

An Argument for Mobility

✦ Dragan Klaic

✦ 06-07-2002

In artistic circles and among theatre professionals, there's no need to make a case for why travel is so important as far as artistic development and advancement are concerned. Defending the immeasurable benefits that come from the opportunity to go abroad and observe, produce, perform, experiment, debate and reflect with one's peers, or to confront an unknown public and register the reactions of unknown critics, is unnecessary. However, it takes extra effort to find an argument that can satisfy politicians and funding bodies, for whom such opportunities usually require justification. The common misgiving is that their money is simply financing cultural tourism in disguise. Perhaps this sort of misunderstanding is at the root of why artistic mobility across borders has not received the support it deserves in Europe.

Some European states have developed programmes to support travel, and some have not. Some important sources have disappeared recently. The European Cultural Foundation in Amsterdam has terminated its small but efficient Apex program, and the Open Society Institute (a network of Soros foundations in Central and Eastern Europe) is rapidly reducing its cultural programme and, thus, its sponsorship of travel between Eastern and Western Europe and among Eastern European nations. The Roberto Cimetta fund has yet to achieve its modest targets in encouraging exchange with Southern Europe and Mediterranean nations.

This current situation of declining support makes it all the more urgent to convince the European Commission to take the question of mobility seriously and integrate it in its action. Support for travel was not favoured as such in the old Kaleidoscope programme and is not a separate priority in the ongoing Culture 2000 programme. Originally envisaged for the period 2000-2004, Culture 2000 is to be extended until the end of 2006. It will continue to support a few pilot initiatives within the same meagre budget of € 33,4 million a year. Now more than ever, it is time to try again to convince the DG Education and Culture, the European Parliament and the Council of Ministers to make artistic mobility one of the objectives of the pilot initiatives.

IETM's 1990 paper "Theatre and Dance for Europe in the '90s", outlined the

advantages of an integrated fellowship system with quick and easy application procedures (that was 12 years ago... and today we are still arguing the same points!). Such a system could be publicized through a good interactive web site. Management and the awarding of grants could be contracted out to an internationally oriented agency, network or foundation of proven credibility. Such an enterprise could provide more than 500 individual travel grants a year for less than 1 million. Eligibility should include candidates from EU countries, and from EU neighbour nations along the Mediterranean, in south-eastern Europe and the Caucasus.

After September 11th, it is all the more urgent to shape a climate of trust and cultural security in Europe and beyond, as a means to combat ignorance, prejudice and xenophobia, and thus build a stronger sense of intercultural ties among artists, cultural administrators and audiences. What greater step towards this goal is there than encouraging the mobility of artists in their work, thus creating more extensive opportunities for creative encounters, experimentation, and collaborative adventures? Even if the strictly artistic benefits of such mobility fail to sway decision-makers, the political benefits should be evident enough.

Dragan Klaic

Professor of Theater Studies at the University of Amsterdam and President of the European Forum for Arts and Heritage (EFAH/FEAP)