



Mary-Ann DeVlieg
IETM's Secretary General.

Informal European Theatre Meetings
(IETM)
<http://www.ietm.org/>



Presenter Interview プレゼンターインタビュー

The IETM "network," contributing to the promotion of collaborative commissioned works and tours in Europe

2008.9.3

ヨーロッパにおける共同委嘱やツアーの進展に寄与
IETMのネットワーク力

The International Network for Contemporary Performing Arts (IETM) was established with head offices in Brussels, Belgium, in 1981 for the purpose of creating an international network for producers in the performing arts field. Today it has a membership of over 450 professional producers, directors, arts managers and presenter organizations from 45 countries and holds biannual "Plenary Meetings" and regional "Satellite Meetings" around the world. This network contributes greatly to the promotion of collaborative productions and tours in Europe. We spoke to IETM's Secretary General, Mary-Ann DeVlieg about the organization's activities.

(Interview: Yoko Shioya, Artistic Director, Japan Society)

The shortest description of "what the IETM is" would probably be "a network-building organization." But "network" is a kind of a vague term. Would you elaborate on it?

IETM first called itself the "Informal European Theatre Meeting," and was founded in 1981 in Italy. It was the first 'European cultural network' as such, to be founded. At that time, six people from France, Croatia, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Italy came together at the Festival of Polverigi in Italy. They said, "This is great. We came here to see performances, and we speak to each other about artists that we are producing." At that time Polverigi was one of the few small or middle-scale festivals involved in international contemporary performance. So they had the idea to start co-producing young European artists, and to give them a bigger public by presenting them in other European countries. Later that year, the six people invited about 100 more professional colleagues and got together in Paris, at the invitation of Philippe Tiry, founder/director of ONDA (Office National de Diffusion Artistique) and one of IETM's founders. For the first eight years IETM functioned by word-of-mouth: no structure, no constitution, no statute, and no membership fees; it was run on a volunteer basis. But those first eight years gave the organization a strong basis for existence, because what people were doing then, and what we are still doing now, is to bring people together who are interested in the same type of arts, artists and issues.

Today we have 450 member organizations from 45 countries. Although we currently organize many different initiatives, the main aim is still to bring people together and to put them in a situation where they can find people who are interested in the same artists and the same themes, to encourage them to collaborate, co-produce, organize tours and exchanges. IETM members are arts centers, theatre spaces, performing arts companies, festivals, independent producers and presenters, also local authorities from cities, regions or at the ministry level who are in positions responsible for performing arts. Their encounters happen naturally.

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*IETM Future Meetings

IETM Autumn Plenary Meeting

Date: November 6-9, 2008

Zurich, Switzerland

IETM's Autumn Plenary Meeting 2008 will take place in Zurich from November 6 to 9. Since the Geneva meeting held in 1992, Switzerland's economic, political and cultural relationships with its European neighbors have gained importance. The meeting in Zurich will make a contribution to the "European Year of Intercultural Dialogue 2008" <http://www.interculturaldialogue2008.eu/> by focusing on the theme of "Misunderstanding." On ten stages in Zurich, an up-to-date overview of the creativity in Switzerland's independent theatre and dance scene will be provided. Between 400 and 600 IETM members and Swiss performing arts professionals are expected to participate.

Programs and details:

<http://www.ietmzurich.ch/>

Registration for IETM Meeting Zurich under

<http://register.ietm.org>



Before they started IETM meetings, was there no such organized tour or co-commissioning system in Europe?

People were certainly touring, but a lot of the touring was on a national basis. And not all the countries at that time had set up national touring systems, depending on the policies of the country. Germany, for example, still is based on regions rather than national organization – though this has changed to some extent. And of course there were co-productions but mostly on a large scale like opera - not so much on the small and medium scale, or with experimental productions. This developed strongly in Europe because of IETM.

Suppose I am an IETM member and decided to commission an artist to create a new piece. Do you introduce someone who may be interested in joining this project in such a case?

Sometimes we help people like that. But you can imagine that since there are about 2,000 active people in the network – it's become too big to know everyone personally – what we do is to organize an environment: network meetings, working sessions. In that way people can find each other much more easily. We also have presentation sessions, which aren't pitching sessions, but rather presentations of projects-in-progress or ideas which are just taking form. A colleague can say, "I'm working with this theme and we are looking for other presenters interested in the theme." Or, "The theme of our next festival is this and we are looking for companies who are making works on this theme." These sessions are informal and aim to help people find eventual partners.

Do those sessions take place as a part of the biannual IETM meetings?

Yes, we call our official meetings "Plenary Meetings." They are held twice a year, and include 450-600 participants, 15-40 performances over a period of 4 days with around 45 working sessions and/or training sessions each time. Those include possibilities to present ideas or work-in-progress, rather than products to be sold. We also organize "Satellite Meetings," which are smaller IETM meetings organized 2-6 times per year on specific themes. Activities at the Satellite Meetings may include working sessions, workshops, and performance programs.

Would you elaborate more about how people can meet and discuss?

Well, a bit ironically, we say that we try to arrange a "bar" experience. At a bar you can quite easily meet somebody you need to. But some people can be shy and they just standing at the bar counter (laughs). So we organize "working sessions" on different themes to stimulate discussion among the people attending who are interested in the same themes. That's how you get to know your future colleagues.

Of course, many people make their appointments before the conference. Another reason IETM was founded was to be pragmatically useful. If I am going to make a co-production or tour in Europe, I have the option to meet my partners by flying to five cities; or by flying to one city to attend the IETM meeting and to meet them all there...

I basically understand that function very well because we American presenters do the same at the annual APAP conference in New York. But APAP has been growing and the number of people attending and performances during the conference period are too overwhelming. We are trying to make several appointments for your own agenda – at the same time we are being requested to have meetings with several different people who also want to discuss their own agendas or future

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projects. Many of my presenter colleagues get insanely busy. So my point is, when the “meeting point” is so large, the whole thing becomes chaos. Aren't you also facing to that kind of problem?

Yes, but IETM is one-fourth the size of APAP. And we really operate on a word-of-mouth basis – we don't do much publicity. Having said that, though, in the 15 years I've been working for IETM, it has certainly become bigger. We are concerned to safeguard a certain quality of communication and also the spirit of generosity and solidarity which characterized the network in the early days. And as it gets bigger, there has been a tendency among our members to think, “IETM is a ‘conference’: we just go and they will give us something.” If they come and think everything will be given to them, they are disappointed in IETM, because it's much more about people building something *by themselves*. This is the difference between a conference and a network. We want people who are willing to take advantage of the opportunity and help construct a nourishing environment for everyone – so we ask our members to be active. For that reason we don't call ourselves a “service organization” though we suspect that we really are. Over the coming years we want to really try to make IETM a “members' organization” again, strongly guided by the members' initiatives.

Would you tell us about the administrative structure of IETM, such as budget and number of staff? Also, why you have your office in Brussels?

The financial turnover which goes through our office is between €350,000 – €500,000 per year. But that's doubled if you think of the income and expenditure which go through the accounts of our meeting co-organizers. So IETM's global turnover is about a million euro a year.

The first eight years were, as I mentioned, were organized spontaneously rather like a rave party: Someone would invite everyone: Come to my festival! Let's be here, let's go there. That period was the beginning of the Belgian-Flemish Wave: Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, Wim Vandekeybus, Jan Lauwers and Jan Fabre, all those artists were emerging – and Flemish professionals were organizing themselves, firstly into a Flemish performance circuit which then became the Flemish Theater Institute. The Founder-Director was one of the founders of IETM. He said, “I will give you a corner of the office and some time of one of our employees so that we can take care of the network.” A lot of people think we are in Brussels only because of the European Commission – but we are there purely because of that background.

We have a Board of Directors with between 20-25 people from different countries. They delegate most of the work to six people, our executive committee, which we call the “Daily Board.” The six prepare the meetings for the 25, and the 25 prepare the things for the whole network. Including myself, we have a staff of five at the moment – three permanent posts and two posts for 1-year apprentices. We also have interns, so we can be up to eight people at any one time. It's a small number but enormous compared to what we used to be: we were only one or two for many years! We are small – that is why we have to do everything in partnership with co-organizers for our meetings.

How did you come to assume the position of executive director at IETM?

Before IETM, my specialty was mostly in contemporary dance, with some ballet and music theater – touring, programming and presentation. Then I started to work for the Arts Council in the Southwest of England, in-charge of developing dance and experimental performance arts. At that time I was doing a Masters Degree in

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*The TPAM-IETM Satellite Meeting, IETM's first satellite meeting in Japan, held jointly by Tokyo Performing Arts Market and IETM from March 3 to 5, 2008, has provided a platform for information exchange, communication and networking, and contribute to activation of cooperation among participants. The complete records of the TPAM-IETM Satellite Meeting are now available on the TPAM website:
http://www.tpam.or.jp/index_e.html

TPAM-IETM Satellite Meeting
http://www.tpam.or.jp/e_ietm/e_ietm.html

*Tokyo Performing Arts Market (TPAM) 2009 will be held from March 4 to 7, 2009 at Tokyo's YEBISU The Garden Hall/ Room. "TPAM Showcase" will also be held from February 28 to March 8 in Tokyo along with TPAM.

Dates: March 4 – 7, 2009 [TPAM Showcase: February 28 – March 8, 2009]
Venues: YEBISU The Garden Room and others.

Tokyo Performing Arts Market (TPAM)
http://www.tpam.or.jp/index_e.html

European cultural policy. I wanted to look at the phenomenon of co-producing in Europe. All the people I interviewed for my thesis who were making interesting co-productions were members of IETM. So I thought, "It must be interesting." I became a member myself. When the current position, "Secretary General" – we don't call it Executive Director because of the European background – came up, I applied and was selected.

You had a Satellite Meeting in Tokyo last March (2008). And there was a meeting in Seoul last year. Before Seoul, it was in China. IETM is primarily for European countries, so why these meetings in Asian countries?

Although we call ourselves an "international" organization, we know that 85% of our members are from Europe (both EU and non-EU countries). Obviously that means 15% are from some other world regions. So we try to make bridges between the European situation and the rest of the world. We try to set up opportunities for our members to more easily find out who to meet, what to see, what is happening and what to discuss in Asia - and vice-versa for Asians or others wishing to collaborate with Europe.

Meetings are quite expensive to organize as you might imagine. Fundraising for the costs of the meeting is done by our partner in the country where the meeting takes place. Most of the partners that co-organize the meetings with us, like TPAM (Tokyo Performing Arts Market) – are our members. They make an offer to host a meeting, they have to bid, and our Board makes a selection. We try to maintain a balance concerning the locations – but somehow we have rarely had to approach a city or country and ask them to be a local partner. Normally, the member organizations express their interest to invite us. Sometimes smaller, younger organizations are ambitious and express their interest to co-organize a meeting but we have to say, "You are not ready yet. Let's work together and wait for a few years until you become strong enough."

Do you involve yourself in the decision-making process concerning what kinds of performances or productions to show during the IETM meeting?

No. For both our Plenary Meetings and our other smaller meetings such as Satellite Meetings, we always leave artistic choices to the local partner/organizer. We only say to them, "Please include people in your selection committee who have an international outlook," because it would be useless if the pieces to be shown are not appropriate for international presenters. We also ask the partner to show full length performances – not excerpts – because that is what IETM members prefer. But artistic choices are left to the local partner.

What kind of reaction did you get from your members on the IETM meeting in Tokyo?

The interesting thing from an inter-cultural point of view was that Europeans are used to talking a lot and asking a lot of questions, whereas Japanese are more apt to listen and be quiet. We thought that perhaps Japanese don't feel it would be polite to challenge a speaker by asking questions. So the Europeans talked all the time, and were surprised that the Japanese didn't! After this experience, we decided that if we co-organize another meeting in Japan, we should break up the meeting into much smaller groups, so that both the Japanese and the Europeans can be more comfortable about discussing things together.

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Besides co-organizing network meetings in many places, what other kinds of activities does IETM involve itself in?

We are very politically active and do a lot of advocacy work at the European level. We do a lot of lobbying for the conditions to help performing arts improve in Europe.

What exactly do you mean by “politically active” and “lobbying?”

Participating in a lot of committees is one of our ways of being “politically active.” Sitting on boards of organizations, or working with national or European-level cultural policy think-tanks are other ways. For example, I was one of 12 people chosen to give recommendations to the European Union to improve the international mobility of young people, students, researchers and artists over the next 10 years. We worked on the recommendations for six months and delivered our report yesterday.

We also look at all the different arts support programs, at legislation that exists but is not being implemented, at different national policies which do or do not improve the situation for contemporary performing arts. We observe different kinds of subsidies and partnerships with business that would make things easier. For example, we’ve seen in Central and Eastern Europe that conditions have not improved as everyone thought they would do after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Now in the new liberal-capitalist economies, public subsidies are decreasing and sponsorship is not growing. We are very concerned about that.

We write reports and discuss these issues during our meetings. Sometimes we commission studies which go into greater depth to see what the problems are. And then we may make recommendations for the different political levels, foundations and business, etc.; then we will go out to see politicians, big foundations or companies, knock on their doors and say, “Look, this is a vision for Europe. Do you agree with it? Do you want to be a part of it?” So IETM is not only at the point of sale. It’s really much more than that.

I would like to ask you about co-producing. As presenters and producers have become active and built a closer network, haven’t you seen any negative effects arise? Suppose there is a small emerging company, just becoming talked about in a local city. A well-known international presenter happens to find their work and he wants to work with them. Then the small company all of a sudden jumps to the status of “everybody wants them.” What do you think about such a situation?

We have had many discussions in the network about this. There are a few issues. The first one is “the Kleenex effect” – I don’t know who used this phrase first. Everybody is desperately searching for something new. They find something new, take it and wipe their nose with it, and then throw it away – just like with Kleenex tissues. And, as you mentioned, this causes great pressure on the young/emerging artists.

But there is also something that I suppose you could call “responsible producing.” That is, producers taking care of the artists’ needs, not only their own. Co-producers can simply put money in and get a cheaper premiere; or they can sit down with the artists, help them develop the work, really guide and help them along. I think both types of producers exist. The good ones do the right thing. There are also examples of young artists who say, “I need a year off. I need to go back and find what it was that I was doing.” And enlightened funders will support that.

Another negative effect is the kind of “mafia effect,” where the same artists appear everywhere; and people who have different aesthetics can’t get in because one kind of aesthetic is generalized and perpetuated. We also have talked a lot

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about a “new colonialist attitude.” These people say, “I see the work through my own value system, and I make a decision about it based on that” – and then just invite foreign work because it’s exotic, without having a deeper understanding between the artists and presenters what the work is about. We are concerned about that and so would aim to support presenters to understand what they are presenting so that the audience will have a deeper understanding of it, too.

Not all producers and programmers are aware of these problems, and that is why it has often been a theme over these last six years. But just because someone is aware of something does not mean that they are going to act on it. We need to go deeper into these questions and to share experiences. I think it is important for people to talk about these things and to be sensitive to them – and get beyond them – or have discussions with other people to bring out alternative perspectives. At the same time, we also try to be aware about whose voice is not being heard. “How can we make sure that their voices are also heard?” because as the network gets bigger, there is a tendency for the people with the big mouths to be the only ones heard!

So IETM does not set a course for what people should do but rather focuses on awareness enhancement so that solutions or new directions will be discussed, or set, among members by themselves...?

We used to say that we provided opportunities for people to meet. It was a very passive role. But we undertook a re-structuring in 2000 and 2002 and we changed our mission statement. Our job now is also to stimulate and challenge our members; it’s more pro-active. Now we have a double role: providing opportunities for people and stimulating and challenging them.

The surveys we’ve just done about IETM meetings prove that people unanimously value the inspiration they have received at meetings. We thought they would primarily value the contacts, but they say, “No, it was the inspiration of hearing for 4 days what other people are doing, who’s who, what’s happening, whether there are any new trends.” And people go home quite refreshed. They are inspired not to copy but to pursue new things that they got excited about at the meeting.

Out of personal curiosity, I now would like to ask you how IETM views the way presenters are addressing the issues of theater (drama). Dance can easily be presented internationally because it doesn’t involve language like theater does. Having said that, though, European people have always handled the problem of language differences as part of their history.

We have often made this a subject of discussion at IETM. European presenters have been very clever over the years with different kinds of subtitling. In Belgium for example, we often have subtitles in three languages. We also discuss the possibilities for funding the translation of theatre works. You can still find different kinds of subsidies which are particularly interested in translation from, let’s say, one minority language to another, or making minority language works available in different major languages – but not in English, or course, as English already dominates. Many smaller networks have emerged from IETM – sometimes they develop into independent networks. We call this IETM’s “catalyst effect”. On this subject of supporting translation of plays, two small networks have emerged which concentrate on translation. They work on a project-by-project basis. In this sense IETM functions as an incubator for new networks and networked projects.

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Lastly, because networking is the main activity of IETM, I imagine that ways to use the Internet must be an ongoing issue for you. What is your view of the possibilities of the Internet?

We have just requested subsidies for next year for a new website. It should have less text, many more visuals, more excerpts and moving things, as well as vocals. It is probably better to have one minute or 50 seconds of a pod-cast than to put a long text description of something on a web site.

We also want to create more possibilities for people to meet each other on the Web. Personally I'm very interested in virtual mobility because it responds to the ecology dilemma. Traveling is also expensive and not available to everyone. It's a kind of personal fantasy, but I would like to look into the possibility of making 600 people meet in a virtual IETM meeting. But my colleagues in the office say, "That would be very boring because you would have to sit in front of a computer for 4 days." (Laughs)

Regarding blogs, we just launched a site called "Raft" (<http://raft.idanca.net/>), which is a temporary platform for questions about contemporary arts. It must be said that most IETM members are not people who use the Internet in that way. Of course our aim is to put them in direct contact with each other, but it should naturally start among them: we can't force it!

Thank you so much for your time, and good luck in your future meetings.