



Wigbertson Julian Isenia

The Question of Dutch Politics as a Matter of Theatre

Theatre and Performance after the 2008 Financial Crisis



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Katharina Pewny and Kati Röttger

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PREFACE

Due to the neoliberal agenda of the Dutch cultural ministry in recent years, the younger generation of theatre makers and scholars in The Netherlands is confronted with a drastically shifting field of cultural politics and harsh consequences for the status of theatre. This problem is aggravated by the lack of a profound analysis of these developments. Against this backdrop, the significance and actuality of the thesis Julian Isenia is presenting here, cannot be underestimated. While being clearly focused on Dutch cases, the topic extends much further, critically resonating the global problem of post-democracy which encompass depoliticisation and the narrowing of the public sphere.

For the sake of in-depth analysis, Isenia has chosen for a double agenda that is clearly announced in the title of this book: *The Question of Dutch Politics as a Matter of Theatre. Theatre and Performance after the 2008 Financial Crisis* indicates the double-bind notion of theatre at stake here, which is explained and implemented in the first chapter. It covers the tension between the Platonic metaphorical use of the notion to indicate a false theatre of politics on the one hand and a notion that – in the course of Hanna Arendt – stresses the inherent political impact of theatre constituting public sphere. Delving into the critic on the ongoing deterioration of democracy – coined by Colin Crouch with the term post-democracy – he highlights the antitheatrical attitude lurking behind. He shows to which extent critical approaches to post-democracy are pervaded by (anti)theatrical terms like the “illusory, deceptive, exaggerated, artificial, or affected. (...) [And] the acts and practices of role-playing, illusion, false appearance, masquerade, façade, and impersonation” (Davis, Postlewait). Making these concepts and terms an integral part of his analysis, the specific merit of the thesis

is the aim to deconstruct the antitheatrical binary inherent in this approach. Or in the words of Isenia: "The aim of this thesis is to change the value of the concept of theatre; to transform a 'bad' term into a 'good' one and vice versa, and enable a deep understanding of theatre and politics, not as separate entities, but as processes in a conundrum with each other" (p. 7).

This more general proposition is concretely linked up with two questions: "How do these symptoms and characteristics of post-democracy and theatricality define current Dutch politics? Moreover, what are the ramifications of this diagnosis for the question of our democracy, as well as for the worlds of the arts and the theatre in the Netherlands?" (p.8)

To dispute these questions, Isenia starts with an analysis of the general election in The Netherlands in 2010 to find out what kind of theatre is currently performed in politics. Concluding a narrowing of the public sphere and a radical trend of the Dutch neoliberal government to restrict certain rights and social services under the disguise of freedom of choice, responsibility, independence and efficiency, he explores how these aspects both influence and are influenced by theatre and performance practice, art policy and governmental action. Analyzing in a second step the current inheritance of these new politics, he delves into the cultural policy agenda. More concretely, departing from a letter to the House of Representatives, from the succeeding Minister of Culture, Jet Bussemaker, *Cultuur Verbindt: Een Ruime Blik op Cultuurbeleid (Culture Unites: A Broader Interpretation of Culture Policy)* (2014), he concludes that she took her predecessor's plans further by asserting that not only should art institutions "be flexible and potent" and take (financial) risks, but more importantly that the relationship between the arts and other social domains should be brought forward more coherently. "Artists, the Minister assesses, 'should take responsibility for the social context in which [their artworks] take place'. This cryptic formulation gets a relatively concrete interpretation when Minister Bussemaker links a specific social problem to the domain of art" (p. 31), making the relationship between culture and three social domains - healthcare, sport and education - explicit by means of examples from the art world that can be used as a benchmark for others.

In the following, he presents three performance-cases to explore the consequences of this policy agenda for performance practice and

the question to which extent theatre can re-politicise the public sphere.

While the first example, *Wijksafari Utrecht* by Adelheid Roosen (2013), presents the problem of being benchmarked by the governmental politics to prove art's instrumentalisation to deal with social problems, the other two cases are chosen to demonstrate to which extent – as the last chapter is headed – performance can become a political affair. The first case in this is a clear example of so called activism. It highlights the case of Quinsy Gario who performed an intervention into the popular arrival ceremony of Sinterklaas (Sint Nicholas) protesting against the tradition of staging a parade of “Zwarte Pieten”, the blackface ‘helpers’ of the Sint. Together with another activist, he had posed alongside the parade carrying a banner with the text “Zwarte Piet is Racisme” (Black Pete is Racism), for which reason they were arrested violently by the police. While this case “served as a catalyst to re-politicise the discussion around Black Pete” (p. 48), the last example undermined governmental power structures by drawing attention to the refugees’ state of being. It was a participatory theatre project led by the ‘We are Here Cooperative’ under the direction of Nicolas Stemmann that staged the production *Labyrinth* (2015).

The ‘We are Here Cooperative’ consists out of approximately 200 refugees that are out of procedure (Wijzinhier.org) residing in Amsterdam. For all of them, the asylum applications have been refused, and all legal remedies have been exhausted in the Netherlands, in spite of the fact that they could not return to their home country. Together, they wrote a play about their own experience with the Dutch asylum policy and performed it confronting the audience with an uncomfortable and confusing experience.

Drawing on theories of Jacques Rancière, Pascal Gielen, Martin Jay, Colin Davis, and – last but not least - Colin Crouch, Julian Isenia offers detailed and careful analyses of the three cases to provide important insights into the vibrant question how theatre could be able to re-politicise post-democratic public spheres. A book that should be recommended for theatre students and makers who are interested in the actual problems of the fields they are aligned with.

Kati Röttger

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1	TABLE OF CONTENTS	
1	DUTCH POLITICS AS A MATTER OF THEATRE	13
2	DIAGNOSING A POLITICAL MALAISE	27
2.1.	The 2010 Dutch general election and its aftermaths.....	27
2.1.1	The Binnenhof deliberations	29
2.1.2	The coalition agreement	30
2.1.3	The Catshuis deliberations	32
2.2	Why post-democracy?	35
2.2.1	The Dutch Polder Model and the idea of governmentality	35
2.2.2	The trivialisation of politics: is it the media?	37
2.2.3	Active citizenship, participation society and apathy.....	40
2.3	The theatricalisation of politics. What theatre?	41
3	THE STATE ASSUMING A MORE CEREMONIAL AND THEATRICAL ROLE	45
3.1	The inheritance of the Rutte I cabinet	45
3.2	<i>Wijksafari Utrecht</i> by Adelheid Roosen	48
3.2.1	Zina Neemt de Wijk	51
3.2.2	Wijksafari en Tepito	53
3.3	The instrumentalisation of the arts?.....	55
3.3.1	Recent developments within citizen initiatives and participatory art	58

4	RE-POLITICISING THE PUBLIC SPACE	61
4.1	The Question of Democracy	61
4.2	Protest by Quinsy Gario	63
4.3	Politics as theatre, theatre as politics	73
5	THE POLITICS OF AESTHETICS AND THE AESTHETICS OF POLITICS	77
5.1	<i>Labyrinth</i> by We are Here Cooperative and Nicolas Stemann	77
5.2	Citizenship, democracy, and humanity	84
5.2.1	Democracy: a distinction between human rights and the rights of the citizen?	85
	CONCLUSIONS	89
	WORKS CITED	95