In the Netherlands, the Avant-Garde Is the Establishment

American Theatre, July 2017, By Kasper van Laarhoven

Dutch artists like Ivo van Hove and Wunderbaum only became mainstream forces after an audience revolt. Will the tide ever take a similar turn in the U.S.?

A Friday night in late 2015, and New York Live Arts is abuzz with anticipation for the second half of Looking for Paul, a play by Dutch theatre group Wunderbaum. A man with a protruding rubber nose and gigantic hands enters the stage. He walks to the center, where a toilet stands, and drops his pants to take a seat. Two women—the first leading the second on a leash—enter the scene. Meanwhile, the man on the toilet has begun smearing his own feces onto a cloth. Then, one of the women pours liquor bottle after liquor bottle over her body, while a second man throws heaps of spaghetti toward her bosom. Then a third man undresses and starts penetrating a bale of straw while rhythmically screaming, “Room service! Room service!”

For American audiences this may be provocative and uncomfortable, but for the Dutch actors it is nothing new. “Americans say we are modern and experimental,” said Wunderbaum actor Walter Bart. “But for me, I don’t see that. I don’t think it’s that much of a provocative performance at all.”

Flemish theatre director Ivo van Hove, who debuted on Broadway in 2015 with a modern interpretation of Arthur Miller’s A View from the Bridge, made a similar observation a few years ago in Dutch newspaper Algemeen Dagblad. In the Netherlands, where he has worked since 1990, people see him as “rather mainstream,” he said. But in the U.S. he is often labeled as a “bad boy avant-gardist,” and praised for his unconventional approach to classical texts. His A View from the Bridge, for example, which is now making the rounds in theatres across America, is stripped of props, traditional décor, and markers of the Brooklyn setting; part of the audience is seated on the stage, only a few feet away from the actors.

How can theatre be mainstream in one country and avant-garde in another? And what is the history behind this difference?

For one, American theatre is still relatively young, according to Dutch director Erwin Maas. “Film and theatre grew up together in the U.S.,” he said in an interview conducted in Dutch. “As a result, a filmic realism has come to play an important role in American theatre. Theatre in the U.S. needs to get as close to reality as possible, and so we see décors that copy entire apartments, with conscientiously recreated interiors.”

Dutch theatre director and playwright Paul Binnerts noted something similar. “In the U.S., it was Stanislavski’s acting system, which is particularly useful for film acting—think of Marlon Brando—that has been imported into the theatre world,” he said in Dutch. In Stanislavski’s system, an actor uses past emotions and experiences in order to credibly portray a character. “It is this complete identification that is shirked in Dutch theatre. In the Netherlands, we have come to accept that theatre is not real, and once you have accepted that, you can start playing with it.”

In Binnerts’s book Acting in Real Time, he discusses a method that prescribes that actors not fully identify with their characters. Instead, they become storytellers who are present onstage and have an active role in determining how the story is told. At times they engage the spectators directly,

tearing down the fourth wall that traditionally separates actors and audience. One of the central tenets of this “real time” acting style is that “the time in the play is always the same as the one in the real world. The illusion of reality makes way for the reality of the illusion,” Binnerts said.

A second important difference between American and Dutch theatre is the funding and structure of companies. “American theatre is characterized by a businesslike approach,” Maas said. “Because theatre in the U.S., generally speaking, lacks government funding, it is oriented toward profit. This structures the entire industry. It is the reason why executive producers are often in charge of a play in America, rather than a creative director.”

This also leads to a hierarchical structure of creation. In the U.S. the director is usually hired, together with the cast, and they perform in the service of the producer and playwright. In the Netherlands, by contrast, theatre companies often comprise a director, dramaturg, actors, designers, and other artists, who cooperate on a long-lasting and more egalitarian basis, and devise multiple works together over many years. “American theatre is structured more hierarchically, more vertically,” Maas said. “Dutch theatre is more horizontal, more collaborative. Actors are expected to actively steer and shape the play by their input during rehearsals.”

British actor Mark Strong, who played protagonist Eddie in van Hove’s A View from the Bridge, was intrigued by this approach. “It felt as if we were all in this together. It was very unusual,” he said during a public interview at The New York Times‘ TimesTalks. Referring to van Hove’s lack of reverence for realism, Strong said: “It was a fantastic journey into something I didn’t know was possible. But of course now it seems so clear that, to make something as evident as this story, you need to get rid of all the extraneous stuff that is trying to persuade you that it’s real. We know theatre is not real.”

Binnerts is not surprised to hear this. “This was a development in Dutch theatre that Ivo contributed to,” he said. “He was part of the progressive and experimental current in the Netherlands that instigated these changes in the 1990s.”

New York University drama professor Kevin Kuhlke runs an exchange program between the school and the Amsterdam University of the Arts. He said that one of the things that surprises American students who spend the summer semester in Amsterdam is “how experimental work is being produced on a high level in the Netherlands,” along with the realization that “there would be not enough audience in the U.S. to make that work here.”

But such a widespread availability of high-value experimental theatre has not always been the norm. Toward the end of the 1960s, there was a lot of public discontent about the quality of art and how it was funded in the Netherlands. The government tended to subsidize exclusively large theatre companies and pushed them to perform the classical canon. Consequently, smaller theatres suffered and the work produced in the country was neither innovative nor adventurous.

On Nov. 1, 1969, during a performance of Shakespeare’s The Tempest, two theatre students started throwing tomatoes at the actors. Similar protest actions spread through the country. This season-long “Aktie Tomaat” (“tomato action”) led to an art subsidy system that, Maas said, many other countries came to envy. Subsidies were increased and spread across the country to all kinds of theatre companies, regardless of size. This facilitated the rise of new, young, experimental theatre groups, which in turn influenced the overall course of Dutch theatre and created the fertile ground for high-level experiments in the ’90s.

Then in 2010, as the government announced severe budget cuts to the arts, more protests erupted across the Netherlands. It was in this context that Wunderbaum created Looking for Paul, commissioned by REDCAT in Los Angeles. The play revolves around a controversial Paul McCarthy sculpture that the municipality of Rotterdam bought in 2001. The sculpture features a provocatively shaped Christmas tree in the hand of a stocky Santa Claus—a depiction that soon led to the nickname “Gnome Buttplug.” With this sculpture as a point of departure, Wunderbaum explored the extent to which art should be funded by community money. “In a way,” said Wunderbaum actor Walter Bart, “Looking for Paul is a statement that you can make the most extreme variant of theatre with subsidy.”

American guest actor Daniel Frankl hinted at this in the first half of the play, when he confided to his Dutch colleagues that he was “hoping for some well-funded Dutch artists to come and wake up the U.S.”

American theatre, however, has not always turned to Europe for experimentation. Binnerts describes the coming and going of experimental theatre on both continents as recurring waves. “In the 1960s, it was the other way around,” he said, “Back then, the American theatre experiment was further developed than, for example, the Dutch one,” signified by the stateside success of such “revolutionary innovators as Peter Brook, Joseph Chaikin, and Jerzy Grotowski.”

But while this theatre was often grown and/or embraced in America, it was sustained by Europe. “This experimental theatre often had to tour through Europe in order to sustain itself—in the U.S. there was not enough of an audience,” Binnerts said of a phenomenon that continues to this day. “Many American avant-garde companies wouldn’t have existed if it weren’t for Europe embracing them.”

The U.S. then seems stuck in a vicious circle, where the majority of the audience never gets acquainted with experimental theatre and thus cannot develop an interest for it, while producers find it too risky to invest in such unconventional work because they assume there will not be enough of an audience.

That does not mean experimentation is dead in America. Just look at the success of such devising theatre ensembles as the Rude Mechs, Pig Iron, Elevator Repair Service, or 600 Highwaymen. But overall, experimentation on a larger scale, on Broadway and at large nonprofit theatres, tends to be reserved for foreign directors such as van Hove. It may be no coincidence that Sam Gold’s controversial recent Broadway production of The Glass Menagerie, which was critiqued for interpreting Tennessee Williams’s classic too loosely, was first developed and performed in at van Hove’s Toneelgroep Amsterdam.

While the American theatre establishment’s reverence for the text and its precise execution may make it difficult for more metaphorical and physical theatre to find its way onto Broadway, experimental groups in the U.S. are often embroiled in a continuous struggle for financing. In June, Sebastián Calderón Bentin, a Peruvian actor, director, and theatre professor at New York University, premiered The Reception, a piece that he and cocreator Sean Donovan crowdfunded and devised over the past three years with a team of actors. It was presented at the Off-Off-Broadway HERE Arts Center.

“More and more young theatremakers want to show their own work,” Calderón Bentin said. But due to rising real estate prices in New York (and in many cities nationwide), these young people face many logistical problems that impede their work. “The question is, how do you allow for a sustainable laboratory? How do you keep the arts in a city that is becoming more and more

expensive? You will burn out if you’re bartending to get by and have to commute three hours a day in order to rehearse.”

Is it lack of funds that’s keeping high-level avant-garde theatre in this country in check? Could a foreign director such as van Hove shake or even breach Broadway traditionalism? Perhaps, and his Tony might be a positive sign. But with money talking so loudly, it will be hard for the more collaborative and less text-reverent understanding of theatre to take hold on this side of the Atlantic. A great loss, Binnerts said, for “American actors are often incredibly good technically, and once you get them to fully contribute to the process, wonderful things happen.”

As a Dutch theatre enthusiast living in New York City, I cannot help but wonder what kind of magic would spark American theatre if the professionalism, talent, and money of Broadway were to combine with the daring attitude of its own fringe and Europe.

Kasper van Laarhoven is a New York City-based Fulbright scholar and freelance journalist from the Netherlands. He holds degrees in Literary and Cultural Analysis, International Relations and Middle Eastern Studies.