam for large-scale amateur productions. In 2007, we significantly lowered the rate of our hall rental. As a result, we were able to attract new performances and concerts to our theatre that pulled large crowds of new visitors.

6. Guest programmers

As we mentioned earlier: we started working with guest programmers from various cultural background and ages who were better able to translate the needs of our potential visitors.

New take on quality

Because we attracted a different audience with our new programming, we also had to review our definition of quality. Although many of our theatre colleagues and initially also our subsidy providers labelled these new productions as 'amateur productions', we felt this did not do justice to the quality of the theatrical experience. After all, the audience was fascinated by these shows even if we didn't understand or weren't able to appreciate the performance ourselves. Sometimes we even contracted world-famous artists that we, as traditional Dutch programmers, were not familiar with. Currently, our definition of quality deviates from our Dutch professional colleagues' definition. We have made a conscious decision to move away from the absolute Western concept of quality and focus on audience participation.

Change in marketing policy

We also evaluated our marketing policy and found that our price, promotion, distribution and service policy was not in line with the needs of our diversely segmented target groups. The following three changes were made:

1. Not enough networks

We found that we did not have enough networks that can reach out to our new target groups, while outreach is the most important means to attract a new audience. And networks are also very efficient for finding out what the audience thinks of our programming. Our mainly originally Dutch staff did not have the resources to build or maintain structural networks. We tapped into these networks by becoming a company with a thriving learning and working environment. All of our departments are directed to offer trainees a fun and educational internship. The fact that over half of our interns have a double cultural background is an added bonus. They open up possibilities for our staff to get in touch with new networks.

2. Change in admission price policy

We also found out that our admission prices were too steep for our target groups. So we made sure that we only booked affordable productions of less than € 20 per ticket.

3. General

In addition, our food & beverage assortment did not appeal to the various new target groups. We also updated our policy in terms of interval and starting times and started selling tickets through different outlets.

Change in staff and Supervisory Board

We also adapted our personnel policy. We now specifically recruit new talent with a double cultural background (because of their extensive and relevant networks).

Our theatre was privatised in 2006. From the start, we ensured that new members of our Supervisory Board were recruited among cultural minority groups to reflect the diversity of the people of Rotterdam. This also proved to be a useful strategy in establishing and maintaining new networks.

New policy costs money: This is how we financed it.

To finance our entirely new policy, we started making use of volunteers for some of our activities, such as ticket checks, cloakroom services and greenroom services.

What has our new policy brought us after four years?

These are some of our achievements:

1. In the past three years, our audience numbers annually increased by 8% to over 86,000 in 2009.
2. Our visitors are a reflection of Rotterdam's population: 50% is traditional Dutch and 50% is of immigrant descent; 75% has a low to intermediate educational level and standard of living. Nearly 50% of all performances were attended by young people. We can now truly call ourselves a theatre for all Rotterdammers: a people's theatre.
3. We are involved in the development and staging of productions by new Rotterdam theatre makers who make theatre for a new audience. This is not only inspiring, it also enhances the image of the city of Rotterdam and boosts new theatre makers' self-esteem.
4. The financial agreements with new theatre makers are financially more interesting than the agreements we used to make with established theatre companies. Financially speaking, we are in a good position.
5. As a large learning and working company with around 90 interns each year and a regular staff of 30 employees, we have become an important discussion partner for local training institutes and the City of Rotterdam. This has increased our social relevance, and more importantly, the youngsters' self esteem. And in turn, working with so many young people with fresh ideas has given our organisation lots of energy and inspiration.
6. Since we have been actively involved in promoting safety in our immediate surroundings, we have become a reliable partner for businesses and residents.
7. We have become a discussion partner for the City of Rotterdam regarding the social challenges of urban planning in the heart of South Rotterdam because of our knowledge of the perceptions of many people in Rotterdam.
8. Our reputation among colleagues in the theatre business and local authorities has changed from being 'a poorly performing subsidized institution' to 'a leading pioneering company'. In 2008, this earned the Zuidplein Theatre the KoplopersTop award which was presented by our minister of Culture. And our audience refers to the Zuidplein Theatre as 'their theatre'.

Maintaining our own identity?

It is our experience that bad prospects in terms of future direction for our company led to innovation and our subsequent success. This success has brought a new audience, new energy and a great deal of inspiration. Have we lost our identity in the process? No. It is much the same people's theatre today as it was in 1954, only society has changed considerably.

We wish those who want to change policy the best of luck in doing so. For us, the process is still trial and error, because we are the first theatre in the Netherlands to structurally focus on less educated target groups. Our theatre is not just about promoting cultural diversity, but promoting diversity in the broadest sense of the word. And we thoroughly enjoy and take great pride in what we do.

Thank you for your attention.

Are there any questions?