

# Our Stories of Change

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**VOL. 2**



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FOREWORD

# Growing in Unexpected Ways

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**It is my pleasure** to introduce you to the second edition of our new ETC publication, *Our Stories of Change*.

This is the publication that brings you stories from ETC colleagues – artists, dramaturgs, directors and theatre managers – about the impact that participating in ETC activities over the past 12 months has had on them. It aims to illustrate the effect of our current programme of activities: TRANSFORMATIONS – Recharging European Theatres and Audiences in a Post-Covid World, which is only possible thanks to the support of ETC Members, and co-funding from the Creative Europe Programme of the European Commission.

At ETC we organise many types of projects and opportunities, split across three strands of activity: Artistic Collaborations, Professional Development, and Theatre Advocacy. Activities include large-scale international artistic projects (such as Young Europe IV); our regular ETC International Theatre Conferences; upcoming Roadshow trips to South Korea; major workshop and training programmes ... Each of these activities also fits into one or more of our key themes of work: diversity, sustainability, and digital readiness.

The more we evaluate our activities, the more we realise that participating in just one ETC exchange or session can have a transformational impact on a personal and professional level. And often, these impacts are indirect, and help ETC colleagues grow in unexpected ways. So we have teamed up with our partners at On The Move, the European network for cultural mobility, to conduct a series of interviews to discover ETC's 'Stories of Change'.

In this edition we're excited to share:

- The journey and learning during an international coproduction, with the artistic team behind 'The Best European Show', supported with an ETC Development Grant
- The value of participating in an ETC staff exchange, from the perspective of Nina Jacques, Dramaturg at Národní divadlo – National Theatre Prague, who spent one month at Folkteatern Göteborg – and from Lotta Lekvall, the theatre's CEO
- The joy of networking with Anica Tomic, a Croatian director who discovered new career possibilities through the ETC's Women Directors Networking Group
- Why travelling to CINARS, Canada as part of the ETC Roadshow had a profound impact on Jennifer Weiss, Former Dramaturg at Volkstheater Wien

I hope you enjoy reading these 'Stories of Change' too. It is important for us at ETC to discover the real impact of our work, and to share the learning so that others can benefit in similar ways. In the coming year we will organise a public workshop, using the 'Most Significant Change' method, to connect storytelling and participatory approaches to build up a more complete picture of change in theatre overall.

As the world around us changes at an unprecedented pace, our stories keep changing. Enjoy the read!

**Heidi Wiley**

*Executive Director, ETC*



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'Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore',  
Directed by Paolo Magelli, at SNG Nova Gorica  
© Peter Uhan

# Everyone is Learning from Each Other

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*with*

Giacomo Guintini, Francesca Gandini, and Marko Bratuš

**The team behind ‘The Best European Show’, a new international coproduction between five ETC theatres in five countries, discuss the impact of receiving an ETC Development Grant.**

“We think it is a good moment to reflect on theatre in Europe,” says Giacomo Guintini, Director at Teatro Due, when explaining the idea behind ‘The Best European Show’, one of the four projects that has received support from ETC’s Development Grants programme. “Especially after the pandemic, and during a historical moment in which conservative parties gain ground in Europe, the risk of closing our minds is real. We need to create a space to talk and exchange ideas about what makes a united Europe,” he adds. They did not hesitate to join the project when Marko Bratuš, Artistic Director at SNG Nova Gorica in Slovenia, invited them along.

Marko explains that a couple of years ago he and several other European theatre professionals were part of the jury at a Slovenian festival. “We were watching the performances and started imagining a show about this process – which would be ‘judged’ from our different backgrounds,” he explains. When ETC launched its development grant, for the co-creation of an international project between at least three ETC member theatres, he mobilised different people that had already been discussing the concept of developing something together. Kushtrim Sheremeti, Artistic Director at the National Theatre of Kosovo; Francesca Gandini, Producer at Teatro Due Parma; Norbert Rakowski, Artistic Director from JK Opole Theatre in Poland; and Sean Buhagiar, Artistic Director of Teatru Malta, all joined the team. And with the support of ETC, the collaboration project started.

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“We came together with a partner meeting in Avignon to develop the concept further. We then met during the ETC Conference in Lisbon in November 2022, had many calls online, and we are now finishing the casting phase,” explains Marko. International coproduction comes with opportunities and challenges. The cast is international, consisting of two actors from each producing theatre’s country. “The actors are interested in the project that gives them the possibility to work with other countries, other directors, in other languages and ways of doing theatre. This is a rare opportunity,” explains Giacomo. “Diversity is one of the most important elements in Europe. And if we want to renovate Europe, it is important to recognise these differences and see their value.”

And how has the artistic concept developed? ‘The Best European Show’ takes place at a European theatre festival in Brussels at some point in the future. An international jury, composed of theatre professionals and politicians, has the role of choosing ‘the theatre champion’ in this competition. Judges have different opinions and views on the aesthetic or content part of the plays. To make things more complicated, the ‘public’ also questions the quality and the narratives of the plays. “The performances themselves represent the whole spectrum of what we see in European theatre,” explains Marko. “For us it is meaningful, powerful and special.”

Marko admitted that writing the text has been a tough part. “We started this as a collaborative endeavor, but we could not wait for everyone to contribute. Me and Haris Pašović [the Bosnian theatre director collaborating on the production] worked on a first draft, and then we try to work on the second draft with everybody together and get the final structure.” The biggest challenge, he explains, is the different structures of the institutions each collaborator represents: the legal status, their practices, their limitations, to what extent they are bound to existing rules. “Some institutions need 10 signatures in one invoice - if you put all this together it is not easy to manage,” he says. But all interviewees agreed that their participating theatres are committed to the project. “We need to be creative - also management wise - but we believe in this, and we have all allocated financial means to make this project happen,” underlines Marko.

Rehearsals in different cities, post-production and first shows are still under way. “Nothing is in balance at the moment, but everything will be in balance in 2024,” says Francesca, who with her producing experience keeps

an eye on the processes. She recognised that collaborating with different theatres and different ways of working is not easy. “It is better when we meet somewhere and we solve issues and look each other in the eyes,” she explains. Marko agreed that technology has had a transformative effect on international collaboration, but this project made him aware “that we are still people, and we need to do these things while being together.” He also adds that while they have all worked in international projects, “this energy when people get together from different environments, where everyone is learning from each other, is really enriching.” Most importantly for Marko “international work is important for our local work,” because seeing what is happening outside your known territory, “opens your mind about how to work at home, from an artistic level, with the actors but also for the audience.”

“Our European colleagues will be able to recognise themselves,” he says, “and theatre professionals will have a long conversation about things that really bother them.” Although avoiding playing with national prejudices, the intention is to showcase the variety of challenges the European theatre world faces. “Stereotypes in theatre don’t work,” he says. There are other issues to be raised: How do you find actors for a theatre show when most of them try to work in cinema or TV because it pays better? How is the quality of a play influenced by the public support it receives? Is a performance about ecological transition good enough just because of the topic it tackles? What would happen if we streamed the deliberations of the judges online? Would their discourse change? On what basis do we judge quality in a theatre performance?

The team behind ‘The Best European Show’ can’t wait to show this work to other ETC members to demonstrate how it is possible to collaborate. But also to reflect on this satirical representation of European theatre, and ultimately, on its future.

**Marko Bratuš** is an ETC Board Member, and Artistic Director of SNG Nova Gorica/Slovenia. **Giacomo Giuntini** is Director at Teatro Due Parma/Italy. **Francesca Gandini** is Producer at Teatro Due Parma/Italy.





$$\sqrt{x+300} = (x+20)$$
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'Skönheten i kaos' at Folkteatern Göteborg  
© Mats Bäcker

# Fika – The Art of the (Staff Exchange) Break

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*with*

Nina Jacques

**What impact does working in a completely different theatre, on the other side of Europe, have on a staff member? Nina Jacques shares her experiences during the month-long ETC Staff Exchange at Folkteatern Goteborg in 2022.**

“I am a fixed dramaturg at Národní divadlo – National Theatre Prague, and this is my fifth season.” This is how Nina Jacques introduces herself. For this young theatre professional of French-origin, mobility has always been part of her life. “I always think about mobility – every chance that I have had in my life, I have used it,” she says.

Nina applied for ETC’s staff exchange programme in 2022 and spent a month at Folkteatern Göteborg. She never thought that she would have access to a mobility opportunity as a permanent staff member within a theatre. “It feels like there are a lot of (mobility) possibilities out there, but most of them are not suitable for employees; the artistic field is more freelance-based,” she explains.

Nina works for the biggest theatre venue in the Czech Republic and spent a month through the ETC Staff exchange programme in a much smaller venue, in a much smaller city, in Sweden. Her host was anxious to provide the best experience for her, she says, as it was not a rehearsal period.

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“But I was not interested in the creative process. I wanted to see how the institution works and how work is organised, how they create their artistic vision – this is what interested me, not purely dramaturgical work.” And, as she explains, this required an open mind from both sides, so that her hosts would let someone in and “enter the void and see what happens.” Even if following meetings in Swedish was not the easiest, Nina explains that that’s the way it should be: “I am there as a guest, and they need to work.” From her desk in the theatre, she continued working for her own theatre-related projects she had left behind; “while taking some distance as well.” But she also had lots of opportunities to exchange with the theatre’s dramaturgs. “I realised that we, dramaturgs, are professionals of dialogue: you just put us on a table, and we talk for hours,” she says.

Nina wanted to question whether they were doing it ‘right’ back home. “And we are doing everything right, somehow. They were dealing with the same problems but on a different scale,” she says. For example, the whole team at Folkteatern gathers regularly every month, using the opportunity to discuss or comment on open topics. In contrast, Národní divadlo – National Theatre Prague’s full staff meetings are “more to present the season programme than to discuss and debate.” That’s not because the theatre in Prague is a closed institution, but a logistical reality: their staff meetings involve 600 people, so they take place at the beginning of the season and serve a different purpose.

But in a mobility programme, it is not only a professional life one leaves behind. For Nina to participate in the staff exchange, she needed to make sure she could take her little daughter and partner with her. This meant a lot of organisation and a lot of operational support from the hosting theatre’s side.

What did she take back home? Nina explains that when observing the work practices within Folkteatern Göteborg, she found that they had a flyer addressed to guest artists that they called production plan, and in which they described how the production loop works with guest artists. She brought this flyer with her, and they made something similar in her theatre for all guest artists, but also for all the freelancers that work with the theatre. For her this small change was significant “You don’t need much money to change some ways of thinking and this flyer helps a lot on a human basis.”

What does it mean to leave your permanent position for a month? “My colleagues understand that my job is to stay open minded and look at different inputs. That was what I was expecting: new inputs and contacts, and connecting the Czech theatre with Europe,” she says. “And because it is within ETC, this adds extra credibility.” And her personal life? “Both ETC and the hosting organisation understood that I needed to take my daughter with me,” Nina explains, grateful to the hosting theatre and ETC for making the necessary arrangements for this.

Nina adds that in Sweden they have a break of around 15 minutes for coffee and sweets. They call this ‘Fika’. Nina enjoyed meeting people and exchanging with them in this informal – but at the same time, institutionalised – setting. It was a learning moment for her. She saw this as a ‘cultural thing’ that it would be interesting to bring back home. And she cherished the hospitality and the connections facilitated by the host, especially by Lotta Lekvall, Folkteatern’s CEO.

If this mobility break would have a name, it might be called Fika.



'Quasimodo' at Folkteatern Göteborg  
© Mats Bäcker

# FOLKTEATER

# The Art of Hosting

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*with*

Lotta Lekvall

**What benefits are there for an ETC Member Theatre to host a staff member from another theatre? Lotta Lekvall, CEO of Folkteatern Göteborg, shares her thoughts.**

**“It was a wonderful opportunity** to get to know a dramaturg from another theatre,” says Lotta Lekvall, CEO of Folkteatern Göteborg which hosted Nina Jacques from Národní divadlo – National Theatre Prague for four weeks in 2022, as part of the ETC staff exchange. “I got to learn more about working as a dramaturg, she described the theatre she works in. It is a wonderful way to learn about how the theatre works.” Can being a host during a staff exchange for someone from another theatre be a transformational experience? For Lotta, perhaps the effects are not so immediate and tangible, but the experience is unique.

Mobility starts before the actual travel. Lotta explains how important it was for her to hold a digital meeting with Nina and exchange with ETC staff to better understand the expectations of the staff exchange and curate a programme that would respond to Nina’s needs while respecting what the theatre could offer her. “I do think it is good to have a meeting beforehand; to feel the ambition, the person’s drive and hopes of what they expect to get out of the exchange,” she says. For Lotta it was important to create a stimulating environment for Nina and for this reason she organised meetings with more theatres in town, but also with a university college that runs educational programmes for gamers where Nina presented her theatre. The question of language was the biggest challenge for Lotta. “It makes the mobility exercise a bit harder, and you need to think through how to do it. You need openness for finding a model that fits everyone”,

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she says. For this reason she tried to seize as many opportunities with other projects and meetings taking place in Göteborg so that Nina could attend them and explore different players in the city's cultural ecosystem, and Folkteatern Göteborg's partners.

For Lotta, hosting Nina was an opportunity for other members of the theatre staff to find out more about ETC. As she explains, it is not always easy for staff members to participate in ETC meetings, for different practical reasons – and, also, because her theatre became a member during the pandemic when travelling was quite restricted. “I think it is important that our ETC membership does not depend on me as a member, but on us as an organisation,” Lotta says. Even though she talks about ETC in staff meetings, it was different when her colleagues met Nina. Lotta invited Nina to present Národní divadlo – National Theatre Prague in different staff meetings. “As soon as you see a person and understand what their context is, it creates curiosity from the other members of the staff. People became curious, and it was wonderful that someone from Europe had an interest in our theatre,” she says.

And even if – as she explains – everyone was quite busy, this exchange was transformative for both parties. “We are a small theatre in a small town in the northern part of Europe. It is important for us to reach out and get to know the art of theatre around Europe, to know the challenges, what is important, how is support organised, how everything is for new artists, what new artistic work looks like, what sort of plays they stage...” she says. And even if the size of the venues, the number of staff, the programming requirements and the audiences are different, these encounters inspire new reflections. “We in Göteborg are a number that you can gather in a room, and you can talk to each other – they do the same thing but in a different way,” explains Lotta. “This made me think about how to maintain artistic prominence when you have a lot more of stages to fill with a repertoire – how do you reach a wide audience and put on interesting and contemporary work?,” she adds.

The experience of being a host also inspired the interest in participating in a staff exchange herself. “I don't think there is an age limit,” she says, “it's up to person: if you are young, it is a great way to learn; if one has a lot of experience, you could plan it in a different way. But there is always something new to learn.”



'Zur schönen Aussicht', Directed by  
Anica Tomić, at Schauspielhaus Graz.  
© Karelly, Lamprecht

# A Serendipitous Opportunity

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*with*

Anica Tomić

**Croatian theatre director Anica Tomić explains how participating in the ETC Women Directors Networking Group fulfilled a need for exchange – and presented international artistic opportunities too.**

**“I never planned to get engaged** with the theatre, but theatre found me.” That’s how award-winning theatre director Anica Tomić from Croatia opened the conversation. An actor during childhood, she later founded the amateur theatrical troupe ‘Theatres des Femmes’, one of the most well-known alternative groups in the 1990s in Croatia, which operated from 1995 to 2003. “I could not just sit by and watch what was happening,” she says, explaining that this female theatre group was a form of social and political engagement for her. But directing eventually won her over, and in her work, the position of women took a special place.

In April 2021, one of Anica’s former colleagues from the Croatian National Theatre in Zagreb, a long-term ETC member, encouraged her to register for ETC’s Women Director’s Working Group. “For 15 years I have been screaming about the need for an association for theatre directors in Croatia, and here I found a European group of female theatre directors.” An open space for exchange and sharing, the group has held regular online meetings since spring 2021, giving female directors the opportunity to share their work and experiences. “I was impressed to find so many smart women in the small computer screen and to explore the procedures they put in place, what references and instruments they use to develop their argumentation,

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what decisions they take on the basis of their background..." Anica says, that members of the group also shared their concerns: the unfair payment for women directors or combining motherhood with theatre work...

Anica rewrites and reshapes classical theatre plays and works on projects closely related to violence, misogyny, socially-marginalised groups, xenophobia, and "people who do not have a voice." "I often do projects based on documentary material that review the position of women in our societies, and violence against women... I am trying to see what happens with women in transition: women who lost their husbands, their jobs, or lived through hard situations." She mentions her work on 'Hotel Tito' or 'Little Frida', and that for her, "theatre is a space of empathy and of catharsis, a space where we can change things." A mother herself, she says that she had put aside her career for a couple of years to serve this role, but her socially-engaged approach in theatre also has to do with motherhood. "I have two children and I try to do theatre for them," she explains.

In December 2021, Anica's presented herself at the ETC Women Directors' Networking Group. "I am loud and passionate about my work, but shy to talk about myself," she admitted. Soon after this, Anica was contacted by ETC Member Theatre Schauspielhaus Graz as they were interested in her work and hoped to collaborate with her. A bit more than a year later, in March 2023, Anica's production of 'Zur schönen Aussicht', by Ödön von Horvath was staged at the theatre. "The writer is their national writer, I direct it and stage it in Austria, and I am Croatian. One could ask - why this lady?," Anica says. This would not have happened without the serendipitous opportunity offered by the Networking Group to present her work. But it also did not come without challenges: "I found it a big challenge to work in several languages. I am not brave enough to give instructions in German, but I had this double translation from German into English and Croatian, and I managed to hear the rhythm and the colour of the language. I often hear the text as a musical score that communicates on another level," she adds.

This experience has been a unique opportunity for Anica to better understand the theatre world in another country and to showcase her work. But most importantly, it reaffirmed her conviction that we should find more ways for different cultures to interact with each other.

**Anica Tomić** is a theatre director based in Croatia. She has worked with ETC Member Theatres Croatian National Theatre in Zagreb/Croatia, and Schauspielhaus Graz/Austria.



OFF show – Alan Lake, from CINARS Biennale  
© David Wong

# There's Nothing Like Visiting in Person

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*with*

Jennifer Weiss

**Jennifer Weiss, formerly dramaturg at Volkstheater Wien, on how travelling to CINARS, Canada as part of the ETC Roadshow broadened horizons and made collaborations possible.**

“I always wanted to go to Montréal, and I was really interested in the theatre scene there,” says Jennifer Weiss, dramaturg at Volkstheater Wien. Jennifer had studied comparative literature before becoming a dramaturg and was attracted by the idea of exploring French-speaking Canada. The opportunity arose when Jennifer joined the delegation of ETC member theatres that travelled to Canada in November 2022, as part of ETC’s Roadshow trip to the CINARS Biennale.

The purpose of CINARS is to promote the Canadian performing arts scene, encouraging exchanges between producing and presenting organisations and placing Québec on the international performing arts map. ETC’s Roadshow offered representatives from 8 member theatres the possibility to explore the Canadian and North American performing arts market, and to meet potential future partners. “ETC suggested this Roadshow during the Conference in Prague in spring 2022, and we said that it would be interesting to meet the theatre scene there. It is an experience; you get new impressions and ideas. It was one of the most interesting exchanges within ETC,” Jennifer mentions.

The Roadshow was a week-long programme full of meetings and exchanges with local theatre professionals, representatives of theatre venues and companies. “We attended a lot of shows, we met the artistic directors of

*In the end,  
Canada is not  
so far away.*

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different theatres. They were from different parts of the town; you could get a full picture of the cultural scene,” explains Jennifer. But this was also an opportunity for the ETC theatres to present their own organisation. “It was like a big exchange conference, we had a slot that we had to present our own work,” she explains.

Of course, connections and collaborations take time, but the will is there. “There is a lot of desire, we would be interested in having a play here from Canada. This was just the beginning.” Being exposed to the atmosphere and the arts scene in Canada contributed to getting a better understanding of the landscape. “I could look at web links,” explains Jennifer. “You can have an impression, and you could invite a theatre piece, but it is far away from the live experience.” And there are not many opportunities to have such an exposure.

Jennifer explains that perhaps engaging in a co-production might be difficult, but inviting guest performances from Canadian performing arts groups and theatres could be an option. While they met a wide range of theatres and artistic directors and professionals, there were affinities with a few of them that might evolve into “realistic” collaborations, as Jennifer says. At the same time, the Roadshow raised the possibility of engaging in more collective projects with other ETC members that would join forces to bring performances from beyond the continent to European theatres.

Meeting the Canadian theatre scene was not the only transformation. The Roadshow also allowed for more deep connections among ETC members. “There were 10 of us, and that was really nice because at conferences there are too many people, and you don’t get to know each other very well,” she explains. Spending time with other ETC members outside their normal routines was also an opportunity to think about new projects.

“These relationships need continuation,” she says, underlining that it is necessary that ETC nurtures these connections, “as there are so many possibilities.”

“In the end, Canada is not so far away.”

### **Author and Researcher of this publication:**

Matina Magkou is a freelance consultant specialised in cultural cooperation, cultural policy and audiences. She has worked for festivals, theatre productions and as a cultural manager and consultant to cultural networks and organisations evaluating projects, facilitating learning processes and managing complex projects. She holds a PhD in Leisure, Communication and Culture from the University of Deusto in Spain and is currently a post-doc researcher at the SIC.Lab Méditerranée of the University Côte d'Azur in France. Matina is part of the evaluation team of On the Move, the European network for cultural mobility.

*Our Stories of Change* is a collection of best practices from European theatres by the European Theatre Convention. It is the latest in a long line of ETC's artistic research and publications on European theatre developments.

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\*Membership as of August 2023

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