

**Annual Report

10CHILDREN 2023**

In 2023, after extensive preparations, 10CHILDREN concretely began its work in Cleveland. In other countries, preparations are still ongoing. New contacts are also being established with additional cities and countries for possible future collaborations.

Cleveland, Ohio

On 22 February, we flew to Cleveland to work on the various projects. We conducted further research and spoke with the families. We spent considerable time with the writer Eric Schmiedel and, together with actors, did a reading of part of the script. This allowed us to hear how it sounded, receive feedback, and gave Eric the opportunity to continue writing from there. We also held discussions with the artists responsible for set design, costumes, music, and lighting. Ideas were developed, and decisions made. On the production side, preparations were also in full swing.

It was wonderful to see how everyone at the Cleveland Playhouse was enthusiastic and fully committed – even willing to deviate from their usual working patterns for the sake of that unusual Dutch approach.

We held two days of auditions for children in two different neighbourhoods, attracting many children and their parents – sometimes even entire families. For the auditions, we worked in small groups. The atmosphere was playful, and we took the time to allow each child to truly shine.

We selected the six children who would appear in the play, ensuring diversity in age and background. In addition, we took on four more children as understudies. These children came from neighbourhoods and families where circumstances could change rapidly. Contracts were signed with the parents, the children were paid for the performances, and the parents received generous compensation for transporting their children to and from rehearsals and shows.

It was a wonderful group, aged between 7 and 13. We continued conversations with families from the different neighbourhoods and held a family dinner to keep everyone updated. The title of the performance – *Watching Butterflies* – came from Joe Fiasco, who was visibly moved that his words were now the title.

We held several meetings with documentary maker Cigdem, going through the outline together. MetroHealth Hospital and the arts organisation LAND introduced us to photographer Amber Ford. Her work explores Blackness, identity, and culture while questioning the accepted, idealised conceptualisation of “truth.” Ford describes her artistic practice as “a collaborative engagement between photographer and sitter,” in which the photographer creates a platform for the sitter to construct their own image. This allows the sitter to present themselves exactly as they wish to be seen – unapologetically – and engages them in the dialogue that her work provokes.

We were impressed by her work, and she, in turn, was highly motivated to work with 10CHILDREN. A plan was drawn up to connect her in the coming months with our core families and various institutions specialising in the theme of health.

After a week of intense work, we returned home, knowing that the next time we came back, rehearsals would begin. In the meantime, there was regular artistic and production-related

On 23 May, Liesbeth Coltof flew from São Paulo to Cleveland, where rehearsals began on Wednesday 24 May. In the mornings, work was done with the professional actors, and from 3.00 to 7.00 p.m. with the child actors. The children had significant roles in the play, so they rehearsed almost daily. Fortunately, the school holidays arrived soon after, which made their days less busy – though they still brought a great deal of energy, and occasionally some tiredness.

A dedicated chaperone was appointed specifically to accompany the children, ensure they had food and drink breaks, and answer any questions from them or their parents. As is typical in America, there was very little time to create the production – just three weeks plus the technical period – so we had to work intensively. Thankfully, there was a fantastic floor manager who recorded, noticed, and remembered everything.

We also worked with the understudies, though for them, the long hours mostly meant watching. It was decided to move to a larger theatre, which offered far more possibilities – a choice that pleased everyone.

We had four days in the theatre to complete the technical set-up, and during this time, we worked full days. The children and professional actors had become a close-knit group, with the adults supporting the children with tips and encouragement. It was remarkable how quickly these children – most of whom had never acted before, let alone set foot in a theatre – learned and began to conduct themselves professionally.

We discovered that not all children could bring meals from home, so we began making lunches and even sending food with them to take home. These children came from Cleveland's poorest neighbourhoods. When some parents could no longer manage the drop-offs and pick-ups, Cleveland Playhouse took on that task. It was truly impressive how quickly CPH staff responded to the difficult living circumstances of these children, always finding practical solutions.

In the final ten days, Dennis Meyer also travelled to Cleveland, focusing mainly on the programme for the opening. Meanwhile, the final touches were being made to the documentary *Lead in the Land*, and Amber's beautiful photographic work was printed and framed.

For the set, many schoolchildren had coloured butterflies, which were all attached to a backdrop revealed at the end of the performance. In the theatre corridors, mobiles of butterflies were hung, where visitors could write and draw their own wishes.

On 17 June, the project's premiere day arrived. We began in the CSU cinema, where Dennis Meyer and Liesbeth Coltof opened the afternoon by speaking about 10CHILDREN and its goals. The film was screened, followed by a discussion with director Cigdem Slankaard and some of those portrayed in the film. After refreshments, we moved on to the opening of

Amber's exhibition in the theatre foyer. Visitors had time to view the works and speak with the artist before entering the auditorium to watch *Watching Butterflies*.

After the performance, there was a reception with speeches, overjoyed actors, and an enthusiastic audience – a wonderful mix of families from the neighbourhoods, artists, and policymakers.

Following the premiere, performances continued: school matinees in the morning and public shows in the evening. Large school buses brought children from across the city – for many, their very first time in a theatre. It was a celebration of recognition. The child performers gave the young audience the feeling that the play was about them, too. The content resonated deeply: a sister with asthma needing hospital care, lead poisoning, no money for the bus to the hospital, dangerous housing conditions. The children knew these realities and responded with complete engagement.

Pam DiPasquale, the driving force and initiator of Cleveland Playhouse's educational projects, and Liesbeth Coltof stood at the back with tears in their eyes. This theatre work mattered so much. Adults also responded strongly, deeply moved by the content, the outstanding performances from both adults and children, and the overall production design. For Cleveland, this was clearly something new – not a musical, but meaningful theatre close to the people, telling the stories of growing up in underserved communities.

The core families attended in full dress, watching with immense pride. Parts of their own lives were now on stage, with attention paid to their daily struggles to care for their children.

With financial support from the Holland America Foundation, 10CHILDREN invited journalist Brechtje Zwanenveld to travel to Cleveland. She interviewed participants, families, the hospital, various organisations, and the four women who brought the project to life and carried it forward: Linda Jackson, Pam DiPasquale, Marcella Gonzales, and Cigdem Slankaard. She attended the grand premiere, spoke with the children, and produced a beautiful article for *Theaterkrant*.

On Saturday 24 June, Dennis Meyer and Liesbeth Coltof flew back, confident that the Cleveland project was in good hands and would continue to reach many people.

10CHILDREN Curitiba / São Paulo

After our first visit to Curitiba and São Paulo, we contacted everyone we had spoken with to ask whether they wished to participate and in what way. Our producer, Michelle Menezes, reached out to them as well. It took some time before we received responses. Some of the artists had travelled to their home villages and replied only upon their return.

It was not easy to gain the trust of the Indigenous artists. They had extensive experience of being exploited by Western organisations and even other artists. Michelle did an excellent job of continuing to try to reach them. We also had to adjust to a different concept of time: things happen when the right moment arrives. We learned a great deal about respect – and about waiting with respect.

On 18 May, Liesbeth flew to São Paulo. 10CHILDREN had rented a house there, with enough rooms for overnight stays, a spacious living room for working, and a kitchen. The following were invited: the writer and performer Márcia Wayna Kambeba, filmmaker Edgar Kanaykō Xakriabá, professor and writer Emerson Oliveira Da Silva, director and manager Andreai Duarte, visual artist Gustavo Caboco (who ultimately could not attend), Michelle Menezes, and two interpreters.

For four days, we met together to discuss the project's content. The starting point was *Indigenous childhood on the edge of the cities*. Here, Indigenous families often live in extreme poverty. It is important that the project belongs to the makers – and ultimately to the children themselves. The artists spoke about their connection to the theme, what they found important, and what form the work could take.

The conversations were beautiful, making it clear that, despite the harsh circumstances, the stories are also full of pride and vitality. The artists are engaged in a struggle for autonomy, striving to portray their realities beyond the clichés, to fight for the rights of their peoples, and to bring injustices into the public eye. The discussions were deep, honest, and at times confronting.

We began each session with a blessing song from Edgar and Márcia, opening ourselves to honest dialogue. On the final day, three projects were designed and even drafted on paper with initial budget outlines. An application for a preparatory phase was also written. Everyone was very satisfied and impressed with the gathering, and we hoped to see each other again soon.

Two weeks later, we received word from Michelle that she was stepping away from 10CHILDREN. She had become anxious about producing an Indigenous project without being Indigenous herself. She explained that, in the current Brazilian context, this was complicated, and she feared negative reactions – as well as making mistakes towards the Indigenous community. She was deeply regretful and wished us every success.

This came as a shock; we had not seen it coming. We contacted her, had a good conversation, but her decision was final. It was, among other things, the interpreters who had made her question whether she should be involved. We needed time to recover from the news – she had been our solid foundation in Brazil.

10CHILDREN Cape Town

In Cape Town, work had been done with children in the Free State, but otherwise the project had unfortunately stalled due to a lack of funding.

Liesbeth Coltof received an invitation to attend the *Cradle of Creativity* festival in Johannesburg, to give a presentation about 10CHILDREN and to participate in several discussions. There was a great deal of interest in the project, and exploratory conversations followed with various arts centres across Africa.

Afterwards, Liesbeth flew on to Cape Town to speak with partners there about the project and to search for sponsors. Together with project leader Faye Kabali, a plan was made for the next

steps. We also visited the Zeitz Museum to ask if they were still interested in participating. We received a wholehearted “yes” – they were even willing to commit their own teachers and to search for an artist or artist collective to join the project.

Discussions were held with the intended director, Nwabisa Plaatjie, who also came on board. Furthermore, Liesbeth met with entrepreneur Shona MacDonnell to discuss sponsorship possibilities, and reconnected with Jenny Reznick from the Magnet Theatre.

We found that enthusiasm for the project remained high, but the lack of funding was becoming an increasingly heavy burden.

10CHILDREN Düsseldorf

Preparations for the Düsseldorf project are in full swing. Here, the chosen theme is **Food**. Through our conversations, it became clear to us that in many Western countries, children growing up in financially difficult circumstances receive food with little to no nutritional value on a daily basis. This often results in obesity, which in turn brings significant health risks.

Through two paediatricians, we became acquainted with the term *Stiller Hunger* (“silent hunger”). The food available to many children is rich in carbohydrates – noodles, pasta, pizza, crisps. This is much cheaper than fruit and vegetables. At first glance, it seems to fill their stomachs, but because it lacks the necessary nutrients, the body soon begins asking for them again. The child becomes hungry once more and eats the only food available – perpetuating a vicious cycle that leads to children becoming increasingly overweight while almost constantly feeling hungry.

The consequences for brain development are also significant. Missing essential vitamins and minerals hampers their growth, making it harder for children to reach their potential and ultimately causing them to lose interest in learning.

We are working together with Junges Schauspielhaus Düsseldorf. Liesbeth Coltof has been asked to direct, and we will work with the theatre company’s professional actors, as the production will become part of their repertoire. Writer Akin Sipal has been invited to join the research process and to write the script.

We have also visited several museums to explore their interest in participating, and we are searching for documentary filmmakers. Dramaturg Kirsten Hess has been making contacts across the board – with experts, as well as in various underserved communities where local initiatives around food are taking place with children and their families.

The research is thorough and intensive. There have been many conversations with food banks, paediatricians, Foodwatch, nutrition experts, teachers, psychologists, and pedagogues. We visit neighbourhoods and cook there with children, talking to them and their parents. We conduct workshops in schools in underserved communities, and through the food bank we meet families with whom we hold further discussions.

The municipality has been approached for cooperation, and their response has been enthusiastic – they are exploring ways they can be involved.

We have found documentary maker Eren Onzlo, who immediately joined the research process and has also set up his own track of work. Unfortunately, despite their interest, the museums could not find a way to fit the project into their annual programming, so we are looking for alternative options.

10CHILDREN Pune

At the start of the year, we met the Indian artists Vibha Deshpande and Ranga Godbole. In Pune, they run an organisation called *Rainbow Umbrella*, which creates theatre and educational arts activities for children, young people, and their parents. They work frequently with a number of German youth theatre companies, including GRIPS and Düsseldorf.

Since they were in Germany for other work, they extended their stay and came to Amsterdam for a few days. It was a meeting full of mutual recognition, and both were immediately very enthusiastic about the project. We suggested that this time the theme could be **Girls** – a suggestion that proved spot on. It did not take long before we were making concrete plans and even creating a timeline.

By the time Ranga and Vibha flew back, 10CHILDREN Pune was already taking shape. Back in Pune, various contacts were established with organisations working for the wellbeing of girls in the *Vastis* (slums). One of the first to become a partner was *Seva Sahayog*, an organisation largely made up of volunteers, dedicated to enabling people in the slums to develop themselves and thus build a better life.

It is a very large organisation, with a specific focus on girls. They provide spaces within many slums where girls can do their homework after school, find a listening ear, receive help with problems, and take classes from countless volunteers on a wide range of topics – from personal care, to understanding their rights and how to stand up for them, to exploring career options and study possibilities. These spaces are also safe havens in the often dangerous *Vastis*.

We also sought cooperation with the first school for women in Pune, which has now grown into a vast campus housing a primary school, secondary school, and university. Girls who, for various reasons, have been placed out of their homes – or brought there by their parents – also find a home there.

On 12 August, Dennis Meyer and Liesbeth Coltof flew to Pune to meet everyone and further develop the project. It was a fantastic and intensive week, during which we got to know the city and held many conversations with our partners. The project began to take concrete form. *Rainbow Umbrella* had already started working with a group of young students and theatre-makers, engaging with the girls in the *Vastis*. This way of working – particularly in the *Vastis* – was new for *Rainbow Umbrella* as well.

Seva Sahayog handled all the contacts, with their teachers accompanying visits and providing introductions. We met these teachers, toured the school, and got to know the entire *Rainbow*

Umbrella team. We also spoke with several filmmakers and visual artists who had been approached to join the project.

A timeline was established, and it was decided that the premiere would take place at the end of December 2024. We were deeply impressed by Rainbow Umbrella's decisiveness and their passion for this project.

Finances

There is one aspect that greatly concerns us: how to finance the projects, both in the cities where we work and for the organisation of 10CHILDREN itself – including travel and accommodation in different locations.

We have spoken with many funds and institutions about grants, but it has become very clear that we tend to fall between the cracks. For arts funding, we work too much abroad and are sometimes considered too social; for development funding, we are considered too artistic.

We have decided to hire a professional fundraiser in the hope that she can find a way in. When we spoke with her, she was very optimistic.

In America, everything is financed by our partners, who often find sponsors – usually private individuals. Dennis attended one of these sponsor dinners to speak about 10CHILDREN.

In Cape Town, the situation is very difficult: within South Africa, there is no funding available, and access to private sponsors is almost impossible. The embassy also cannot, may not, or will not help us here.

A solution will have to be found, as our original funds, despite our frugality, are beginning to run low.
