

Music Theatre Beyond [the Rainbow]

To reflect on how and which music theatre explores new horizons is a difficult exercise. Difficult, because horizons always determine norms, and we tend to believe that we live in a postmodern age where art continuously questions such norms, if not undermines them. Still, we like to think of opening up horizons, particularly *new* ones. We dream of going beyond horizons, especially our *own* ones. And yet, ever since post-colonial consciousness has set in our culture, we are aware of the dangers of such aspirations.

However, norms were long music theatre's horizons. Music theatre has a personal record of 'going against the grain'. Its mode of existence is resistance to traditional models. 19th century bourgeois opera, text-based dramatic theatre, spectacular entertainment, song-book musical, they are only a few of the art forms music theatre set out to resist over the past decades. Discontent with the ways things are in the concert stage and the performance arts, music theatre set out its own horizons to transgress. One used to speak of *new* music theatre to withstand inclusive definitions where opera and musical took claim of the term. But how *new* can the *new* still be?

If music theatre were to be about exploring new horizons, it certainly was successful in creating its own horizons as a mode of existence. Since its reaction against the conservative music stage in the 1950s followed by a massive implosion of new work from the 1980s, music theatre has been shimmering in the most colorful array of shapes and artistic forms. I'd like to call it a 'rainbow' of music theatre styles (and apologize for the somewhat unfashionable metaphor, bringing to mind one of the most trashy ballad songs in popular musical theatre). I see this rainbow, however, as music theatre's self-fulfilling dream. The dream of renewal by expanding definitions and transgressing horizons added to music theatre's most successful boom, though today it is perhaps a programmer's nightmare.

Music theatre's quest for new horizons is exhaustive, but also, exhausting. As a genre, it became a multi-genre and a meta-genre. It adopts various existing genres of music and performance in order to transcend them, to make something new, something original, unseen or unheard of... It became a genre of theatre that puts into question its own status as genre. The rainbow of genres that reflects from its continuous expansion extends from the most experimental opera project to the most musicalized post-dramatic theatre production. But, as is so often the trouble with rainbows, its colors start to fade after a while. The heterogeneity of genres, styles and shapes has made music theatre into a self-sufficient art form. But as a label for cultural programming, music theatre seems to be ever more scrutinized by deflation of its definition. It caters in its multiplicity to a pan-aural spectator that is getting harder to find.

So how do we keep reaching for that rainbow? Isn't the expedition for ever more new horizons self-deflating? And we haven't asked ourselves yet who is deciding on the horizons: the artists, the producers, the subsidy system, the audience? Let's have a look at a few of the horizons that reflect in music theatre today in order to give a glimpse of the pot of gold at one end of the rainbow, and the reasons to search for it at the other.

On one end of that rainbow, music theatre in the Netherlands started with a bunch of horizons set out by the musical phenomenon of Hauser Orkater. *Zie de Mannen Vallen* (1979) literally sought to meticulously bring out of balance the divide between theatre and popular music video. The traditional divide trusted on a normative awareness of both art forms which was detonated by Hauser Orkater's music theatre as a way to break through towards the audience. It comes as no surprise that music theatre then borrowed a lot of Brechtian theatre ideas. The implosive energy of music theatre that went straight through the fourth wall of theatre still resonates in ensembles like Susies Haarlok and

Veenfabriek today. Most of Veenfabriek's musical horizons equally lie in popular culture. What is really *new* under the sun? What really is at the other end of that rainbow's lure?

There seems to be a new sense of aesthetic inquiry fed by a scientific-informed awareness that music theatre can do much more to the listener and his listening culture. In this regard, music theatre has many concurring art forms that have developed through its reliance on the commercial music industry: animated movie, music video, cinema soundtrack, Dolby surround, personal stereo, MP3, and lately, flash mobs ... What *news* has music theatre to offer in the ongoing musicalization of our lives?

It seems that against this volatile auditory environment, music theatre offers an investigation of its audience, its listeners. Since music theatre is not so new anymore, it renews itself through its audience. It started therefore to target other audiences and its cultures as its main new horizon. Some focus on youth and children's theatre (even unborn babies in some quirky projects), with the latest opening of the Youth Opera House in Amersfoort. Others reach out to specific communities such the Turkish community in Hollands Diep's most recent production *Lege Wieg / Boş Beşik*, or the Utrecht suburb Overvecht in *De Operaflat* at the Yo! Opera Festival. Though I had much resentment to their aesthetical claims on opera, both performances did try to surpass personal auditory horizons by incorporating different listening cultures. Music theatre seems then to eavesdrop on its listener that does not only sit back as its backdrop or target audience, but also becomes its main performer.

The act – or the performance – of listening is mostly marked in concert theatre where concert elements are exposed in a new theatrical context, such as in many of Paul Koek's performances at the Veenfabriek but also, in Muziektheater Transparant's *Ruhe*. In the latter performance, the listeners meet each other's eyes, seated randomly in the performance space, while singers of the Collegium Vocale Ghent bathe them in harmonious Schubert songs. The context of the Nazi testimonies in-between disturbs the aural bliss. As such, personal horizons tied to our sense of auditory selves are being put to the test. Even in the most oblique silence, music theatre can work as a numbing super filter as well as a source of deafening noise.

And now we come to the pot of gold at the other end of the rainbow, or to say the least, beyond music theatre's horizons. The vantage point lies at its thumping heart: the music, the sounds, the silence, the sense of speech without words. Music is the odd component that invites composers and theatre makers to push the limits, to renew our theatres, to reach out to new audiences, because it speaks to us, talks back at us, and resonates to our imaginations. But the golden pot always comes with a riddle that can't be solved.

In recent years, some branch of music theatre seems to develop as audio theatre, which is perhaps the latest and last attempt to transgress its own horizons. Heiner Goebbels removed the presence of live actor-musicians in his *Stifters Dinge* (2008), a giant pianola-like installation that put both liveness and the theatrical context at stake. Yannis Kyriakides, conversely, presented a large screen in *Dreams of the Blind* (2008), directly projecting text-images, syllables on each sounding tone into the brain of his audience. The effect is that of an unsung voice taking shape in the listener's mind. Ever since Wagner's revolutions with music drama's acoustics, music theatre became a resonating cave. After Cage, that cave is tuned into the theatre of the listener's personal mind, as is so common when one plays the piano or listens to a Requiem with eyes closed.

So the horizons are self-fulfilling and the gold is still luring. The downside of the chase for new, personal, cultural and auditory horizons is that music theatre's memory today is faltering, which is to the detriment of its existence. What we need is a music theatre that is reflective of itself, its connection to its own past and a clear direction. Only then, in all irony of its own flaws, can music theatre as a theatre for the ears set the future to take off.

*Somewhere over the rainbow
skies are blue
and the dreams... that you dare to dream
really do come true
If happy little bluebirds fly
above the rainbow, why
Oh, why can't I?*

Pieter Verstraete, 17 May 2010