



Frie Leysen  
Curator of Theater der Welt 2010

Theater der Welt 2010  
<http://www.theaterderwelt.de/>  
<http://www.ruhr2010.de/>



Meeting Points  
<http://www.meetingpoints.org/>



# Presenter Interview プレゼンターインタビュー

## European arts scene leader Frie Leysen talks about the role and activities of arts festivals

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欧州のアートシーンを牽引するフリー・レイセンが見る  
フェスティバルのアイデンティティとは？

Frie Leysen has won an enviable reputation throughout the European performing arts scene as a spirited arts curator with a long slate of accomplishments. Among these are her roles as founder and artistic director of the deSingel, contemporary arts center in Antwerp (Belgium), which has led the Belgian arts world since the mid-1980s, and as a founder and director of Brussels KunstenFestivaldesArts (KFDA), which has grown to become one of the leading international festivals, known for its cutting-edge programs, for discovering and encouraging talented young artists and actively undertaking joint international productions. With her unique approach to nurturing the next generation of curators, she has also helped numerous festivals toward success. In this interview we hear about Leysen's recent activities and the alternative vision they reveal, as well as her views on the state of arts festival activities in Europe today.

(Interview: Tadashi Uchino)

After establishing the KunstenFestivaldesArts (KFDA) in Brussels in 1994, you served as the festival's director, and in that capacity you have been a leader among Europe's arts festivals and one of the prominent presenters in the region for many years. In our interview with your successor as the KFDA artistic director, Mr. Christophe Slagmuylder, on this website, he told us in considerable detail about your achievements and resume. With the strong reputation and trust you have won among presenters and artists around the world, you now serve as a curator for important festivals in different parts of the world. In this interview we would like to concentrate on your most recent activities and your thoughts about the state of arts festivals today.

First, I would like to ask you about the Meeting Points festival in the Middle East where you served as curator in 2007.

I was invited to curate Meeting Points by Tarek Abou El Fetouh, director of the Young Arab Theatre Fund (YATF). YATF is a small but important organization that created six spaces for contemporary arts in the Arab region and supports artists in creating works and also for traveling around in the region. He started Meeting Points as a small project, in one city. The next edition took place in three cities in the Arab world, and in 2005 he organized it simultaneously in seven cities. It was so successful that Tarek decided to hold it every two years with a different curator each time.

I was invited to curate Meeting Points 5, which was held in 9 cities in the Arab world and in Berlin in November 2007 and Brussels in January 2008. It was a fantastic experience, because it was so different from organizing a festival in Brussels or other places in Europe. With a festival like KFDA, we address an audience that we know. But Meeting Points covered the Arab region from Morocco to Egypt and Palestine and also in Beirut and Syria. So, I had to address societies

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フェスティバルのアイデンティティとは？

Kunsten Festival des Arts (KFDA)

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and audiences I didn't know. And the perspective is completely different: you're not looking from Europe to the Middle East, but from the Middle East to the Middle East. Also, we often think about the Arab region as one monolithic block. We don't realize how different each of these countries is.

### What were your initial ideas for organizing and curating Meeting Points 5?

Prior to my own policies, there was the approach that the Young Arab Theatre Fund (YATF) had established for the festival. It was in 2006 when I was doing my last [KFDA] festival that the Egyptian director of YATF, Mr. Tarek Abou El Fetouh, talked to me about curating Meeting Points 5.

The basic idea for Meeting Points was to present artists from the Arab region in the Arab region. Because today Arab artists are presented quite regularly in Europe and in the US, but they rarely have the chance to present their works in the Arab region, and often not even in their home country.

The consequence could be that we end up with only export-productions. In such a situation, clever young men and women from the region might start to make works that they think the West would like.

That is certainly true in the visual arts, where the market principle is so strong. It's crucial for artists from every region of the world to present their work in the West. But I believe artists' first audiences should be in their own home country or region. My starting point was to respect this philosophy.

### Meeting Points has been held five times so far and each time it has grown in scale and in the richness of the program. It clearly appears to be a festival that is growing.

Yes. As I mentioned earlier, the first event happened in just one city. But the project grew in an organic way, parallel to the development of a network of the performance spaces YATF had created in the region.

So, Meeting Points 5 happened in nine cities of the Arab region: Alexandria, Beirut, Tunis, Damascus, Ramallah, Rabat, Amman, Cairo, Minia and also in two European cities: Berlin and Brussels. Tarek Abu El Fetouh asked me also to open up the festival to include not only artists from the Arab region but artists from all over the world.

For instance Hiroaki Umeda from Japan was one of the international artists. The audiences loved him, especially in Beirut. Also, Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker (Belgium) and Bruno Beltrao (Brazil) performed successfully throughout the region.

### Can you tell us in more detail about your actual programming for Meeting Points 5?

I spent nine months traveling around the region. One important thing I learned is that all the cities are so different. For example, Beirut and Damascus are only two hours apart by car, but the two cities are completely different: Beirut, the Paris of the Mediterranean, has very little in common with the Syrian capital.

What I tried to do, was to make a program that was not dictated by a European agenda. Because that's what I saw a lot of in Europe: Arab projects here are mostly programs that basically confirm the European agenda: our sovereignty in culture and moral and democratic values. Things tend to be viewed in a "them and us" perspective. Non-Western artists are the "victims of suppressionist systems, or the terrorists, or the fundamentalists." Very often artistic programs in Europe with foreign artists are meant to confirm this viewpoint.

It is the same with Chinese artists in the West, for instance. Their work was always considered to be political by Westerners, even if the artist claims that is absolutely

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フリー・レイセンが見る  
フェスティバルのアイデンティティとは？

not the case. Western audiences and media always seem to need confirmation for the cliché? Or they have created to prove that the West is right. And new cliché? Or are constantly being created.

That is why it was so interesting to work in the Arab region for an Arab audience. It required a mental shift, a change in perspective.

In each city I researched its strengths and its weakness. You can try to make the strong points stronger, or you can go for the weaker points and try to develop them. For instance, Beirut is a city where you have very good theater. Walid Raad and Rabih Mroue grew up there at the same time (born 1967). But, dance does not flourish as much in Beirut. It was interesting to play with that and present more contemporary dance in Beirut during Meeting Points.

In specific terms, I had made a pool of more or less 40 artistic projects. At the beginning of the festival, the projects were scattered among the different cities of the region, and then they began to move the performances to new venues. But none of the projects was to go to all 11 cities, and none of the cities was to have all 40 projects. Out of this pool we tried to create a tailor-made program for each city.

We had local coordinators in each city to take care of communications with the press, PR, hotel arrangements and logistics and ticket sales. So, the success of the festival in each city depended a lot on the capabilities of these coordinators. In some cities they did a fantastic job, but to be honest, in others they didn't.

In addition to our program, we set up an event called "Unclassified" in six major cities: Cairo, Alexandria, Amman, Damascus, Beirut and Tunis. We invited young people, artists, intellectuals, organizers, as local curators to these events. They got an envelope to curate their own artistic program, presenting artists from the younger generation reflecting the situation in their own city. Some were teams of young artists or people who had their own venue in the city, such as a theater or a gallery. And sometimes they were just individuals. Through them we got to know a lot of young people that you normally wouldn't meet, such as people just out of college. In some cases I was told that a certain person was too young to be a curator, but I was still interested in their viewpoint.

For instance, in Tunis our curators were two young choreographers, Selma and Sofiane Ouissi, who are brother and sister. They created a project called "Dream City" in which they took the old city, the Medina, as one big performing space. They involved 60 young artists from Tunis.

In Beirut, the curator was Raed Yassin, a very young visual artist and musician. He is of the generation after Walid Raad and Rabih Mroue. Yassin is from a generation that is fed up with being viewed as "war artists." He curated an exhibition with photographers, visual artists and installation creators from his generation titled *The secret of peripheral city*. Although he didn't take part directly in the creation of the work, the artists he worked with told me that he was a real curator—advising people and always there to help them realize their works. He did a perfect job.

**If they are not dealing with the war issue, what do they deal with?**

They deal with the kind of issues that young people deal with all over the world: music, life, love, consumerism, death...

**Inevitably, in the Middle East, don't you always have to deal with the reality of censorship. Was there censorship in your Meeting Points festival?**

Absolutely. But we knew this in advance. Criticism of religion and politics are not done, and sex is taboo. But there is still so much you can communicate....

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フェスティバルのアイデンティティとは？

### How about the audience?

The population of the region, and thus the audience, are extremely young. You don't need statistics to realize that fact. Just walk around and you will see it. Also the audience is super-curious. They don't have the opportunity to see very much, so they are really hungry for new things.

### You have been successful at Meeting Point once. Are the organizers asking you to come back again?

No, the idea for Meeting Points is that every edition will be curated by a different curator.

### Tell us what other current projects you are engaged in?

I am working as a curator of Theater der Welt in Germany now, which is an international festival that will happen in Essen and Mulhaim in July 2010. That is why I am here in Japan now. ITI (International Theatre Institute) Germany asked me to do the next edition. Theater der Welt is held once every three years in a different city in Germany, with a different curator and different team.

As curator, I never work with themes, and with Theater der Welt the title itself is the theme. Theater der Welt means Theatre of the World. It is a huge theme, and I want to take it literally.

My big concern in Europe now is that everything is closing up again, and the borders are coming up again. Nationalist feelings are rising.

For me it's very important to present "artists" rather than "work". I want to present artists who come from all over the world. When I look at Europe as a whole, I see that international circulation of the arts is decreasing. For example, in Holland there is hardly any international circulation. In Germany, I am sorry to say, there is not as much circulation as before. France, on the other hand, is actually doing better now. England is getting more isolated. International circulation is more the exception today, whereas it should be an everyday thing.

TDW wants to open things up internationally. And I prefer to make selections based on the artists—on strong personalities—rather than on specific productions. I want to invite people with different visions and to have them gather in the same place, at the same time. Bringing together people with different visions on society and the world creates a big, and hopefully inspiring, clash of visions.

### As for Theater der Welt, can you give us a specific idea what kind of work you want to have in the Festival?

It is called Theater der Welt, but I am not interested in strictly a "theater" festival. I want to make an arts festival, because when you talk about contemporary theater, what is the borderline between theater, music, dance and visual arts? I believe that what's important is to present interesting personalities, more than presenting the forms in which they work.

So, first of all, the festival should be not only theater. And secondly, I want to focus on very, very contemporary work, not mainstream or traditional work.

Maybe I should say something more now about the need to be very international and to link with non-Western culture. In 2010, Essen will become a "European Cultural Capital," and as a result, the region is concentrating a lot on itself. Because this "PCultural Capital" program has become a marketing thing in which cities promote themselves and their region. I think that's okay. But, Theater der Welt is something else. And, in this context, it becomes even more important that we come in with a program that is radically international, and one that makes an artistic statement.

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フェスティバルのアイデンティティとは？

Do you have any particular companies, works or artists that you have already decided to invite to Theater der Welt in 2010?

Yes, some have been decided. And there are some that I am developing now. For instance, I would like to set up an opera with a Mexican director. After Japan, I will go to Mexico for discussions with him. It is an opera by a German Baroque composer named Graun, who wrote an opera on the Aztec Emperor Montezuma. This Mexican director is a musician himself and he loves baroque music.

I will also invite some artists from abroad to reflect on the region. Essen and the whole Ruhr area had been very industrialized with coalmines and the heavy metal industry. The industries died and the population decreased, but the industrial architecture is still there and it is amazingly beautiful. Many buildings have been restored and given a cultural designation. But the structures are also so immense that you have to be a strong artist to cope with them.

As with most festivals, will you be inviting existing productions and also commissioning new works?

I invite both existing and new works, but I never have works created for a festival on a commission basis. Real artists know very well what they want to do. I invite artists to do what they have to do, and then when necessary we provide support to realize it. It may be new creations or existing works. I never commission people to make something just for one festival. Nowadays, everybody wants new works, premieres, exclusivity. But an artistic work should have a life. It should be played and performed and develop by performing and confronting different audiences. But now all the curators want new stuff. It has become a terror of novelty, and that kills artists.

Your long career in European festivals has certainly given you a lot of insights. What do you think of the state of festivals in Europe today? How do you feel about the trends or currents that the festivals seem to be moving toward?

Well, everything becomes festival now. Even theaters organize festivals all the time. And again, it is this kind of need to label, and to make a package that sells well. There is an over-saturation of festivals.

With regard to festivals, you seem to have an alternative vision. Normally, the idea of holding a theater festival involves a large marketing aspect. But, a festival should also be substantial like you said. However, that takes a long time, a lot of thinking and a lot of energy.

No, it takes a radical position and the will to resist. And it takes the desire to defend the artist and his/her work. To fight for their position in our societies, to refuse to allow art to be part of an entertainment industry. If the only ambition were to attract as many people as possible, we could just leave it all to the bookkeepers of this world.

The art world is not courageous enough to resist pressures from all sides—economical, political, or marketing or whatever; even aesthetics. If the situation has become what it is today, we are not victims. We are co-responsible.

What are the implications of the financial crisis in Europe. There should be two sides of it. One is that because of the crisis social problems are more visible, and artists are forced into dealing more with social issues. Another aspect is that the financial crisis makes artists afraid that arts subsidies will decrease, and thus they will become willingly to succumb to government aims.

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Art is per definition political. Always. Crisis or not. Even in its denial. For some the crisis will be an eye opener. And regarding the decreasing subsidies: there is always prostitution in the arts, like there is prostitution all over. You will feel where the real artists are.