



Shooting Stars in the New Sky

Report of the Plenary Session at IETM Meeting in Vilnius, October 9th

This meeting's theme of "Eastern Promises" was kicked off with our opening Plenary Session "Shooting Stars in the New Sky", through which our competent and knowledgeable panel raised questions, shared personal experiences, and brought to light specific circumstances, both past and present concerning the East-West partnership dilemma. What defines East and West? How and where are those lines drawn? What are the problems, inequalities, obstacles in the broad playing field of East-West cultural and artistic exchange? What can and should be done so that we may recognize, understand, and accept each other? After all of the political change which has so greatly influenced cultural and artistic (and indeed all) relationships between the East and West over the last 20 years, what is our current state? Where are we now in the East-West question?

Nele Hertling started the session off with an impressive speech analyzing the East-West relationship from past and present, from her own particularly active and involved point of view. As one of the founders of the famous Hebbel Theater in Berlin, she played an integral part in bringing artists from East and West together there face to face - often for the first time. The separation of the two sides when the Iron Curtain was at its strongest during the Cold War brought a great deal of interest in Eastern work for Western audiences. She said, "*Maybe the interest was not so much in the artistic, but in the "subversive" quality - projects having come through the Iron Curtain!*" Without this subversive quality to draw Western attention, the relationship between Eastern artists and venues and their Western counterparts suffered. Work from the East was no longer considered subversive, but rather folkloric, out of touch, old-fashioned, and Eastern artists were often met with arrogance or rejection. In a strange way, it seems that our previously stark separations were actually somehow a benefit to artistic and cultural exchange - even if only, at the least, to get a foot through the curtain.

However, Maciej Nowalk, director of Polish Theater Institute, said in his presentation that he wanted to clear up *“the iron curtain myth - that it ended this year. It still exists.”* He pointed out that the exchanges between East and West are extremely uneven - that the East gives in to the West by creating work that still caters to the Western “old world” curiosity, but that it is very difficult to invite a Western artist to bring work to the East. *“There is an idea that all of the money and power comes from the West - things are catered for that way.”* But he stressed the point that this is not necessarily a permanent stasis. Poland now has quite an active Ministry of Culture, gay officials for the first time, and in Poland, he said, *“Everyone has the feeling that everything will be changed.”* He pointed out the growing numbers of artistically engaged young people who are feeling disconnected and seeking their place in the world. He stressed the importance of finding room for them, to help cultivate the new potent energy of a new generation to grow in the right direction.

The importance of focusing on healthy relationships between the generations was echoed by Goran Stefanovski, a leading playwright of ex-Yugoslavia, who relayed to us his very entertainingly-told life story - how his marriage to an English woman thrust him into constant travel between two worlds, being somehow a member of both and neither cultures, and having the unique luxury of being able to see the mounting situation from both sides of the curtain. He told a very humorous anecdote of walking through the living room as a youth, and noticing an old person sitting there motionless and ignored, *“as a stone.”* To which his friend commented something to the effect of, *“Oh, don’t worry about him. That’s just Grandpa. He’s from ‘The old world’”* I believe his point is, that there is a process of older generations becoming more and more removed from the young-centric world, and becoming a footnote in history- merely an everyday object in the home, “like furniture”. And he wonders, *“Will I someday become furniture for my children?”* But that furniture is dying to tell a story. It is important not to overlook or underestimate the value and benefits of another generation, or another culture (for in this case, indeed, the remaining elders of the former Yugoslavia are living representatives of a culture much different from the one that their 20 year old grandchildren live in). In this sense, if the younger generation of artists is unaware of what came before them, as well as what is currently happening outside of their culture, it is hard to expect them to be in touch with worldwide artistic advancements, to have a clear sense of themselves and their place within the evolution of the artistic scene - especially in those locations where it is very difficult for young people to travel outside of their own countries.

And whose responsibility is it to make that change? Mr. Stefanovski said, *“Why is it the East that’s promising? We think the West is promising, but not delivering.”* At this point, when the discussion was opened up to all members to share their thoughts and experiences, again the idea that Eastern-Western exchange is not equal was brought up (and indeed repeated several times throughout the engaging open discussion). Specifically, many feel the East is giving to the West culturally, but not getting anything back. The conversation turned again to the question of money, (the argued new Iron Curtain which is to blame for the current trends in inequality), and the current crisis, which was the looming, not-so-hidden white elephant in the room for the entire conference. One member said *“Well, if it is just a question of money, let’s all go home. There is no answer.”*

Indeed, it is inarguable that the financial situation of Eastern as compared to Western countries makes a huge impact in the practical import and export of art and culture (and many other things for that matter). It was suggested that this uneven exchange, and thereby forced popular aesthetic, forced structure of commerce as a result of the unequal economic situations on the two sides can be compared to a form of colonization. Certainly, people from neither side would like to admit to a “cultural colonization” happening before our eyes. As Mr. Nowak said, *“It is not by chance that it is difficult to say ‘colonization’”* (Indeed, even moderator Hilde Teuchies couldn’t help but trip over the word). But perhaps it is more than the mere undeniable imbalance of funds which creates the difficulties in our reaching a healthy relationship of cultural exchange. There is something of an underlying unease between the two sides, which may, of course, be a direct product of the inequality itself, but also, could be an awareness of past histories, mistreatments and injustices. As one member said *“The idea is being afraid of others, it is not a question of East and West.”*

Many members shared poignant personal stories along this universal theme of being faced with the challenge of overcoming a history of unhealthy, undesirable, or demoralizing relationships between different groups, of which there are countless examples throughout history and current standings. There were stories shared of Eastern artists being invited to the West only to be met with disrespect and under appreciation, or indeed, being forced to face their own internal prejudices and preconceptions - as one Eastern member said *“I was shocked to think that I could teach Swedish schoolchildren.”* However, some argued that, 20 years later, there is not a new iron curtain, merely an unwillingness to share because of the current crisis. We must work hard so as not to slip backwards in our Eastern-Western relations, at a time when everything is slipping under the unsure grasp of the economy. One member noted, *“We*

are past the dating stage” and the suggestion arose that the focus should be put on how to produce and provide sustainable connections and collaborations between foreign artists and communities, creating opportunities for the two sides to truly discover each other, instead of a short view which further reinforces the one-hit-wonder thrill of seeing something from faraway.

Perhaps it is this very notion of “foreign” “other-worldly” separateness that reinforces the undesirable relationship between East and West, which this Plenary Session, and indeed the entire weekend in Vilnius was centered around. Or rather, the continued recognition of this barrier between East and West. Is it possible for an artistic work to be evaluated blindly, without knowing where it comes from? Is it possible to view each other as colleagues, and not “Eastern” or “Western” colleagues? (This can, of course, perhaps work both in favor of, and against artists from both sides, who may receive a certain amount of prejudice or reverence from the other side for their “otherness”- including all the preconceptions, be they positive or negative, that go with this). If it is possible, is this even something we want to strive to achieve? As Nele Hertling stated in her fantastic opening speech on the subject, *“Don’t we want – as a consequence of globalization – more and more diversity? Is it not artistic quality- a true ‘message’ - that counts, no matter where it comes from? Do we want to be equal?”* I found this last question particularly potent. Would equality mean a diluting of the differing means and aesthetics that both sides have found so fascinating and often inspirational in the other? Should we be celebrating our differences, instead of trying to erase or ignore them? Or is it possible that, as Dr. Dragan Klaić said during his session on sustainability in the current economic crisis, maybe if we just stop pointing so much attention to it, this problem and the uneasy feelings surrounding it, will just go away on its own?

In the end, there are of course no easy answers to difficult questions. At its basis, the realization of a healthy East-West artistic relationship – even exchange, collaboration, and mutual recognition and appreciation - hangs on many factors; perhaps the greatest of which is the challenge of overcoming sour feelings left from decades of prejudices, misunderstandings, and mistreatment. This is indeed a universal question at its root- how do two groups with a longstanding history of imbalance of power and unkind relations find a way to meet each other eye to eye, to make peace with the past, and to start again new as equals? Must reparations be paid and special attention drawn to establishing new means of healthy co-existence? Is it even possible to erase the wounds of the past to such a full an extent that true equality, not only in actions but in consideration as well can be reached? Or is it just a matter of forgiving and forgetting - working with the new generation to assure the healthy remodeling of an out of date system, and the building anew of an equal partnership? It was everyone’s hope that the time spent in Vilnius would be the first stepping stone to

creating this new healthy connection not only for ourselves, but for the younger generation, currently striving to find their place in this tug-of-war, and defining themselves along lines which were drawn in the past. We are looking towards our young shooting stars to pave a new way, but it is us that must steer their trajectory.

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