

# Cabaret and Beyond

Discussion about the Dutch theatre scene and cultural policies

An interview with Quirijn Lennert van den Hoogen by Szofia Tölli



Photo: Quirijn Lennert van den Hoogen

There are quite a few differences between academic and cultural approaches in the Netherlands and Hungary. Quirijn Lennert van den Hoogen, assistant professor at Groningen University talks about the specifics of the Dutch system in the context of his research.

*In the Netherlands, at Groningen University you are working as an assistant professor in art policy and art sociology. It was not your original field—could you tell more about your academic path?*

■ Originally, I trained as a business administration student at the University of Groningen, and halfway through, I also did a program called arts and arts management. I've always stayed in the art world, and I focused my studies and knowledge on public administration in the art world. For over ten years I've worked as a consultant and later as a policy advisor on local and provincial levels in the Netherlands. In the meantime, I had started my PhD on the topic of cultural policy, and performance arts policy on the municipal level in the Netherlands. My question was how Dutch municipalities evaluate such policies and how those evaluations can be improved. I started teaching courses on arts policy and art sociology at the university during the final stages of my PhD studies and have been teaching for over 15 years now.

*Art sociology has many aspects. What is your focus?*

■ I started to deepen my knowledge in the field of sociology during my PhD. That was the first time when I started reading Bourdieu and some of the criticisms of Bourdieu. From critical art sociology, my research shifted to the role of the government, particularly local governments in the cultural sector, having done a lot of research on value changes in cultural policies in the Netherlands. Lately, I'm also looking at the role of arts and culture in peripheral regions or peripheral locations. It includes everything that happens in the countryside. That research hasn't taken off empirically, you need a lot of money to get someone who then has a lot of time. In my opinion one has the most chance to do empirical research during a PhD, after that it becomes quite difficult because it is very time-consuming.

*Throughout your career Groningen University remained your intellectual base. Could you tell us some specifics about the Dutch university system?*

■ In contrast to how it works in Hungary, in the Netherlands there is a particular rule: the right to tutor a PhD student is only reserved for associate professors, and full professors. I'm an assistant professor, which means that I don't have that right. You always have a team of supervisors, usually at least three people. The reason behind it is to avoid any chance of fraud. It could be easy to do because tutoring mainly involves one-on-one consulting sessions. Unfortunately, there was a mishandled case, so the procedure became safer and more bureaucratic. We always complain about our bureaucracy, because it is ever expanding here and that is also true for the cultural sector which makes it more difficult to devote enough time to art exclusively.

*Do you think that bureaucracy affects the artistic field and the expression of freedom negatively?*

■ Yes, but I think we are ahead in the development. The Western system in general and the Netherlands have done this very well, I need to say, to provide some sort of security to art organisations for them to be free content-wise. What works very well is the system of independent art institutions. In the Netherlands, almost all of them are independent foundations with their board of trustees, with their own managing director and artistic director. This double role in the management of institutions is very normal in my country.

*What about the local level?*

■ The system is mirrored on the local level. Every municipality organises independent advisory boards when they are allocating their subsidies. Not following the board's advice is political suicide in the Netherlands. If the advisory board gives the green light to a project, you need to subsidize it.

We also have precedents for saying no, but it only happened twice in the history of Dutch cultural policies. It comes with a cost because the cultural sector in the Netherlands tends to be very autonomous and does not need to connect to societal issues. It simply represents what the artists want to do, and the board needs to hope that they choose relevant topics. The projects sometimes have

a very limited audience appeal. Subsidized Dutch spoken theatre is seldom played for sold-out houses. It simply does not happen, because there is not enough demand for this type of theatre, however in number there are many companies. The more experimental parts of the system are particularly overproducing while playing for only twenty people.

*How can these companies get support for their art if their projects are often-times reaching out to a limited number of people?*

■ Well, if that is the audience you can get for this type of performance, then you've done well. My perspective is always that you take the performance with the artistic company's profile as the starting point and then try to select a better or larger audience rather than trying to adapt the performance to attract a larger audience. I've done a big research project on the National Council for Culture, which is the advisor to the Dutch Government. I have talked to the theatre committee about the judging of applications. We have six national theatre companies; they all tour the country. I was told that nowadays the artistic director's and lead artists' name on the application is a must. Apart from that companies need to name the marketing director and the educational director as well. The reason behind it is that the advisors know these professionals and they want to ensure that not only the artistic, but every aspect of the company's work will uphold a standard.

The theatre committee usually doesn't turn down applications, because there are not many alternative possibilities amongst the bigger companies. If they say no to an application, a spot in the system is not filled. However, if an application does not meet a standard, companies have to do certain things to get support.

*The theatre committee keeps its eyes on the companies. Does your role and research at the Council for Culture mean that a sociological approach is implemented in financing the art field?*

■ To answer that we need to define the sociological approach. If one says that the sociological approach to theatre means that theatre makers account for their position in society and think of the relation of their work to the rest of society and to their audiences: the answer is yes. If one defines the sociological

approach by a certain sociological perspective such as critical theory or system theory, then the answer is no.

Most of the members of the Council or the committee know arts management and the basics of arts sociology. Everyone who works in this field in the Netherlands has read Bourdieu. They all know distinction theory: that means that if politicians suggest doing better marketing to sell more tickets, then they can explain how it works for the field. The managers understand that at the end of the day, it is not simply an issue of trying to attract a larger audience. The real issue would be to get people more interested in their work and raise more cultural capital. The key to that is to understand that it is not possible without the proper education. It is not just an issue of putting up more flyers and creating more social media content and then everyone will buy a ticket.

### *How would you describe the Dutch cultural scene?*

■ I think a concept that is well understood nowadays in the Netherlands is cultural democracy. A well-observed idea is that culture and arts are not only for the elite. A lot of institutions are thinking about ways of listening to the people who live around them and addressing what these people have in terms of cultural needs. But that is immensely harder for them because the Netherlands has a strict division between producers of theatre and musical theatre and the houses where they play. Both parties have their management, they are separate organisations. The venues select the program from the producers: they know their local audience way better than the producers do, and sometimes there is also a place for experiments. Several theatres think their role is that they present everything that the big companies do.

In smaller cities, the program is more selective, because usually in smaller cities the ticket sales need to earn back the cost of the program. The municipality may pay for the building, but not for the program itself. In larger cities, the municipalities usually also pay for the program, so you can get a loss on the program economically.

### *Is it common in the Netherlands to have fully for-profit companies?*

■ Yes, there are some for-profit companies mostly specializing in musicals and cabaret. Dutch theatre is famous for its unique Cabaret, which is not the same

as the German term for Cabaret. However, the German term *Kleinkunst* can be linked to this form. These are usually one-man or one-woman shows, mostly like in stand-up, but it also includes singing. The best way to describe it: it is a full musical support, usually with live musicians on stage, and a full staging. It is usually a two-hour show or even longer, and it is fully commercial, although many successful performers of cabaret have started out in publicly funded small theatre venues or performing at festivals that are publicly funded. Dutch Cabaret is very critical politically, and it is also elitist: it's not entertainment. The genre of musical is considered entertainment. On the other hand, Dutch musical producers want space to experiment and to come up with critical musicals.

*For how long can the audience see these productions?*

■ A tour of a Cabaret may last up to two years, while a tour for a spoken theatre production is usually three months. Maybe if it is successful, they retake the production next year, but it is simply developed for a shorter runtime using the distribution network of the theatres that are funded by municipalities.

These productions tour around the country. However, this system is now under discussion because of the ecological crisis: they have huge emissions because of transport.

*Do you think that a green law would solve the problem?*

■ The question is whether there will be a green law for culture or whether the green laws for transport will force the cultural sector to change. I think the latter. Well, the political parties that have won the national election in November are not that bothered with the environment at all. But at some point, they will have to implement some changes, and everything is linked to emission in some way.

*How is your current research linked to the theatres? Was there a case when a theatre directly used the research studies and its achievements to change their politics?*

■ Well, my research is not that much on the institutions themselves, it is on policies. The last big project on policy advice and the value changes in cultural policies was used by the Council for Culture. It showed that indeed this

advisory body acts as a mitigating force between what politicians want and the cultural sector. I have shown through quantitative means, that the values that the Council for Culture use to assess policy plans are quite constant while political values are all over the place. But that doesn't say anything about what is in the applications of the theatre companies, it is not a part of my research. Over time, the companies start writing different sorts of applications. A lot of development in the sector has been on management and marketing, on inclusiveness of company's operations, and now on social responsibility. Even experimental theatre companies now have paid staff to do their marketing, which is an interesting development of the field.

*Has marketing become an essential tool even for the small companies and troops?*

■ Well, it is now considered normal, however in the 1990s it wasn't so. The question always is whether that is because of what the government wants or is the government following what happens in these companies? I think the latter. Have those changes in the sector occurred because of the pressure from society? In the Netherlands, it is very normal to discuss the legitimacy of the cultural policy. In the UK, France or Italy that's not an issue. In the Netherlands it is constantly under discussion whether it's legitimate.

*Do you see a fundamental difference between Eastern and Western European cultural policies? How is the Dutch system wired?*

■ I would argue that the Dutch cultural policy nowadays is very much linked to Scandinavia, if we look at the basic value on which the cultural policies are founded in the Netherlands. That's based on the notion of the right to access to culture in general and of one's own culture. That is cultural democracy. However, the Netherlands, before the Second World War came from another tradition, that came from the UK. Here the idea is that arts and culture are so important because they are an expression of personal values and beliefs that the government should not interfere with them. They are an inherently private matter. That makes for a far more limited public budget. It makes sense in the UK because it is a much bigger country, there is a much larger audience, groups can have longer tours, and there is a culture of private donations to the arts.

However, the Netherlands until the Second World War, was structured socially by the denomination. Everything in society was organised through the Protestant pillar, the Catholic pillar, the Socialist pillar, and the General pillar. The remains of this can be seen in the school systems: we have a lot of ecclesiastical educational institutions. Only the social elites transcended these pillars and met each other in cultural institutions. They were the ones to support the arts. This means there is a tendency in Dutch public administration to always choose for bottom-up solutions and leave matters to civil society. After the Second World War, we shifted to a far more active role of the government. On the one hand, people are very much in favor of freedom of education: school boards run their school programs, and the government cannot tell a school what to teach. But in the end, people are unsatisfied that some schools are doing very well and others are not. Everyone has the right to a good education, but not everyone lives near a good school. This is where tension starts occurring because that's a consequence of when you leave it up to society. But politically, that's no longer accepted. Everyone has the same right to the same chances. You need to organise it for everyone at the same level. Our system is really good in general, yet there are differences in what you have access to. The culture policy has the same problem. We expect people to organise it for themselves and then if they do it differently and people get different chances, we get mad. We are at a very difficult point in time, because the internet is everywhere. Everyone is supposed to have access to everything but in reality, that is simply not the case.

***How much did the STEP City project help to understand different European cultural systems? What were the benefits of the joint research?***

■ Well, I think the major benefit of selecting this set of countries—the Netherlands, Hungary, the UK, Estonia, Ireland, Denmark, Slovenia—is that they are small. This way the system can be described as a whole, and one can make sensible comparisons. We worked with small countries coming from very different cultural regions in Europe and also with very different types of infrastructure and organisational setups. And this was the first international group I've been in where the Netherlands is the biggest country. The main difficulty was that there were certain cultural differences. We wanted to achieve a sort of categorization of the types of theatre that are around. It failed, because to some types of productions or groups there is no international comparison. That was interesting



to be able to find those differences. Even if we could not compare them, we could say a lot about how they are organised, and how does it impact audience. I wasn't part of the research on the audience, but I think it was very worthwhile—Attila Szabó has had an essential part in that project.

With the researchers of STEP we developed a sort of theoretical conceptual frame of how to investigate theatre far more sociologically. People from the field of theatre studies came together to develop a sociological perspective on theatre studies.

### *How can it move forward?*

■ Well, there are several options, but we have the problem of getting them funded. We, the researchers mostly started as a group of PhD students who all had their funding done. We were all busy doing our project and realized, we could find the connections between those projects and help each other. We didn't have to work on applications to get support. That's our big problem now because we don't have funded researchers in the sense of PhD researchers. The beauty of PhD research is that this is the only time in an academic career that you have proper time to do empirical work.

I must say, as the STEP group, we have stayed on the periphery of theatre research internationally, while the efforts and results are being praised for being original. With the partners in the project, we have known each other for a long time, and we like the kind of methodologies we use. But to get it on the road towards a full comparative project as we started, which we managed to do... I don't see that happening soon. I think that's the problem.

### *What are your preferred topics in research and what are your future plans?*

■ The research on peripheral culture is definitely one of my favorite topics, but the problem with that project is that it doesn't prioritize theatre. The goal is to compare how cultural agents in peripheral locations operate compared to those in more central, which is the dominant trope we found when researching these theatre systems, that in every country there is a tension within the system. But when you start from the periphery, there is no argument to start with theatre. You start with the art that is made in the periphery and that can be theatre. Well, not a love baby, I would say, but I think we cannot avoid talking about

sustainability. My big goal for the coming years is to research how cultural policy can contribute to mitigating or averting the ecological crisis, or how it should do that. I think that anyone not asking this question is simply missing the elephant in the room.

*What kind of art do you usually come across during the peripheral work?*

■ It mostly includes stage events, but not necessarily spoken theatre. The project I'm collaborating with now is also consciously hiring visual artists. And it's a lot of music because you start engaging with people, most people are musically active. One can be surprised at the number of people that draw or paint... I am also working on an introductory textbook on art sociology with my colleagues, we sent the manuscript to Routledge this summer, and we're awaiting publication.