



GENERATIONS

Bringing together people of all ages through opera and dance

Warsaw, Poland, 18-20 October 2012

in cooperation with Teatr Wielki (Polish National Opera)

Impressions and Reflections

Even after 16 years of existence, a RESEO conference is far from being everyday business. It is an extraordinary occasion when over 60 opera and dance education managers, artists and cultural and political stakeholders from across Europe meet. It is a think tank, an energy hub, a supporting family, which comes together to discuss, experiment, connect and learn together and from one another. The aim of these professionals is to bring opera and dance to everybody, regardless of age, social, economic and cultural background.

In this conference in the Polish National Opera in Warsaw, the focus was on **intergenerational projects: reaching out to people of all ages and bringing them together through the arts.**

Why this topic? As was outlined in the European Symposium "Culture and Education", organised by the Festival d'Aix-en-Provence in cooperation with RESEO in July 2012: *Intergenerationality is a key factor in European societies, which have been confronted with major changes, such as: increasing life expectancy; families and relationships taking on new structures; youth culture; new insecurity faced by young professionals; social and cultural life organised into peer groups rather than intermingling between generations; fear of young people and the forgotten older generation, siblings separated through migration. The result of these countless societal evolutions is that intergenerational relationships are made complicated, difficult or just plain impossible.*

*The cultural world is accosted by these transformations. Without innovative and proactive policies auditoriums are attracting relatively uniform audiences in terms of age. Cultural and social segmentation of audiences is a phenomenon that is often accompanied by generational segmentation.*¹

But is forging links between generations the core business of our opera houses, we were asked? Beyond reflections on the social responsibility of cultural institutions in today's societies, this question was clearly answered by a delegate: yes, projects with people of all ages are important: because "we feel we must do it".

Another confirmed: We must demonstrate how strongly such projects have the power to touch people. The aspect of living a project, of experiencing strong emotions is often wrongly left aside when we argue why we as cultural players do intergenerational projects.

However, the opinion of another delegate is not to be neglected either, who underlined that one should not forget that opera houses need to sell a product- thus that in order to be able to continue to further such projects, one may need to communicate to directors and sponsors in commercial rather than emotional terms.

However, the passion to create with people of all ages was certainly the red thread of our discussions: this sense of necessity provided the motivational background of this fascinating conference.

Reflections on the topic of intergenerational activities and projects were nourished from different perspectives and via different approaches:

A strong introduction was provided at the opening of the conference by the General Director of the Teatr Wielki, Waldemar Dabrowski. Convinced of the necessity to link education to his artistic project, he founded the

¹ Modified after the summary of the Aix-en-Provence Education Symposium, written by Sabine de Ville, August 2012 – www.reseo.org/invitation/european-symposium-culture-and-education-aix-en-provence-2012

education department at the very beginning of his mandate, which is, to date, the only opera house in Poland with such a department.

Then, on a political level, Jan Truszczyński, Director general for Education, Training, Culture and Youth of the European Commission reminded us of the importance bringing together Education and Culture. His words were highly significant, as it is the Commission which supports our network since 2002. Lastly, the Polish Ministry of Culture, represented by Beata Drewniaka, conveyed her satisfaction that such a conference take place in Warsaw.

Introducing the conference theme, a scientific perspective on intergenerational communication was presented by British neurobiologist Prof. Colwyn Trevarthen and then discussed with a panel of opera and dance educators and artists. Based on his research, intergenerational communication was shown to be a behaviour ingrained in us, apparent and necessary from infancy onwards: exchanges between parents and young children are almost perfectly rhythmed, and reflect instinctive parallels between voice and movement, thus laying the basis for communication throughout our lives.

Different intergenerational opera and dance projects from throughout Europe were presented and discussed in small working groups, providing the opportunity for in-depth exchange on very practical matters pertaining to intergenerational work², and providing an excellent overview of European diversity.

Practical workshops allowed for experimentation and hands-on learning and experiences, lead by specialists and artists working with people of different generations: French choreographer Thierry Thieû Niang led the participants in an atelier based on the ideas of letting go and of mutual trust, essential elements to go beyond preconceptions when working with a generation one knows little or not at all. Maria Genné, Artistic director of KairosAlive! in Minneapolis, USA, offered a workshop bringing together conference participants and senior citizens from Warsaw to explore adapted dance and movement techniques. Clare West, a Swiss-based dance and wellbeing consultant, provided ideas and practical tips on working with the elderly.

Discussions and exchange continued on throughout the breaks and until late in the evening under the autumnal skies of Warsaw, as well as in the voluptuous corridors and backstage labyrinths of the opera house.

And what are the results of these exchanges?

Certainly, practical results will be seen over the next seasons, developing from the seeds planted during the conference which blossom in opera houses throughout Europe. Approaches will be applied, translated to the local contexts, and ongoing projects enhanced.

But what, in fact, *is* an intergenerational activity or project? As a panellist summed up, different possibilities can be distinguished according to three axes:

- in relation to **who** is participating, either people of different ages from the same family or people who are of different ages but not linked via family ties

- in relation to the **intention**, thus whether the intergenerational activities are specifically conceived to be with and for different generations; or whether people of different ages participate “incidentally”- because they happen to come to the activity or are interested in the same subject.

- in relation to the **declared aims**, thus artistic, social or even therapeutic aims.

This was without doubt the most controversial aspect of our discussions on intergenerational projects:

Some speakers defended the necessity not to engage in intergenerational projects as “therapy” or “social projects” but as art. The aim is thus to create an artistic work (e.g. Thierry Thieu Niang).

2

- **Companhia de Musica Teatral and Laboratory for Music and Communication in Infancy (PO)**: “Opus Tutti” and “Peaceful Sunday”: Intergenerational transmission between Infants, Children and Parents; [Helena Rodrigues](#), Artistic Director

- **Glyndebourne (UK)**: “Imago”: A Community opera; [Lucy Lowe](#), Head of Education

- **Bregenzer Festspiele (AU)**: “Panta rhei- alles fließt!”: An intergenerational dance project; [Nina Wolf](#), Education Manager

- **Junge Oper Stuttgart (DE)**: “Irgendwie anders” – “Something Else”: Intergenerational music theatre performance; [Christoph Söckler](#), Opera Educator

- **Vlaamse Opera (BE)**: “DIVODIVA”: An opera project with secondary school students and residents of senior citizens’ Home Clare; [Josephine Schreibers](#), Education Manager

- **Cie Minute Papillon (FR)**: “Checkers”: Intergenerational opera workshop with school children and inhabitants of a retirement home; [Sophie-Margot Dutilleul](#) & [Violaine Fournier](#), Directors

- **Scottish Opera (UK)**: “The Memory Spinners”: Creating an Opera with people who have dementia and their carers; [Judith Riddell](#), Education Manager



With financial support of the



Culture Programme

Others underlined the inverse opinion in which, also in intergenerational work, one must link artistic and educational/social aims; the social sometimes even being more relevant (e.g. Marie Genné).

The general consensus during the conference was that both approaches towards intergenerational work can exist next to each other or be combined, and are thus not mutually exclusive.

Several reflections, which surfaced during the final discussion, should furthermore be mentioned document:

The intergenerational tissue of our societies and cultural offers was seen as increasingly weak. The “young” and “old” remain amongst themselves in social settings. Mutual apprehension sometimes bordering on rejection and fear can be observed, and a French participant put forward that areas populated predominantly by young people are often seen as more “dangerous”.

However, and referring to the RESEO Conference in Stuttgart on Intercultural projects³, this may not only be due to an intergenerational difference as such, but also to an *intercultural* difference between the generations. It was described that for example in certain areas, older migrant populations may be of Italian origin, while young migrants may come predominantly from northern Africa. Thus, the relationship between these generations is less linear and more difficult to construct via common cultural ties and artistic projects.

But must there necessarily be harmony between the generations? Does asking people to create together result in a harmonious whole and mutual wellbeing? Must we be “in phase”? Is this even the aim, or do our societies not evolve due to different views, to changes in perception, or even to “clashes” between generations? These differences must be accepted as natural when bringing together people of different generations.

Concluding: It is certainly through the arts that diversity can be integrated as a positive feature, that beauty and inspiration can arise from differences between generations, and that dialogue can be created.

No matter whether the aim of the artist, opera house/ dance company or education department engaging in intergenerational projects be “artistic”, “social” or both: something new is created both in the minds of the participants, artists, organisations and audiences involved, a link is formed and an opening created.

People are brought together to live a unique experience of emotion together, all the while remaining valued for their individuality. Is this not the basis of our societies? And is this not art?

These in-depth sessions were made possible by the Polish National Opera, both its education team as well as its directors, who participated in the conference and provided fascinating insights into the cultural and educational landscape of Poland, the activities of the opera house and their work in the field of opera and dance education. The attendance of two performances: a performance of Alice in Wonderland by young amateur dancers initiated by the education department as well as of Manon Lescaut on the main stage provided for a strong artistic framework. We wish to thank the team of Teatr Wielki for their support.

RESEO
October 2012

³ RESEO Conference “Playing a role in society- Opera, dance and intercultural dialogue”, 1-3 March 2012 in cooperation with Staatstheater Stuttgart: Oper Stuttgart, Stuttgarter Ballett, Schauspiel Stuttgart (DE). www.reseo.org/event/conference/playing-role-society-opera-dance-and-intercultural-dialogue