

## KJTZ – Das Blog

FÖRDERN WAS GEBRAUCHT WIRD – THEATER ZUM WACHSEN

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### Watch. Stop. Repeat. Erase Yourself. – Ein Festivalbericht

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*Eliot Moleba ist derzeit in Frankfurt im KJTZ zu Gast, arbeitet an neuen Stücken und Projekten und hat das **Internationale TheaterFest der Deutschsprachigen Gemeinschaft Belgiens** in St. Vith besucht. Hier schreibt er über seine Erlebnisse im Next Generation-Programm.*

*Eliot lebt in Johannesburg, ist Autor, Redakteur, Theatermacher und Regisseur und Mitglied von **PlayRiot**, einem Autor\*innenkollektiv, das sich dem Erzählen wagemutiger Geschichten in/aus Südafrika verschrieben hat. Er studierte Dramatic Arts und Diversity Studies an der **University of the Witwatersrand** und ist momentan Dramaturg am **South African State Theatre**.*

I attended the 29<sup>th</sup> International TheatreFest that is organised by Agora Theatre, which took place from the 16<sup>th</sup> to 21<sup>st</sup> October 2018. The festival happens in a small German-speaking Belgian town of St Vith. As I only know Belgium to be predominantly Flemish\Dutch and French, I found the proposition of travelling from German city of Frankfurt to a German town in Belgium to be quite strange at first, until I learned that it is a bordering town that has changed hands between Germany and Belgium a few times. At this stage, I didn't know what to expect from such a place but as a South African – given our troubled history and its territorial questions – one is now more comfortable diving into any place with a complex, laden and conflicting national history and identity! And so the journey began!

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Luckily, driving into St Vith was a magical experience because it offered a very contrasting scenery! The first thing that greets you from a



distance is its dramatic landscape, which holds and wears the beauty of its greenery on the palm and sleeves of the small surrounding hills. And as you rolled downed the window, the fresh air hits you with the

whiff of cow dungs from all the nearby feed and the sound of a trucker approaching along a narrow road. This will probably be the most congested traffic this road will see today! And with the emblem: **Welcome to St Vith!** This moment felt like stepping back into my childhood. Even though I grew up in the rural Northern parts of South Africa, the familiar aromas and the open landscape that allows you to feel and connect to the natural surroundings immediately transported me back to my humble origins. To compliment this feeling of being at home (alas in a strange place), was the warm welcome I (and I hope everyone else) received from the theatre staff. Amidst the rush of getting the festival ready to hit the road, everyone never missed an opportunity to stop and offer you a friendly welcoming smile. I am always amazed at how easing this small gesture is when one experiences a new place and people for the first time. In a few glimpses and impressions, I was already convinced that the festival is ran by an awesome team and we are in for a great treat!

I attended the festival as part of the Next Generation (NG) programme. The theme of the NG was *Watch. Stop. Repeat. Erase Yourself.* It is a loaded theme and



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the festival invited a small pack of 10 young people to unpack it in relation to their festival program. That is, we were tasked with a mission to see the theatre pieces, attend both the organized or informal meetings, observing

everything that the festival had to offer – and to do something with it. In the end, we were asked to give our experiences and impressions of the TheaterFest a form or shape, whatever that might be.

The core of the festival programme was made of 12 different theatre performances that were usually followed by an open discussion called „moving thoughts“, which was moderated by the artistic team. This exchange offered the audience a chance to engage with the theatremakers who were presenting the work (and vice versa). While my participation in them was limited due to language constraints (that is, I could not judge how critical, challenging, or robust the engagement was), but it was still interesting to see how energetic these encounters were, and how the small gatherings prompted much enthusiasm from both the audience sharing their impressions of the work(s) and artists responding to the feedback. It is not a feature that you find in a lot of big festival but it is also vital to foster a culture of not just seeing theatre work but to speak back to it, especially with the makers. I find it enriching as a theatremaker to hear how my work is received – both the criticisms and compliments alike!



In the NG

programme, we were fortunate to have a space and time to extend these conversations about the performances we witnessed. Although we never had the audience of the theatremakers themselves in our sessions, they were tasked with providing us any piece of material (i.e. a text, image, etc.) that we can use as an entry point into our discussion of their work and then our programme leader sourced additional material. The material formed the basis of how we framed and unpacked them in relation to the work itself. Our conversations were multifaceted as they offered various perspectives and interpretations among the diverse group members. Curiously, as we were from different backgrounds ourselves, our varying reactions were also problematised. It was not just about what your reaction to something was, but where you were also reacting from; and suddenly the question emerged of who we are and who do we speak for – if for anyone at all – both as individuals and a collective. This began to eat away at the assumption(s) of what it means to be the Next Generation, both among ourselves and the *absent* but felt larger festival public. I do not know how conscious we were of this fact but we have spent the rest of our

time together trying to unpack these complex questions – and perhaps this was in search of a collective voice. Did we find it? I don't know. But the discursive reading, questioning, challenging, (re)framing and unpacking that punctuated these dialogical moments was nuanced and richly textured. We found it productive to engage these questions and their embedded assumptions. And I think the discursive process of engaging these questions became the work of our meetings.

For me, this is the most exciting thing about the potential of intercultural dialogue. It was able to demonstrate how we needed to understand our own diverse



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positionalities for any effort to build a collective voice to be possible. And, of course, that these conversations were carried beyond the group sessions into coffee, lunch, and dinner breaks showed just how important it was for us to digest the experiences of the theatrical buffet that was so spectacularly organised (and generously offered) and our own subjectivities and sensibilities! This also weaved discussions about how we work in our own respective processes, and even played several exercises together.

These moments of ‚digestion‘ proved to be the most valuable of experiences of my stay. Yet, at the end of our stay, we were faced with an interesting question: how do we give shape to these ‚digestive‘ moments? Do we have to? In the Next Generation, although it is not obligated, it is nonetheless expected that we would take this digestion of the experiences and impressions and give them some form or shape, to present at the end of the festival. This is how usually Next Generation program is framed within **ASSITEJ**. And it's not difficult to understand why this expectation is placed on the NG. I mean, it is a good way for other members of the festival and programme organisers to see – perhaps in somewhat more concrete terms – the impact that this moment and programme has had on its participants. Yet, this is not how the script was played at the TheaterFest. The doors opened but *nothing* was presented except a cleaned room and remnants or fragments of written notes, a looped conversation we recorded of one of the sessions, props we collected and played with, which were all neatly packed against one side of the room. For the most part, the work that had taken place in this room was erased. Ironically, and, in hindsight, this became an interesting play on the theme of the NG programme: *Watch. Stop. Repeat. Erase Yourself*. We had watched the festival shows. Stopped to think and respond or react to it. Repeated this

over and over. And now here we were, with traces of our encounters and ourselves erased.



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At first I battled to understand how I could explain this ‚presentation‘ to the audience who came up to me to ask directly about what it was or meant. In their eyes, everything in this space reflected nothing much really. I think the offer was read and understood as

being empty. It took a while to make this distinction myself but the room was not empty, it was emptied. We emptied it. But emptied of what? Now, this is a trickier question to answer. But to make this attempt, I would like to highlight and reframe two key words I have used so far in order to articulate my next point more succinctly. If one has to think of this digestion I have spoken about as ‚research‘, at the end of this program it was hoped that the result will lead to some ‚practice‘, i.e. something the group does to give shape to the experience and emerging thoughts gained from engaging the festival, which would be what is presented when the NG opens their door to the public. I have been lucky enough to participate in other NG programmes before, and this is usually what happens. But I think in this NG programme something strange, unexpected and quite interesting happened: the ‚research‘ (i.e. this digestion) became the ‚practice‘ itself. I don't think that we had intended it to be, so perhaps that explains the ‚strangeness‘ of our presentation both to the public and ourselves. For obvious reasons, I don't think the public was quite satisfied with this result. If anything, they were underwhelmed and perhaps even disappointed at what we ‚offered‘. But I find this ‚disappointment‘ to have a productive side to it. How? Because it is a moment of rupture in what this programme is expected to mean or be. As such, this, for me, has raised interesting implications for the other NG programmes going forward. If we say that the participants are not given the obligation to *create* a ‚presentation‘ at the end of their stay, do we really mean it? In other words, are we really fine with it if they do not to create something? If we are, then I think the current framework is fine. But, as we were met with somewhat disappointed faces, it is clear that there is tacit expectation at play here and it is more binding that people expect. And not only is that fine but also understandable. Because this is an opportunity to respond to something unique and to give form to something unknown. Read me well, I think it would be great if that happens but for future NG programmes we must not forget that this is also a moment that brings artists „from different walks of life together to take part in an exchange of ideas, stories, practices, and most importantly, inspiration. These artists meet, eat, sleep, cry, laugh, joke, drink, play, live, and spend a week together; watching

performances and engaging in formal and informal critical discussions about how they receive and make theatre." Should the impact of such a dynamic encounter be reduced to the form or shape that the participants are able to give their experiences and thoughts? I hope not.

Overall, I thought the festival programme was fabulous! As a non-German-French speaker, I had my fair share of confusion, ah-ha moments, and great

conversations that I hope will inspire new ideas and new collaborations! I look forward to experiencing Agora's International TheaterFest again in the near future!



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*Eliot Molebas* Aufenthalt bei der ASSITEJ Deutschland und im Kinder- und Jugendtheaterzentrum in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland wird gefördert aus Mitteln des Programms Internationale Jugendarbeit des *Kinder- und Jugendplans des Bundes*.

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