

**MUSIC THEATRE NOW
SYMPOSIUM – SOAPBOX SPEECH
BY J.P. DE GRAAFF,
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Ladies and gentlemen, comrades, compatriots! Our nation is ablaze, our land is on fire! And as the smoke and flames rise higher, the people dance in rounds around our funeral pyre! And that, dear guests, that is how my first opera started, and therefore my career as an opera composer. (libretto by Yuri Robbers)

Good afternoon everyone, to give you a short introduction: my name is Jan-Peter de Graaff, I'm a composer from The Hague, and I am currently working on a new opera which will be produced in September by the Nederlandse Reisopera.

Thank you all for being here today, and what a fantastic sight it is to see that nearly all opera companies, festivals and institutions are represented as well as governmental funding bodies. Next to this we have many creative people joining us including a fantastic group of my colleague-composers! It truly shows that there is a desire and interest to connect more and have a proper discussion about this artform.

Before we discuss how we can connect and build great collaborations between producers, composers, and funders, and how we can develop long term partnerships, I would like to talk a bit about why I think this is extremely necessary right now.

First: because we are living in a society that is at best apathic towards the arts and culture and at worst hostile, especially in terms of government-backed funding. Many people still see opera and music theatre as an elitist hobby which costs too much to produce and gives too little in return. This attitude is reflected in

the ever decreasing budget assigned to the arts: politicians do not want to burn their fingers. Yet through our creativity, we can work to change this attitude and stimulate investment in our sector.

Second: because opera and music theatre are artforms that, as a so-called 'Gesamtkunstwerk,' are supplied by inspiration and talent from an entire ecosystem. This multifaceted, cultural ecosystem needs to be nourished and protected in order to flourish and in order to safeguard its future survival. Like an ecosystem, if one part is weakened or becomes extinct, the whole ecosystem suffers. Our cultural ecosystem needs to be made more resilient, safer, and more futureproof.

Third: because I am convinced that our country currently holds some of the world's best talent available in music, directing, design, and technical skills. I think that these talents deserve a better trajectory to grow and develop within our country's institutions as well as more growth possibilities beyond the borders of the Netherlands.

So to tackle these challenges, what do we need? The way I see it, we need to work on ownership. Our public needs to feel that the institutions we cherish are THEIRS and we create not only something for them but with them as well.

Several institutions have already increased the public sense of participation through educative projects and amateur participation. However, due to the many cuts in the last 30 years in music- and arts education, fewer and fewer people have the chance to grow to the top of our professional system, which is currently dominated by either imported talent from abroad, or by those who had the privilege of a private music education, often abroad. I am aware that the institutions here present cannot reverse the inevitable consequences of the devastating government cuts from the last 30 years overnight. But they can

play a role in creating a stronger feeling of ‘ownership’ of the arts among the public.

If the public feels that new works come from similar roots, there is a chance for the audience to grow together with the artists, thus giving a stronger sense of connection with the people on stage and behind the scenes. This could ultimately inspire support to reinstate public music schools to nurture local talent, especially when fueled by community art projects, and perhaps lead to more funding for the arts at all levels.

So now we arrive at ‘our’ ecosystem: I think it would be a very good idea if we would consider the institutions and festivals we have gathered here, to be as one countrywide ecosystem for music theatre, instead of “local brothers and sisters”. This is because I think we need all music theatre institutions to collaborate to employ talents and let them grow to the very top.

This means that all institutions need to support each other much more than I see the case is now, especially in economic hardship and exchange knowledge and strategies. If the government threatens to cut more arts funding or refuses to invest in those institutions that we need most, we need to raise our voice in protest and stand as one.

I mean: If two composers and six singers can band together to raise awareness for the funding cuts of a crucial institution in our ecosystem with resulting in two(!) soprano’s sharing Masetta’s aria within the houses of parliament, it should be possible for institutions to do the same, and instead of competing for funding, to join forces, and to collaborate to keep the ecosystem for the whole country healthy.

I also urge upon the people representing the Arts Council and Performing Art Funds present to do the same and to consider the

roles all these institutions play within the ecosystem as important as the funding applications these institutions write to you.

To finish I would like to say that I'm very pleased to see that music theatre and opera as an artform is, despite the challenges of funding and collaborating we see today, very much alive and kicking among composers in the Netherlands. The country is bursting with talent and ideas that can refresh and renew the artform and connect with a contemporary audience.

The trajectory on how to grow from "young talent" to "mid-career" to "legendary" to "legacy" status is sometimes very difficult and shaky because of the many stakeholders involved. Yet I think it could be less difficult to revive a successful production now and then to allow a piece to live a life beyond its premiere.

And why stop there, how fantastic would it be if it would be possible to set up more co-productions with houses abroad, such as ENOA's productions of Mathilde Wantenaars "Lied voor de Maan"? I might be wrong, but I think the potential in our ecosystem is so enormous, the Netherlands could become the place again for cutting-edge opera and music theatre, like it was in the seventies, eighties and nineties with international attention for the works of Andriessen, Schat, Ketting and many other composers. Even until recently The Holland Festival, NTR Zaterdagmatinee and NO&B collaborated to present the premieres of new opera's by Jeths, De Raaff, and Wagemans and present them on an international stage. I would love to see a continuation of this ambition.

In the end, I think this all comes down to collaboration, to see the talent we have here and to make plans together on how to develop those talents so the public feels connected to the creatives, the creatives feel connected with the houses and festivals, the houses and festivals feel secure enough by the art funds to take

risks, and the art funds will be fully supported by the government because the public demands it!

I wish you a fantastic afternoon and I hope to see many fruitful collaborations in the future.