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“Prelude Festival: practicing for the future of NYC experimental theatre community”

Interview with Frank Hentschker (Executive Director of the Martin E.
Segal Center and founder of the Prelude Festival)

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"Prelude Festival: practicing for the future of NYC experimental theatre community"

Interview with Frank Hentschker (Executive Director of the Martin E. Segal Center and founder of the Prelude Festival)

Marielle Pelissero

The Martin E. Segal Center and the Prelude Festival : Websites

- 1 <http://thesegalcenter.org>
- 2 <http://preludenyc.org>

Presentation of The Martin E. Segal Center¹

- 3 The Martin E. Segal Theatre Center (MESTC), is hosted by the Graduate Center, City University of New York (CUNY). MESTC is a non-profit center for theatre, dance, and film affiliated with CUNY's Ph.D Program in Theatre. Originally founded in 1979, the Center's primary focus is to bridge the gap between the academic and professional performing arts communities by providing an open environment for the development of educational, community-driven, and professional projects in the performing arts. The Center presents staged readings to further the development of new and classic plays, lecture series, and arts in education programs, and maintains its long-standing visiting-scholars-from-abroad program. In addition, the Center publishes a series of academic journals, as well as single volumes, including plays in translation.

Fig. 1

© Martin E. Segal Theatre Center

Biography of the Interviewee² :

- 4 Frank Hentschker is the Executive Director of the Segal Center. He holds a Ph.D. in Theatre from the Institute for Applied Theatre Studies in Giessen, Germany, came to the Graduate Center in 2001 as program director for The Graduate Center's Martin E. Segal Theatre Center and was appointed to the central doctoral faculty in theatre in 2009. Among the vital events and series he founded at the Segal Center are the *World Theatre Performance series*, the annual fall *PRELUDE Festival*, and the *PEN World Voices Playwrights Series*. Before coming to The Graduate Center, Hentschker founded and directed *DISCURS*, the largest European student theater festival existing today ; he acted as Hamlet in Heiner Müller's *Hamletmaschine*, directed by the playwright, performed in the Robert Wilson play *The Forest* (music by David Byrne) and worked as an assistant for Robert Wilson for many years. Frank currently teaches Theatre History at Columbia University.

Fig. 2

© Frank Hentschker

Interview : *Prelude Festival: practicing for the future of NYC experimental theatre community*

Comments by Marielle Pelissero : The Martin E. Segal Theater Center (MESTC) at the Graduate Center, City University of New York. Among the variety of activities the fruitful team of the MESTC is running the Prelude Festival which is a creative attempt that deserves to be widely known. Throughout the past fourteen years, Prelude has managed to settle a temporary space-time exclusively dedicated to New York Experimental Theater community. Every year in Fall, during three days, Prelude welcomes around thirty theater companies.

With and through the words of its founder Frank Hentschker, this article aims to present the stakes and prospects of this initiative. The case of the Prelude Festival informs both the European and American standpoints vis-à-vis the function and the model of theatre festival.

Frank Hentschker : The idea of the Prelude Festival is to give inspiration and to encourage the work of New York experimental artists, as well as to honor and celebrate them, who are at the forefront of the theater. It is so hard to do theater in our city, we have the highest respect for everybody who tries to work outside of a dominated commercial scene. Throughout the fourteen years of this Prelude history, this idea has become a tradition, and I think it is now respected for what it is trying to do.

The idea is to provide a space, a moment in time for the New York City theater scene. The Festival is truly dedicated to the space of New York City. The artists we invite are not from Philadelphia, or Boston, or international artists. It's very large, thirty groups coming in three days, plus discussions and workshops.

Prelude is unique and interesting for its idea to open up a space which is not only a space of visibility, but rather, a space of gathering. To this regard, Prelude seems to follow the

primary meaning of the word 'support', as it provides a platform. A 'home' for the New York City Experimental Theater community, a space-time enabling artists and spectators to share time, thoughts and aboutness.

Frank Hentschker : At the time it was created, Prelude was a kind of reaction to the opening of PS122³ to international touring, and international presented companies in New York City. There used to be more room for New York City artists until they changed and developed - for very good reasons, but there was no place left for New York artists to get together and show something. Prelude is a very small Festival, of course it's not comparable to the whole year PS122 had. We're a very very small festival, it's just ridiculous, although we are named next to BAM's *Next Wave Festival*⁴, or *Under The Radar*⁵, as some of the respected festivals. We also run playful Prelude Parties at the end of each Festival, which are very popular.

It's very complex for us to organize, we present thirty public programs, book publications, three academic journals, *The Prelude Festival*, *Theater Film Festival*, *PEN Voice Festival*. The Center produces all of it with only one full-time person. Prelude Festival is free and open to the public, nobody pays any money.

As Hentschker stresses, the means of the Prelude Festival are very limited, however the way Prelude handles this duress certainly constitutes its most interesting feature. Facing limited means of production, Prelude chooses to drift away from the very idea of production, and to provide a space to pay attention to outskirts and processes of production. While this focus might sound quite usual from a French standpoint, this attempt accurately answers the American society saturated framework, in which theater is entirely rendered to commercial efficacy. This context doesn't provide any space for the artists and audiences to pay significant attention to their own practices and processes, at distance from the production and reception of art work. Hentschker states :

Frank Hentschker : Theater and performance art reflect very accurately what a society cares about, without judging whether it's good or bad. And what is done with its surplus, energy, finances, dollars, and ideas.

As the Prelude's founder points, the way American society deals with theater epitomizes the idea that drives the general organisation of American Society.

Frank Hentschker : In the United States, the traditional idea is that you have to struggle to do experimental work on your own. Americans believe in a vision of the artist being poor, starving and trying to find something that might be rewarding. The idea to support or finance art and artforms is perhaps too foreign for the United States. A lot of money is spent on the art in the United States, some statistics suggest even more money than Europe, although it's distributed differently. Most of the subsidies goes to Museums, Visual art, Chamber Music and big cultural Institutions, and less to what we would call experimental theater, theater that questions its own form, which is part of a social discourse, where a society works to its problems, whether it's family, head of states. I guess the Americans say : 'We don't subsidize baseball games, we don't give money to pop singers, why should we give money to theater and take it away from starving babies, hospitals, elderly care, or public housing. Isn't it much more important, why should we care for ? It's not the role of a City to finance extravaganza coast endeavours. Someone said 'only war is more expensive than a work of art'. The National Endowments for the Arts has \$ 148 million annual appropriation, this is under the budget of the Berlin Schaubühne or of one Opera, it's ridiculously low.

In New York City, experimental work is almost like a small independent business, a small mobile unit, a start'up, you do something on your own, you ask your friends to pay for it, to do kickstarters, have a non-profit foundation. Every company does annual fundraiser and asks for donations ; every company does that to finance art.

We Europeans of course think differently. We think it's a right for people to have access to health, education and the arts, that it should be democratic, that it should be low cost, that the government should take the surplus.

Hentschker's German culture allows him to bounce in and out the European standpoint and context, thus Prelude bears this peculiar inbetweeness. During our conversation, Hentschker refers to Jack Lang's PhD dissertation, written at the moment he created the Festival de Nancy, two decades before he became the French Minister of Culture. In the mouth of Hentschker, the early thought of Lang articulates the will to care for the Theater community. Hentschker's European experience and standpoint deeply defines Prelude spirit and method.

Frank Hentschker : I'm very much for Jack Lang, your countryman, in his dissertation I once read, "L'État et le théâtre", not only does the State have to support it, the State should decide where money should be going, and he says it very clearly, it should not be a commercial enterprise, it should be the education for the people, entertainment and also highest artistic level, aesthetic level, the State is responsible for that. In here the state is not involved, because commercial interest would take over.

The times when theater artists were in the front page with their opinions have long gone. I think the last time was the Living Theater in the seventies in the cover of the *Time Magazine*. Today theater artists are considered as irrelevant to contemporary social, political discourse. You will never see them on page one of the newspapers, or on TV. Which still is the case in Germany, when directors address an opinion it's respected, it's taken seriously.

This event is thought with distance from the American mainstream ideology while dealing with the American context, aspiration and policy. The European model certainly doesn't fit the American society. Some fundamental ideas are apprehended very differently.

Frank Hentschker : American people are quite suspicious of experimental artists with high subsidies from European countries, it's a constant kind of debate up here. 'Jan Fabre ? Of course he can do, he has so much money'. 'Experimental artists that are subsidised by the State are State's artists. It's not far away from the socialist system, where then the artist ends up politician'. In the United States, people think that the art should be independent, subsidies can be considered as a kind of censorship on their own. I think it's still taken very seriously in the United States.

Prelude carefully tries not to overpass its function of platform in order to reverberate New York theater community aspirations and needs. One of the main resource for the Festival to keep this fineline is to involve the people from inside the community.

Frank Hentschker : The New York Theater is proud of something that happens in town, and artists say "we feel at home", it is their space as much as it is ours. I have been very careful to be a host, primarily we are hosts. We don't manipulate, we really try to see what is out. Whereas the curators are from the scene, they are directors, young curators. It means something for artists to participate, because the curators of Prelude are part of the same theater scene.

We encourage Prelude curators to keep an eye, to reach out the curators, go out ask artists, see things, seek what strikes you, what comes to your mind, your own futurism : experimental dance, classics and politics, themes of new opera, etc. We start meeting in

February and March and meet many times, many Mondays we meet here at Nomad's. It slowly materializes, like a big soup it condenses slowly. It's a very opened system, in a way that's how new companies work, they no longer develop a product in secret, pay a lot of marketing money, do press release, and hope that something stakes. We approach companies, and say 'this idea is good, would you like to collaborate with us ? We buy you, or we give you resources and give advice, and then present you with other work and see how influential it might become'. Traditionally, a festival director, he/she has to see everything, like a monolithic vision. Ours is different, we have an ensemble who really comes from the scene, really a bottom-up, it's very opened, we really listen.

Another Prelude method is to look at the future of this theater, offering the most significant on the young generation. "Prelude" is well named in this regard. This feature ties a correspondence between the Prelude Festival and the early years of the Festival of Nancy, when it still was a student festival.⁶

Frank Hentschker : Most of the time, Prelude curators are emerging curators and we give them a chance to show their view. They are the young ones, who start out and try for the first time to put a festival together. We invite lots of young companies who started out their first showing. Student theater has always been there, although we don't present students' work. What we present is always made by professional artists, or at the beginning of their career. Each curator stays for two years : on the second year they have the experience of the first year, so they can modify something and experiment once again.

No pressure, no survey, no performance evaluation. Rather than a space of visibility, a space of backstage, Hentschker says : 'We open the motor and ask : what is the software ? What does it make it matter ?' The attention is driven toward the process rather than the artwork as an achievement, or a commodity. The limited means of the Prelude would enable to focus on form anyhow, so this Festival rather focuses on questions and ideas.

Frank Hentschker : We are interested in research, in understanding by doing something, aesthetic practices, listening to artists and being in dialogue with them. We just like that artists ask question, and maybe present them. People maybe may have questions and also the artists might have questions.

There's no pressure, it's not like in the French Festival where people fight for the light, or a review, or to be discovered.

We don't have any big stage, and present perhaps eight shows or six shows in a day. Because they are very restricted to thirty minutes or an hour, artists bring mostly what they can bring in cars and suitcases. Since we pay very little, people who come are very interested and have the time.

Almost all of Prelude's selected works are in development, and 99 % of the work we present have never been presented. The Festival is not about the final product, rather, it gives an insight to the process. We think the process is of significance. It's not all about the final product.

There's an engagement by the artist, a journey that could and should be shared. The idea to take something out also sometimes helps artists to focus on a point, to discuss that angle, and then go on. So they enjoy it, because it's also in front of friends, colleagues and people, and opened to the public.

Since last year, Prelude is experimenting another emphasis of this direction. Relying on its embedding in the University, the Festival now gives voice to researchers and scholars, which is quite unusual in the framework of American theater festivals.

Frank Hentschker : In the American art scene, something that sounds academic is an insult. I was hesitant to be honest, I didn't want to look like thinking 'the University should bring light to the natives who don't know what to do'. Although last year for the first time Prelude also had talks⁷. I strongly believe as much as we have to listen to artists' voices, we have to listen to the voice of philosophers, the voice of researchers. At the moment, we need to reorient what we are doing, what we did, because also it didn't work, if we think of the election of Trump. Everybody is full of questions, nobody has an answer, about what to do. We're all in a great confusion as something is changing. I think it is time to react, to listen to the variety of voices, and researchers and scholars can share some ideas, research topics.

The Prelude team carefully tries to hold to the idea the Festival should preserve and build on the advantage of the community. The aim is therefore to orchestrate a polyphony of experience and standpoints, to take the artist, the audience, and the researcher in the same consideration.

Frank Hentschker : The idea is to serve, as we think this seems to be helpful, meaningful to New York City Theater community. It seems like a European tradition, whereas New York City artists are not really used to talk about their work. 'I have nothing to say, my art speaks for me.' There's a meaningful philosophy behind which can explain the process of thought. We feel strongly that it's also to the advantage of artists to be part of this thinking with a philosophical interpretation of their work. This goes beyond the good or bad review in newspapers, that have less and less real estates for them, for these insights. It's an opportunity for artists to show what they're working on, what they are developing, the state of their practices. It's a research and understanding by doing something. Hopefully, the academics also learn something; this is what they write about, the center of the study. Our theater department has now a closer attention to what we do, with Peter Eckersall⁸. It's really a chance that those people are really engaged. I feel our mission is to reach academia professionals, there is real value to engage this research. That's what normally happens with magazines, but within a theater Festival, with practitioners there, it's a new step.

This gathering of artists and researchers wouldn't make sense without the presence of the public. This experiment intends to involve the whole theater community. In this regards, Prelude echoes Jacques Rancière's thought about the artwork as a center of social and political gathering⁹ :

Frank Hentschker : There is something in there that is of significance as a social contribution to the discourse an artist makes, which creates communities, people sit in a room and breathe together.

This is about taking the artist seriously, but also the audience seriously. It's not a 'mass culture', it's not catch, it's not just 'audience', as we see people who come toward us as human beings, who would like to know more than just passive consumers. Theater can be enjoyed by everybody, someone who never went to University or School. We take audiences not just as target audience, we aim to discuss, to look for what is behind the surface. I think that's also what the audience seeks, no to only be sitting here during the shows, but ask something they just really

want to know about the artistic process. No festival has put more emphasis on the idea of process than ours.

It's a new experiment and also, I think, very unique. We want to find a way to pair the research and the work in a very democratic balanced way, this is a model of the future. I hope the new direction we took with Andrew¹⁰ might also be a model for other festivals, to give away from just a presentation. There are real engagements in the shows, a philosophical, aesthetic discourse about the world, and I think the audience is all ready for it, this is one of big changes of the twenty-first century, it's very different from the last.

Hopefully, the Prelude Festival will manage to keep on preserving its subtle equilibrium between practice and theory. Focusing on the questions, means and processes rather than the answers and final products, Prelude festival manages to escape any dominant authority. This may be the condition for the whole community to feel hope in the Prelude space. At this time, it is too early for Hentschker and his team to define the theme of the next festival, although Hentschker gives us a hint: something around the idea to "stop making sense". To be followed...

NOTES

1. Confer <http://thesegalcenter.org>
2. The biography comes from The Segal Center website: last visited 28 march, 2018 <<http://thesegalcenter.org>>
3. PS122 is one of the first not-for-profit arts organization dedicated to performing arts in New York City. Founded in 1980, the organisation just re-opened its door to the public in 2018, with a new name, Performance Space New York performancespacenewyork.org
4. The Next Wave Festival is a famous festival runned by the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM) every year in Fall. This international event presents notably experimental theater, dance, opera, music, performance art.
5. Under the Radar is another famous New York City festival dedicated to international experimental theater, runned by The Public Theater since 14 years. <https://www.publictheater.org/Under-the-Radar/>
6. Hentschkers has himself founded a student theater festival in Europe
7. For instance, one of the talks last Prelude was about the doomsdays' question plays, the end of the world
8. Peter Eckersall is the EO of Theatre and Performance Program, The Graduate Center, CUNY
9. See Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipate Spectator*, 2009
10. Andrew Kircher is the curator of PRelude 2017 and 2018. He's also Director of the Devised Theater Initiative and associate dramaturg at the Public Theater

ABSTRACTS

Interview with Frank Hentschker, Executive Director of the Martin E. Segal Center and founder of the Prelude Festival. The interview was conducted in New York City in February 2018.

Entretien avec Frank Hentschker, directeur du Martin E. Segal Center et fondateur du Prelude Festival. L'entretien s'est déroulé à New York en février 2018.

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