

ENTREVISTA
INTERVIEW

Interview with Louis Janssen

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Louis Janssen is co-founder and creative director of Theateradvies® bv, a Dutch company specialized in building theatres, and the former president of OISTAT, the International Organization of Scenographers, Theatre Architects and Technicians. He has been working for the theatre Stadsschouwburg Groningen and the touring company Toneelgroep Amsterdam, and was the theater consultant for the renovation of Koninklijk Theater Carré, Stadsschouwburg Amsterdam, Casino Kursaal in Oostende, Haus der Berliner Festspiele and many other theaters in the world.

Louis Janssen planned and developed several new built theatres, like the Muziekgebouw aan het IJ in Amsterdam, Theater de Spiegel in Zwolle, the Schouwburg Almere, Wei-Wu-Ying Center for Performing Arts in Taiwan and many more.



1) What do you think are the current trends of the theatres and scenic spaces being built today?

The trend differs in many countries. In the not so rich countries they try to renovate and upgrade existing theaters for which there was no money in the last decades. In other developing countries, like Taiwan and China, new large Theater complexes are being built. This is because there is a connection to western culture. The trend is to build iconic buildings designed by star architects.

2) Having been responsible for several theatre projects around the world, in your view, what defines a good theatre venue?

A good theatre is a theatre where everything revolves around the engagement between artists and the audience. For that engagement to succeed, it is essential for the artist to feel surrounded by their audience and that the audience can almost touch the artist. To achieve that, you need a good auditorium.

But you need even more than that. The whole building needs to function effectively and efficiently as a performance space. From the audience point of view, that means to have parking space, a good foyer, enough toilets and other audience facilities.

From the production point of view it means excellent logistics, enough dressing rooms, and appropriate technical installations.

“A good theatre is a warm, lively venue for the audience to have a night out, a welcoming, inspiring performance space for artists and musicians and an efficient, safe workplace for technicians and others working in the theatre.”

3) You are a defender of natural light on stage. What are the advantages of this technique for the theatre scenes?

It is more than natural light only. My plead is for a more human theatre. Historically, in theatre it was all about art, the conditions backstage were such that, in the vision of most people, everything had to support the performance only. People, working backstage were totally not included in this equation. As a result, stages are painted black, the architecture

is denied, work lights are scarce and daylight is not existing. Very depressing working conditions.

I promote a more human approach in which the architecture is not denied. The stage area should be an interesting area, the building material should show the natural colours of that material, brick = brick = brown or red, concrete = concrete = grey, etc. There should be good work light and of course daylight. All of these elements can be hidden with good masking so that the performance still can have the optimal conditions. But with all the above, people get a good working environment which is not depressing but stimulating. On top of that, the stage itself gives the opportunity to act as a set when there are 'open' performances. Everybody wins with this approach.

4) You have also been involved in the creation of a data base with information about all the theatres in the Netherlands. Why the need to create this database and in what way has it made an impact in theatre building?

In the Netherlands we have a strong touring system. Productions tour and stay mostly one night in a theatre. All of the getting in the theatre, performance and getting out has to be done in one day, also with large productions. You only can do that if you are very well organised. That means that the theatre building has to have good facilities, the production is designed to allow for intensive touring and that there is good information available about all the theatres the production tours to. That is what we have set up already 30 years ago, a database of almost all theatres in the Netherlands and the Flemish part of Belgium. In this database are plans and sections of these theatres plus all kind of extra information. The impact on theatre buildings is that the planning of theatres is done for touring, good loading docks, short lines, space, easy access to catwalks, automated flying systems, etc. It still allows for variety in design of these buildings, it did not create a single model for every theatre, the theatre landscape is still interesting.

5) How can architecture deal with the challenges that are raised by contemporary theatre, which is heavily invested in formal experience and exploration of the limits of space?

A good theatre gives space and conditions, also for contemporary theatre. You have to plan for what purpose a theatre is being built, an opera is totally different from a drama theatre, a studio type flexible theatre or a music hall.

6) Why the need for an international organization like OISTAT for the work and education of scenographers, architects and technicians?

OISTAT is a network organisation. Through this organisation information can be exchanged in all aspects of theatre. Education, design, technology, research, history, architecture, you name it. By being part of this organisation you can put yourself in a larger perspective.

7) What are the main activities of OISTAT and what is their impact in contemporary theatre, set design and architecture?

OISTAT facilities exchange through organising exhibits, events, workshops, making publications, etc. Please take a look at www.oistat.org

8) OISTAT is organized in several committees and working groups, covering areas like Space, Light, Sound, Costume-design, Education, Technology, Architecture and Research. How do these committees and groups work?

OISTAT has commissions and sub-commissions for Theatre Architecture, Performance Design, Technology, Publications, Research, Education, Lighting Design, Sound Design, Costume Design and Space Design. Every commission organises events in their field or they work together with other commissions for multidisciplinary projects. These activities are open for all OISTAT members and organised all over the world.