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Ladies and gentlemen!

I come from a country where - believe it or not - it has been possible that, shortly after the second world war, a serious debate has been held in parliament on the question whether ballet should or should not be included in the arts to be subventioned. The reason for this extraordinary debate was that a large part of our representatives thought of ballet, in all its supposed lusciousness, mainly as a direct invitation to a behaviour which they considered to be necessary for procreation, but absolutely unsuited for pleasure.

Well. Also in Holland, times change. The taboo on sex has been done with, at least to its greater extent, and the appearance of lambada on Dutch television has not in any noticeable way alarmed our members of parliament. But where one taboo disappears, people will readily find another. And it seems that one taboo which at present particularly hinders us to recognise true art as it presents itself, is the taboo on tradition.

When I, some time ago, applied for a job at the Amsterdam-based Folkloristic Dance Theatre, the president of the commission reviewed my professional past - recorder player, puppet-theatre official and then application at the Folkloristic Dance Theatre - and jestingly asked if it might be concluded from my career that I had a preference for the underdog-position. I think this question is highly significant. I.e., not particularly for the recorder. This instrument has, since its revival by people like Frans Brüggen and Hans-Martin Linde, quite proved its standards, and its position in renaissance, baroque and contemporary music is now unchallenged. Nor does folkloristic dance find itself in an underdog-position, I believe. But its situation is already different from the recorder's. Public interest in this kind of dance is substantial and seems to increase; besides, there is a large number of people who practise it as amateurs. And on the level of professional dance in general, folkloristic dance, though not exactly considered to be avant-garde, is seen as a potential source of idiom for modern dance. Its influence even seems to increase: where in classical and modern ballet folklore only had a rather limited and stylized back door to the stage in the

shape of what is called 'caractère', nowadays both settled choreographers and small experimental groups borrow from folklore much more freely. Not surprisingly so, as folkloristic dance, the ancestor of all other dance, is still capable of expressing many truths of life in a simple and often beautiful way, which contemporary artists, though in more sophisticated or experimental ways, also seek to express. But there is one level where folklore has difficulty to be accepted for what it is: that is the governmental, subvention-bestowing level. The story of how our ministry of culture recently dealt with the Folkloristic Dance Theatre is surprising and most interesting; unfortunately, it leads us to far astray for today's purpose.

Coming to the subject of puppetry, of puppet theatre, the subject, the passion, or - who knows - the object of hatred which has drawn all of us here together, the folklore man can hardly have realised how justified he was in using that word, underdog-position. I strongly believe that the practice, the appreciation and the supporting of what we call puppet theatre is seriously hampered by a gigantic and collective inferiority complex, not only of the artists in question, but also of people who, professionally, have something to do with this branch of theatre. People who occupy themselves with puppet theatre and who are proud to say: I am a puppeteer, are by far outnumbered by those who feel bad at ease, who think that as a puppetry man or woman they are not valued, not loved. Those people, instead of choosing another profession - which they should do - either complain of the fact that they are not understood, or - and that seems to be the modern way - they try to change the presentation of the art, the image of the art, or even the art itself. Not because they feel the inner need to do so: that would be most justifiable; but only to earn the love of others. The public, their colleagues, the puppet theatre institute, whoever.

What do we call our art? That already is a serious problem. Formerly it used to be known by everyone as puppetry, which covered a broad scope from sheer entertainment to highly refined theatre. In Holland it must have been about 1980 when people began to be annoyed by the connotation of folklore, of low-profile art. The more fashionable name puppet theatre was introduced, and accepted.

And why not. But you know what happens with fashion: it changes. By 1990, people discover to be still provoked by the toy-like word puppet, and what happens? They change the name again, presenting an impressive mix of alternately and inconsequently used names, like: object-theatre, Figurentheater, theatre with puppets, theatre with puppets and actors, théâtre du mouvement, plastic theatre, and so on. Everyone looks for his own truth - not in his art, as you would expect, but in its name. Result: the picture becomes blurred, and the outsider is left behind confused.

Ladies and gentlemen, why should we put the world upside down? Don't we all know that we don't change things by calling them differently? That, if we should bestow on ourselves the most magnificent and impressive titles in the world, we are not really more important? The whole discussion on the name, let's face it, is a farce. A waste of energy and creativity. The fight about the name is a fight against history. But - every historian can tell you - history cannot be beaten. Nor can it be ignored. And it should not be ignored either, if we want to live in a harmonious relationship with our art.

That this seems to be very difficult I would like to illustrate with two examples of puppet theatre companies I happen to know, that make both traditional and more modern productions. Both will be well-known to you: the Belgian (Flemish) Teater Taptoe, and Teatro del Drago from Italy.

Teater Taptoe, Flanders' biggest puppet theatre company, presents theatre with actors and puppets. Most of their performances are for children, and in Flanders they are considered as not really top of the bill but still providing theatre with a reliable and stable quality. It claims to be innovating, and, without entering into the question how far that is true, it is obvious that it does not make what you would call traditional performances. What few people know, however, is that Taptoe also makes quite different performances, called after the main character Pierke Pierlala. It is not traditional in its contents: the original Pierke was a children's show, whereas Pierke Pierlala is for adults and has as its only subject the current politics, especially the local politics of its home town Gent (a rich subject, I can assure you). But the

form and style are completely authentic. These performances are quite an experience, exciting, provocative, and even if you do not quite understand the dialect you feel that Theatre with capital letters is vibrating all over the place. The Gent population knows that it is always sold out, and is used to queueing up for tickets. According to a few people I know, this is where Taptoe reaches its highest artistic quality.

You would expect Taptoe to present this program on page one of its brochure. Would you believe that it is quite on the contrary? In the brochure of Taptoe you will look for Pierke Pierlala in vain. It is not even presented under the name of Taptoe. This shyness is explained by Luk De Bruyker and Freek Neiryck, the directors of Taptoe, by saying that it would not do Taptoe any good to be too closely associated with this more popular branch of puppet theatre, where Taptoe has clearly chosen for a more sophisticated style. You don't believe your ears.

Another case, far less extreme but equally eloquent, is Teatro del Drago. Like Taptoe, this company also has a traditional program, Fagiolino, besides their more experimental productions we know from so many festivals. These productions, made for a large stage, generally show a high level of theatre making. And one recognizes the perfection and genuine dedication that lie at the roots of them. Still, sometimes the perfection just doesn't go home - maybe because the concept is not yet as concisely and consequently defined as is the case with Fagiolino. There, every small bloody detail hits the mark. The story is largely predictable - one of the innumerable variations on themes you know inside out. But it is so incredibly well done, with wit, with a feeling for the grotesque, and indeed with a most absolute perfection, that you sense: this is it, this is absolutely as it should be, this is theatre.

A puppeteer who can play like that, like Mauro Monticelli of the Teatro del Drago, is bound to know this. It cannot be imagined that he should be ignorant of it. Still, if conversation comes to Fagiolino, he always starts to explain that the play is traditional, and that you should go and see his other performances as well, suggesting that you, as a knowing man, would think them far more interesting. This distinction, ladies and gentlemen, between what he

and what you might find interesting, is again most significant and symptomatic for the collective inferiority complex that has an oppressive, even detrimental grip on puppet theatre.

In my opinion there is a clear link between puppetry's complex and the taboo that rests on tradition. Traditional art seems not to fit in our brave new world, a disturbing element between video, magnetron and computer. Please no more Jan Klaassen, no more Punch and Judy, and if it has to be, then as a kind of museum presentation, a curious tradition of which one or two specimina are preserved. A most odd and striking illustration of this attitude can be seen in the Dutch International Puppet Theatre Festival 1990, the most expensive puppet theatre festival of Holland, which last November took place in Amsterdam. This is a festival of traditional puppet theatre, with special focus on countries that we do not exactly keep a living and throbbing artistic relationship with, like China, India, Mali .... a living museum, a curiosity shop. "Rituals and customs, often dating from the beginning of our civilisation, are fondly and carefully cherished in puppet theatre", the program is happy to inform you. "Traditional puppeteers frequently go to great lengths to safeguard this cultural legacy from extinction." Exactly. And, to make the alienation complete and perfect, the only Dutch puppet player who is included in the festival program is ... Jan Goes, one of the most pronounced representatives of the Dutch puppet avant-garde. In confusion, we cling to our program leaflet, which explains: "And yet it is not only traditional companies which are fighting to give puppet theatre the place and recognition it rightfully deserves among other forms. Companies such as that of Jan Goes, which set out to renew form and content ... also belong to this festival." Dutch avant-garde, ripe for the museum!! In memoriam puppet theatre?!

By placing the tradition in a special show-case, it is put beyond the world of here and now, it is treated as something that can tell us of strange people from the past, but has no meaning for us, in our present social situation. Is that true? I doubt it. I think that Jan Klaassen, Punch and Judy, Fagiolino, and also fairy-tales, historical as they may appear, still have to tell us a lot. Where

society, and life in general, become more and more complicated, it seems refreshing, even 'new', to have life reduced to a few basic questions and problems. Questions of life and death, of love and hatred, of wealth and poverty, of the king, the priest and the clever peasant. Historical as they may outwardly appear, they are ever so recognisable for us twentieth century folks.

New. What is new? I don't know. We all are looking for things never seen, never heard, never done before. Do they exist? And how should we search? Quite philosophical questions, and most essential. Would we, with Heraclitus, describe the cosmos with the words 'panta rhei', everything streams, or rather with the static 'to be', like Parmenides did? This question, one of the basics of Greek philosophy, is, obviously, not troubling the minds of most people who nowadays are concerned with theatre. In Holland it is rather like this. If you ask a subvention of, say, Dfl 20,000 for making a puppet theatre production of the fairy-tale The Sleeping Beauty, it is most likely to be refused. But ask four times this amount for the same project and add: "Traditional values are put upside down. The Sleeping Beauty will be presented as a post-feministic projection of the fatalistic female who, because of her incestuous relation with her father, has a problem with entering into heterosexual relationships. It wants to challenge our views on motherhood and to invoke critical self-reflection", or such crap, and hey bingo, there is a subvention readily waiting for you.

You may well laugh, if it would not be so sad. Since the end of the sixties, 'vernieuwing' - innovation is the key-word for getting subvention, the key-word for receiving a positive review, the key-word for being accepted and esteemed among the artistic Amsterdam elite. So every artist is frantically trying to be still more innovative than his neighbour, and so there are, in Holland alone, already about a dozen puppet players claiming that they were the first to come out of the booth and act before it on stage. And some of them have really no reason to be proud of it. But if you are not innovative, or liable to be considered as such - then you are in trouble. Then you are lost - ripe for the underdog position. In this way one can understand that a puppeteer considers his history his burden.



How is this problem solved in other arts? How do they prove that they are 'new'? In the dance, as we have seen, the problem seems not to be paramount. They who are in any way concerned with dance seem not to see their folkloristic ancestry as a problem. And, to be sure, Holland is already comfortably provided with a lot of interesting and promising modern dance companies.

What do musicians do? Now that is interesting. Among musicians prevails an opinion which might prove its value to their colleagues of the (puppet) theatre as well. For 99 percent they play music which already exists, usually for quite a long time. For this reason, the apostles of innovation sometimes call music a recreative art, this in contrast to the creative arts which they suppose to be infinitely more creative. (The dichotomy creative - recreative arts is even a more or less accepted conception in official Dutch arts policy.) But a musician knows this is rubbish. A piece of music is performed well only if he can make it sound as if it is newly created right there and then. A musician who reproduces is not a musician but a bookkeeper. The audience should be startled, should be struck. If it already knows the piece, that might be difficult. But it never is impossible, because the audience arrives with an expectation of what it will hear. If you can counter that expectation, play with it, the audience indeed will hear something 'new'. Even to the point of hardly recognizing the original (or the notion it had of it) - if you happen to have listened to the first recordings of Vivaldi's Four Seasons or of Bach's St. Matthews Passion conducted by Nikolaus Harnoncourt, you will remember the shock of hearing a new piece of music.

Now you might well argue that, when I speak of St. Matthews Passion, it is hardly traditional art I am referring to. Admitted. Admitted? For once remember the numerous chorales scattered throughout the Passion. What are they, but simple 16<sup>th</sup> century German folk tunes, set in a four-part harmony? Formerly, when I was in my studies I used to dislike them as blaring interruptions by protestant worship. But that is so untrue. Listen to a good performance of a few chorales by, say, the Rheinische Kantorei, and you will hear music of an indescribable beauty. Simple, naïve, but genuine, and with unexpected instances of emotional depth. Who does not understand

the essential musical qualities of these pieces does not, I am afraid, understand a bit about music. And therein, dear friends, lies an important point for us puppeteers as well. It is very well that the puppet theatre looks for innovation, struggles to develop itself. Though you might have got the impression that I would rather stop and kill all innovation if I could - such, I'm sorry, is not the case. I greatly admire Stuffed Puppet Theatre, Cathérine Sombsthay, the Swiss Théâtre de la Poudrière - to mention just a few companies which are all highly innovative, though very different from each other. A living art has to grow, or it will cease to live - and that holds good for traditional art as well.

Ladies and gentlemen! Cultural anthropology learns us that no society can exist without its taboos. So maybe I am fighting windmills. But a society that has a taboo on tradition is in a weird condition. Culture, as indeed the art of puppet theatre, needs its past as much as it needs innovation. Even more, innovation would not be possible without departing from history. I believe that due acknowledgement of this would help puppet theatre a lot, and get rid of a few frustrations and complexes. Let's be open-minded. And let's not be deterred from enjoying and giving credit to the beauty and expressiveness of more traditional forms of puppet theatre. In simplicitate veritas - truth often comes to us in simple terms.

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On the author

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He has held several posts in the field of arts management and arts policy, notably as business manager of the European Chamber Orchestra Per Musica and of the Folkloristic Dance Theatre, Amsterdam. His involvement with puppet theatre manifested itself in his functions as counsel of the Dutch Theatre Institute and as international staff member of the Dutch Puppetry Institute.

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