

# Expanding from the centre

## Music theatre in Flanders in 2015

WANNES GYSELINCK

*Sometimes a metaphor fails because reality is too complex. Or moves about too much. Are we even able to present music theatre in Flanders as a landscape? It would then be one in which a tropical jungle borders a polar landscape and polders, where boundary markers never remain in the same place for long. Change of metaphor: music theatre as a house. But one in a permanent state of renovation. Walls are knocked down while elsewhere new annexes are built onto the older. While 'music theatre' is proudly chiselled in the façade, the rear annex is being dismantled, the garden is being subdivided and the gazebo appears to have more visitors than the comfortably furnished front room.*

*The floor plan, however, is clear enough. There is opera, and there are musicals. That which doesn't fit into these categories, we call music theatre. This landscape sketch will focus especially on the latter. Since Flemish cultural policy explicitly targeted the development of music theatre in the early 1990s, a rich and flourishing segment has been created. We will give an overview of the major players active today, the historical developments of recent decades and current trends. The result is a dynamic picture. Because while taken separately, music and theatre each cover a wide spectrum of manifestations, the number of possible areas where sound and theatre overlap within the remarkable subset 'music theatre' is increasing. We are seeing more and more new attempts to connect the two poles of 'music' and 'theatre', in the hope that sparks will fly. This sketch will show the diversity of the landscape, but also provide insight into this permanent state of flux and change.*

### 1. (anti-) Definitions

#### The policy framework for music theatre

One thing is certain: Flemish music theatre is thriving. There is international wonderment at the amount and idiosyncratic nature of the productions coming from such a small region. This success – quantitative, qualitative as well as with respect to diversity – is closely related to broader evolutions in the Flemish performing arts of the past thirty years, and the way in which this has been supported by arts policy. The performing arts underwent radical changes in the 1980s and 1990s. A new generation of internationally acclaimed makers were eagerly bending the artistic rules, and succeeded in setting up new structures within which they could create and present their work.

Flemish cultural policy jumped on the bandwagon. In 1993, the Performing Arts Decree – successor to the Theatre Decree (1975) – came into force. For the first time organisations could apply for project or structural funding specifically for music theatre. A Music Decree followed in 1999 that gave structural support to ensembles and made possible the commissioning of compositions. In 2006,

the Performing Arts Decree and the Music Decree were integrated into the Arts Decree: a single policy framework for all artistic disciplines (except literature and film). Music theatre remains a subsidy category within the new decree.

In this way, the policy created a framework that strengthened the positive dynamics present in the arts since the 1980s. It made possible a growth scenario for a number of initiatives that combined drama and music in a new way. A number of initiatives that emerged in the 1980s such as LOD, WALPURGIS and Muziektheater Transparant were already recognised as a music theatre structure in 1993. With only small subsidies in the beginning, they managed to grow into the solid structures that they are today. Since then, other companies and producers have found their way into this system of multi-year subsidies.

Subsidies within the Arts Decree are granted structurally (two or four year subsidies) or on a project basis. The two largest structural players are **LOD muziektheater** and **Muziektheater Transparant**. Both operate as a platform and production company for directors and composers. Together with LOD and Transparant, **WALPURGIS** is among the organisations funded for the longest time, but it occupies a middle position between the ‘big players’ and the smaller organisations. While these three organisations produce very diverse works, all three are related to opera. Thus they most closely resemble the ‘historical music theatre’ of the 1960s. Leuven-based **het nieuwstedelijk** – the merger of **Braakland/ZheBilding** (BZB) with theatre company **De Queeste** – is a new structure since 2015. BZB was created at the end of the 1990s and makes music theatre based on an ensemble, as is more common in theatre. Musically, its starting point is rather rock, alternative pop idioms, jazz and improvised music.

Several smaller structures focus on a – sometimes very – young audience. **Zonzo Compagnie** with its BIG BANG festival and multimedia productions has a strong international presence, **Theater De Spiegel** makes experiential music theatre for toddlers, **Pantalone** presents children’s theatre to a slightly broader audience, **DE KOLONIE<sup>MT</sup>** in turn makes music theatre for children and adolescents as well as adults. Very recently, **Tuning People**, which previously worked with project subsidies, was awarded two-year operating subsidies. Until 2014, **Compagnie KaiET!** also received operating funds and distinguished itself as the anarchist brother of the family with its pieced-together music theatre on location. The company around Geert Hautekiet evolved into project-based subsidies.

**Judas Theaterproducties** is the only musical company in Flanders to receive structural subsidies. And finally, **Alden Biesen Zomeropera** received structural funds in the previous four-year round.

Today, there are eleven organisations recognised as music theatre structure. In the last five years, 44 organisations and 10 artists received subsidies for music theatre projects. And these organisations are not the only ones in Flanders making music theatre. There are also many structures in other disciplines supported by the Arts Decree – some occasional, others regular – that experiment with (live) music and theatre. This has been the case for some time for theatre companies like **Ensemble Leporello**, **Zuidpool** or **Troubleyn**, the structure behind the performing arts work of **Jan Fabre**. Music also plays an important role in the work of prominent Flemish choreographers such as **Alain Platel**, **Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui**, **Wim Vandekeybus** and **Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker**, even though policy supports them as dance structures. The proportion of live music is increasing in all genres of the performing arts. Artists appear to have blown apart from the inside any approach to the performing arts involving neat categories. Productions by companies such as **Needcompany** morph into concerts, a concert becomes a drama (*The Broken Circle Breakdown featuring the Cover-Ups of Alabama* by **Cie Cecilia**), and concerts are given a theatre touch (*The Great Downhill Journey of Little Tommy* – long English titles appear to be characteristic of the genre). Installation art meets scenography and instrument building in performances by **Tuning People** and **Hans Beckers**, soundscapes silence the actor in the wordless productions of **Abattoir Fermé**, **Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker** has singers dancing and dancers singing (Cesena, 2011). And recently musical ensembles such as **Zwerm** and **Nadar** have found their way to the music theatre funding system with scenically interesting and dramaturgically elaborate forms of presenting (contemporary) music.

In short, while the policy framework may well create order in this permanently shifting music theatre landscape, it by no means tells the whole story. This landscape sketch also aims to examine

new fusions located beyond 'explicit' music theatre: music and theatre, audio art and stage, sound art and narration – and all possible combinations of these. It is inevitable that the fringes of the genre will be discussed. Traditionally music theatre is a 'centrifugal' genre: innovation takes place at the periphery, moving away from the centre.

## Tradition and innovation

Independent of the policy framework, those wishing to define what does or does not belong to the genre music theatre, are on dangerous ground. You can approach the need for a definition of music theatre in two ways. Either you place productions on a sliding scale, closer or further from the centre of 'prototypical' music theatre, as this developed historically alongside opera and musicals. Or you take a more phenomenological approach: instead of searching for essences, required characteristics or unchanging features, you examine how the label is used. Who has appropriated it, and for what reasons? The first is a more strict definition; the second is much broader: an umbrella definition that also can include opera, musical, cabaret, chanson, theatre with music, and, of course music theatre.

Both definitions have advantages and disadvantages. The advantage of the broad, inclusive interpretation is at the same time its greatest disadvantage: it covers everything, so it remains difficult to draw boundaries. The narrower definition also entails dangers. Rather than a negation, it contains a clear criterion: innovation. If there is something that seems to define music theatre in the narrow sense, it is the fact that it is constantly reinventing itself as a medium. *Must* reinvent itself, even: innovation is also an important criterion for assessment committees when evaluating dossiers. In short: our narrow definition is (implicitly) normative. We measure work based on its relationship to a certain ideal type of music theatre.

This requirement for innovation is also ingrained in the history of the genre that emerged under that name in the 1960s. Artists called what they made 'music theatre' explicitly to distinguish it from opera: music theatre as a more democratic, collective, anti-institutional, innovative and/or small-scale art form. Where bourgeois opera had fossilised into conventions, music theatre could be revolutionary and subversive. This innovation came from various quarters, but we can largely credit it to composers such as Mauricio Kagel, Luigi Nono, Georges Aperghis, Philip Glass and Karel Goeyvaerts. But the compositions of John Cage also result in performances as often as they result in music. Also in Flanders we see in the late 1980s and early 1990s how **LOD**, **Muziektheater Transparant** and **WALPURGIS** chose to work on a smaller scale in the margins of opera, and focus on contemporary composers and theatre makers who often operated outside the canon. They freshened up the landscape with new creations and radical reworkings of the operatic repertoire.

Dismissing opera as a 'calcified' and over-conventional genre must of course be seen more as a strategy for self-determination than an accurate assessment of the actual developments within this centuries-old genre. Since the 1980s, opera too has begun to drastically question and renew itself. In Belgium this happened under the impetus of Gerard Mortier, first in the De Munt/La Monnaie, then in the Flemish Opera. Mortier wanted to allow the opera genre to connect with innovative trends in theatre, by 'transforming opera into theatre'. In the Netherlands, the Dutch opera went so far in its struggle for self-renewal that it named its new theatre 'The music theatre' (renamed in the meantime to 'National Opera & Ballet': this too is a sign of the times). With these developments, opera partially succeeded in moving away from the dusty performance traditions of the past that music theatre had reacted against decades previously. This evolution resulted in a fading of the former sharp distinction between music theatre and opera. This was reinforced by the frequent co-productions between the Flemish Opera and music theatre houses, such as *Koningin van de Nacht* with Muziektheater Transparant. De Munt/La Monnaie and the Flemish Opera called upon many theatre directors such as Ivo van Hove, Johan Simons, Guy Cassiers and Stef Lernous.

Even now it seems that music theatre must continue to fight for its revolutionary roots against its 'calcified' great aunt 'opera'. It must repeatedly reinvent itself in order to avoid it too calcifying. The essential questions must be asked again and again: why music, why drama? Why sing the words and not say them? Why put actors on stage, and not singers? Why acting and scenography, and not a concert performance? These questions go to the heart of the drama of each music theatre production.

Asking – and answering – them usually means stripping conventions of their obviousness. They again are deliberately given a dramaturgical function.

Thus, the strict definition of music theatre indeed has heuristic value for a landscape overview. It brings work into view that does not explicitly label itself as ‘music theatre’, but at the same time does what we expect of music theatre: always making new, unexpected connections between theatre and music in order to renew a genre.

## 2. A landscape in motion

### Shifting centres

Music theatre historically has always positioned itself with respect to its ‘dusty’ great-aunt, opera. After a nearly twenty-five year history, during which music theatre was put on the map as a sector, the situation now is structurally different. Opera is no longer the only centrepiece. Not only have opera and music theatre converged artistically, the situation is also not the same institutionally. The larger music theatre houses – Muziektheater Transparant and LOD *muziektheater*, but also WALPURGIS and Braakland/ZheBilding – have themselves become central players in the landscape. Today they play a central role in the field through co-productions, laboratories and talent development initiatives. They challenge a continuously growing pool of artists to explore on their own possible meaningful relationships between music and theatre. By making their structure available to young makers and sharing their expertise with them, they succeed in organising a fruitful periphery.

LOD, Transparant and WALPURGIS have existed in their present form for more than a quarter century. At first sight, there are strong similarities in operations and ambition, particularly between LOD and Transparant. That in itself is not surprising nor problematic – in the theatre world there are also companies with very similar aesthetics. In addition, a mild form of rivalry protects a company from flying on autopilot. At the same time, both structures are clearly complementary. The differences are related to the different histories and the different growth paths of LOD and Transparant, even though these paths have crossed one another regularly over the past decade. A good decade ago the situation was very clear: LOD focused on new music theatre designed around and based on a few house artists. Transparant, for its part, presented contemporary versions of the existing repertoire. Due to the steady growth of both houses, a contact zone emerged whose artistic potential was largely realised thanks to intensive dialogue. Thus, for example, Josse De Pauw, from the LOD stable, was able to realise a production like *RUHE* at Transparant. This was based on artistic grounds: he wished to work with existing Lieder by Schubert instead of with newly composed music.

**LOD muziektheater** – once the abbreviation for ‘Lunch On Thursday’ – grew from a small production company to the largest player, alongside Transparant. LOD is the base of operations for directors Josse De Pauw, Inne Goris and two generations of composers: Kris Defoort, Jan Kuijken and Dominique Pauwels, and younger composers Thomas Smetryns, Daan Janssens and Vasco Mendonça. The production company opts for long-term trajectories with these artists, supporting them in developing an oeuvre and their own artistic language. In this, it seeks a balance between continuity and diversity, for example by regularly taking on productions with artists outside the regular pool, with names like Pieter De Buysser (*The incredible changes of Mister Afzal (we won't mention his glass leg)* with music by Thomas Smetryns), Patrick Corillon (*The Devil Bedeviled*, with Thomas Smetryns; *The Blind*, the first chamber opera by Daan Janssens) and François Sarhan.

The activities of LOD fall roughly into four domains, each based on the specific artistic projects of its house artists. Josse De Pauw has developed a quite unconventional musical theatrical oeuvre at LOD. With *The Soul of the Ant* (2004), a first collaboration between Josse De Pauw and Jan Kuijken (text by David Van Reybrouck), De Pauw continued along the path he started earlier with Peter Vermeersch (*The Soluble Fish*, 1994, WALPURGIS), *WEG* (1998, Kaaitheater) and *Larf* (2000, Victoria). In the hands of Josse De Pauw, music theatre becomes a jam session between actor and musicians. The rhythm of the text finds a backbeat in that of the music. The work by Josse De Pauw at LOD at the same time includes larger, highly stylised auditorium productions (among others *De Gehangenen en Huis*, both with Jan Kuijken), but also smaller scale, internationally touring and

highly successful performances such as *The Soul of the Ant* (2004) and *An Old Monk* (2012) together with the Kris Defoort Trio.

A second major project within LOD is the development of contemporary, new medium-scale operas. The path taken by Kris Defoort, jazz pianist as well as composer, gradually led him to the opera genre. For Defoort, in 2001 this culminated in the production *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* (directed by Guy Cassiers). It has become a benchmark in contemporary music theatre thanks to Defoort's intelligent linking of jazz and contemporary music, and seamless reconciliation of musical drive, dramatic narration and typographical visuals. In 2018, Kris Defoort will present his third opera, *The Time of our Singing* (based on the novel by Richard Powers), directed by Ivo van Hove.

The young composer Daan Janssens is also fully engaged in developing innovative commemorations of the opera genre. He did this for the first time with *Les Aveugles* (based on Maeterlinck, together with Liege artist Patrick Corillon). He will base a second opera on *Menuet* by Louis Paul Boon. LOD consistently tries to facilitate a dialogue between composers and directors, to ensure a strong dramaturgical entwining of composition and direction concept. Thus for example, together with young Walloon director Fabrice Murgia, Dominique Pauwels created the first two parts of the diptych *Ghost Road* (2012) and *Children of Nowhere* (2015), which can best be described as documentary music theatre.

In addition to her theatre work, director Inne Goris is developing an idiosyncratic music theatre oeuvre that targets a younger audience but is also able to charm adults. Thus she has made productions such as *Long Grass* (2012) with music by Dominique Pauwels, an installation in which scenography and music were intimately intertwined to present a theme like child soldiers in a manner suitable to children, or *Snow* (2015), a performance for 4+ with music by Thomas Smetryns.

Finally, LOD is committed to talent development. On the one hand, LOD gives young composers like Daan Janssens and Thomas Smetryns the opportunity to seek their own artistic identity. But at European level it is also developing a highly interconnected network of young music theatre makers with diverse expertise. An important factor here is the role of LOD in the European network ENOA (European Network of Opera Academies), which organises workshops at European level for composers, opera directors, playwrights and technicians. Via this network, Thomas Smetryns, outside of LOD, created a first chamber opera *Triptych* with the British Opera Erratica, and young composer Frederick Neyrinck will also be able to develop music theatre projects. Using the same network, LOD was able to link the young Portuguese composer Vasco Mendonça to famed British director Katie Mitchell, known for her work for *Written on Skin* by George Benjamin. This same partnership resulted in the chamber opera *The House Taken Over* (2013). Meanwhile, a second chamber opera by Mendonça is in the pipeline, with a libretto by Dimitri Verhulst and based on the world of Hieronymus Bosch.

For several years, LOD has had an interesting infrastructural asset available to realise all of these dimensions of its work. Since 2008, LOD has been housed at the Bijloke site in Ghent, where – like dance company les ballets C de la B – it has access to a newly built rehearsal studio.

Where LOD gradually grew in the direction of opera, **Muziektheater Transparant** – formerly Chamber Opera Transparant – has a long tradition of small-scale operas. Transparant has existed in its current form as production company for contemporary music theatre since 1987. Roughly two lines can be discerned in the great diversity of Transparant productions. There are chamber operas that reinterpret and update the existing repertoire by confronting early music with contemporary imagery or a new text. In other cases, the music is given a thorough makeover. This adventurous approach to the existing repertoire highlights the difference with classical opera houses. Transparant can afford itself the freedom to rewrite Mozart's *Don Giovanni* for Hammond organ, bass and violin, as composer **Jan Van Outryve** did for the production *Opera Buffa* (2013, co-produced with youth theatre company Laika).

In the last fifteen years, Muziektheater Transparant has also increasingly focused on developing contemporary operas and music theatre. It has invited composers and directors into its company to experiment with the genre. Transparant has mainly worked with composers in recent years. There have been regular collaborations with composer **Wim Henderickx** (among others *Triumph of Spirit over Matter*, 2000, directed by Johan Simons), theatre maker **Josse De Pauw** (*RUHE, Over the Mountains and Escorial*), **Claron McFadden** and **Wouter Van Looy**. Young

composer **Annelies Van Parys** has also been given opportunities to develop her own musical theatrical language. After smaller-scale work such as writing a contemporary coda for *RUHE*, and her rewriting of Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* for chamber orchestra (2012, directed by Wouter Van Looy), she will be presenting her first full opera on stage in 2015. *Private View* (directed by Paul Creed, libretto based on a scenario by Gaea Schoeters, 2015) received the first Fedora-Rolf Liebermann Prize for Opera – an incentive prize for ‘pioneering work of young makers’ – already a few months before its première. *There is no why here* (2015) in turn is multimedia music theatre directed by Wouter Van Looy, with music by Italian Andrea Molino and voice artist David Moss.

Muziektheater Transparant aims to be more than a house in which artists can grow. It also wants to be a crossroads of international networks that results in a large number of co-productions spanning the breadth of the music theatre spectrum. In the past, for example, Transparant has co-produced *Roman Tragedies* (2007) by Toneelgroep Amsterdam, directed by Ivo van Hove and with music by Bl!ndman (Eric Sleichim). In 2015, it will be co-producing *Winterreise* (with among others the Ensemble Intercontemporain, directed by Johan Simons). Muziektheater Transparant regularly works with European Capitals of Culture (Mons, Lille, Pilsen, Wrocław) and major festivals such as the Edinburgh International Festival, Wiener Festwochen, Holland Festival and the Sydney Festival, and with partners such as the Bergen National Opera, Le Grand Théâtre de Luxembourg, Deutsche Oper Berlin.... The fact that artistic director Guy Coolen also leads Rotterdam Opera Days is an undeniable asset in developing international partnerships.

In the co-production *Van Den Vos* (2014, directed by FC Bergman, a co-production with Toneelhuis), originally conceived as an opera, **Liesa Van der Aa** is pivotal artist and composer of theatre music. With the ambitious concert performance *The Weighing of the Heart*, this versatile artist is also working independently on her own musical theatrical form, again in co-production with Transparant and (among others) her own structure (**Louisa's Daughter**).

Alongside Nicolas Achten, Liesa Van der Aa plays an accompanying role in Transparant's youth activities. In addition to the annual summer internships for young singers age 15 to 25 years, young singers are given the opportunity to create a chamber opera under professional guidance. These youth activities – both the internships and the youth operas – are an interesting breeding ground for vocal talent in Flanders. Between 2001 and 2011, Transparant was also the driving force behind the Institute for Living Voice. Under the artistic leadership of David Moss, intensive working and presentation sessions were offered to singers with an interest in exploring the limits of the human voice. Transparant hopes to add a sequel to this in the form of a European ensemble for young vocalists.

Since 2011, Transparant – together with Laika and De Roovers – has been housed in a new site in Borgerhout (Antwerp): Matterhorn. This has given Transparant the opportunity to open its doors as multimedia studio, as growth place for Transparant's youth activities.

**WALPURGIS** is built around the artistic personality of soprano and director Judith Vindevogel. She is artistic and creative hub of the productions of WALPURGIS as well as artistic mediator, in particular by coaching artists via residencies. WALPURGIS started in 1987 as a small structure formed around a single artist, evolved between 1989 and 1999 into a production company, and has been functioning as an ensemble since 1999. Despite declining subsidies, the company has managed to retain the three pillars of its activities: the production of its own work, setting up co-productions, and the development of a music theatre laboratory through residencies.

WALPURGIS continues to make quality, adventurous and diverse music theatre productions, most recently with the psychological thriller *The Medium, Reconstruction of a Murder* (2014). Guy Van Nueten wrote new material inspired by the contemporary chamber opera by Gian Carlo Menotti, and rearranged the original music.

Most of the productions in the WALPURGIS repertoire are collaborations with artistically related houses. With HETPALEIS, WALPURGIS presented the fairy tale opera *Princesse Turandot* (2011, 4+), which won the public choice prize during the 2014 edition of the Young Audiences Music Award. For this narrated and sung Persian story, multi-instrumentalist Rudi Genbrugge arranged arias from the classical operatic repertoire for an unusual, minimum orchestration. The partnership with HETPALEIS continues in 2015 with the fairy tale opera *Fidelio*. For *Café Bohème* (2013, text Elvis Peeters), a winter café drama on location about growing poverty in Europe and the role of the

artist in society, WALPURGIS worked with Tutti Fratelli, the socio-artistic company around Reinhilde Declair. The civic engagement of WALPURGIS can also be seen in a production such as *HAVEN 010* [Port 010], a collaboration with asylum seekers. It aims to make music theatre accessible to people who have less access to culture and it does this by working with various non-artistic partners, for example the Flemish Network Against Poverty.

In addition to (co)-productions, WALPURGIS also hosts budding and more established artists from Flanders and elsewhere who wish to experiment with music theatre in the broadest sense. The career of Eurudike De Beul (also a member of dance company Peeping Tom) evolved from a residency (2008-2010) to a sustainable artistic collaboration in several productions, including the already mentioned *The Medium*.

With deFENIKS, home and workplace of the company, WALPURGIS fulfils an important function as a music theatre laboratory and residence for young makers. Each year, young artists from Belgium and abroad spend several weeks in residence experimenting with music and theatre. They demonstrate and test the results during the summer FENIKS festival. The annual, improvised libretto readings with live music and actors are now in their tenth year.

Since 2015, *het nieuwstedelijk* is a new company working on the geographical axis Leuven-Genk-Hasselt around writer-directors Stijn Devillé, Adriaan Van Aken, director Christophe Aussems and dramatist Els Theunis. It is the continuation of **Braakland/ZheBilding** (BZB), which very recently announced its merger with theatre company **De Queeste**.

Since 1999, BZB blew a fresh wind through the music theatre landscape in Flanders. Its cross-fertilisation of text and music is close to the musical theatrical form also being explored by Josse De Pauw, but it conducts this exploration within a collective of makers. Writers, actors and musicians create the production together. In their ‘theatre for the ear’ they take on themes close to their hearts and those of the audience, in search of the focal point where the person of the maker, the times we live in, and the form of the artwork come together. Thus for example the triptych *Hebzucht, Angst and Hoop* (already a co-production with De Queeste, with music by Bert Hornikx & Geert Waegeman) dissects the dynamics that led to the financial crisis, and how this crisis has left its mark on our soul.

BZB usually starts from an original text whose rhythms and musical montage provide the pulse for the music. The music gives rhythm to the production and makes subtexts audible without becoming explicit. BZB calls it *Urban Chamber Music*: a ‘contemporary, non-traditional, alternative cross-over’. Geert Waegeman, Gerrit Valckenaers and Youri Van Uffelen are regular suppliers of sound. Self-built instruments regularly define the scenography of the performance.

BZB is able to combine strong text theatre with music that is always more than just a soundtrack. Its productions balance between classical theatre and a frontal, almost concertante performance of the text. This gives free play to the musicality of the text. Both *Lied* (2006, Kris Cuppens) and the major production *Hitler is dood* (2009, Stijn Devillé) received the *Taalunie Toneelschrijfprijs*, an award for an original play in Dutch.

In recent years, BZB has broadened its public outreach to youth and children through co-productions. *Wagon* is a collaboration with Zonzo Compagnie (see below). *Aan tafel!* (with the Antwerp youth theatre HETPALEIS) is an improvisational performance, with the two musicians at the table improvising based on ideas presented to them by the children.

## Music theatre for a young(er) audience

Music theatre for children and youth has developed considerably over the last fifteen years. Today there are many organisations and projects that have made this their trademark. With the OORSMEER festival, Wouter Van Looy has been implementing his vision of music theatre and musical experience for children and youth since 1995. This resulted in the independent production company **Zonzo Compagnie**, founded in 2001 as an organisational base for OORSMEER. OORSMEER has grown into the internationally active children’s music festival BIG BANG that plays in nine European cities and in 2016 will also open its doors in Sao Paolo. This international reach at the same time creates a nice platform to present Zonzo’s own productions on an international circuit.

Zonzo Compagnie has been producing adventurous, multimedia music theatre for a younger audience since 2010. Three lines can be distinguished in this. The first line comprises a series of composer portraits or homages. The successful production *Listen to the Silence* (2011, 6+) shows how the childlike wonder of composer-inventor John Cage can effortlessly excite the imagination of a young audience. An extensive international tour followed, as did the Young Audiences Music Award 2012 and the YEAH! award for the best European performance of the year. Zonzo developed the musical portrait *Mile(s)tones* around Miles Davis, featuring jazz pianist Fulco Ottervanger (De Beren Gieren) and theatre maker/trumpeter Bert Bernaerts. A tribute to Luciano Berio is in the pipeline.

A second type of production is constructed as a song cycle or 'visual concert' with live music and video footage by young video artist Nathalie Teirlinck. This resulted in *Staring Girl* (2011), with music by Jan Van Outryve. *Slumberland* (2015) translates the world of dreams into images and sound with musicians Fulco Ottervanger and An Pierlé.

Finally, Zonzo also gives tinkerers/musicians free reign on stage. Audio handymen Nicolas Rombouts and Joris Caluwaerts built the musical installation/productions *Wagon* and *Station* (co-produced with Braakland/ZheBilding).

**Pantalone** is the company around composer Filip Bral. It quickly put itself on the (international) map thanks to the success of the narrative concert and book *Luna van de boom* [Luna from the tree], a musical fairy tale written by Bart Moeyaert. The book with accompanying CD won the *Gouden Uil*, one of the most important literary prizes of the lowlands. The music also received awards. The production provided a kick-start for this fledgling company, which immediately attracted international attention.

Theatre for the very young necessarily uses dramaturgy and suspense in a different way. *Karussell* (2+) is associative and colourful theatre for toddlers, on a rotating platform and with techniques borrowed from puppet theatre. Bral's music is danceable, attractive and refined. *Gelukkig Genoeg* (5+) in turn is built around the classical repertoire: *Kinderszenen* by Robert Schumann. Productions such as *Pantoffeltrein* (2.5+) and *Pommeliere* (2.5+) tickle all the senses of their youthful audience, including smell and taste.

**Theater De Spiegel** limits its target group to toddlers 0 to 3 years of age. This company around puppeteer, director and set designer Karel Van Ransbeeck creates experiential environments rather than productions. Children are given the opportunity to give voice to the theatrical world and interact with the performers, for example in *Caban* (2012). Such a musical environment is set up as an artistic playroom with a number of child-sized architectural structures. From the experience with this interactive installation grew the music theatre production *Nest* (2013) for babies six months and older. A singer and a violinist call out wordlessly: singing and playing, musically and expressively, the world of birds. For *Meneer Papier en Don Karton* (2014) the company based itself on the picture books of Elvis Peeters and Gerda Dendooven. *Sleevez* (2015) is a dance theatre production in which an oud and an alphorn stimulate the child's imagination. Since 2008, Theater De Spiegel together with Musica – the impulse centre for music – has been organising a biennial music theatre festival for toddlers, Babelut, at provincial domain Dommelhof in Limburg.

Throughout the school year, both Pantalone and Theater De Spiegel present an impressively full programme, often school performances. Moreover, productions are often presented for years.

**DE KOLONIE<sup>MT</sup>** targets children, youth and adults. In recent years, musician Bo Spaenc, the company's central figure, has succeeded in attracting interesting young players and makers. Thus in recent years Benjamin Van Tourhout (Tg Nunc) directed the children's show *ScattiWhatti* (2013), in which Simon D'Huyvetter and Nele Van den Broeck *scat* their way through the world of jazz. *Hertehart* followed in 2015, also directed by Van Tourhout, a 'kitschy mini-opera for toddlers'. In *Miranda van frituur Miranda* (2014), based on a novel by Erik Vlaminck, Marijke Pinoy plays the title character. The piece is directed by Dominique Van Malder (Cie Cecilia, Orka...).

Bo Spaenc and Peter De Graef have a long working relationship. With *Zoals de dingen gaan* [As things go] (2009), *Stanley* (2011), *Begin* (based on the Epic of Gilgamesh), and *Rudy* (2014), DE KOLONIE<sup>MT</sup> presented four excellent monologues with Peter De Graef as artist in residence. Rich narrative theatre carried by music, which for good reason won the Flemish Culture Prize for Stage Literature 2010 and was nominated for the *Taalunie Toneelschrijfprijs* 2012. Bo Spaenc supports the



tension of the narrative with a minimum of musical resources. The music gives momentum to the text and makes the emotional undercurrent of the words palpable, without being illustrative.

**Tuning People** is the outsider of the group, and intentionally so. This young makers collective evolved from project subsidies, supplemented by music theatre development subsidies (for stage designer-sound artist Wannas Deneer) in 2014, to a structurally subsidised company. Founded by choreographer Karolien Verlinden, Wannas Deneer and theatre maker Jef Van Gestel, Tuning People makes productions that cannot easily be placed in the already obscure category of music theatre. In its case, sound theatre is the better description. In *dUb*, Verlinden and Deneer, under the wings of *FABULEUS*, created a 'mass choreography' for fourteen young dancers. What happens to our perception of movement when sound effects are added? Our imagination then goes to work: the movements transcend their true proportions.

In the children's production *Tape voor Kleuters* (2011, final direction Randy De Vlieghe), the trio tinkers together a world (of sound) with tape and cardboard. The decor is stuck together, the diverse sound possibilities of tape are stretched far beyond the boundaries of imagination. With their tape-wrapped muddy boots, actors violate the rules of children's theatre and treat their young audience to grotesque slapstick, grim jokes and Dadaist masquerades. *Utopia* (2012) is a scenographic concert under the direction of Wannas Deneer. Scenography, sound effects, makeshift instruments and sound design flow together seamlessly, or better: with rough welds. With *DaDaKaKa* (2015), a ferocious revue, they again go Dadaist with Randy De Vlieghe.

With its 'analogue', untechnical and rudely constructed approach, Tuning People occupies a unique position in the music theatre landscape. There are high hopes for *Ruis!* (2015), its first production for adults.

All of the above organisations are being supported structurally by the Arts Decree in 2015. Productions for children and youth are also an important segment within project subsidies, often linked to (modest) development subsidies for individual artists, with companies such as **Tg Schemering** (around Eric Vanthillo) **Rubus Productions** (*Grietje de Heks*, children's opera by Luc Frans and composer Filip Martens) and **Tal en Thee** (*Octavio's Elektro*, 2014, music/puppet theatre with Reineke Van Hooreweghe and Maarten Van Aerschot).

The larger children's companies also regularly work with artists who explore the music theatre genre on a project basis. We have already mentioned a number of co-productions of the Antwerp children's and youth theatre HETPALEIS. Villanella, the Antwerp art centre for youth, supported singer/theatre maker Mira Bertels with the production *Luchtfietsers* (2014), made in collaboration with Wannas Deneer and Anna Vercammen. At Kopergieterij (Ghent), Anna Vercammen contributed in 2013 to *Broken Dreams*, a music theatre production on location by Mambocito Mio and Johan De Smet. In 2015, she made *De Koningin is verdwenen* with actor-musician Joeri Cnaepelinckx.

Han Stubbe – multi-instrumentalist with DAAU – is active in music theatre in diverse formations and for very different audiences. Together with Yamina Takkatz, he is the driving force behind **De Sprookjesweverij**, best known for the production for youth *Lounja en de Tseriel* (2014, music by Geert Waegeman). However, Stubbe does not limit himself to making music theatre for children. Since 2013, together with Els Roobroeck, he has been part of the promising **Cie Covar**, which has been making exciting and innovative productions for three consecutive years. The duo gained fame with the experimental musical performance *Medea Redux* (2012). Stubbe made his first production under the Covar flag in 2013, with *Tot de stilte erop volgt* (2013). *Adult World* is planned for 2015, an adaptation of the experimental short story of the same name by David Foster Wallace.

## Musicals

Unlike music theatre, a genre that we defined by its tendency to escape categorisation, the musical is a well-defined genre with strict conventions. In 2015, only one company was awarded a structural subsidy. **Judas Theaterproducties** makes medium-sized musical productions especially for the Antwerp Fakkeltheater, with a growing presence in the Flemish cultural centres. In this, they maintain a balance between their own creations (scenario and/or music) such as *Pauline & Paulette* (2013, based on the film of the same name by Lieven Debrauwer), *Josephine B.*, *Schone Schijn* (2012) and

*Lelies* (2011), and their own interpretations of existing musicals like *Ganesha* and *Je Anne* (both from 2009).

With only one subsidised musical company in Flanders, the musical appears to be under-represented compared to its potential audience. Partly due to this potential audience, former culture ministers – first Bert Anciaux (sp.a), then Joke Schauvliege (CD&V) – made efforts to support the musical. Which instruments the Flemish government should use to do so has long been fodder for controversy.

In the 1990s, the Royal Ballet of Flanders – one of the great institutions of the Flemish Community – had a musical department. This was abolished in 2004 after a parliamentary debate, with a lack of artistic innovation being given as the main reason. Since then, policy has followed two paths. Initially, a number of commercial players were supported by policy instruments focused on creative industries (CultuurInvest).

Since 2009, the musical has also been a part of the Arts Decree. In 2010, Musical van Vlaanderen, the spin-off production branch of the commercial-style Music Hall Group led by Geert Allaert, received a working subsidy of 2.45 million euro, which entailed a doubling of the total budget for music theatre. Two years later, however, Musical van Vlaanderen lost its monster subsidy after a negative artistic and business evaluation, after which it switched to project subsidies. While project subsidies in essence are meant for talent stimulation or for projects with a lab function, MvV managed to rake in project subsidies for approximately 1 million euro for the production *Assepoester* [Cinderella] and a questionably run Musical Lab. By way of comparison: this is equivalent to the annual subsidy given the largest music theatre players LOD and Transparant.

In 2013, Allaert announced that he would be stepping aside as artistic director of Musical van Vlaanderen. Stany Crets entered the limelight as new head, after success with *Monty Python's Spamalot* and his direction of the Broadway hit *De Producers*. Officially, however, Allaert is still listed as artistic director, with Crets and Frank Van Laecke as artistic advisers.

The uncomfortable attitude cultural policy takes regarding the musical has to do with the middle position held by the musical between art and commerce. As an art form, the genre receives subsidies to make artistic innovation and diversification possible. On the other hand, Juffrouw M, the musical branch of commercial player Studio 100, managed to create the long-running success productions '14-'18 and *Daens*.

## Opera 2.0

During the above described process of institutionalisation of music theatre in Flanders, music theatre and opera have grown towards each other. Composers and directors no longer hesitate to also create productions with the label 'opera' in music theatre houses. What's more: it is the music theatre houses that by far produce the most new operas and give contemporary composers the opportunity to write a first opera, albeit on a smaller scale than in the Flemish Opera or De Munt/La Monnaie. The cooperation between the Flemish Opera and the two major music theatre houses regularly bears fruit in **Opera XXI**, the biennial festival of contemporary music theatre, in its fourth edition in 2015.

Opera is also made at project subsidy level. **The Ministry of Operatic Affairs** of conductor Bart Van Reyn (Octopus/Le Concert d'Anvers) and theatre maker Korneel Hamers (SKaGeN) succeed in presenting fresh stagings of operas from outside the traditional opera circuit such as *Don Giovanni* (2013) and Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice* (2015).

In the meantime, composer **Joris Blanckaert** has presented three chamber operas on stage from outside the traditional structures: the opera buffa *L'Algerino in Italia* (2010) based on a libretto by Dirk Opstaele (Ensemble Leporello) with drawings by Randall Casaer, *The Wandering Womb* (2013, an operatic monologue for Elise Caluwaerts in co-production with Muziekcentrum De Bijloke) and the 'dream opera' *Elle est moi und tôte mich* (2013, libretto Tom Hannes) that depicts the last seconds of the life of Romy Schneider in images and sounds. This production was originally written for the Flanders Operastudio, but in 2015 is making its way through the regular circuit via a co-production with the Mechelen arts centre NONA, directed by Ruud Gielens.

## ‘Staged’ music

In recent years, the project subsidies reflect a new trend at the fringes of music theatre. Musicians and ensembles increasingly are requesting resources for ‘staged concerts’. New ways are being sought in both alternative rock and contemporary music to capitalise on the inherent theatricality of making music in visual-theatrical performances. More and more ensembles and musicians are looking for scenographic forms and dramaturgical concepts to enhance the impact of a musical performance. This trend is also beginning to translate into new programming at venues such as deSingel or Muziekcentrum De Bijloke, which in 2014 launched the new series ‘muziek en scène’.

In addition to the already mentioned work by Liesa Van der Aa (*The Weighing of the Heart*, Transparant/Louisa’s Daughter, 2014), with *Henric* (2013), Elvis Peeters has added a ‘literary concert’ to his impressive music theatrical accomplishments (with music by Gerrit Valckenaers and Stevie Wishart).

In 2011, a collaboration led by **Dez Mona** (around Gregory Frateur and Nicolas Rombouts) and the ‘indie baroque collective’ **BOX** (around Pieter Theuns) resulted in the concert opera *SÁGA*. BOX continued along this path with the music theatre production *You Us We All* (2013, music by Shara Worden, text and direction by Andrew Ondrejcek).

Much is also happening in the world of contemporary music. The Brussels **Ictus Ensemble** plays a crucial role in the development of ever new concert forms that can increase the communicative impact of challenging contemporary music. They do so among other at happenings such as *Liquid Room*: an eclectic programme of contemporary music in a rock setting with four stages in one area. In addition, Ictus – like Spectra Ensemble – also plays an important role as coach of emerging talent (for example, Nadar Ensemble and ensemble Besides).

These new ensembles have found their way to the Arts Decree since 2012. Guitar quartet Zwerm and Nadar are creating ambitious presentation forms via project subsidies for music theatre. Zwerm did this in 2012 with *Park* in collaboration with choreographer Shila Anaraki (who also received a development subsidy for her research), and Belgian composer Stefan Prins (also co-founder of Nadar). With the Prins composition *Infiltrationen* as starting point, their exploration of the interaction between people, music and technology resulted in a production with maximum interaction of music, movement and text.

In 2015, Nadar created the multimedia production *Recht*. On an island in the Moselle – near Schengen, a symbolic place – thinkers, musicians and artists come together to create new laws and to make music. Documentary footage, music and theatre intertwine into a visual-acoustic composition. Concerts such as *Doppelgänger Deluxe* also search for situations in which to play that result not only in music but also in ‘playing’, – i.e. acting in the dramatic sense – often with a strong visual, theatrical component. The composition *Generation Kill* confronts the audience and performers with digital look-alikes of the musicians.

All this finds its place in international trends in contemporary music rooted in both the European tradition of *musique concrète* and the American, conceptual approach to music as reflected in the music of John Cage. Since the 1980s, composers such as Helmut Lachenmann have been composing music by writing down not so much the notes, but rather the movement patterns the musicians must execute: music as instrumental choreography. John Cage in turn approached music as a performance, governed by a set of rules devised by the composer. Thus he breaks down the boundaries between execution, improvisation and (theatrical) performance.

Younger composers such as Matthew Shlomowitz, François Sarhan, Johannes Kreidler and Stefan Prins – digital natives – are permeated with these traditions, which they continue by ‘plugging into’ recent technological developments such as the Internet or the sampling of sound and images. This attention to the interplay between image and music, the sampling of acoustic and visual ‘*objets trouvés*’ linked to compositional techniques taken from the musical avant-garde, and the great attention to the joining of music, movement, execution and performance guarantees a total approach to music. Live concerts automatically go in the direction of music theatre. Gradually this is being included in the subsidy system.

## New urbanisation, hybrid identities

Where artists and companies such as Nadar, Zwerm and Liesa Van der Aa in the meantime have found their way to the subsidising bodies, we see how a different musical periphery, one we can characterise as ‘urban music’, is gradually connecting with institutionalised theatre. These musicians and theatre makers often reflect the hyper-diverse reality of large cities. The Antwerp **SINCOLLECTIEF**, which includes in its ranks Junior Mthombeni, Ikram Aoulad and Fikry El Azzouzi among others, makes productions that are rooted in the fabric of the city. *H&G (Grimmiger)* (2011) links Grimm’s fairy tales with the plight of being uprooted and young in an urban jungle. In this, when dealing with language and music, he borrows from the rich hip-hop culture. *Rumble in da jungle* (2013) is a concert, a spoken-word performance and a boxing match all in one. For *Troost* (2013), SINCOLLECTIEF joined hands with NoMoBS, the hip-hop collective around Salahdine Ibnou Kacemi, Saïd ‘Eazy-Lo’ Boumazoughe, Mike De Ridder and Yahya ‘R8’ Affane. In the meantime these urban poets have created their first production, *Wachten op Gorro* (2014), also directed by Junior Mthombeni with text by Fikry El Azzouzi.

There are a number of initiatives present in the arts education and youth sectors that focus on urban art forms like hip-hop dance and slam poetry such as Urban Woorden (Leuven), Let’s Go Urban (Antwerp) and Yawar (Genk). It is hoped and expected that the talent that unfolds here will find its way to Flemish music theatre sooner rather than later.

Such issues are also catching on outside this urban context. From her nonprofit Dunia, Antwerp actress/theatre maker **Dahlia Pessemiers-Benamar** is making a series of productions that are strongly tied to the city and that treat themes such as multiculturalism and multiple cultural identities (*Secret Gardens* and *MozaIK*).

## Tinkering with sound

Finally, there is a new trend that is based more on earlier installation art and (acoustic) bricolage. Young musician/sculptor/inventor **Hans Beckers**, for example, won the TAZ Young Music Prize 2012 at the Summer Festival Theater aan Zee with his interactive sound installation *Sonare Machina*. In 2015, he is working on a sequel to TAZ with *Clangdelum Cinematographica*. Within the POST.TRAUM collective (around Maya Wuytack), Hans Beckers provided the live music for the interdisciplinary performance *Ademlozing* (2013).

**Wannes Deneer**, sound artist and scenographer at Tuning People, makes music installations and builds instruments with strong visual qualities, such as *Worm* (2009) and *Etudes* (2014). He does this under the aegis of Antwerp production house ChampdAction, around composer/inventor Serge Verstockt. **Serge Verstockt** is currently also working on his second ‘opéra de trash’. This musical travelling companion of Jan Fabre presented *Hold your Horses* in 2013. In visually captivating total experiences, he destroys the boundaries between digital and live, between trash and high art, between free improvisation and opera. He similarly explores love in times of digitisation in the production *HRZSCHMRZ*, again a co-production with the Klara Festival (2015). Troubadour Guido Belcanto shares the stage with classical, free jazz and pop musicians who sing the love of Pérotin, through Buddy Holly to Belgian new beat.

## Performing arts: a fusion of music, theatre and dance

From the 1980s until today, experiments that combine music and theatre have been taking place in varying degrees within the broader field of the performing arts. We roughly see three ways to deal with music in the context of contemporary theatre.

A first group of companies places (usually live) music at the heart of their dramaturgy. What they create does not differ substantially from what musical groups such as Braakland/ZheBilding or DE KOLONIE<sup>MT</sup> do. **Ensemble Leporello**, with productions such as *Minnevozen* (2010) and *The Final Party* (2013, based on the works of Chekhov with choral music by Kurt Bikkembergs), presents theatre

that, in its own words, occupies the middle ground between music, text, and dance theatre. Strongly influenced by French dramatist Jacques Lecoq, artistic director Dirk Opstaele seeks links with the ritual, musical roots of theatre. This is reflected in a thorough-going stylisation and musicalisation of narrated text.

**Theater Zuidpool**, which emphatically bases itself on text, paradoxically enough often reverts to music precisely to enhance the musicality of text narration and development. *Siberia* (2005) was ‘a theatrical concert’, a concept that was expanded for the production *Macbeth* (2012, with among others Mauro Pawlowski). And in *Empedokles* (2014), the original German text of Hölderlin is enhanced with the hypnotic guitar music of Bert Dockx. Zuidpool actor and musician Jorgen Cassier also contributed to the new production company **Volksopera** founded by conductor Stijn Saveniers, which aims to again provide a platform for *opéra comique* and debuted in 2015 with *Le Docteur Miracle* by Charles Lecocq.

A second group of companies makes theatre with live music, without the dramaturgy of the production being profoundly determined by the presence of music. Thus for example, **Compagnie Cecilia**, the company around Arne Sierens, regularly works with guitarist Jean-Yves Evrard (*Altijd Prijs* [Always a Winner] 2009, *Enso*, 2013), the series around Klein Jowanneke by **Martha!tentatief** was given a live soundtrack by Bart Voet and Tim Clement, **Tg Nunc** had *Het Geslacht Borgia* [The House of Borgia] accompanied by the music of Jan Van Outryve and Brent Vanneste (from the rock band Steak Number Eight), and in productions such as *Nerf* (2013), puppet theatre **Ultima Thule** works with baroque ensemble Zefiro Torna.

Then there is theatre that integrates music or a musical logic in a way that is neither pure accompaniment nor recognisably a part of music theatre as we know it. The productions of **Abattoir Fermé** invariably have a dark undercurrent of music and sound. The Mechelen company has a long-running artistic collaboration with musician/sound architect KRENG. A performance such as *Snuff* (2012) is so punctuated by music that it, as Lynchian techno act, fit perfectly on the alternative music stage at the Lowlands Festival. The baroque imagery of artistic director Stef Lernous appears to thrive within a stylised genre such as opera. In 2011, Lernous directed the new chamber opera *L’Intruse* (2011) for the Flemish Opera, and took on Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde* in 2014.

**Lucinda Ra** has in its ranks theatre maker Simon Allemeersch and jazz musicians Giovanni Barcella and Jeroen Van Herzeele. With *Het fantastische leven van de heilige Sint-Christoffel zoals samengevat in twaalf taferelen en drie liederen* (2012), Allemeersch together with Barbara and Stefanie Claes made a production he describes as ‘jazz theatre’.

The boundaries between dance, music and theatre are becoming increasingly blurred. For decades, much attention has been paid to musical and dramatic forms in the field of dance. The work of **Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker** can roughly be divided into two broad lines: in productions such as *Fase* and recently *Vortex Temporum*, she grafts her choreography very closely to the score of the musical processes of the music she uses. She usually opts here for live performances by the Ictus Ensemble. But she is also engaged in an ongoing exploration of the meeting points between text and dance. For several productions in the late 1990s, she worked with her sister, theatre maker Jolente De Keersmaeker (Tg STAN), in among others productions such as *I said I* and *In Real Time* (with live music by Aka Moon). Her exploration of the physicality of speaking and singing, or into the possibility of using singing and speaking as a starting point for choosing movement, resulted in recent years in productions such as *3Abschied* (based on Mahler), *Cesena* and *Golden Hours (As You Like It)* (based on Eno/Shakespeare).

For decades, artists such as **Alain Platel** and **Jan Fabre** have been making productions that play upon the theatricality of the dancing body. **Platel** in particular knows how to graft his dance theatre to surprising reworkings of the classical repertoire. Together with Fabrizio Cassol (Aka Moon), he has pursued a fascinating artistic trajectory that – again – begins with Gerard Mortier. He asked Platel to follow up *Iets op Bach* [Something on Bach] (1998) with ‘something on Mozart’. This resulted in the production *Wolf* (2003), with surprising rearrangements of Mozart’s music by Cassol. This momentum continued in *vsprs* (2006), this time based on Monteverdi’s *Vespers*. Also at the request of

Mortier, in Madrid Platel created the production *C(H)OEURS* (2013), an exploration of the intoxicating and threatening nature of groups, featuring the music of Verdi and Wagner.

Platel's les ballets C de la B has shown itself to be a breeding ground for talent. Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui worked as a choreographer with this company until 2006, and attracted considerable attention with his production *Foi* (2003). Meanwhile Cherkaoui with his own company **Eastman** has made strong symbolic productions that attract a large audience. Cherkaoui will lead the Ballet of Flanders from 2015.

**Jan Fabre** also launched new talent with his choreographies that border on performance. In the 1980s, Wim Vandekeybus danced in Fabre's *The Power of Theatrical Madness* (1985), and put himself on the map as a choreographer with the production *What the Body Does Not Remember* (1987). With his company *Ultima Vez*, he often creates productions in close cooperation with (rock) musicians such as Peter Vermeersch, Thierry De Mey, David Byrne, Marc Ribot, Eavesdropper and David Eugene Edwards.

### Socio-artistic music theatre

Interesting developments are also taking place in the socio-artistic field. The number of participatory art projects has steadily increased in the past fifteen to twenty years. These participatory processes allow non-professional artists to become involved in the production of arts. Socio-artistic work has been a grant category within the Arts Decree since 2006. A number of structures such as **Unie der Zorgelozen** or **bij' De Vieze Gasten** engage in multidisciplinary activities in the field of music and theatre. Especially in the case of **Tutti Fratelli**, this results in productions in which musical and dramatic forms are organically intertwined. In the 1970s, driving force Reinhilde Decler was associated with the socially engaged music theatre of the Internationale Nieuwe Scène. This company made international headlines at the time with an adaptation of Dario Fo's *Mistero Buffo*. This was music theatre 'avant la lettre': the developments in the socio-artistic field complete this circle.

## 3. Challenges for the future

The sustainable functioning of structures, a high level of mobility allowing makers to engage in ever new partnerships, a policy framework that imposes few substantive obligations and provides lots of space for initiatives in the field has resulted in recent years in a boom and exciting artistic developments. However, this is no guarantee for the future. In 2015, the current way of working – which has lately yielded fascinating results – is under increasing pressure.

### Present way of working under pressure

As the production companies grew, the productions also increased in scale and logistical complexity. Co-productions at home and abroad make it possible to also create large-scale productions that can compete with the grandness of opera. Before the financial crisis also began to trickle down to the international cultural sector, these large-scale productions could be financed by national and international co-productions and good international distribution, so much so that Flanders had two houses that were able to engage in similar work, without putting each other out of business.

This situation has begun to change noticeably since 2009. In several countries, the financial and economic crisis led to cuts in cultural subsidies, often at national *and* local level. Since then, negotiations are harder than ever concerning buyout fees and co-production contributions. These are decreasing on average, making it necessary for producers to involve more and more partners in order to meet their budgets. In addition, opportunities to present are becoming scarcer, making competition keen.

Venues are also under increasing pressure in Belgium. The opportunities to present performing arts productions are declining at the many cultural centres in Flanders, among others due

to cuts in local culture budgets. More often than in the past, programmers are being judged based on the figures, resulting in more conservative programming. This so-called ‘distribution problem’ is an issue for many theatre companies. The situation is even more acute for music theatre. Not only do cost and the high degree of experimentation play a role, but it also seems that not everyone finds ‘music theatre’ a compelling label. While genre boundaries may have become irrelevant to artists, for programmers – and by extension the public – such labelling is important to continuing to see the forest through the trees and to developing and offering programming strategies. A number of attempts by diverse houses to offer programmes in music theatre have now been withdrawn because they were ‘too comprehensive and too hybrid’.

This has consequences. Because there is much at stake financially and because some venues are taking fewer risks, the danger of ‘compromise productions’ is real. Especially in the case of larger-scale productions, logistical complexity can result in dramaturgical heaviness, reduced experimentation and greater conventionalisation.

Production houses are searching for answers to this changing situation. Some are – more deliberately than before – adapting their activities to each other, in order to avoid duplication. But new working models are also being tested. Thus, productions are travelling more efficiently and sustainably, for example by presenting and sometimes even re-creating productions at distant locations using local players and ensembles. To ensure the survival of grand music theatre for large auditoriums, the scale of productions is handled more judiciously. In consultation with the artists, the necessity of a large scale to address the artistic needs of the artist is being looked at more critically than in the past.

## A new Arts Decree

The key question is whether policy will be able to sustain the current boom with respect to both artistic content and organisation. During the preparation of this text, many players in the Flemish art scene were busy planning for the future. There is an important deadline in the autumn of 2015 for a new multi-year funding round of the Arts Decree. Thus it will be interesting to see the new directions and possibilities that artists and organisations are planning, to artistically grow in an organisational context that is under pressure financially.

This multi-year funding period is an interesting and important experiment in itself. For the first time, a thoroughly redesigned Arts Decree is being put into practice. The new decree contains a number of important innovations that are likely to have a major impact on developments within music theatre. Thus, for example, the organisational forms of the previous Arts Decree are disappearing. ‘Music theatre’ as a separate organisational form, an important innovation of the Performing Arts Decree in 1993, is again disappearing. It will be replaced by a more flexible approach: starting in 2017, all structures will be ‘arts organisations’ that can define their own artistic ‘DNA’ based on a combination of functions and disciplines. Applicants must indicate whether they play a role in the area of artistic development, production, presentation, participation and/or reflection. They can fulfil this role within five major clusters of disciplines: music, performing arts, visual and audiovisual art, architecture/design, and a miscellaneous transdisciplinary category. With an artistic practice that is hybrid by definition, music theatre makers can be placed in almost every discipline. ‘Music theatre’ after all is a subcategory of not one but two discipline clusters: ‘music’ and ‘the performing arts’. ‘Sound art’ in turn falls under ‘visual and audiovisual art’. And for those for whom these labels are irrelevant, there remains the miscellaneous transdisciplinary category.

The crucial question is what the impact will be of the amended assessment and decision-making procedure. The principle of permanent evaluation committees is being abandoned. The dossiers submitted will be assessed by evaluators chosen ad hoc from a large pool of experts. This can have major consequences for music theatre: will this new procedure allow the evaluators to see the big picture? How will this new method shift or eradicate the boundaries of the arts landscape? Will ‘music theatre’ still be recognisable as a separate field? Which artistic and political/strategic gains can be had?

## Betting on the future

The developments in artistic practice and cultural policy of the past decades have resulted in less clear boundaries between the traditional genres and disciplines. They have blended into constantly changing intermediate forms for which the term 'intermedia' is more appropriate than 'multimedia'. The performing arts have become 'transdisciplinary'. Due to its intrinsic hybridity, music theatre is closely associated with this increased transdisciplinarity.

The label 'music theatre' certainly has had its cultural/political significance within the context of the recent decades. Music theatre exists and is flourishing as a sector in Flanders, partly because there is a subsidy-giving assessment committee that recognises the genre under this name and supports groups that present themselves as music theatre. With the new Arts Decree there is a chance that the current field will fragment into different, ever-changing discipline clusters.

But there is more going on here. Some companies deliberately choose not to use the label 'music theatre'. This omission is revealing. Where this label was used historically to distinguish music theatre from an established genre, namely opera, these companies choose *not* to identify with music theatre as established genre. They are defending in this way their new-found identity in these transdisciplinary times. The paradox: they are doing exactly what the definition of music theatre – in the narrow sense of the genre – expects of them. Question themselves, reinvent themselves. In short: to continually expand from the centre.

*Wannes Gyselinck (1980) studied Latin and Greek literature, teaches at KASK/School of Arts, and works as a freelance writer and dramaturge.*