Event Review

The Dictator versus the Rebel, battling between Despair and Hope: playing the Archetypes that shape our World

Captivating music and acting with powerful themes characterise the yearly Amalyashi storytelling & theatre festival in the Netherlands

Caspar ten Dam

Introduction

Between 21 and 23 October 2022, the second edition of an unique storytelling & theater festival took place at six locations in the Netherlands, at the university city of Leiden and at the nearby smaller towns of Leiderdorp, Oegstgeest and this time also Katwijk and Noordwijk at the coast. This time an unique mix of over thirty novice and experienced actors and storytellers with or without a migration background played in over half a dozen short English- and Dutch-language theatre pieces and music performances, each of which they performed multiple times at the said locations. The closing
ceremony of the festival took place on October 23rd in *Het Gebouw* (The Building) at Arubapad 2 in Leiden, with four performances and a speech by a municipality representative, followed by a word of thanks to the catering and to several people who had contributed to the festival.

The last rehearsals by the participants took place earlier in October, several of whom already performed during the first edition of the festival in the autumn of 2021. In April 2022 there were preparatory workshops in the Diaconal Center *De Bakkerij* (The Bakery) at Oude Rijn (Old Rhine Street) in Leiden ¹—which became one of the festival’s primary venues as well—in which they practiced both rehearsed and on-the-spot short plays to develop their originality, self-confidence and acting talents.

A group of actors with coordinator Tommy Sherif (standing right) during a Spring workshop in De Bakkerij preparing for the 2022 Amalyashi festival (© photo Caspar ten Dam)
Background and aims of the festival

In October 2022, the second edition of this festival took place entitled *Amalyashi*—a word from Bemba (the main language in Zambia) meaning “many stories”.\(^2\) Just like the first edition in 2021, writer and theater maker Tommy Sherif, initiator and coordinator of the festival, has written some of the plays; he also directs or acts in plays that others have devised and developed for the festival.

Tommy Sherif fled his native Egypt after being kidnapped and maltreated during and after the coup in 2013. Living in Oegstgeest since 2015 after obtaining his Dutch citizenship, he has made a name for himself with his play *I’m not zo zielig* (I’m not that pitiable) which tells with dark humour about his experience as a refugee in the Netherlands. In 2019 he started his own theatre, filmmaking and (other) arts foundation called 999 Geen Dienst Studio (999 No Service Studio), through which he has also initiated and organised the new yearly Amalyashi festival.\(^3\)
Tommy stresses that this festival aims to forge bridges between different groups in society—and hopes that it will help actors with different ethnic, religious and national backgrounds in their careers and personal lives. Tommy: “With the help of donations, crowdfunding and municipal subsidies, and above all the help of many volunteers and a few paid media spokespersons and location managers, the festival should grow into an annual, thriving, multicultural and multi-ethnic festival with performances in multiple cities and villages across a large swath of the Rhineland region around Leiden”. And who knows, the festival may branch out across the Netherlands and beyond in the more distant future.

The festival

The last edition of the Amalyashi festival consisted of a general program with four short plays and two storytelling performances in various locations; a children's program called Amalyashi for Kids with two performances in Oegstgeest and two performances in Noordwijk; and a multi-location music program called Music Daira (Arabic word for circle) featuring musical stories by musicians playing unique instruments from countries outside Europe.
For example, one of the musicians, Yusuf Suali from Somalia, performed African songs accompanied on his traditional drum; in between songs he told his story—about his origins, ‘his’ music and his sometimes difficult stay in the Netherlands.

The Amalyashi for Kids program took place in a very cozy atmosphere, first on Friday afternoon on October 21 at the Bollenstreek 5 Library in Noordwijk, and then on October 22 at the Bollenstreek Library in Oegstgeest. The first day started with a short speech by Roberto ter Hark on behalf of Noordwijk municipality, in front of an audience of over thirty children and their parents. Then there was a dance performance mixed with South American stories; this performance reminded one of Jungle Book, and was performed by dance instructor Jill Medina. At next performance The Balloon Magician, ‘Obada’ the balloon magician entertained the children with tricks and deforming balloons which he then gave to them.

On the second day, this time in Oegstgeest, dozens of children and their parents also showed up. Kevin van der Meij rendered surprising combinations of traditional Arabic stories and modern Dutch children’s songs. The children were so excited that they started singing and dancing along; they even tried playing guitar with Kevin afterwards. Balloon magician ‘Obada’ then once more impressed the children and their parents with his skills in making puppet figures from balloons—which he once more gave to them. The latter were already looking forward to the Amalyashi for Kids festival next fall. The organisers of the Amalyashi festival hope to hold more children’s theatre performances in the meantime.
Several professional actors performed at some plays throughout the Amalyashi festival, including Emile Jansen—known amongst other things from a leading role in the famous Dutch TV soap series *Goede Tijden, Slechte Tijden* (Good Times, Bad Times).

Emile himself acted as the overarching storyteller for the play *25/11* about the confrontation and struggle between the archetypal Dictator and Rebel (players: Yara Jourak, Kevin van der Meij, Terik Habib and Mohamed Akab).

Emile Jansen played a kindred role in play *The Trend* about a musical duo MISHO & KISHO showing and telling us about some major cultural trends of the past and present, and putting to us the question whether it used to be better—without social media!—in the past (players: Tommy Sherif and Ramy Morsy). The play *The Trend* turned out to be a sparkling light comedy that entertained the audience but also made it think, while *25/11* turned out to be a rather dark comedy that confronted the audience with pressing issues on oppression, manipulation, freedom, democracy and (counter)violence.
Another play, *Er kan ook niks meer!* (You cannot do or say anything anymore!) about the good and bad of our current culture full of social and political correctness, seemed to steer deliberately between light and dark comedy in its tones and tenets.
Concluding impressions

The actors and musicians in the aforementioned and other plays refused to be rattled by the occasionally faltering sound, light and image effects at different locations (interferences which the technicians quickly remedied), and continued acting and performing with verve. They sometimes did respond to these sparse mishaps with some witticisms to which the audience—ranging from dozens of people in small halls like those in De Bakkerij to over a hundred in large halls like those in Het Gebouw—responded appreciatively with laughter, grinning and/or applause. Novice actors also kept their nerve, expressed their characters well and proved to have a firm grasp on even lengthy dialogues. This bodes well for these actors if they wish to make it in the theatre and/or movie industry—and for the future of the Amalyashi festival itself.

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Endnotes—Sources

1. See https://debakkerijleiden.nl (solely in Dutch).
2. For more information about the festival, see www.amalyashifestival.nl (some texts in some pages are in English).
3. For more background and information, see www.999geendienststudio.com (mostly in English).
4. Excerpt from a conversation (to some degree an informal interview) between the author and Tommy Sherif on 15 August 2022, followed by a series of email-communications on the Amalyashi festival.
5. This term refers to the ‘Duin- en Bollenstreek’ (Dune and Bulb Region), a region with a rich history in the Western Netherlands featuring coastal dunes and the cultivation of flower bulbs like tulips and roses that are known and sold across the world. One of the largest nearby cities just beyond this region happens to be Leiden.

Play The Trend in Het Gebouw on 23 October 2022 (© photo C. ten Dam)

NB: do you have any comments on Ten Dam’s article? Please send these to info@ethnogeopolitic.org or by contactform at www.ethnogeopolitics.org.