

The Hot Seat

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Beppie Blankert

As part of the government's planned €200 million in cultural budget cuts, Dansgroep Amsterdam expects to lose its entire basic infrastructure grant. For the first time in 30 years, the company is fighting for survival, its director tells *Malcolm Rock*

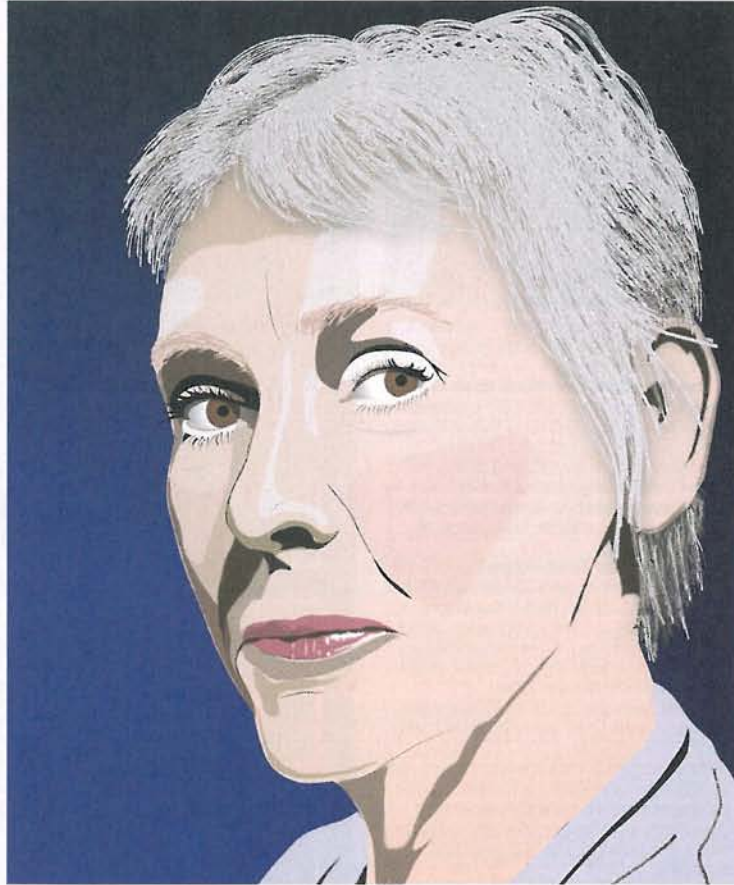
How definite are the cuts proposed by the Ministry of Culture? And how detrimental do you think they'll be?

They're out of proportion with austerity measures being forced upon other sectors. Instead of pruning dead branches, the plan is to sever the tree at its roots. Recovery, even in the long-term, will be close to impossible. The final decision will be made as late as the autumn of 2012. Only then will we know which organisations have been saved and which will disappear forever.

How do these plans differ from the proposal offered to the government by the Raad voor Cultuur, which advises on arts policy?

The Raad voor Cultuur came up with a plan that aimed to maintain the rich variety of companies that we're lucky to have in the Netherlands. Basically, it determined that cuts of such magnitude should only be implemented on two conditions: that companies were given time – until 2015 – to seek new sources of income by fostering financial relationships with the private sector and if VAT on theatre tickets (which recently rose from six to 19 per cent) was reversed. The Raad voor Cultuur, which comprises working members of the cultural sector, has threatened to resign over the ministry's decision to ignore its recommendations.

The government argues that the arts only benefit a small part of the population and that funding should be determined by audience attendance figures, not by a small group of cultural professionals. How do you respond?



Cut and thrust: Blankert challenges proposed budget cuts in the arts

Subsidy traditionally goes to art that is experimental and therefore commercially unviable. It supports innovative work that furthers the arts as a whole and for this reason is bound to appeal only to smaller audiences. The commercial entertainment that attracts large audiences wouldn't exist without this research and development allowed for by subsidy. The great stars of mainstream entertainment hone their craft in subsidised theatres. **How are medium-scale subsidised companies like yours important to the well-being of the performing arts?**

Because they foster young talent and experimentation and are more widely scattered across the country, which means they're more flexible, offer cheaper tickets and are readily accessible to audiences outside big cities. In contemporary dance, there are steps that you take from being at dance school to being a stagier, to becoming a fully employed professional. These steps will be

disrupted by the removal of small and mid-scale companies where artists develop and hone their skills. Artists will have more difficulty entering the sector and audiences will find it more expensive and elitist.

How do you expect this decision to change the landscape of modern dance in Holland? Contemporary dance will always exist in this country, but 40 years of professionalising the practice through the establishment of strong companies will disappear down the drain. It will be like when I started my career in the '70s: contemporary dancers worked on their art in-between properly paid teaching gigs. It took many years for us to build audiences and an industry. Now we face reverting to amateurism. It's a gigantic backwards step. **Do you expect we'll see more dark theatres?**

Absolutely. Smaller theatres will have to close altogether, but others will feel the effects too. Composers and designers will be out of a job;

technicians and administrators and all the other people who work in our field will be suddenly without work. **Without public subsidy, what alternatives do organisations like yours have for survival?**

We're confident that the city of Amsterdam will continue supporting the local arts as it has always done. We'll also have to develop relationships with private corporations

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such as banks and insurance companies. This will be difficult because there's currently no precedent in this country for privately sponsoring medium-scale companies. It took the Hermitage Museum ten years to secure sponsorship: we have only until the end of 2012.

Are you protesting?

We've engaged in every possible form of protest, from signing petitions to walking the streets and being present at the Tweede Kamer whenever the topic is discussed in The Hague. The Mars der Beschaving was a march from Rotterdam to The Hague, coordinated by the cultural community and many of my contemporary dance colleagues and I took part in a 'silent bow' onstage at the Amsterdam Muziektheater, which was very powerful.

The deputy minister for culture Halbe Zijlstra recently compared the Rijksmuseum and the 'Night Watch' with a visit to Disneyland. He said people would rather go to a theme park than a museum. What is your response?

The negative things rightwing politicians such as Zijlstra say about culture in the Netherlands are as damaging to the sector as the cuts themselves. We're told to become better entrepreneurs and to seek funding from the private sector, but what business will support a company that has been ridiculed and abandoned by its own government?