“If You Find One Politician and Convince Him About the Importance of Dance for the Society, You Have Done a Lot.”

*Interview with Ingo Diehl, Director of Tanzplan Educational Programme*

Director Tanzplan Deutschland Educational Program (2005-2011) and Director of the MA Contemporary Dance Education program (MAztp) in Frankfurt

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Photo: Tomaž Črnej

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At a conference on dance pedagogy organised last October in Velenje by the Public Fund of the Republic of Slovenia (JSKD) – *Republic of Slovenia Public Fund for Cultural Activities*, Ingo Diehl presented the Tanzplan Deutschland programme. Tanzplan is a network project to which the German Kulturstiftung des Bundes (Federal Cultural Foundation: a branch of the German Ministry for Culture; the Slovene equivalent would be a public agency) assigned EUR 12.5 million. Between 2005 and 2010, Tanzplan made connections between at least 60 professional German groups and dance universities and other representatives of the German contemporary dance scene. The project continued with a discussion about how to connect the actors working in the dance field with politicians and other municipal representatives to determine what they wanted, what they missed and how to realise this integration project. Then they launched a call to which 14 cities applied, nine of the applicants were successful.

And the results: in Hamburg (in Kampnagel), rehearsal and office spaces were set up, Berlin focused on education (the city contributed an additional EUR 1.2 million), Dresden focused on residencies and Düsseldorf on social centres and the younger population. All they did was connect the existing dance organisations and institutions. Creating a dance archive also played an important role, as it became clear that the younger generations of artists did know a lot about recent dance history, thus the project focused on collecting and preserving dance documents and making them available. This part of the project also included a (substantially supported) project aimed at inviting artists to make reconstructions of contemporary dance performances. After the end of the Tanzplan project, those involved have maintained and continued their cooperation.
First, I would like to know how the German Federal Cultural Foundation, which was founded by the Ministry, functions. What is the role of politics and the Ministry in its activities and decision-making? But mostly, I would like to know how did you manage to raise the large sum of EUR 12.5 million for contemporary dance?

In 2002, the German Federal Cultural Foundation issued a call for the contemporary performing arts field, which, however, did not include contemporary dance. That’s why they started thinking about what could be done for dance. The Federal Cultural Foundation’s annual budget is EUR 38 million. It sounds like a lot, but the budget is small if you compare it with the budget of any German opera house, and even smaller if you consider the areas financed by the Foundation. What is important in the FCF is that the decision as to which programmes get support through a call is done by independent expert committees and not by the Ministry or the Minister.

This is where we differ. The role of expert committees in Slovenia is quite paradoxical: they consider, evaluate, propose, decide, but they are not the decision-makers, the Minister has the final say. The decision-making is in the hands of politics.

In Germany, we have developed a new structure: an association of organisations. If this association presented its own projects, we would encounter many more problems, the scene and society would scrutinise us much more critically. This initiative first established connections between all of the dance institutions and organisations. Of course, at first, all of them were thinking primarily about their own interests, emphasising their own importance and needs; but I was always saying that no one is going to lose anything, that together we will be stronger. We had to understand who we were, what our troubles were and what could be gained by working through an association of so many different organisations: each of them had to have a sense of contributing something that would be missing if they were not in, and of course, some sort of a promise of favourable outcomes of this kind of collaboration.

Tanzplan thus connected the already existing institutions and individuals. You haven’t invented anything new; you were communicating and building bridges.

In the framing of the educational program I invited professors from dance schools and academies and asked them what they wanted. I made a selection of names. At first, there was
not much interest; I also did not want to connect them around an idea or theme that I saw as important, because I think it is not wise to try and connect people who do not wish to work together or who do not immediately see what could be gained from such a collaboration. Gradually, I achieved what I had set out to do. We have established a network of 70 universities, 70 international artists, 180 participants. But you can’t say that you expect something without being prepared to communicate after. Do you think this is political action? I have always opened up a theme, which was followed by a next step.

**On the one hand, it was about integration at the axis of education, on the other, about new contents for the infrastructure, about residencies …**

The initial project, which focused primarily on contemporary art, had a strong regional goal; but at the same time, Tanzplan also developed as an educational project. Local communities have gained a lot; it was about setting a new mission, a new meaning. What to do with the spaces, how to make use of them? In Berlin, contemporary artists and local communities and politicians tried to figure out what to do with the infrastructure; it is not easy to change things. It is much more about contexts and contents than about politics.

**In Slovenia, we always expect that the politics will finally do something for the scene.**

There has to be communication, an awareness of the limitations, about what someone wants, how they understand things. You always have to talk to people, ask them questions, inspire them, clarify things for them to see how they think. Politicians, too, are part of a community, and together with them we have to find a common ground, think about contents, about ways to act for the public good.

**After years of efforts, we finally managed to establish a Centre of Contemporary Dance, but the former government cancelled it after a few short months in the name of austerity measures.**

Having a dance institution is definitely necessary. However, mere walls, rehearsal and performing spaces are not enough. I am not very well informed about the situation in Slovenia, but perhaps your connections with different institutions are not strong enough. Building a house for dance does not suffice: undoubtedly this is very important, but you have
to make connections, locally and regionally. It may be that your institutions are more open and you could build cooperation, not just a house. Is it possible to win one politician over on your side, at a national or local level, who would be your partner? What would the media say?

The media responded harshly, there were also heated reactions from the scene, but the appeals to politicians fell on deaf ears.

Continual attacks by the scene do not help. A dialogue and a conviction that it is all about the public good is better than complaining and attacking those responsible. You should convince the society, politicians and other institutions that this project suits them to the ground. Find one politician and convince him to take a dance class once a week, to go with you for a yoga class … In Germany, we are inviting well-known politicians to give speeches at openings: needless to say they sometimes speak nonsense, but they are there. The other option would be to include artists, dancers, choreographers in the projects of national theatres and give them a chance to work there as guest art directors, curators.

To what extent is dance bound up with German society? Is it an important factor?

It isn’t. There was an idea around the year 2000 to give money to schools, and then invite artists to work with children and teachers on common projects: many artists didn’t want that, because they didn’t want to limit themselves, explain and reveal their working processes or the ways in which they thought.

The problem lies elsewhere. The very relationship of contemporary art to its heritage is unresolved. We know the history and the development of contemporary dance, but what is the connection between knowledge, education and production? When William Forsythe began his project with artists and science institutions dedicated to a reflection on knowledge, heritage and history reflected in the arts, he came to the meeting with a computer and a children’s video game. He talked about the characters and simple games. He said, I want to develop simple rules, the critics do not understand me, I have to communicate and act in a simpler way. It is about passing on the knowledge, which should be our first thought; we should enable insights into dance from a wider angle, from a distance.
My focus in Tanzplan was education. Then I started communicating with those around me: I had to continually negotiate, explain what was possible and necessary; I also learned through my own limitations. It was not a question of aesthetics: when dealing with know-how and knowledge, one has to take broader considerations into account. Before Tanzplan, I worked in state dance institutions, but I couldn’t use my knowledge at a local level. I adjusted and started with more basic questions and approaches: many people wanted to shake off the responsibilities; they would make propositions, but wouldn’t implement them. We have built an information system and put everything on paper and on a web site. This was very helpful for the artists, since they didn’t know there were so many possibilities for funding projects. The situation is now much clearer. Personally, I found everything quite demanding, I had been working day-in-day-out, and in one moment I had to stop all this negotiation and accumulation of information.

Let me give another example. In Kampnagel in Hamburg, studios were built in the framework of Tanzplan, residencies were organised, guest artists were invited. But having a space is not enough – you have to thoroughly work out your content. They got the funding for a period of five years, but to continue the project they had to negotiate. The entire scene depended on the existence of this centre. Besides rehearsals, there were also daily professional classes organised, teachers were invited from abroad. The number of visitors increased significantly, they were constantly checking out the territory, they searched for artists to include in their education processes, they went from one festival to another.

**How did you personally experience this change from being a dance artist to being a director of the Tanzplan project?**

I don’t see a big difference; all my projects are about creativity. I danced for a long time, that’s true – immediately after my studies at Alvin Ailey – then I continued studying in Germany and danced in national institutions. When I began to feel I needed a change, I started working on my own projects. Slowly my interests shifted from performance as the end product to the creative process. I have always been political, had a strong position, an idea of what should be done, how to connect … I arrived in Cologne determined to continue my studies; I was also writing about dance for expert publications. But during the time spent at the academy, I started discovering more and more impracticalities and inconsistencies, so I started searching for possibilities to improve dance education. When the Tanzplan call was
out, I said to myself: this is my opportunity, I have to make a change. If I look back on my professional path, I find this development quite logical. I am aware of the fact that I am not schooled for what I do: I was learning as I went along, the University did not prepare me for this. We are creating new jobs and processes, the entire educational and art system needs to be re-examined. This is, at the same time, an opportunity for dancers, classical or contemporary, to share their knowledge and experience after their professional careers are over, which is extremely important so that the knowledge does not get lost. This passing on of knowledge is very important for the development of society and new working and mental processes, it’s not important just for dance.

What are the new aesthetic shifts in dance, especially in Germany?

A difficult question – I don’t know if I can give you a straight answer. More recently, dance theory made a strong impact: there are many projects dealing with adopting a stance toward power, with political questions if you like. At the level of dance and the performative, Johann Kresnik was very influential, although reactions to his approaches were quite bizarre and mainly unfavourable. I find the reflection in Jérome Bel’s projects important. What I find crucial is a formation of a position toward the times in which we live. Living in the digital age, I am wondering how this could be expressed with the body, how to physically position ourselves in a time of intense virtuality. Dance is not storytelling, it is about a search and a conceptualisation about where we are, who we are. Psychologists have argued that this is even more problematical for children: they don’t know physical work, they are vegging out in the virtual world without a sense of time. Dance has an important role here. That’s why the projects revealing processuality, how artists think when they are creating, how they physically experiment, how performance is made, etc., are very important. These are the ways with which we could make the broader public and society to get to know dance better.

Ingo Diehl is a German dancer, choreographer, dance pedagogue and lecturer. He studied in Cologne, Hanover and New York. Since 2005, he has been a developer and head of many educational dance projects.
**Jedrt Jež Furlan** has worked as a journalist, editor, critic and producer (Radio Student, National Television Slovenia, Dnevnik newspaper, Maska). Recently, she has also been engaged in the promotion and public relations for different art festivals and projects. She writes columns and commentaries. Her main areas of interest are contemporary art and cultural policy.

**Summary:** Dancer, choreographer and dance pedagogue Ingo Diehl gives an interview about the network project Tanzplan Deutschland, which, between 2005 and 2010, connected dance schools, universities, academies, artists and local communities. The German Federal Cultural Foundation has approved funds of EUR 12.5 million for the project for a period of five years: the result was the participation of 70 internationally renowned artists, 70 universities, 180 participants. How to address politicians, the broader public and the local community? Ingo Diehl talks about networking, solidarity and the common good. And about how contemporary dance can contribute to all this.

**Key words:** Ingo Diehl, Tanzplan Deutschland, contemporary dance, networking, collaboration, local communities