

Good Afternoon Every One.

First of all, of course, congratulations to all of you who are graduating today. I can only try and imagine what an important, emotional and, I guess, also somewhat frightening moment this must be.

When Theo Van Rompaey asked me to say a few words on this occasion, I said yes, but didn't quite realize that it was going to be a more difficult task than I initially expected. Who am I, director of KVS – a Flemish theater institution, which doesn't have much of a connection with PARTS, to lecture you about what the next stage in your life might or should bring? And isn't this a time for celebration and even a bit of nostalgia, rather than for supposedly wise suggestions from a relative outsider, for a future that all of you will have to invent yourselves anyway, without ever being able to really control it - an inspiring but probably also tough challenge, if there ever was one?

Without any claim to having any successful recipes for what is to come and how to deal with it, I can only try and share a few thoughts and possibilities with you, based on my own experiences in the past decade as artistic director of the Flemish city theater KVS in Brussels. Those ten years have been a rough but also really great ride, during which one question was always at the heart of everything we undertook – how can our artistic project at KVS, with strong and autonomous artists and their work at the center of it, connect with the city and the society that we are a part of, in a meaningful and responsible way?

If there is one important thing I can say today, it is very probably: go out into the city and the world, embrace them and deeply connect with them. Not that that confrontation necessarily will or absolutely should have an impact on your actual artistic work. But I do think it is crucial to have a strong awareness of the micro- and macro-context that you are creating your work in. And I am quite sure that it will inevitably influence and enrich the way you position yourself as an artist in society. Also: this city, Brussels, and the world in general, need artists, and especially need the young generations like you, to engage with them. Artists can't improve and change the world on their own, but the world cannot be changed without you either. And we have all witnessed in the past years what it leads to when we leave

the mission of imagining what the future of our societies should be like, to the politicians and the bankers.

I guess that the past four years, to a certain extent, have been about retreating from the world. I don't mean that in a bad way: training, learning and studying definitely benefit from a somewhat protected, secure and intensely intimate environment. I would almost say that this retreat is a pre-condition to the training process. Still, now that this stage is coming to an end, do take advantage even more of the fact that the world is everywhere around you: to begin with in this very city of Brussels, where many of us live and work, but that most of us still know so badly. Getting to know the complex reality of this city, or any other city that you might return or move to, in an intricate way, will organically lead to the world at large: the rest of the country, the rest of Europe, and many other continents.

Let me start with one of these other continents. Some of you will be traveling, with KVS, to the Democratic Republic of the Congo in a couple of weeks from now. I traveled there myself for the first time a bit more than five years ago. Rather than a shocking and depressing experience, as you would expect from the media reports about the Congo that only tell us stories of war, disease and famine, it proved to be an immensely inspiring, energizing and humbling confrontation. First of all, it made me realize that so many artists that are as talented and ambitious as all of you are, have to be content with much less than us and have to train themselves, and create their work, in circumstances that we cannot even imagine. Not that we, in Brussels or Europe, are creatures of luxury and should feel guilty about the support we get. We all work hard and it is our duty to continue to emphasize that a healthy and democratic society cannot do without independent artists and a dynamic cultural sector. But I think it is important that we are capable of putting our own situation in perspective and have an awareness that it can and should never be taken for granted. In the Congo, artists do not get any government support, on the contrary. Sometimes they even have to fight the resistance of families and friends towards their artistic activities. They literally and stubbornly create artistic work despite the decision -and policy-makers that surround them.

Still, and this was the second realization that struck me, those young artists in the Congo create their artistic work and position themselves in their society, with a sense of urgency and responsibility that I feel huge respect for. Even though the failed state of the Congo has absolutely nothing to offer them, the insight that nothing they do should be gratuitous or only concerns

themselves, and the question what they can give back to their city and society, is a driving force that informs every step they take. Yes, now and then this leads to the work becoming a bit superficial. And sometimes these artists sadly end up being instrumentalized, which destroys their artistic autonomy. But a choreographer like Faustin Linyekula, with whom some of you might have crossed paths in the past four years, continues to show how artistic force and autonomy on the one hand and a larger and deeply serious responsibility as a citizen of the Congo on the other hand can actually reinforce one another. Faustin works at the most prestigious theaters and festivals in Europe, but also invests six months a year in the development of a network of artistic training and performance centers in his native Kisangani in the North-East of the Congo. A Congolese version of PARTS one could almost say, in a city that was devastated by almost every war that took place in the Congo in the past 50 years.

Of course I don't mean to say that all of you need to move to the Congo now. Or that artists can only work with a sense of urgency in a failed state ravaged by war. But artists like Faustin do show us that it is important to think global and at the same time act local. And that the least we can do is be aware of the fact that also in very different and difficult circumstances, colleagues of ours are devoting their lives to what we all feel passionate about. It is good not to be ignorant of them, and not to consider it a waste of time and energy to invest in culture and the arts in a country that does still battle war and disease. Also, or maybe even especially there, we, and hopefully you, can commit and be active.

KVS did not travel to the Congo in 2005, because we thought it would be cool to visit a failed state, or because we were looking for exotic destinations for one of our tours. We connected with artists from the Congo the very first times in this city. Brussels is a complex place: the Flemish, Belgian and EU-capital, but also, to a certain extent, a Congolese and an African city, in its history, and in its present fabric. When I started working in Brussels, at KVS, this theater had become a real UFO that was totally disconnected from its urban context. It was an exclusively Flemish institution and it was very proud of its long history, during which it played an important part in the cultural emancipation of the Flemish community. However crucial that actually was, in the late 1990's it was high time to move on. It was time to finally acknowledge the social and cultural reality of today's Brussels, and to explore whether KVS could, among other tasks, play a part in the emancipation of artists from some of the numerous other minority communities that this city houses today. In short, KVS had to try and

become a Flemish but also cosmopolitan and multilingual theater, in a city with a very small albeit dynamic Flemish community, a city that is not a big Amsterdam but not a small Paris either, because by now French is no longer the mother tongue of a majority of the Brussels population. A city, also, in which all kinds of European, African and North-American communities now account for almost 50% of its citizens. There are only a few things that we still know for a fact: dozens of languages are spoken, there is no dominant culture, and as Brussels-citizens we don't share a common past.

So what we as culture workers can do, and what those of you who end up staying in Brussels, can do, is get to really know the insides of this city and its populations. And if you choose another city, then get to know the insides of that city. Don't just visit there, don't see the city as a temporary or accidental site from where you make your work, but really engage with it. Brussels, and most big cities in Europe and North-America for that matter, are difficult, problematic, but also extremely challenging and, to a certain extent, hopeful cultural experiments. I am convinced that it also depends on artists, on the cultural sector, and so on you, whether they will be successful experiments. Even though we don't share a common past, we can think about and make propositions for a partly common future. And as I said before, we shouldn't leave this task to the policy-makers. The recent elections in Belgium have shown us again that very few Flemish or Francophone politicians are capable of acknowledging and embracing the diversity of Brussels and Belgium, let alone of projecting a vision for the future of this city and country. If you decide to stay here, and to continue to make work here, it could be part of your responsibility to help all of us in the cultural sector to contribute to that vision for the future. A lot of work has already been done. The 'Culture Plan for Brussels' that was developed by a team of local cultural leaders and launched in the fall of last year, provides an enormous amount of fascinating data about and ideas for tomorrow's Brussels. But so far I have largely missed the input in this field of the otherwise prominent international community of dancers, performers and artists that live and work here. So let me be a bit provocative now: I hope you are not on your way to becoming what the Flemish theater KVS, used to be 10 years ago – a closed artistic community that hardly engaged with its urban, cultural context. I think that urban and cultural context needs you and I think it will partly depend on you whether that context continues to be an inspiring one to work in.

And finally, I think what I just said is true for the cultural situation in Flanders and Belgium in general. I often hear from ex-Parts students and from international artists who are based here, that they couldn't imagine a better place to work from. I agree with that in many respects. But again, I don't think it can be taken for granted. Not here, and probably not anywhere else in Europe. I think, unfortunately, that the times are changing. The powers that be, in the worlds of the economy and finances, of politics and the media, seem to be less and less convinced that what we are all doing, deserves the continued support of our societies and communities. These are evolutions that we cannot fully control. But I am quite convinced that we, and you, have more power than we often think. As long that is, as we don't retreat too much and too permanently, into our safe artistic bubble and take it for granted that every one outside, will be ready to applaud and support all that happens inside the bubble. So let this, at best, be a bit of a wake-up call: I don't mean to say that there are reasons to be pessimistic, but I think that for artists and culture workers active today, the stakes are high. Therefore, at all times: protect your own artistic work, trust your deepest instincts and cherish the urgencies and necessities that you feel. But also go out into whichever city you end up in, and go out into the world and really engage with them. They need you. And, you also need them. Whether they will continue to be nurturing and energizing environments will depend partly on the way you commit to them and take care of them.

Thank you very much.

Jan Goossens