

keõja Think Tank – Touring network for the Nordic-Baltic region

Round table discussion in ICE HOT Helsinki 2012 (Helsinki, FI)
12 December 2012

MEETING REPORT 12/12/2012

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1. Introduction

Think tanks are activities where a certain theme or topic is discussed and elaborated by leaders and professionals from different fields and with different viewpoints. Think tanks gather competent and motivated people asking them to analyze different issues within the scope of the overall theme or topic.

Dance Info Finland is organizing two Think Tank activities within the keõja 2012-2015 project:

- keõja Think Tank: Sustainable strategies for the Nordic-Baltic dance field
- keõja Think Tank: Touring network for the Nordic-Baltic region

These keõja Think Tanks work towards finding concrete action plans, suggestions and recommendations for improved practices in order to develop the infrastructure of the dance field in the Nordic and Baltic countries.

The Nordic and Baltic countries have different kinds of national touring activities for performing arts, but the area is lacking a joint touring network for dance, that would encompass the whole Nordic-Baltic region. The value and need of such a network has been discussed for a long time.

The goal of the keõja Touring Think Tank is to plan and build on a touring network for dance for the Nordic-Baltic region.

The keõja Touring Think Tank will meet several times during 2012–2014. During that time representatives of Nordic and Baltic venues and festivals will meet and work towards the above-mentioned goal.

1.1. Think Tank kick-off in ICE HOT Helsinki

The first round table discussion for the keđja Touring Think Tank was organized December 12, 2012 in Helsinki, Finland during the ICE HOT Nordic Dance Platform. The discussion took place from 12:00 to 17:00 at the Theatre Academy.

Moderator:

Alan Rivett, director, Warwick Arts Centre, and chair, Dance Touring Partnership, (UK)

Participants:

Eva Broberg, producer, Dansens Hus, Stockholm (SE)

Anne-Sofie Ericsson, general manager, SITE Sweden, Stockholm (SE)

Maija Eränen, producer, Zodiak – Center for New Dance, Helsinki (FI)

Maiken Garder, producer, Dansearena Nord, Hammerfest (NO)

Gunnar Gunnsteinsson, manager, SL – Association of Independent Theatres in Iceland, Reykjavik (IS)

Audronis Imbrasas, director, Lithuanian Dance Information Centre and Arts Printing House, Vilnius (LT)

Jørgen Knudsen, artistic director, DanseFestival Barents, Hammerfest (NO)

Harri Kuorelahti, artistic director, Zodiak – Center for New Dance, Helsinki (FI)

Siri Leonardsen, program and production manager, Baerum Kulturhus, Baerum (NO)

Halla Ólafsdóttir, artistic director, Reykjavik Dance Festival (IS)

Tomas Persson Carlberg, touring coordinator, Atalante, Gothenburg (SE)

Anu Rajala-Erkut, artistic planner, Regional Dance Center for Eastern Finland, Kuopio (FI)

Saskia Wieringa, producer, Dansens Hus, Oslo (NO)

The round table discussion was organized and hosted by **Katarina Lindholm** from Dance Info Finland.

2. Outline and agenda

The purpose of the round table discussion was to kickstart the process by mapping the possibilities of a Nordic-Baltic touring network for dance and posing the fundamental questions: what, for whom and how.

Venue and festival directors from all Nordic and Baltic countries were invited to join the round table discussion. The invitation expressed the wish that “all presenters with a keen interest in both building a touring network and being a part of it in the future will be able to attend.” The open invitation was distributed by Dance Info Finland as well as by all keđja partners in their respective countries. 19 people registered to the discussion and 13 people participated.

Moderator Alan Rivett had prepared the discussion in beforehand and the participants had received some questions to think about for the discussion.

- What excites or motivates you currently about programming contemporary dance?
- What, for you, might be the benefits of collaborating with a Nordic-Baltic dance touring network?
- Do you belong to any existing local, regional, national networks that provide a model for such a touring network?
- What do you think the challenges might be in establishing such a network across national boundaries?
- Do you know of any models of collaboration that could be “borrowed” as a model for a new network?
- Would your organization be willing to provide resources; skills, people, money or time to the development of a touring network?
- What would be your “fantasy program” for your venue/festival if such a network existed?
- Who benefits?

3. Round table discussion

The meeting was started by a brief introduction of the Think Tank activities as well as the overall keõja 2012–2015 project. After this, a presentation round took place, during which the participants as well as the moderator not only introduced themselves and their organizations, but also shared some experiences of and reflections on touring and networks in general.

A quick overview shows that most of the represented organizations were venues or production houses, many of which also have a regional task. Only two representatives of festival organizations were present, but on the other hand many of the other organizations also runs a festival. While the Nordic countries were all represented, with the exception of Denmark, only one Baltic representative was present.

The main questions addressed during the day were the following:

- What is the passion behind starting a touring network?
- Which are the benefits of a touring network?
- Which are the challenges of a touring network?
- Does any good models for a touring network exist?
- What would the network look like structurally?

3.1 Finding the passion for starting a touring network

The discussion was started by finding out what the individual passions behind starting a touring network were. According to Rivett, “a network exists on individual passions that are shared in some way”. Being clear and have consensus on why it is important to build a touring network was considered to be especially important when dealing with funding. The question was first discussed in smaller groups, who came up with statements expressing the shared passion.

The statements were the following:

- Meeting point between artists and audience where they share emotional/sensory experiences
- A space that supports continuity, generates the sharing of knowledge, artistic practice and resources
- We wish: a longer life for productions; to help the artists with practical touring and nourish the artistic work and relation building; to widen the perspective for our audiences; to share knowledge and competencies with partners and participants

The statements were then discussed together. When looking at them from a funding perspective (i.e. how convincing they would be when presented to a funding line), Rivett felt that the first one was too vague and would require a shared definition of what dance is. The second and the third statement raised questions of for whom such a network would be – for audiences or artists.

3.2 Identifying the benefits, possible structures and challenges

All kinds of possible **benefits** of having a touring network were mapped out and listed. The list ended up including both the organizations’ and artists’ points of view as well as an audience perspective. The artists and organizations would benefit from *professional development* and *increased professionalism* on the dance field, *increased audience awareness*, *extended knowledge of artistic work and other upcoming artists*, the chance for *local artists to work in international settings* and, on the other hand, *bringing in international artists to contribute to the creativity of the local community*. The *reduction and/or sharing of costs* were easily identified as a concrete benefit. The audiences, on the other hand, would benefit from *participatory activities* such as workshops, and *increased variety and diversity*.

Also *quality* was seen as a benefit of a touring network, but the word itself stirred some discussion due to the many issues around it. It was pointed out that when a network of like-minded is formed, it is easy to become exclusive. The criteria of measuring and defining quality should be defined among the partners because a functioning network should find consensus on what they seek for and what quality means for them. In other words, the structure of the network contributes to defining quality. Furthermore, it was concluded that quality comes with trust and respect.

Different **structural options** were looked at more closely when comparing different existing networks and models. While in Sweden a rather functioning and organized national touring network for dance, *Dancenet Sweden*, exists, there is a lack of established national touring networks for dance in the other countries. In Norway and Finland there has been some attempts of forming a touring network or organizing a tour of one or several productions in partner organizations. The Finnish and Norwegian *national networks of regional dance or culture centers* have coordinated the touring.

Of international or cross-border networks for example *Aerowaves*, *Modul-Dance*, *European Dance House Network*, *APAP* as well as *keđja* were brought up as examples of existing networks.

The discussion on structural issues focused largely on considering the pros and cons of formal and informal networks. Informal networks are in general based on personal relationships and high mutual trust in for example programming choices. As examples of functioning informal networks for example *Bergen International Theatre (BIT)* and *the networks in the Baltic countries* came up. A formal structure was, however, considered to be more equal as informal networks might suffer from different kinds of hierarchies and instability. Furthermore, a formal network was deemed better when applying for funding.

The structural issues also came up when discussing different **challenges** in forming a touring network. Besides the choice between *formal and informal structures*, also questions of *size and span* of the network as well as its *openness* were brought up. The question was raised whether local structures should be in order first before trying to set up a cross-border structure, which was seen as an even bigger challenge. Also *sustainability* was mentioned as a challenge.

Challenges were also seen in many kinds of *national differences*. Such are for example differences in *national funding systems* and *accountability* as well as *structural and political issues*.

The participants easily identified many concrete challenges in finding enough *resources*, such as *time and money*, *human resources* and *technical resources*.

Also the before mentioned issues concerning *defining quality* were restated when speaking of more content-related challenges.

4. Outcome and suggestions

Summing up the discussion of the day, a few topics stood out as recurring questions. For example whom the network is for (for the audience, for the artists, or for 'ourselves') and whose interests it should serve came up on several occasions. However, the participants generally agreed that a touring network is needed in order to benefit both artists' development and audience development.

Also the structure of the network and related organizational issues, first and foremost the choice between a formal and an informal structure, were considered crucial. It was proposed that an options appraisal report or recommendations would be gathered, although many already voiced the opinion that the structure should be formal. When discussing the working methods, it was proposed that reporting back should be a vital part of the working process.

Some other suggestions that came up at the end of the round table discussion were the need of international input, all the while keeping a Nordic-Baltic priority, as well as the need of communicating and knowing more about each other's plans.

4. Continuation plan

It was agreed that a mailing list of all interested organizations and their representatives should be put together for internal communication purposes. It was felt that the potentially interested venues and festivals should be mapped out in order to understand the size and also the context of a touring network in the future. It was agreed that Dance Info Finland as the Think Tank organizer would take these actions.

It was agreed that before the next meeting decisions should be made regarding the size and “map” of the network as well as whether the structure should be formal or informal. Furthermore a list of committed participants should be made.

The time and place for the next meeting was briefly discussed. A meeting before the next keõja Encounter in Klaipeda, Lithuania, in June 2013 was proposed as a natural meeting time and place. It was furthermore considered to be important to have all interested participants present at the next meeting.

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Further information:

www.kedja.net

Katarina Lindholm, katarina.lindholm@danceinfo.fi, +358 9 612 1812



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