

HANDTHEATER'S RESPONSE TO THE DRAFT RECOMMENDATIONS BY THE THEATRE COMMITTEE OF THE DUTCH PERFORMING ARTS FUND

Amsterdam, 11 July 2008

The board and staff are pleased to see that the committee acknowledges the value to society of a theatre group that uses sign language to reach deaf and hard-of-hearing audiences, and that it appreciates Handtheater's efforts to draw attention to deaf culture through theatre performances. The board and staff also share the committee's view that deaf and hard-of-hearing audiences should have an opportunity to see high-quality theatre.

However, the draft recommendations contain a number of inaccuracies which we will discuss below.

“Handtheater’s performances are artistically unconvincing, for the producers have so far failed to create a theatrically valid link between dramatic action and its translation into, or explanation in, sign language. So far there has usually been an intermezzo, a ‘freeze’ in the action and a break in the build-up of tension that detracts from rather than enhances the audience’s perception and experience of the performance.”

The committee uses the words “performances” (in the plural) and “so far”. This implies that the above description concerns the whole of Handtheater's work and that the committee is familiar with it.

It is untrue that all Handtheater's performances involve an alternation between dramatic action and translation into sign language, and hence repeated breaks in the build-up of tension.

Handtheater's performances have so far continued to integrate language and acting in different ways. The play *De Man, de Stad en het Boek* is a monologue for three men, *Theo & Vincent* is a dramatised reading, *Vagina Verhalen* is a compilation of women's stories, *O Amor Natural* is a dance and poetry performance, *Versteend*

Verdriet is a monologue, *Bevroren beweging* is a story inspired by a painting, and *Hotel Alaska* is conceptual theatre.

Nor does the description fit Handtheater's performances for children. *Brekebeen*, *Kan jij een ei?* and *Kika Muis en Arie Mol* all involve continuous action with the two languages incorporated into it.

“The committee also finds the performances anecdotal.”

It is untrue that all Handtheater's performances are anecdotal. This description can at most be applied to one of the performances, *Bevroren Beweging*, which is based on a winter landscape by the seventeenth-century Dutch painter Hendrick Avercamp. Avercamp made sketches out on the ice at different moments and combined them into paintings. According to the Rijksmuseum website, *Avercamp's early landscapes have a predominantly narrative quality, including numerous rather daring anecdotes.*

Since the painting was used as a source of inspiration, a “visual script” for the theatre performance, it is only natural that the performance has anecdotal features – which in any case need not have pejorative connotations.

The former director of the NES Theatres in Amsterdam, Nan van Houte, has said of John van Gelder in the role of Avercamp: *You provide a close-up of the painting – like Henk van Os with his TV art programmes, you show us the painting through different eyes.*

Renate Meijer, who works in the Rijksmuseum's education department, puts it slightly differently: *I thought I'd seen all there was to see in the painting, but there turn out to be tiny corners of it that I really hadn't seen before.*

And various reviewers have stated that the performance goes beyond the mere anecdotes in the painting:

Arend Evenhuis in *Trouw*: *Hugely magnified details of the painting appear at the rear of the stage, and Van Gelder anticipates them. He doesn't improvise, let alone copy them. He goes beyond the frozen movement of Avercamp's winter figures.*

Agnes van Brussel in *De Stentor*: *Van Gelder uses his whole body, his facial expression and his smooth signing to bring people and animals in the painting to life.*

“The variety of topics and themes seems haphazard.”

Far from being haphazard, the variety of topics and themes is a deliberate policy choice based on two main factors: the target audience of sign-language users, and the development of sign-language theatre.

Since Handtheater is the only theatre group in the Netherlands that, as the committee puts it, “specifically aims at deaf theatre audiences”, it is important to offer those audiences as varied a range of theatre as possible. Precisely because it is the only group of its kind, Handtheater cannot afford to focus on a particular style of acting or repertoire. In that sense it differs from the many theatre groups that only aim at hearing audiences and therefore *can* afford to focus on a specific style of acting and/or repertoire in order to distinguish themselves from the rest. The committee has assessed Handtheater in the same way as any other theatre group. Given the group's unique position, that is unfair.

Nor would it help the development of sign-language theatre if Handtheater were to focus on particular areas at too early a stage.

“The comments by the Council for Culture over the period 2005-2008 pointed out similar shortcomings.”

What the draft recommendations by the Dutch Performing Arts Fund and the recommendations by the Council for Culture over the period 2005-2008 have in common is that they both mention Handtheater's artistic quality and profile. The Council for Culture refers to “greatly fluctuating artistic quality”, and the Dutch Performing Arts Fund (specifically, the Theatre Committee) states that Handtheater's

artistic quality is inadequate. However, they reach these conclusions on different grounds. The Council feels that Handtheater's artistic quality can only be improved by collaborating with others, including producers from the Netherlands and abroad, whereas the Fund sees that as a reason *not* to be convinced that the group's artistic quality will improve.

“Although the proposed producers have sufficient ability in their own right, they have little or no experience of the target audience.”

Of the four producers mentioned in the 2009-2012 policy proposals, two have fair to considerable experience of sign-language theatre, and two have little experience of it.

Levent Beşkardeş (who is deaf) has worked as an actor and producer with the International Visual Theatre (IVT) in Paris for over 25 years. The IVT's performances are in sign language only. The Belgian Kurt Vanmaeckelberghe has his own theatre company that gives bilingual performances. Don Duyns has worked with Handtheater once before, and Hakim Traïdia has for many years been interested in sign language and had contact with the deaf community because of his background in mime.

It is therefore untrue that the producers have little or no experience of the target audience.

“There is no logical or convincingly demonstrated pattern in the choice of these particular producers”

Handtheater produces bilingual theatre, in Dutch Sign Language and spoken Dutch. That is why it has chosen two deaf and two hearing producers, who together make up a varied foursome.

The two hearing producers are completely different. Hakim Traïdia has a background in mime, whereas Don Duyns' starting point is clearly language. Levent Beşkardeş' work is associative and impressionistic, whereas Kurt Vanmaeckelberghe is politically committed and works with multimedia.

“.... nor do the proposed performances suggest a consistent artistic course.”

The consistent artistic course is variety – variety in styles of acting, variety in repertoire, variety in guest producers, variety in topics and themes.

“The committee does not expect that in the coming years Handtheater will succeed in becoming an artistically worthwhile addition to the range of Dutch theatre.”

If only by bringing sign language to the stage, Handtheater already *is* an artistically worthwhile addition to the range of Dutch theatre. It offers hearing audiences a new register that results in a different perception and experience of the performance. To take one example, a staff member at the Van Gogh Museum who spends all day transcribing Van Gogh’s letters said after seeing the play *Theo & Vincent*: *“I’ve been working on the letters for years, but it’s only now that they’ve really got across to me.”*

Reviews of Handtheater performances have mainly been favourable, often specifically stating that they *do* add to and enrich the overall range of Dutch theatre.

Handtheater has also inspired other cultural institutions to do things with sign language. The Amsterdam Museum of Photography provides guided tours in sign language; the Rijksmuseum plans to develop a bilingual educational programme on Hendrick Avercamp’s paintings; Frans Weisz has made a film with a deaf actress; and Jiří Kylián has asked Handtheater to translate Beckett’s play *Ohio Impromptu* into sign language and teach it to the dancers for his choreography. Handtheater has thus had plenty of spin-offs.

We would like to conclude with three general comments.

1. To those who know Dutch Sign Language well, it is immediately clear whether or not someone is a compelling signer – with the crystal-clear “voice” of a Ko van Dijk, the restrained acting style of a Marlies Heuer, the comic talent of a Paul de Leeuw, the subtlety of a Joop Admiraal, etc. All that remains largely invisible to anyone

without a proper command of the language. For where does language end and acting begin?

Years ago, Theodor Holman expressed this very well in the 23 October 1990 issue of the newspaper *Het Parool*, following Handtheater's performance of the play *Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

"It was fascinating to see how the bickering, humiliations and emotional wounds were rendered in sign language. [...] I found it hard to assess the dramatic qualities of the piece, for what I saw as drama may have been inherent in sign language."

Although we do not doubt the Theatre Committee's expertise, we do wonder whether it is sufficient to assess sign-language theatre.

In 1997 the Council of Culture wrote as follows to the then minister Aad Nuis: *"An assessment requires expertise in this specific area – expertise the grant institutions at present appear to lack. The Council urges that a solution to this problem be found in mutual consultation."*

At a workshop on artistic expression in sign language held in 2001 on the initiative of the Dutch Foundation for Literature and attended by representatives of the government and local authorities, councils for art and culture, cultural funds and representatives of the deaf community, the Professor of General Linguistics and Dutch Sign Language at the University of Amsterdam, Anne Baker, made the following statement: *"When artistic expression in sign language is assessed, this must be done by someone with a good command of the language."*

Theatre audiences who do not know a particular language may nevertheless be enthralled, charmed, even moved by a performance in it. They may be fascinated by African click languages without understanding what is being said. They may be captivated by the melodious sounds of Portuguese without knowing exactly what is being talked about. The fact that people can in some way be affected by a language they have no knowledge of likewise applies to sign-language performances, as audience responses have repeatedly made clear. However, members of the Theatre

Committee must be capable of more than this – they must be able to pass artistic judgement on the quality of a performance, in other words distinguish language from acting and assess the quality of both, individually and in combination.

2. Handtheater originated in the deaf community. From the outset, it decided to consider and present the deaf community as a minority with a language and culture of its own. Handtheater has therefore considered and presented its own work as a form of artistic expression in that language and based on that culture. Yet deafness is also a disability, which is why words such as “emancipation” and “disability” occur so often in assessments.

Handtheater is torn between the competing requirements of art and social welfare. The former director of the Van Gogh Museum and current director-general of the National Galleries of Scotland, John Leighton, has expressed this far better than we can:

“In my view it would be entirely misleading to regard Handtheater as being introspective, aiming primarily at deaf audiences. Using the language of signing they have developed an extremely powerful, dramatic form which has a very broad appeal, an appeal that extends far beyond the deaf community. It could be said that Handtheater combines elements of traditional theatre with contemporary performance art. The performance Theo & Vincent is an excellent example of the dramatic tension that the team is able to invoke.”

Inevitably, because Handtheater originated in the deaf community, their work will be seen in the context of assistance for the disabled. It is clear, however, that their work combines a concern for exclusion with a powerful form of visual expression that is worthy of support for its own intrinsic merits.”

3. Finally, we would like to return to the committee’s comment that deaf and hard-of-hearing people should have an opportunity to see high-quality theatre. If Handtheater ceases to exist, how will they be guaranteed such an opportunity? Who will fill the gap? Other theatre groups? We know, for instance, that this season Speeltheater Holland will be performing *Riket met de Kuif* for deaf and hearing audiences, as the

young deaf actress Merel van Zuilen will be performing in it in Dutch Sign Language. Yet this cannot make up for the loss of Handtheater. Speeltheater Holland only occasionally gives performances that are also accessible to deaf audiences. Such performances are not part of its regular mission, as they are with Handtheater. And Handtheater is the only group that originated and has its roots in the deaf community.

Merel (whose name means “blackbird” in Dutch) acquired her knowledge and experience of sign-language theatre from Handtheater. Training courses for the performing arts are hardly accessible to deaf people, which is why Handtheater decided to provide such training from the outset. Recently the courses were transferred to a separate body, Cultureel Centrum 't OOG, but sadly the Council for Culture has recommended that it should not receive a grant.

Our blackbird has spread her wings, and we are very proud that she has done so – but where are tomorrow’s blackbirds to come from if Handtheater no longer exists?

Mieke Julien, artistic director
(on behalf of the board and staff)

APPENDIX

MINOR AMENDMENTS

- Handtheater is not an *Amsterdam* theatre group, but an *Amsterdam-based* theatre group.
- Handtheater does not specifically aim at *deaf theatre audiences*, but at *sign-language users (deaf, hard-of-hearing and hearing)*.
- “The artistic directors are Mieke Julien and John van Gelder (performing).”
“Performing” should be deleted.
- Levent Beşkardeş is a producer and actor, in addition to which he makes films.
- “... the value to society of a theatre group that uses sign language to reach *deaf and hard-of-hearing audiences*.” This should read “... *sign-language users (deaf, hard-of-hearing and hearing)*”.
- Hakim’s surname is Traïdia.