

## **A centre of expertise as service provider for performing arts heritage in Belgium**

### ***How a complementary network policy can make a real difference to heritage in society***

*Belgium has a flourishing performing arts sector, which is both locally anchored and internationally respected. Names like Jan Fabre, Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker and Wim Vandekeybus are known all over the world. Consequently, performing arts heritage is an important element of cultural heritage in Belgium. A high quality, forward-looking cultural heritage policy ought to answer the question of what is needed to conserve performing arts heritage in a thoughtful and lasting manner, to pass it on to future generations and to facilitate its use and reuse to the maximum possible extent. The complementary network model, as encouraged by the government in Flanders,<sup>1</sup> leads to a coordinated approach to shared needs and issues. Various types of organization, including ‘centres of expertise’, have joined forces in a quest for overarching solutions in areas like digitization, preservation of performing arts archives and collections, and the safeguarding of intangible aspects of performing arts heritage. Het Firmament is the centre of expertise for performing arts heritage, which plays a connecting and coordinating role. It seeks, through a network perspective, to reduce the fragmentation of cultural heritage efforts relating to the performing arts in Flanders, to make them more resilient, and to bolster their international position.*

The Cultural Heritage Decree came into operation in Flanders in 2008, with the key objectives of caring for cultural heritage, making it accessible to the public and supporting heritage processes. In addition to museums, archives, heritage libraries and local heritage units, a new instrument was created in the shape of several ‘centres of expertise’. The Flemish Government introduced these service-providing, coordinating organizations in response to demand for specialist knowledge on particular themes (religious, agrarian, performing arts heritage, etc.) or specializations (e.g. digitization and intangible heritage). International appreciation of Flemish performing arts and their heritage prompted the Flemish Government to begin funding Het Firmament in 2012 as a centre of expertise for the cultural heritage of the performing arts in Flanders. This recognition reflected the experience built up by Het Firmament in the course of its history, dating back to 1968, when it began by focusing on puppet theatre.<sup>2</sup>

There has been increased international attention for intangible techniques and practices, since the approval of the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003). The convention paved the way for the recognition of cultural forms that previously had not, or only barely, been viewed as heritage. Sicilian puppet theatre, Indonesian Wayang puppet theatre and Japanese Bunraku theatre, for instance, were all placed on UNESCO’s Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Using ‘figure theatre’ as a case study, the Flemish Government took the initiative to explore the scope for safeguarding the hitherto little-known

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<sup>1</sup> Certain functions in Belgium are the responsibility of the Federal Government, while others – including culture – are organised on a regional basis and fall under the aegis of the Flemish Government. Het Firmament is based in Flanders – the northern, Dutch-speaking part of Belgium – which means the organisation is subject to Flemish Government legislation (and funding rules).

<sup>2</sup> Jef Contryn founded Het Firmament in 1968 as ‘De Centrale voor Poppenspel’ (Puppet Theatre Centre). It was intended as an umbrella organisation for the Puppet Theatre School and a planned figure theatre museum, which has still not been created. The structure and name were changed in 2002 to Het Firmament vzw, (t)Huis voor poppen-, figuren-, en objectentheater (literally and in full ‘Het Firmament, House and Home for Puppet, Figure and Object Theatre’). This was shortened in turn to ‘Het Firmament’ in 2012.

heritage of this form of theatre in Flanders and to give it a contemporary interpretation. Through this pilot project, Het Firmament helped establish the heritage paradigm and awareness in a sector that is engaged first and foremost in making theatre and does not have heritage as its core concern. Using the knowledge and expertise gained with regard to the heritage of puppet theatre, Het Firmament has reached out to the broader performing arts sector and has rolled out the developed strategy more widely.

From an international perspective, Het Firmament has systematically continued to build its expertise in various aspects of performing arts heritage. We have used this as the basis for developing a specific set of services to support anyone involved with theatre and dance heritage as they address practical problems. These services are mostly offered free of charge, in a variety of forms and for different target groups. Choreographers, actors and theatre and dance companies – both professional and amateur – can approach us with their questions, as can museum staff, local heritage volunteers, teachers and academics. We use training courses, customized guidance, on-site visits, meeting days and the sharing of information via different channels to bring the expertise of organizations and individuals together and to ensure that it also flows readily to others. This reflects the fact that while there is an immense amount of expertise – including internationally – not everyone knows where it can be found and who is currently engaged with it. A centre of expertise makes the difference by connecting experts and expertise within the heritage field or by forging links with individuals involved in education, international organizations and the academic world. Where this does not occur spontaneously, overall expertise within a particular field can be enriched by putting an expert in set restoration or lighting, say, in contact with a digitization expert or a theatre historian. Professionals and amateurs from the performing arts field remain at the heart of the network. Het Firmament operates as a broker and facilitator in this cultural heritage expertise network for the performing arts, and in so doing promotes a sustainable heritage function.

This is also the reason why we, as an organization, invest in dialogue and consultation with the companies and performers themselves. The solutions we pursue are based on the specific problems they face. On 10 September 2015, for instance, we organized a meeting day in Brussels with the title *#DocumentingPerformingArts – How to Capture Creation and Performance*. We wanted to reflect on questions like: do the archives that performers and companies assemble spontaneously contain the desired material? Would it be useful to create additional documentation before, during or after the production? How might this promote the transfer and study of ephemeral artistic practices? And how can this remain feasible for performers and companies? The ephemeral character of theatre and dance frequently spurs people to look for ways of recording and documenting aspects of the rehearsal process, the performance itself, or its impact. An audience of performing and visual artists, heritage representatives, academics and interested parties spent the day in discussion. A detailed report, translated into English, is available from Het Firmament's website, together with transcriptions of the theme panels and of the debate (carried out in English).<sup>3</sup> Het Firmament is

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<sup>3</sup> See: [http://www.hetfirmament.be/files/Artikels-en-publicaties-HF/2015\\_verslag\\_documentingperformingarts\\_en\\_def.pdf](http://www.hetfirmament.be/files/Artikels-en-publicaties-HF/2015_verslag_documentingperformingarts_en_def.pdf). The transcriptions of the conversations within the theme panels, some of which took place in English, can be consulted at the website ([http://www.hetfirmament.be/files/Artikels-en-publicaties-HF/2015\\_verslag\\_documentingperformingarts\\_en\\_def.pdf](http://www.hetfirmament.be/files/Artikels-en-publicaties-HF/2015_verslag_documentingperformingarts_en_def.pdf)), as can the transcript of the debate, also carried

currently developing a working instrument to support companies and performing artists who want to document their creative process, performance, or its impact on the audience.

Performing arts heritage is not managed centrally in Flanders, and there is no museum or archive as yet, which prioritizes the incorporation of performing arts heritage. Het Firmament is actively committed, therefore, to tracing and describing archives and collections relating to the performing arts. This activity is needed if we are truly to encourage and inspire curators, artists and researchers, and to be able to launch publicly oriented initiatives. Because a great deal of fascinating heritage is spread throughout Flanders among different players in the arts and heritage field. The inclusion of adequate contextual information adds to the basic description of collections and makes it possible to map the relationships that exist between them, potentially revealing unexpected possibilities. As a preliminary step, we have made a number of the identified collections visible through our own website.<sup>4</sup> One particular challenge is tracing the intangible techniques, approaches and processes of the performing arts. An overview of the tangible and intangible heritage of the performing arts forms a necessary foundation for the further development of a properly founded policy on the management and transfer of that heritage. Take the choices surrounding storage policy and a global approach to the appraisal, selection and deaccession of performing arts heritage due to an acute lack of space or a death.

Choices of this kind ought to be made in a coordinated manner, in close collaboration with a variety of parties. The complementary network model encouraged by Flemish cultural heritage policy can provide inspiration internationally when devising, coordinating and implementing overarching strategies of this kind. The willingness to share knowledge is often present, but somebody has to be able to take a lead in integrating these instruments and making them widely deployable for different target groups. You will not, therefore, find many large-scale ad hoc prestige projects in Flanders. Not only because of the network idea, but also because of the use of taxpayers' money, which has to be deployed efficiently. Operating within a network and from an independent and neutral position, a centre of expertise can connect partners from different institutions, sectors and policy-making levels and make optimum use of their expertise.

The launch of the online toolbox TRACKS in June 2014, for instance, enabled us to join forces with PACKED vzw, the centre of expertise for digital heritage, and with various other heritage and arts partners, with the financial support of the Flemish Government. TRACKS stands (in Dutch) for 'Toolbox and Guidelines for Archive and Collection Conservation in the Arts Sector'.<sup>5</sup> We aim to use convenient tools and readily accessible information to encourage the arts sector – and not only the performing arts – to make a start themselves on conserving their archives and collections. In this regard, TRACKS is the basic tool for archive and collection conservation for the entire field of the arts: professionals as well as amateurs not only in the performing arts, but also in music, visual art, architecture and so on. Guidelines have also been developed, moreover, which are a precondition for artists and arts organizations wishing to apply for public subsidies. The network of centres of

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out in English ([http://www.hetfirmament.be/files/Artikels-en-publicaties-HF/2015\\_transcriptie\\_debat\\_documentingperformingarts.pdf](http://www.hetfirmament.be/files/Artikels-en-publicaties-HF/2015_transcriptie_debat_documentingperformingarts.pdf)).

<sup>4</sup> See: <http://www.hetfirmament.be/spotoperfgoed>

<sup>5</sup> See 'TRACKS, Toolbox & Richtlijnen voor Archief- & Collectiezorg in de Kunstensector', [www.projecttracks.be](http://www.projecttracks.be) (2014).

expertise and other related organizations that developed TRACKS organizes training, site visits, study days and so on. The website is therefore supported as a knowledge tool by (free) services, which means practical assistance can also be offered for the preservation of archives and collections. The 'safeguarding' of intangible heritage occurs in a similar, coordinated manner. An online platform for intangible cultural heritage ([www.immaterieelerfgoed.be](http://www.immaterieelerfgoed.be)) provides a readily accessible knowledge tool for this kind of heritage. A network of organizations, including Het Firmament, offers a parallel service to guide individuals and communities that want to pass on their intangible knowledge, customs and traditions to future generations.

Audiovisual archives are another concern for dance and theatre companies. Virtually all performing arts organizations currently manage recordings of their own performances and rehearsals (on VHS, DAT, Betacam, audio cassettes, etc.). These archives are not only important today in terms of promotion and revivals, they will also be critical in the future to the memory of the performing arts in Flanders. At present, they are difficult to access, even internally. Their survival is threatened, moreover, because they are stored on media that is no longer used and for which playback equipment is not available. A similar problem frequently occurs with the long-term preservation of digital archives and collections (also for non-audiovisual material). The digitization and conservation of audiovisual material is not, however, feasible for all performing arts organizations. Het Firmament, PACKED vzw (centre of expertise for digital heritage) and Kunstenpunt (support organization for visual arts, music and performing arts) have accepted this challenge in a centrally coordinated manner. The first step was to draw up an inventory of the performing arts sector's audiovisual archives. Research and surveys resulted in a catalogue of the archives of seventy-four performing arts organizations, which form a cross-section of the publicly funded performing arts sector. Together, they hold over 27 000 audiovisual items that need to be digitized. We then formed an alliance with the Flemish Institute for Archiving (VIAA), which the Flemish Government set up in 2012 to perform the long-term archiving of Flemish digital heritage and to make it readily available ([www.viaa.be](http://www.viaa.be)). Thanks to the inventory, the VIAA will start in 2016 to digitize audiovisual archives and to preserve the digital archives and collections of the Flemish performing arts sector. This material will be made available in due course for education and research purposes, and, of course, for the companies themselves. This represents an unbelievable advance in terms of preserving the memory of the performing arts in Flanders!

Initiatives of this kind are approached in a coordinated way through collaboration and networking, on the basis either of shared needs and issues (such as intangible heritage and digitization) or of a discipline-specific approach, with parties dedicated to particular aspects of performing arts heritage. Every centre of expertise represents a nexus; it is there to serve heritage organizations within the sector as well as other managers of cultural heritage, such as artists and arts organizations, for whom preservation of heritage is not necessarily a core task. A collaborative model like this, stretching from national to local level, is unique and effective, and offers the flexibility needed to respond to specific questions, needs or new trends. It creates space for experimentation and practical research. The 'complementary expertise network' model is the ideal tool with which to facilitate the far-reaching accumulation and sharing of expertise in Flanders and with international partners. Only then, can a heritage policy make a real difference to society and fulfil a useful, societal role. We very much hope that this will inspire policy-makers in other countries and encourage them to act.