

The future of the Bourla Schouwburg, Antwerp (BE)

2/7/2014

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Original wooden structure and machinery on the two lower levels under the stage

Alarmed by a feasibility study, commissioned by the City of Antwerp, that proposed the destruction of the entirely preserved historic stage machinery from 1834 in the Bourla Schouwburg in Antwerp, OISTAT – the International organization of scenographers, theatre architects and theatre technicians – and York University, Toronto (Canada), organized an international conference in Antwerp on 12–15 June 2014,

entitled “**Wood and canvas (and rabbit glue) in the modern world**” [1](#). Almost 100 experts from all over the world attended the conference, listening to fifteen lecturers who presented their findings concerning historic stage machineries in Europe and their possible uses in today’s theatre.

Additionally, PERSPECTIV – the Association of historic theatres in Europe – had nominated the stage machinery of the Bourla Schouwburg for the “**7 most endangered heritage sites in Europe**”, and on 5 May 2014, Europa Nostra – the European heritage organization – included it in this list [2](#), causing a considerable stir.

The **Bourla Schouwburg** is one of the most important historic theatres in Belgium. Designed by the city architect Pierre Bourla, it opened in 1834. The auditorium was enlarged and redesigned by Pieter Dens in 1865, giving it the gilded look of a French opera building of the time. The structure of the building and the unique rounded entrance and foyer area by Bourla as well as the stage machinery by Philastre & Cambon were not touched and have been preserved until today. In 1903, a few empty spaces on the outside of the building were filled with additional rooms without changing the appearance of the building. The stage machinery, entirely made of wood, iron rails and ropes, fills two levels in the attic, the side walls of the stage area and the three levels below the stage. Entirely preserved (although in part dislocated), it is the last remaining historic stage machinery in Belgium. Hence the national and international outcry when the results of the feasibility study became known.

[1 http://woodandcanvas.info.yorku.ca](http://woodandcanvas.info.yorku.ca)

[2 http://www.europanostra.org/2014-list](http://www.europanostra.org/2014-list)

Welcome

This blog is about the still existing historic theatre buildings in Europe and topics connected with them. Every expert on the matter is invited to contribute an article to this blog. It is called "Theatres Route" because it wants to offer a journey through the world of historic theatres. Suggestions for a real journey can be found on www.europeanroute.info

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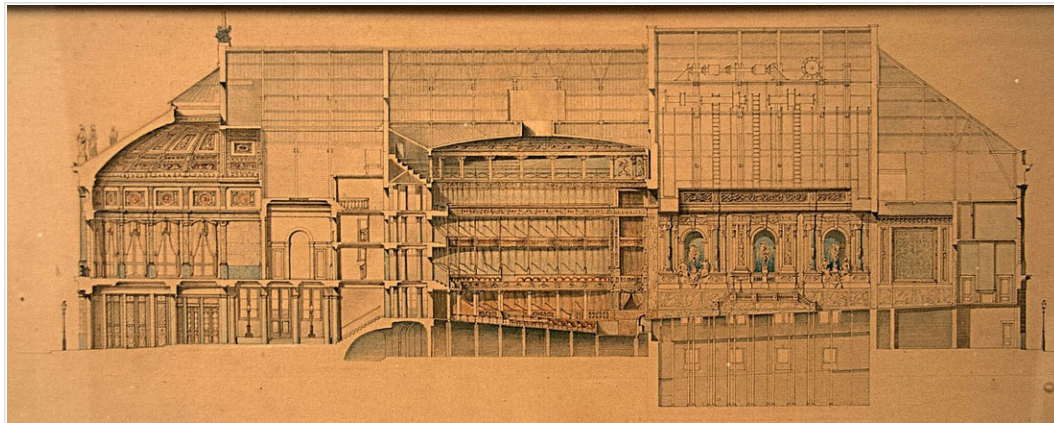
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Section through of the Bourla Schouwburg before 1865

It must be said that the **feasibility study** is not really a study on what is feasible in a historic theatre. Its task is defined as being a “study on the transformation of the Bourla Schouwburg into a modern theatre infrastructure” ³. It looks at a list of changes proposed by the resident theatre company Toneelhuis and develops three different options:

- A) meet the needs of Toneelhuis by removing the historic stage machinery, flattening the raked stage floor and raking the parterre in the auditorium to the level of the first balcony;
- B) answer some of the needs of Toneelhuis and some of the needs of the historic building by replacing the already out-of-date modern machinery from 1993 with new stage machinery, again squeezing it between the parts of the historic stage machinery that shall be preserved in the attic (but not used), plus removing the historic stage machinery in the understage;
- C) meet the needs of the historic building by restoring its historic stage machinery and using the building as a living theatre museum.

The feasibility study was completed in April 2013, but the City of Antwerp did not publish it, although it concerns drastic changes in a public building and certainly merits a public debate. During the conference this June, the Chief of cabinet of the Alderman for Culture agreed to now publish the feasibility study without further delay.

When Europa Nostra published the shortlist for the “7 most endangered ...”, the Artistic director of Toneelhuis went on TV and declared that all the historic stage machinery had to go, so that the Bourla Schouwburg would finally offer the company the luxurious working conditions they found in the modern theatres they are touring to. ⁴ Almost a year earlier, just after the feasibility study had been completed, the chairman of the Board of Toneelhuis had already declared that the only acceptable solution would be option A). ⁵

Notwithstanding this, the management of the Bourla Schouwburg kindly offered guided tours of the theatre at the beginning of the “Wood and canvas ...” conference, including the stage machinery. Subsequently, no representative from the theatre came to hear the lectures, where so much could be learned about functions and possibilities of the historic stage machinery. But on the last day of the conference, a delegation consisting of the Artistic director Guy Cassiers of Toneelhuis, Marc Lambert of TTAS, one of the consulting companies that had prepared the feasibility study, Jan Rombouts, Chief of cabinet of the Schepen for Culture of the City of Antwerp, and the theatre historian professor Frank Peeters from the University of Antwerp joined the event for an open discussion of their plans for the Bourla Schouwburg. Also present from Toneelhuis were Freek Boey (Technical director), Luk Van den Bosch (Managing director), Koen Deveux (Stage manager & Safety advisor) and Fabienne Arras (External relations). The discussion was moderated by Staf Vos of Het Firmament, the Flemish Centre of Expertise for the Heritage of the Performing Arts.

³ „Opdracht: Haalbaarheidsstudie in functie van de transitie van de Bourla Schouwburg naar een hedendaagse theaterinfrastructuur“

⁴ 6 March 2014 <http://deredactie.be/cm/vrtnieuws/videozone/programmas/journaal/2.32378?video=1.1901764>

⁵ De Standaard, 22 August 2013; http://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20130821_00702378



Historic and modern machinery side by side in the roof area above the stage

The representative of the City of Antwerp, Jan Rombouts, stated that the city government wanted the resident company Toneelhuis to continue its excellent work and the Bourla Schouwburg to continue to exist. The intention of the city government was to “adapt” the Bourla Schouwburg for contemporary theatre, he said.

The Artistic director of Toneelhuis, Guy Cassiers, developed his idea that a theatre is a place where dreams come true. If a given theatre building cannot serve this purpose anymore, one has to rethink the past, i.e. the heritage, to develop a possible future. His benchmark for the further development is La Scala opera in Milan which is historic in all its public parts, but has a totally new stage tower and appendix (both 2004).

The representative of TTAS, Marc Lambert, underlined that it would not be possible to combine a fully functioning historic stage machinery with a new modern machinery because of lack of space. The pragmatic solution would therefore be to transfer the entire historic machinery to a new glass tower and theatre museum, where it could be seen day and night, and use the then empty space above and below the stage at the Bourla Schouwburg to install a new modern machinery (the existing modern machinery from 1993 must be replaced soon because it is out of date, unsafe etc.). He conceded that the City of Antwerp did not have the money to do this, and the Flemish government would not allocate money anymore to creating new museums. So it would be advisable to set up a foundation and in the meantime store all the parts of the dismantled historic stage machinery. As a benchmark for the envisioned museum, he named the MIAT in Gent. ⁶

⁶ The MIAT is probably not the best example as regards theatre heritage, as the museum wants to get rid as soon as possible of the remains of the stage machinery from the Grand Théâtre (today Vlamse Opera) that was given to it after the historic stage machinery there had been almost completely destroyed in 1993. On the other hand, the MIAT is not a theatre museum, so this accidental part of its collection is indeed “useless” for it. TTAS thinks of the MIAT as a benchmark because it is a great museum of industrial heritage (www.miat.gent.be).



Marc Lambert of TTAS, seated left of Guy Cassiers, discussing with Staf Vos of Het Firmament (standing) and the scenographer Jean-Guy Lecat (standing right)

During the general discussion, it was pointed out that removing the historic machinery would in effect mean to dismantle the complete stage tower, from the basement and the walls to the top of the roof, because the structure that carries the individual parts of the machinery is also historic and an integral part of the whole

technical construction; so we are not talking about transferring a few wheels etc., but about dismantling and re-erecting an entire part of the building. In order to present the fully functioning stage machinery construction in a glass tower, it would also be necessary to build an auditorium etc. in front of it: by and large a second Bourla Schouwburg. Removing a historic stage machinery from a theatre in order to re-integrate it later or to present it elsewhere has been tried already a few times. And whenever it was tried, it only led to the destruction of the machinery (e.g. in Badia Polesine, Italy).

It was also pointed out that one can create almost any effect of the modern theatre with the historic stage machinery, as Jerome Maeckelbergh had demonstrated in a stage model the day before, and that the running costs of a modern machinery are much higher than those of a wooden machinery. On top of that, the modern equipment has to be replaced every 30 years, whereas the historic machinery can work forever, because it is simple and easy to maintain. Not to speak of the costs: to put in modern power flying machinery will cost 6 to 7 times more than reactivating the historic machinery. The participants generally held that it would be much more creative and attractive to use the historic stage machinery in the theatre it had been designed for.

Asked what his ideal stage and theatre would look like, if he had all the choices, Guy Cassiers of Toneelhuis answered that he would simply like to stay in the Bourla Schouwburg, because the citizens of Antwerp identified with this building, and that he would leave all decisions to the city.

When the discussion turned to the plan (included in the feasibility study) of levelling the stage and, as a result, raking the parterre of the auditorium to the height of the dress circle, effectively eliminating the first balcony and thereby drastically changing the architecture of the auditorium, the representatives of the city, the theatre and TTAS declined to comment.

Apart from this instance, it was a very good and serious discussion, and one may hope that the representatives of the city and the theatre keep thinking about what they have heard rather than pressing on blindly with the one option they have favoured most: the de facto destruction of large parts of the Bourla Schouwburg.



The level just below the stage is filled with chariots that once moved the wings on stage

Personally, I believe the problem is not so much about historic stage machinery versus modern machinery, but about **accepting limitations** and **exploiting potentials**.

Every building, old or new, has its **limitations**. When you can work within these limitations, you feel happy. When you are unhappy with the limitations, you can try to stretch them, and any building will allow this to a certain extent. But there comes a point where stretching the limitations means damaging the building. That is the point when you have to decide whether to destroy the building, at least in part, or to move out and find a new building that really fulfils your needs.

Toneelhuis has tried to stretch the limitations of the Bourla Schouwburg by working around the historic

stage machinery, by dislocating parts of it, by introducing a scaffold in the auditorium to improve seating, etc. It has now reached a point where the proposed changes, which the management deems necessary, will destroy parts of the building. The Bourla Schouwburg has been a protected building since 1937, and destroying even small parts of it is neither legally possible nor desirable. Consequently, the solution for Toneelhuis would be to look for a new venue where all artists and technicians can be happy. But at present, the management seems to avoid thinking in this direction, at least as an alternative to the legally impossible and destructive proposals in the feasibility study.

Exploiting the potential means using the historic building in a way suggested by the building itself. In every historic building, not only in a historic theatre, the first task of the owner and anyone living and working in it is to understand the building: why it is there, why it was organized the way it is organized, how it works internally, what the decorations mean, and much more. When you do not understand the building, you are always in danger of accidentally destroying it. And what is lost that way will be lost not only for anyone today, but also for all future generations.

When there is a historic stage machinery, for example, finding out all about it, discovering the special aesthetics it was designed to serve and teaching the old machinery new tricks is the obvious thing to do. What kind of artists, what sort of technicians does Toneelhuis have, one is inclined to ask, who have had unique opportunities in front of them for the last twenty years, possibilities no other theatre in Belgium offers and only very few theatres in Europe still have – and they don't exploit these opportunities. Why aren't they creative in this respect, too?



Participants of the conference looking at level 2 and 3 of the understage during a guided tour

The truth is that Toneelhuis is not interested in the potential of the Bourla Schouwburg. Toneelhuis is interested in creating touring productions and showing them everywhere: in Antwerp, around the country, and worldwide. Toneelhuis has been doing this with great success for many years, and every measure should be taken to ensure that it can continue its work for many years to come.

The only problem is: in Antwerp, Toneelhuis is working in the wrong building. Toneelhuis wants a flat stage and 72 flybars above the stage, because most theatres they tour to have a flat stage and this many flybars – whereas in the Bourla Schouwburg there are a raked stage and only 24 flybars, a number that cannot be augmented because the historic stage machinery is in the way. Secondly, visiting productions coming to the Bourla Schouwburg from theatres with a flat stage etc. find it difficult to adapt to the historic stage. Thirdly, Toneelhuis wants a different auditorium, one where everyone has a perfect view of the action on stage, whereas in the Bourla Schouwburg, as in many historic theatres, some spectators are looking more in the direction of the people on the opposite balcony; an auditorium without balconies, completely raked front to back, would therefore be ideal.

Given all these necessities, the obvious solution would be to give Toneelhuis a modern theatre, equipped

with everything necessary for their work. This could be the modern Stadsschouwburg next door, or a large empty hall that will be redesigned for the purpose, or a new theatre built from scratch. The feasibility study calculates about 14 million Euros for “adapting” (i.e. ruining) the historic theatre. For that sum, the city could just as well redesign the Stadsschouwburg or an existing empty factory or a similar venue.

And what would happen then with the Bourla Schouwburg? We keep it as it is (which, in the end, is the meaning of “protected monument”), reactivate the historic stage machinery and create a programme exclusively for this theatre, using all its potential. This would be attractive for the people of Antwerp, and it would also be attractive for many tourists and theatre lovers from abroad who come to see something special, something they can only experience in the Bourla Schouwburg.

Author: Carsten Jung

Carsten Jung is Secretary-General of PERSPECTIV – Association of Historic Theatres in Europe

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Jerome Maeckelbergh →

9/7/2014 08:22:23 pm

I appreciate very much this clear explanation, and hope that the concerning decision makers will take the time to read it. Meanwhile, theatrEurope vzw, as local co-organizer of the conference "Wood and Canvas", will try to make a digital publication of the different presentations at the conference. This will take a little time, as besides the extra work, we need also permission from the presenters to publish whatsoever.

We thank Carsten Jung and PERSPECTIV for their valued commitment.

Jerome Maeckelbergh, secretary theatrEurope vzw

[Reply](#)

Jerome Maeckelbergh

25/1/2016 07:49:29 am

There is also a very informative 12 page article in the USITT td&t magazine summer 2015 on the "Wood and Canvas" conference by Margaret Mitchell, professor of Theatre Arts at the University of the Incarnate Word in San Antonio (Texas). You can consult it at http://www.nxtbook.com/nxtbooks/hickmanbrady/tdt_2015summer/index.php?startid=3#/14

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Jerome Maeckelbergh

25/1/2016 08:12:19 am

Margaret Mitchell's article "Wood and Canvas (and Rabbit Glue) in the Modern World" has been chosen to receive the Herbert D. Greggs Award 2015 granted by the TD&T editorial staff and the USITT Publications Committee as special recognition for the quality of research and writing.

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