



## Inside Toneelgroep Amsterdam's Barbican Box

Wednesday 23 November 2016

Each year, Barbican/Guildhall Creative Learning commission a theatre artist or company to design and curate the Barbican Box to provide an artistic starting point from which teachers and students devise their own play. This year the box has been curated and created in association with **Toneelgroep Amsterdam**, who have their first residency at the Barbican in 2017, with three productions directed by **Ivo van Hove**, the company's Artistic Director.

*Gesamtkunstwerk*, meaning a total work of art, is the impetus for this year's Barbican Box and indeed the creative crux of Toneelgroep. The phrase, often associated with Wagner's *Ring Cycle*, refers to an ideal work of art where the whole is more than the sum of its individual parts. Toneelgroep's actors, dramaturg, scenographer, sound, video and costume designers all work in synergy through the process to create a total theatre experience. Barbican asked the question: if they could bottle their process, what would it look like?

It turns out it looks like a large wooden box. On closer inspection we can see this consists of four interlocking wooden trays that stack in reverse order, the box itself a metaphor for *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Each tray is named for the stages in the rehearsal schedule- beginning at the foundations and working up, the boxes guide students through the prologue, concept, pre-production and rehearsal.

### 'You have to take the risk to let it fail...'

The first box serves as prologue, embodying the importance of teamwork and trust. Director Ivo von Hove strives to create an environment where artists feel they can experiment to allow a work to grow: 'you have to take the risk to let it fail'. Before the creative process begins Toneelgroep ask users of the Box to develop this trust, placing in the Box blindfolds, balls and elastic bands. If this may seem a little bemusing, the Box is accompanied by a

learning resource pack outlining activities and games that use these devices. Teachers participating are also invited on an intensive weekend where they are guided through the process and can explore ideas and gain an understanding of Ivo's processes.

The second stage in the Box aims to find the concept, an archive file, pencils and sketch-books serve as the tools for this. Much of Ivo's work begins with a text, a text that can be told through the prism of 21st century life, the archive folder contains samples of scripts from previous Toneelgroep productions, along with reviews and newspaper clippings.

Pre-production, the third stage combines dramaturgy, scenography, video, sound and costume. Materials and inspirational devices have been carefully chosen by the creative team of the company. Material swatches, a monologue from *Angels in America*, images of sculptures from Belinda de Bruyckere and two bamboo sticks, for students to experiment with natural sound are all inside. Toneelgroep incorporate video design into their productions and Tal Yarden has included a selfie stick as his contribution to the box, not for the students to reflect on themselves as individuals, but to play with angles and viewpoints.

'Video design can bring the outside world into the theatre and can also widen the production's frame of reference', video designer Tal Yarden explains. 'It's similar to what happens when we use our cell phones: we take selfies in order to connect with each other and to make sure we exist, to search for proof of our own existence. That's what we do in theatre as well, which the use of video can highlight.'

## **We all have to find the key to the state where we don't have any self-censure – where we dare to show our most extreme emotions**

The final stage is that of the rehearsal, represented inside the box as ties, a conductor's baton and a key. The objects signify: acting [ties] and the balance of staying close to oneself whilst being in character; direction [baton]; and the bringing together of all the elements to create one piece. The key is about discovery, 'we all have to find the key to the state where we don't have any self-censure – where we dare to show our most extreme emotions'. It also, we are assured, opens the door to a room in the Amsterdam offices.

The final secret Toneelgroep offer is that the underside of the four boxes form a perfect replica of the Barbican theatre in a scale of 1:50, setting the stage for when we welcome the students to share their performance on our stage next year.

A total work of art, a total work of love.

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Photos: Cardinal Pole

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