

Journalist Marian Buijs is a well-known theatre Journalist. She worked 25 years for one of the biggest newspapers in the Netherlands. She curated discussions and wrote several theatre books. She interviews Liesbeth Coltof and Dennis Meyer about 10CHILDREN. "In this project we want to work at the intersection of art and social action. Children, young people and their parents see their lives reflected on stage and experience how important they are. And the quality of the performance also affects the people sitting on the other side, the very people who make the decisions that can change and improve things. Really good art gives us a real experience and inspires people to act."

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THEY SHOULD GET THE CHANCE FOR THEIR VOICE TO BE HEARD!

Marian Buijs

They both worked in all sections of the Dutch youth theater. Liesbeth Coltof, a household name in that world, for many years led one of the most prominent youth theatre companies in the Netherlands, then Huis aan de Amstel, now the Toneelmakerij. She has directed in about a dozen European countries, worked in the Gaza Strip, in the U.S. and received one prestigious theatre award after another. In Gaza she worked with Dennis Meyer. As artistic director of Het Lab Utrecht, a production house for youth theatre, he guided young talented professional artists at home and abroad. He also teaches at the theater school and has worked as a producer on numerous productions.

When Liesbeth said goodbye to her company, she wondered what she could do with the wealth of experience she had gained over the years and all those contacts spread all over the world. She is still invited to direct in the U.S., Germany and Switzerland. She has a rich and busy life, but all the children she encountered in places outside the prosperous Western world were too dear to her to be put aside. The same was true for Dennis. They came across a report from Unicef on the rights of the child. While talking, the plan that is now called 10CHILDREN - art for change - arose.

"We both read that UNICEF report showing that the problems of children growing up in a situation far below the poverty line are getting worse and their numbers are only increasing. More and more children are growing up in dire poverty and insecurity. That is unacceptable and we wondered if we could do something about their situation. How we could give them the opportunity to make their voices heard. "

Neither are naive. They know they can't change the world but don't believe that if you do nothing, everything will be fine. They do believe in the power of art. They believe in the zest for life, talent and resourcefulness of children who often survive in circumstances where adults would not. "Ten-year-old children who take care of four brothers and sisters. They just do it. There is so much value and strength in those children. It would be stupid and a shame to let all that potential go to waste. Because when they are eighteen, nineteen, things go wrong. Then they have to take care of themselves while never having the chance to learn anything. Then becoming a drug pusher is maybe the best they can be."

With these thoughts in mind they chose ten cities all over the world. Ten, just a nice round number, and ten children as a symbol for all those others. "Ten cities where we keep zooming in on the cause or effect of poverty: homelessness, lack of education, growing up without parents, violence, war or purely the physical effects of incessant poverty. So that you ultimately get a very diverse picture of what poverty actually is and where it leads. " There will be a festival in every city with a theatre performance, an exhibition of photos and visual art, a documentary about the daily lives of these children and a major education project. At the end, all projects from the 10 cities come together in one place, supplemented by an extensive program to contextualise the work.

Working together in Gaza, they saw how great the value of art can be in a community lacking the most basic things. "After a heavy bombardment, we made a performance about a woman who had lost her oldest son. She had climbed a tree and refused to come down. In Islamic culture men and women are not allowed on stage together. That is why the women there are usually played by men. This time we chose a real woman, a real man and real children. A committee then comes to Gaza to reject or approve the performance. We were very tense. Afterwards it remained completely silent. All those eight men were crying. Slowly they started to clap and not a word was said about the fact that men and women played together.

That is the power of art. Art that arises from social necessity often has a quality that directly affects the heart and immediately prompts action. "We want to work in this project at the intersection of art and social action. Children, young people and their parents see their lives reflected on stage and experience how important they are. The quality of the performance also affects the people sitting on the other side, the very people who make the decisions that can change and improve things. Really good art gives us a real experience and inspires people to act. "

You can choose ten cities on paper that together form a nice network around the world, but then there is still a lot to develop. "We always start with a contact person from our own network. He or she will then look locally for people who can inform us and contribute: doctors, social workers, scientists, artists, activists. We talk to them and together get ideas that we develop. They know the situation on the ground and they know what it should be about. We come with our experience and our baggage, they with theirs. In this way it becomes an equal exchange and by opening up to each other the project gradually acquires a form and content that can acquire meaning in that place.

The child's view is central to all parts of the project. "We try to describe the world from the perspective of the child. That is normal for us. Dutch youth theatre has been taking children seriously for years. However, they experience this approach completely new in some other countries. And they love it. "

Like a work of art, the project changes as they work on it. In Cleveland, USA, the first city they went to, it would actually be about obesity, a typical poverty-related disease. After discussions with doctors and psychiatrists, toxic stress turned out to be a much larger health problem there. If you are homeless as a child, there is always danger, violence, your parents are not there, your body is constantly on edge: it is fight or flight. Your body produces a stress hormone that turns against your own

body, so that the chance of deadly diseases, also later in life, is very high. If a child has contact with one adult who can be trusted, that stress already decreases.

They think it is important that children are given the opportunity to express themselves. This is done during the project by involving children in the development. Educational projects are set up in every city. Art education is actually an extension of any performance. Once the children have seen everything, they are given creative assignments. It could be a conversation or create or a chance to create or play something themselves. "Being able to express themselves in such a relatively safe environment can work wonders for these children. That's where their strength and talent can come out "

In Cape Town it would be about AIDS and child families whose parents had died. "We went to the townships. There we could see what this project should really be about. It was shocking. Pure poverty, people on top of each other in huts, dirty streets. The children turned out to still have parents, but they are never there because they work somewhere far away. Men are often gone, this was already the case during Apartheid. The women often have two jobs to make ends meet, so they are never at home. The children have to take care of themselves, they almost grow up as orphans."

They are constantly looking for cooperation. They definitely don't want to do everything themselves. "In South Africa, for example, we met a young director, Nwabisa Plaatjie, with whom it immediately worked. Someone with a voice of his own, even from a poor family."

"We were supposed to go to Brazil in April. The corona epidemic intervened. Our "hub", as we call our contact persons, had already made agreements with many people. We had those conversations anyway. Via Zoom. The project had already started to develop in four conversations. The theme there is "indigenous children". As long as they live in their own way within their own community, they don't feel poor. They do have problems, but no poverty. As soon as they are taken out of those communities and go to the city, they are among the poorest. Without money and without roots. That's what it's about. Then it also becomes a political statement to allow those original communities to exist."

The financing has not yet been finalized. Liesbeth received a grant from the municipality of Amsterdam, 35,000 euros. "I put all of that into this project. I thought that was a beautiful, sensible destination. We set it up and paid for the trips so far. Traveling is hard work by the way. In six days, we have at least six conversations per day. We do all the work for free. We are also looking for financing in the countries themselves. In the US, where the festival will take place in 2022 and Brazil, also in 2022, we have been successful, but in South Africa, hopefully in 2021, it will be virtually impossible. So we have to seek additional finances from private funds and crowdfunding. Within the regular funds we fall between two stools. We don't fit anywhere. It is not set in the Netherlands, nor is it an export product. But such a young director in Cape Town has to be paid for her work."

This is a project that has meaning and is broader than just a beautiful performance. Collaborations arise between the partners in the different countries and so they build an ever-expanding community that supports these children. In this way art can still

address the causes of social injustice, so that things change. Maybe very little at first, but eventually it can work like a snowball."