

## **DENMARK AT THE CROSSROAD OF CULTURES AND PEOPLE**

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

It is indeed a privilege for me to have been given the opportunity to this 14<sup>th</sup> international conference on Intercultural Dialogue.

As the Secretary General of The Danish Cultural Institute, it is equally a pleasure to welcome you to Copenhagen, a city which many international observers have qualified as one of the most livable and accessible capitals.

Throughout its 850 years of existence, Copenhagen has seen her share of people from all corners of the world. Some have passed by, others have stayed because they found she provided them with the right framework to go on in life.

The water which flows through the city is her aorta and it is not a river but actually the sea that links Saint Petersburg to the Atlantic and further beyond.

Copenhagen literally means Port of Merchants and in many ways this says it all: Denmark is a maritime nation and as such its people are and have been conditioned by an awareness of the advantages and benefits of being exposed to exchange with

other shores.

In fact, Denmark has been shaped and nourished through encounters with foreign cultures and ideas throughout all of its history. A quick survey shows us that what many consider to be essentially Danish is actually the result of achievements by immigrants settling in the country.

That goes for the Royal anthem and the national opera composed by Friedrich Kuhlau, a German. The founder of the most Danish of all artistic ensembles, The Royal Ballet, was indeed Monsieur Bournonville from France just like Jean-Francois Saly who sculpted our finest public art work, the equestrian statue at the Royal Palace and subsequently became director of the Royal Academy of Fine Art. Nothing we consider Danish would have existed without the input and guidance of these three and many many other foreign personalities.

On the other hand, an important number of Danish artists and scientists have travelled extensively abroad for inspiration, subsequently bringing inspiration, wisdom and knowledge acquired in far-away countries back to Denmark. Writers like Hans Christian Andersen and Karen Blixen, sculptors like Bertel Thorvaldsen and Robert Jakobsen, designers like Verner Panton

and Jørn Utzon are just a few of those who in this way have broadened the Danish horizon by enriching it with foreign sources. And hereby changing the course of Danish culture...

To this very day, the interchange between Danish and foreign approaches to art, society and knowledge continues to be essential and primordial for the development of a contemporary Danish culture. Two of our most visionary directors of stage art, Eugenio Barba and Giacomo Ravicchio are, as their names indicate, Italians who have settled here; our most successful ceramist, Alev Siesby is a Turkish of birth, and the majority of young Danish artists now consider Berlin as their home base not least thanks to two Germans, Arthur Köpcke and Ursula Reuter who've lived and taught here for decades thus influencing the local art scene profoundly.

Then, how come that people around the globe widely think of a series of cartoons which were published in a daily paper more than four years ago when they are asked about Denmark? How come this reputedly tolerant and open-minded country continues to be linked to a feature in a single, private newspaper and that no one seems to remember Images of The Middle East. This the world's largest festival on Middle Eastern culture was held the same summer but planned way ahead of the cartoons'

affair with a governmental support of 4 million € out of a total of 8 million €.

Why is it that nobody seems to remember that prior to this true vehicle of cultural exchange Denmark was host to similar festivals entitled Images of Africa and Images of Asia with the presence of numerous artists and personalities from the other cultures.

At the end of July this year, Copenhagen hosted the World Outgames, an LGBT offshoot of the Gay Games. Though the event is primarily about sport, it had a heavy cultural element. There was an opening show with 18 parties around the city. And Copenhagen invited six cities – Melbourne, Rio, Tel Aviv, Mexico City, Antwerp and Aarhus – to send artists, dancers and musicians to perform.

These examples from the public realm are just samples showing to which extent importance to cultural encounter with foreign cultures is being paid by the official Denmark. We are not talking about Public Diplomacy and soft power activities carried through through traditional Diplomatic channels, rather they should be seen as honest and well researched attempts aiming at creating better understanding of and confidence in the cultural diversity

that characterizes the world of today.

When the Danish welfare society was conceived some 75 years ago, it was designed to meet social, health and educational requirements of all people in the country. When I say it was designed, this is to be taken literally because the vision of the wise fathers was a society that provided its population with decent and appropriate housing, schools, hospitals and public facilities.

The Danish welfare model was and is to a large extent financed through taxes on personal income which also allows for one of the highest state budgets for culture in any country if not the highest. This is another way to say that culture is considered and recognized as a prerequisite of welfare – individually as well as socially.

Culture is a condition for human dignity and societal coherence. We all belong to a culture – some several – and every one of us understands the significance of cultural communities as well as artistic and cultural production. In a secular universe like the Danish society, culture has actually become our only opportunity to engage in a common language because of its capacity of speaking beyond social and religious differences. Even more

importantly, culture provides us with an understanding, a tolerance vis-à-vis the alien that we do not know of.

In recent years –in keeping with Denmark becoming more multi-ethnic and thereby multi-cultural – policy makers have put growing attention on incentives and financial support that may foster dialogue and exchange between the various ethnic and cultural groups within Denmark itself. The goal is twofold:

- To counter a social breakdown deriving from pressure from groups that do not subscribe to the social cohesion and values which the welfare society is based upon.
- To prevent those who are fermenting the clash of civilizations, either directly or by default, from succeeding.

Along with the climate change this is the biggest issue European societies are facing today. A conflict of cultures is to be avoided at all costs as it may have consequences almost as important as the current financial and economic crisis.

This is where Intercultural Dialogue adds a new dimension to the missions of national cultural institutions and institutes. ICD takes as its starting point that today's societies within Europe are more mixed culturally than ever before and will remain so. This

can be through migration and the descendents of migrants who are now full citizens or through other minorities.

Intercultural Dialogue is about building and earning trust between individuals; this requires a deeper engagement than changing perceptions or awareness and differentiate ICD from traditional international cultural and artistic promotion or exchange. The key point is the difference between promoting and using the arts for artistic and nation branding purposes; perfectly normal activity of cultural institutes and Intercultural Dialogue which has as its objective social cohesion.

The arts have a major role in Intercultural Dialogue. At a simple level it should be obvious that each cultural institute ensures that the artists it supports over a year are a fair reflection of the citizens of the country and the contemporary art forms. Quality of the artform is still a major criteria of course but that is not to be used to deny access to taxpayer supported opportunities for all artists. Indeed there is a case to answer for a period of positive support for artists from migrant and minority communities to show that Europe's citizens are changing.

Intercultural Dialogue moves out of the arts sector and into social activism and its players, whether at city, government or

civil society. It engages with city authorities who are tackling social cohesion issues and are using the arts as a vector.

Compared to the United Kingdom and Germany – and to some degree also neighbouring Sweden – the recognition of Denmark as a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society is relatively new. For that reason we cannot yet boast of a wide range of projects and activities which have been specifically designed with Intercultural Dialogue in mind. Our experience is still limited despite some projects based around long term encounters which use a neutral vehicle to explore differences and similarities and let them emerge rather than in head-on one-way events.

Please allow me to highlight a few of these:

Contact- an organisation dedicated to integration and education, based at the Betty Nansen Theatre in Copenhagen, Denmark. The idea behind this project is to give young people a voice in society and provide the opportunity for them to use the film media to raise issues about questions of identity. Expressing your thoughts about the world makes you more conscious of your own opinion. The Danish Cultural Institute has carried a number of Contact projects through in The Baltic States and in Hungary.

Community Dance is a series of break dance activities in the Copenhagen area destined at teenagers of immigrants' parents. The activities are monitored by professional dancers and musicians who set up productions teachers of the local schools that visit schools in other cities. Some of these have even travelled abroad as ambassadors of the a new model for integrating

The flagship of our Intercultural Dialogue activities has been the Alter Ego Projects which was realized throughout 2008 in more than 20 EU member states. Alter Ego addressed more than 1500 young persons all around Europe who were asked to create double portraits in mixed media resulting in a dynamic collage of linguistic, musical and visual expression to show the ethnic and cultural diversity in contemporary Europe. An important dimension in the project was the use of internet which has lead to numerous networks which are still operational.

The European Commission puts Intercultural Dialogue as one of its three strands of culture (creative industries and cultural coproduction being the other two). It has set up a formal platform for consultations with civil society in the EC. The platform which now engages with over 800 organisations from a

very diverse range of sectors uses this definition, developed after a 18 month discussion period.

EUNIC, The European Network of Independent Cultural Institutes, of which I am the current president, is encouraging its members to engage in a process that comprises an open and respectful exchange of views between individuals and groups with different ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds and heritage, on the basis of mutual understanding and respect.

Such projects require the freedom and ability to express oneself, as well as the willingness and capacity to listen to the views of others. This is a change from our typical way of devising projects. Most cultural promotion is “one-way”; “here is an artist from my country on stage, on the gallery walls”. Sometimes there may be a debate on artistic or creative terms but essentially it is marketing and awareness creation.

This is a relatively new approach for most cultural institutes (except the Danish Cultural Institute which already in its original statutes in 1940 had international understanding as one of its main purposes) , one that is based on encounters and engagements bringing parties together to build a level of trust. When that happens, we may be able to reach those who stand at

the edge of society to that they can become included and be part of the social and cultural cohesion, which is the trademark of the best of European civilization.

Finn Andersen