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THE MANY FACES OF POVERTY

Dutch theater project goes global

According to UNICEF's annual *The State of the World's Children*, the situation of the world's most vulnerable children is worsening. From this alarming message internationally appreciated director Liesbeth Coltof and dramaturg Dennis Meyer started the project 10CHILDREN - art for change. With this they make the pain of children growing up in underserved circumstances visible, audible and above all tangible in ten cities around the world. The first edition was in June 2023 in Cleveland, the second poorest city in the United States after Detroit.

By Brechtje Zwaneveld

'We're screwed. We were screwed before we ever got here. We were screwed the minute we were born, and you know who cares? Nobody.' Five children wander through an empty, enclosed room. A red-haired girl refutes the bitter denunciation of the most rebellious of the bunch; her twin brother hopes someone knows a solution. The expressions on the faces of the two slightly older boys suggest that, on the one hand, they feel the same way and, on the other, do not want to hear that truth spoken aloud. It is a telling moment in the theater production *Watching Butterflies*, directed by Liesbeth Coltof, which shows both the hopeless reality and the enormous resilience and resistance of children who grow up in poverty and for whom few really care.

'To me, listening is a radical choice. Listening means entering a danger zone; risking having your life turned upside down, having everything you always believed in suddenly no longer be true.' With these words, Coltof opened the first edition of 10CHILDREN in one of the many theaters in Playhouse Square, downtown Cleveland. In addition to the theater

performance, Cigdem Slankard's documentary *Lead in the Land* premiered and Amber N. Ford's photography exhibition opened. The theme of 10CHILDREN Cleveland is "poverty and health. Liesbeth Coltof and Dennis Meyer have talked intensively about this in preparation with children and families in Cleveland's poorest Hispanic, black and white neighborhoods. With school principals, social workers, employees of community centers and nonprofit organizations, with psychologists and doctors. They did this research not only out of an artistic-content interest, but also to create a network and support base. Because the explicit intention is to try to make a social difference with 10CHILDREN. Says Meyer, 'By working with local partners, artists, children and their families to build a community and depict the stories from this community personally and poignantly in various art forms, we hope to create awareness and generate active involvement from those who have the power and resources to improve the lives and health of these children'.



Watching Butterflies (2023) from Eric Schmiedl/Cleveland Playhouse Direction Liesbeth Coltof Photo Roger Mastroianni

The intersection of art and social action

Those in Cleveland who grow up in poor neighborhoods live an average of 23 years shorter than those who grow up in affluent neighborhoods. The MetroHealth System hospital website reports that research has shown that 80 percent of a person's health has to do with factors outside of health care: for example, whether you live safely, can buy enough healthy food, can use reliable transportation, your level of education and whether you have job opportunities. In the United States, where the government contributes little or nothing to social safety nets for citizens and the tax system perpetuates disparities between rich and poor, these factors affect a large group of vulnerable people.

MetroHealth is trying to help build a healthy population and reduce this

inequality in many ways. And one of those ways is through art. The hospital's Center for Arts in Health is entirely focused on the impact art can have on wellness and health inside and outside the hospital walls. Among other things, the department provides music therapy for patients and creates a healthy environment in the hospital building by programming dance and music and exhibiting thoughtfully chosen visual art. Anyone who walks into MetroHealth for a doctor's appointment enters a spacious, bright lobby, where murals and video artworks by local Cleveland artists are the first to catch the eye. But the Center for Arts in Health is also focused on what happens outside the hospital, in the neighborhoods. In collaboration with several professional arts organizations, the department organizes, art programs in

schools around social issues such as children's physical and mental health. Head of this department is Linda Jackson, an ex-dancer. It is she who put Coltof and Meyer in touch with various artistic partners in Cleveland. Says Jackson, "When Liesbeth and Dennis told me about their plan with 10CHILDREN to work at the intersection of art and social action, I knew that was exactly what Cleveland needed."

And so Coltof and Meyer got in touch with Cleveland Play House (CPH), Cleveland's major professional theater company. This company makes theater for adults and also has an education department focused on theater for and by children, especially in Cleveland's underserved neighborhoods. Unique to the United States, this education department focuses not only on theater programs but also on social assistance. Director Pamela DiPasquale was immediately captivated by 10CHILDREN's plan: "Here in Cleveland, children are 56 percent more likely than average to have traumatic childhood experiences. These so-called ACEs (Adverse Childhood Experiences) include

seeing violence and gunshots, not daring to walk to school because it's dangerous, not having food, or growing up with drug-addicted parents. Medical research has shown that children with many ACEs are more likely to become seriously ill later in life. The beauty is that just one positive, meaningful relationship with an adult can substantially reduce the effects of ACEs. The only problem is that people are embarrassed to talk about their situation. And if you don't talk, others can't direct you to help either. We have begun to talk about it by creating performances and programs in neighborhoods and schools in which children and families can recognize themselves and feel that they are not alone. But you have little use for theater if you don't have food to eat. The need for food, items, clothing, legal aid, access to the Internet, transportation to doctor's appointments, et cetera, comes first. With a variety of partners, we wrap our arms around children and open doors to help meet their needs. Partly because of this, our theater teachers in the schools and neighborhoods build trust with the children and can fulfill that role of that one meaningful adult."



Watching butterflies (2023) from Eric Schmiedl/ Cleveland Playhouse Direction Liesbeth Coltof Photo Roger Mastroianni

About 500 people now work in CPH's education department across multiple districts. They provide theater classes in after-school programs, summer schools, English classes for non-English-speaking children and parents, as well as community dinners in partnership with the food bank, movie nights where washers and dryers are available, and markets where families can pick up supplies and food - 'no questions asked. Marcela Rodrigues-Gonzales, responsible for contacting families and aid organizations in the various neighborhoods, says, "Because of the system in the United States, the situation in these neighborhoods is not going to change. Taxes only benefit the neighborhood in which they are paid, so in poor neighborhoods there is always less community money than in rich neighborhoods, which means that, for example, education is not as good and there are fewer facilities. Theater is a means of empowerment. We don't work out of pity, nor do we tell people what to do. We show them where to get help and how to express and shape their stories and voices; that's how we help people take control of their own lives. Because children left to their own devices grow up resentful of society."

Through Rodrigues-Gonzales, Coltof and Meyer got in touch with eight families who wanted to share their life stories, concerns, and challenges for 10CHILDREN. These families were given the position of "community dramaturges" with a contract and serious payment for their work. Says Coltof, "Often all these families have is their story, so you have to treat that with respect. I have built relationships with these children and their families by listening, coming to their homes, eating together. These families must think every

day how to get food, pay the rent and provide security for their children. Mothers on their own with children from different fathers and young daughters with children of their own. Families where nieces or nephews have been taken in because their own parents have addiction problems or - usually the fathers - have been shot or are in prison. What struck me is that these children and families have no language to express themselves, they don't know how to talk about their situation and feelings. I had to find a language that is open and careful. Build trust. That's how very candid stories slowly came out."

Watching Butterflies features children between the ages of seven and 14 (from the neighborhoods in question), who auditioned with Coltof and Meyer, as well as professional actors from CPH's adult department. This collaboration between the two departments is new and came about on the initiative of DiPasquale, Coltof and Meyer. Normally the education departments produce performances at locations in the neighborhoods where they operate, with few technical resources. This performance was created not only for, by and with Cleveland, but also with the professional artistic and production efforts of the city's largest theater company. And played in the beating, cultural heart, so that the unheard voices of children living in underserved circumstances are not confined to their own neighborhoods but can deeply affect the affluent elite as well.

Toxic stress

During opening week, the performance plays every evening for free audiences and every afternoon for children from the neighborhoods where Coltof and Meyer have worked. In the typical yellow school

buses, 160 children of all nationalities come to Playhouse Square for the first time in their lives. A little intimidated, they

wait in the stands for the performance to begin.



Watching Butterflies (2023) from Eric Schmiedl/Cleveland Playhouse Direction Direction Liesbeth Coltof Photo Roger Mastroianni

The five children emerge from numbered lockers. They are welcomed by the stern doctor SYS and her slightly less stern aide. Digital devices on their shirts, so-called "neebler" that record their identities, are activated. Then a series of curious tests are done in which the children must perform physical tasks on commands such as "Zippy" and "Zappy. It's all part of "the process of processing your processing," as Doctor SYS sharply explains. This sets the absurdist and somewhat gruesome tone of *Watching Butterflies*. The children in the audience react with a mixture of giggles and horror to the unreasonableness of the allegorical doctor SYS (an abbreviation of a complicated name in which the word "system" can clearly be heard) who takes it perfectly

natural to keep the children imprisoned in her rules. When one of the five children on stage, Ronnie, begins to talk about how he takes care of his little sister Angie, the audience becomes silent. Angie has asthma and breathes with difficulty, but there is no medicine in the house. No money. A second allegorical figure, Tox, delicately confronts Ronnie that he is not such a good brother, because big brothers help little sisters, and if Ronnie does not get Angie to the hospital very soon, she may die. But yes, pestering Tox, how will you get to the hospital, in the dark, by yourself? Desperate, Ronnie lifts his panting sister. 'Help,' he shouts to the bleachers, 'Can someone help me? Help! In the audience, hands shoot up from both very young and slightly older children.

'I do want to help you!' cries a girl who has risen from her seat with excitement.

In the performance, Tox depicts the fact of toxic stress. A form of stress that does not go away and can occur in children with a lot of ACEs. MetroHealth child psychologist Dr. Lisa Ramirez explains that chronic toxic stress involves continuously producing too much of the hormone cortisol: "This can cause high blood pressure, enlarge your heart muscle, and lead to reckless and risky behavior. Because these symptoms can also have other medical causes, toxic stress is often overlooked."

Coltof realized when she heard this that toxic stress often exists in the families she met. Says Coltof, "Those kids are carrying responsibilities that shouldn't be on their shoulders. One of the community dramaturges explained that she can't afford to pay for her three-year-old daughter's asthma medication. So, she waits until the girl is in acute mortal danger and hospitalized. Then she uses up the medication she is given and waits again until the next attack. In the case of one of the child actors in the play, a crisis arose during the project that caused the father to break contact and the mother to have to find a job in another state. The five young children stayed home with their 15-year-old sister to take care of them.

They had no money and no food and CPH jumped in to help. Fortunately, father still came to see the performance, and something could be restored because of the pride he felt for his child. But I saw this child get angrier and angrier over the course of the project. That anger comes out sometime."

Lead poisoning

Another aspect that struck Coltof very much in talking with doctors, children and families is that the old houses in Cleveland's underserved neighborhoods are painted with lead paint. This paint was touted in the past as "safe for children," and although it is now widely known that the opposite is true, this paint is peeling off many walls. Children inhale paint dust or put bits of paint in their mouths. And lead paint tastes sweet. Lead poisoning can heal, but long-term exposure causes permanent damage, in the brain or in the organs. Children develop learning and developmental disabilities. Mister L. is therefore a third allegorical figure in the show. In black glitter outfit, he winds the children around his finger with a swinging song. He then entices the rebellious Victory to sample the colorful paint chips peeling off the walls. In a subsequent scene, it is revealed that Victory has lost her exceptional talent for mathematics, and it will not return.



Watching Butterflies (2023) from Eric Schmiedl/Cleveland Playhouse
Direction Liesbeth Coltof Photo Roger Mastroianni

'There are no happy endings'

Watching butterflies ends with the magical appearance of a woman who identifies Tox and Mister L.: "These two will always be in our lives, children. Such are the sad facts. But if you recognize them, if you name them and know how they are, you can diminish their powers." And to loud cheers, including those of all the children in the stands, Tox and Mister L. are chased out of the auditorium. Cheers that are immediately smothered in realism as well: 'There are no happy endings. There will always be poison. Ronnie's sister is not coming home (...) and Victory still has lead poisoning. Nothing changes, not really,' says Dr. SYS.

Writer Eric Schmiedl visited with Coltof the community dramaturges and wrote the stage text based on their stories in close collaboration with Coltof and Meyer. Schmiedl: "One of the biggest challenges I found was to remain honest with regard to the personal stories. We are not so used to that here in the United States, to give hard reality a place in youth theater. Dennis and Liesbeth kept me on my toes on this point. They were guided by what the families told them, they had no agenda of their own, and they felt it was important to really show how hard it is, in addition to humor and hope. With CPH, it is precisely this trademark of Coltof's that ended up - once the show played - being greatly appreciated. And, also des Coltofs, the performance ends hopeful, with a lesson in solidarity in a sense. The walls of the waiting room give way to a wall full of butterflies, and the entire cast sings a pleasing final number about the power of building something beautiful and new together.

10CHILDREN Cleveland

Coltof and Meyer look back on an intense and successful first project. Meyer: "One of the goals was to create awareness here in Cleveland, to present a nuanced and penetrating picture from different points of view and art forms. This week, children and adults from Cleveland's most underserved neighborhoods saw a performance based on their lives and giving voice to their struggles. Later in the season, CPH hopefully will reprise the performance and invite teachers, health care professionals and many more school children. Classes will be held in the schools around the scenes on lead poisoning, asthma, and toxic stress. The documentary will be screened widely in Cleveland, at city council, homeowners, health care. And one of Amber N. Ford's photographs is going up as a mural in one of the neighborhoods where we worked. Coltof adds, "The only thing that didn't work out well was that in this opening week we didn't have any decision makers in the room. The mayor was invited, people from the embassy were invited; but the people who can really do something for these children were not there. There is still work to be done there; hopefully those people will show up at the reprise. Moreover, CPH is going to do similar projects like this in Buffalo and Las Vegas.

Saying goodbye to one of the community dramaturgs, the Fiasco family, outside on the porch of their home - fortunately declared "lead safe" - reveals the personal impact of the project for this family. Mother Fiasco first proudly explains that the title for the show came from them. Fiasco: "We just had a baby and it needed a bottle. I was upstairs in bed and said to my husband, you go make a bottle. He went downstairs and stayed away for a

very long time. When he finally came back, he didn't have a bottle with him. What were you doing, I asked, and he said, "I don't know, I was watching butterflies. Sometimes all it takes is a moment's dreaming to get back to normal. And then she elaborates on her children's school. Things are not going well; her son is being bullied and the principal is not handling it

well. She wants her children to go to another school and explains that her main criterion for a school is whether it cooperates with CPH. "Because it is important that my children learn to express themselves, and to be independent. That's what a project like this can teach them. That will benefit them for the rest of their lives."

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10CHILDREN Cleveland: the documentary

In Cleveland, lead poisoning among children is four times more common than the national average in the United States. When Cigdem Slankard, director of Film and Media department at Cleveland State University, was asked to make a documentary as part of 10CHILDREN Cleveland, she decided to focus on this latent and, to many, unknown disease that affects thousands of children in Cleveland. Says Slankard, "Of all the health effects of poverty, such as mental problems and the effects of toxic stress, lead poisoning affects me the most because it is so specific to children growing up in poverty."

The film *Lead in the Land*, which she made with students, shows, among other things, that owners who rent out houses with lead paint make little effort to replace the paint. This is because it is an expensive job, all the window frames must be replaced, all the wooden walls have to be completely covered and repainted. It is easier to find new tenants when old tenants leave because their children were poisoned, than to do such an expensive renovation. The president of the Cleveland City Council explains in the film that for several years, owners have been required to make their homes "lead-safe". "Lead-free" is impossible because then houses would have to be replaced entirely. But there is a lot of ignorance: a social worker drives for hours through a poor neighborhood looking for houses where the paint is peeling off the walls. She seeks out the owners and warns them to have them tested to see if there is lead in the paint. Says Slankard, "People don't know what kind of houses they live in. I'm optimistic, I think slowly solutions are going to come and I hope the film contributes to awareness about this problem."



Still from *Lead in the Land*

10CHILDREN

After Cleveland, there will be nine more editions, spread around the world. Scheduled for 2024 are Curitiba - near São Paulo, Brazil - Mumbai in India and Düsseldorf in Europe. Cape Town will follow in 2025. Each city has its own theme related to poverty. For example, 10CHILDREN Curitiba focuses on indigenous children living in the big city and 10CHILDREN Mumbai on girls and their scarce opportunities to build an independent life. In this way, the many faces of poverty worldwide are depicted. In most of these cities, Coltof will not direct herself, but she and Meyer will bring their artistic expertise to facilitate and support local artists and organizations as best they can in conveying both the wry and hopeful sides of their stories. The tenth edition will bring together as many performances, documentaries and exhibitions from previous editions as possible. There will be an intensive professional program in which experiences, insights, bottlenecks, and results - artistic and social - will be exchanged. In addition, the Krokusfestival in Hasselt will pay attention to the development of the project every year starting in 2024. An important part of the funding for the individual projects comes from the respective countries. Whether the entire project can go ahead, however, depends in part on Dutch and European subsidies, which have so far failed to materialize.