

INTERVIEW

**KARLIEN MEGANCK IN
CONVERSATION WITH ARCO RENZ**



**Manila is not a city much-visited by artists.
What led you to go there?**

A combination of factors led to my first visit in Manila in 2011; firstly, a series of personal encounters: In 2010 I met Maribel Legarda, artistic director of PETA, at the IDF in Jakarta. And shortly afterwards i encountered artist and performer Eisa Jocson during her first residency in Brussels. Eventually both, Eisa and Maribel, became essential partners in creating COKE three years later. I have frequently been working in Asia since 2000. First collaborations and creations were in Indonesia, Korea and Taiwan and later in Cambodia and Vietnam. Other residencies and touring brought us to most countries in the region - except the Philippines, which made it a somewhat mysterious destination. When i finally arrived in the Philippines in 2011 I discovered a country very distinct from its neighbouring countries, a very different Asia from what i had known before.

You have now been in Manila several times. What was your first impression? And has this impression changed throughout the different times you went? The main thing that I learnt was to open my mind - open up for a new way of thinking, of doing, of perceiving everything around me. That unveiled a whole new direction in dance, a direction that I did not know so well before. It was at that moment that my line of work became clear to me. From that moment on, I focused on contemporary dance. In the past, I was trained only in classical ballet. When I started doing contemporary, it felt like it was the perfect match, something that fitted automatically with my personality.

What is contemporary dance for you, how do you define it?

I was shocked by apparent and violent social inequalities. I was surprised by the strong grip of consumerism and of the catholic church on society. I was tied up, just like everybody in Manila, in endless traffic congestion. But most of all, I was touched and impressed by the warm-hearted openness and life-embracing attitude of the people i met.

My first impression was that Filipinos love to sing and dance, thus defying the serious challenges of everyday life in Manila. Perhaps it is because of these challenges that entertainment has such an important social role.

For the creation of COKE you worked with performers with different backgrounds, all from Manila. How was this experience? What has working with them shown you?

It is a great privilege to be introduced to a culture and country by being part of a creative process with local artists. COKE has grown out of a series of workshops over a period of 2 years. During these workshops i was able to work with and get to know a large number of dancers and performers from diverse backgrounds: dancers, actors, singers, entertainers, artists... From these workshops i selected a group of 6 performers to develop COKE. The group reflects the diversity of the workshop participants, the performers come from diverse performance backgrounds and all are relating with their work in one way or another to the entertainment industry. This confrontation with entertainment was new to me. The root of my performance work are questions. In the context of entertainment, I was obliged to change perspective. Likewise, it was my goal to invent a creation process where the performers change perspectives on their usual performance languages. Thus, we all engaged in a process of changing perspectives in the context of diverse forms of entertainment. The work on COKE and my stay in the Philippines have challenged me to keep changing perspective. It is always possible to look at the world in a different way, to open new mental spaces.

You have travelled extensively within Asia and have worked with artists from different Asian countries. How - in your view - do the Philippines relate to the rest of the region? Culturally in general, but also in terms of dance.

I think cultural differences with its regional neighbors are bigger than geographic distance. The reasons for this are complex and manifold, and they

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are rooted in the history of the Philippines. Spanish and US American colonial rule as well as nearly 5 centuries of Catholic missionization have all been major influences. Dance practice in Manila is closely linked to entertainment industries. There is a variety of regional folk dances that are taught in schools or recreated on stage by folkloric dance troupes like Bayanihan. Sometimes folk dances serve as inspiration for choreography. There is a heritage of Classical Ballet and American Modern Dance which strongly influenced most works that I was able to see by Filipino choreographers. Contemporary dance is a marginal practice and does not receive the political nor social support that it deserves. Contemporary dance makers such as Eisa Jolson, Jay Cruz and Donna Miranda are part of a new generation of pioneers that have to struggle with extremely difficult working and production conditions every day. These conditions show many parallels to the situation in neighboring countries. An important difference to countries like Indonesia, Cambodia or Thailand however is the absence of a "classical" dance tradition in the Philippines that would trace its identity back to an ancient kingdom or empire.

When you work with artists from Asian countries you are confronted with the fact that they have a very different context of life and a very different arts scene in general. How do you go about in finding a way to collaborate?

In the beginning there is a white page. No story, no music, no movement in my mind... The personal encounter between all the participants is the starting point of the creation process. In the beginning I have no other master plan

than working together with the people that are present in the workshop or rehearsal. The essence of collaborative practice is to do something together, to pursue a common goal that integrates everyone's interest and benefit. We begin to work with what we all share, breathing. Then there is a complex process of breath becoming body becoming movement becoming space and time. In parallel I try to immerse myself into the context of the participants: personal trajectories, social conditions, national and regional history ... we dance and discuss, and gradually themes crystallise. Practically, I try to explore these themes within a third space during rehearsals. A space in which none of us feels comfortably at home. A third space in which we have to invent a foreign language in order to communicate. This foreign language is the result of multiple negotiation processes with existing body languages. These are taken from the everyday context of the participants. In the case of COKE, we purchased and learned a number of short choreographies of the "Sexbomb Girls", a famous entertainment dance troupe on Filipino TV. Based on diverse physical principles and tools, the performer negotiated these choreographies, that is they examined, appropriated, distorted, abandoned, challenged, recreated ... in order to discover different perspectives. The performance is the result of a working process and not the result of a preconceived idea. Of course, at some point choices have to be made on how to formulate propositions and working material in the performance. However, the range of choices is determined by the group process and the negotiations of the performers to formulate their foreign language, and to possibly say what we cannot think.

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