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Changing Europe, Changing Arts #4 (conclusion)

Creating space through resistance

Kretakör, CAC Vilnius and Ma'aleh School for Television, Film and the Arts

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The concluding instalment of the SICA-EUNIC series *Changing Europe, Changing Arts* featured three organisations: the theatre company Kretakör from Budapest, the Contemporary Arts Center in Vilnius and the Ma'aleh School for Television, Film and the Arts in Jerusalem. Three organisations with very different ways of relating to the world in which they work and offer resistance to complacent ideas.

Of all the stories in this series, that of Arpad Schilling of Kretakör was probably the most personal one. He gave up his internationally successful repertory company to be able to devote more time to questions that occupy the audience. "As a director I was in too great a position of power. You determine what the problem is with a society, you choose a piece that you feel addresses this problem and you divide up the roles. There is no dialogue with the audience at all", is the way he explains the switch he has made to a community arts approach. The new Kretakör investigates other forms of theatre and tries to activate the audience. This is a real challenge in a country in which people are used to waiting to see what those above have thought up for them this time.

In the circle

The old Kretakör company employed fifteen people; now Schilling works in a collective of just five. The remaining employees have all gone on to find good positions, as Kretakör served as an excellent reference for the actors. Freed from the burden of the production factory that the company had become in Schilling's eyes, he has now gone back to the basics: theatre as a space for confrontations, allowing those present to experience collective catharsis in the end. The name Kretakör, 'Chalk circle', is a reference to Brecht and the Bible and the place where a solution is found.

Small questions

The path to that solution does not have a defined form. Much of the work Schilling does is commissioned or arises as a result of an invitation. This has resulted in projects including a quite remarkable short film commissioned by Heineken Hungary about alcohol abuse among young people (*Can you hold the line?*), and a workshop held in two country villages with large Roma Communities, in which different notions of tolerance are put to the test, in the tradition of the 'Theatre of the repressed' developed by Brazilian director Augusto Boal. Schilling's aims are not over-ambitious. What he is interested in is searching for solutions to uncomfortable situations, not answering the larger existential questions.

Big questions

In contrast, the question of 'how to live' forms the starting point for most of the productions of the Ma'aleh School for Television, Film and the Arts in Jerusalem. The school was founded by modern orthodox Jews, who – unlike the ultra-orthodox Jews – participate in daily life, although they also follow a strict interpretation of Jewish law. Although there is no ban on the medium of film, it is not the most obvious form of artistic expression you could think of in the context of this community. Ma'aleh is an environment in which talented students from orthodox and secular backgrounds can set to work. The school does not prescribe particular themes, but many of the students stay close to home by choosing subjects such as relationships, family histories, moral dilemmas, the compulsory military service and sexuality. "Making a film usually starts as a kind of therapy. In the course of the production process the students gain more of a distance to the subject", according to the school's director Neta Ariel.

In public

The students' films do not remain unseen by the outside world. The school organises screenings that are open to the public and releases a large number of films on DVDs, which find their way to festivals around the world. Some films are also shown on national television. Ariel: "Orthodox groups are curious about the way in which the issues that occupy them are represented in artistic films and we also have a small audience of ultra-orthodox Jews who live near to the school. They sometimes come and take a look when we organise open-air screenings in the garden in spring." There are no taboo subjects, but Neta Ariel does ask her students to consider the responsibility that goes with making certain choices: "Film offers lots of possibilities. You don't need to show everything in order to tell a story." Is this a way of protecting her students or is she trying to prevent the school from falling into discredit among orthodox groups?

Open pluralism

The answer seems to be that it works both ways. The school encourages students to devote their talent and creativity to the things that preoccupy them and simultaneously tries to open the eyes of the religious authorities to the issues that occupy 'normal' Jews in their daily lives. This appears to be a successful approach: students do not shy away from taboo subjects and religious authorities are increasingly open to joining the debate on difficult issues. As in the case of a film by a student about his coming out as a homosexual. His classmates were the first people he had the courage to tell. The school helped him with the script and the production and organised a special preview for a group of rabbis. This approach has proved so successful that Ma'aleh can show the film around the world without any reservations. Ariel: "The pluralism we advocate is visible to the outside world and not something that only exists inside the walls of the school. Naturally what the press picks up on most is the orthodox aspect."

Talking back through art

Seen alongside the small and big questions that Kretakör and Ma'aleh try and face up to, the activities of the Contemporary Arts Centre (CAC) in Vilnius seem more like a light-hearted artistic comment on Lithuanian society, experimentation and the establishment. Instead of talking in terms of 'communally experienced solutions' or how macro problems make

themselves felt on a micro level, assistant director Evaldas Stankevicius speaks about the way in which an organisation can talk back in an environment in which the independent arts have very limited means at their disposal. The exhibitions, debates, lectures and concerts attract an audience of around 100,000 people annually, a little less last year because 'As a result of the harsh economic times art is one of the last things people are thinking about'.

Anything goes in contemporary art

Stankevicius gives us a tour of the CAC using images from exhibitions. With its 2,000 square metres of exhibition space in a building designed to house modern art, including a Fluxus collection, there literally is space for a range of different activities. It served as the location for the first ever cricket match to be held in Lithuania (an artist who had lived in England for a while thought it would be amusing to introduce the sport in Lithuania), a temporary collection point for cars dumped in the West, and is functioning as an artistic haven for artists from Belarus. The public has reacted to all this with enthusiasm, it seems; even a cannabis farm of considerable proportions failed to meet with a negative response. "It is only with the former 'state-sanctioned' artists from the Soviet period that we have a rather tense relationship. In addition, there are always some people who feel we are too international in our orientation. Others don't like us for the simple reason that they hate contemporary art", is Stankevicius laconic answer to the question who is less enthusiastic about CAC's activities in Vilnius.

Uniting different dimensions

The very different organisations in this last instalment of *Changing Europe, Changing Arts* each illuminate a different dimension of the relationship between the artist, the public and society. The places also show us different variants upon the figure of the artist. This instalment shows how amateurs, prospective makers and authoritative professionals operate. In Vilnius, Stankevicius trusts his curators to keep their eyes and ears open to survey what is going on in society and the arts. In their programmes they try and offer some resistance to the agendas of politicians and megalomaniac project developers. Kretakör and Ma'aleh also try and offer resistance to the mighty forces and set opinions in their countries. The former does this by handing the role of maker to the public and thereby giving them the opportunity to reflect on situations. Ma'aleh trains makers and encourages them above all not to be afraid. In each case, these activities lead to discussions, thereby creating space for reflection and for alternative choices. Managing these processes in a successful way is an art which, apart from these three, the rest of the organisations that featured in the *Changing Europe, Changing Arts* are also every adept at.