

# **RISK ASSESSMENT IN DUTCH THEATRES**

## **theory and practice**

The practice of risk assessment in the entertainment business in the Netherlands has changed (and is still changing) dramatically since October 2001. The national authority for safety at work in the Netherlands ("Arbeidsinspectie") gives a much higher priority to (production) risk assessment than before. Their controllers visit the Dutch theatres regularly during setup, show and strike, to inspect risk management within the theatre and the visiting company, the quality of the safety information that the participants have exchanged, and the safety conditions for the ones who work on stage.

A special document should be made for every theatre production, to describe the specific risks and hazards, and how the company deals with them. The rules of risk assessment in general, and production risk assessment documents in particular, do not only apply to Dutch companies, but also to foreign companies who tour in the Netherlands. The controllers don't just look, they can give high fines if the rules are not obeyed.

First of all:

- a) A hazard is the intrinsic property or ability of something with the potential to cause harm.
- b) A risk is the likelihood that the potential for harm will be attained under the conditions of use and/or exposure, and the possible extent of the harm.
- c) Risk assessment is the process of evaluating the risk to the health and safety of workers while at work arising from the circumstances of the occurrence of a hazard at the workplace.

In the theatre risk assessment is often considered an annoyance that takes time and energy away from the creative process. However, it can also be a powerful tool to protect workers, and therefore an important part of the final result.

Four aspects:

- a) Good working conditions benefit work pleasure, quality and satisfaction.
- b) A safe and healthy environment can prevent accidents and occupational diseases.
- c) Accidents are often caused by working conditions instead of personal mistakes; these conditions are a (direct or indirect) result of management decisions.
- d) Clear information about the risks and hazards at work, and about the responsibilities of each participant, lowers stress levels for workers.

This article has been written to introduce the reader to risk assessment of workplaces in general, and to give information about the practical implications for theatre companies who tour in the Netherlands.

# **1 Risk assessment at the workplace in general**

Risk assessment at the workplace is an issue in European legislation. A lot of information about this can be found on the internet, f.e. on <http://europa.eu.int/eur-lex/>.)

Every company, no matter the size, needs to make an inventory and evaluation of the specific risks and hazards of the work for their employees and other workers, to be described in a document that also mentions the actions taken to protect the workers, to increase the safety at work and to prevent accidents.

Since 1994 a law exists in the Netherlands that tells companies to:

- a) carry out a Risk Assessment Inventory (RAI),
- b) describe the results in a RAI document (and have this document approved by the POHSS (Private Occupational Health and Safety Service - in Dutch "Arbodienst")),
- c) specify future measures in an Letter of Intent that also mentions when the measures are supposed to be taken,
- d) specify how the company will deal with changing circumstances in the future.

A typical RAI document deals with at least the risks and hazards concerning

- ♣ organization of the work and the workplace
- ♣ work equipment and its use
- ♣ work practices and layout of premises
- ♣ use of electricity
- ♣ exposure to high sound levels
- ♣ exposure to substances or preparations hazardous to health and safety
- ♣ environmental factors and working climate
- ♣ emergency exits at the workplace
- ♣ interaction of workplace and human factors
- ♣ behaviour of workers and supervision by the management or its representatives.

The RAI documents don't have to be detailed about all the subjects: the more priority is given to a subject, the more information is needed.

The employer informs employees and other workers about the RAI and the safety measures concerning the work. The POHSS approve the documents and the implementation and effectiveness of the measures. The RAI document is not valid without their authorization.

All the theatres and touring companies based in the Netherlands must follow the rules of RAI, and most of them have got their authorized documents by now.

## **1.1 general risks**

The main goal of the law is to combat risks at the source. Above all risk prevention is a management issue. Managers can eliminate most risks for the workers by taking the right decisions.

Three examples:

- a) In a company that uses machines, the management decides about the budget for maintenance and replacement.
- b) If certain risks are inherent in the work, it's the management who can organize (and pay) safety education for the workers.
- c) When buying new tools or machines it's up to the management to choose a supplier for whom safety of the products is an important issue.

All the strategies and choices must be mentioned in the RAI documents. Future measures must be specified in the Letter of Intent.

### **1.2 residual risks**

When elimination of risks cannot be realized, the risks should be reduced to the minimum, and the residual risks should be controlled.

Two examples of how this can be done:

- a) Clear instructions to workers about the risks of certain situations.
- b) Supply of personal protective equipment.

The worker is obliged to follow the instructions and to use the protective equipment.

The management of residual risks is another issue to be described in the RAI documents and Letter of Intent.

### **1.3 risk management under changing circumstances**

The last issue of a RAI document is the company's strategy for changing circumstances in the future. A theatre describes how it will deal with visiting companies, a theatre group specifies the general safety strategies when making productions.

This, however, is only a general base for risk assessment under changing circumstances. For every specific change (in the theatre this means: for every production that is made and that goes on tour) a separate RAI document needs to be made, in the theatre business known as a Production Risk Assessment Inventory or PRAI.

## **2 Production Risk Assessment in the theatre**

As mentioned before, on October 30<sup>th</sup>, 2001, the national authority for safety at work in the Netherlands wrote to the entire professional theatre business that from that moment on, during their visits to the theatres they would give special attention to production risk assessment, as an example of risk management under changing circumstances. The process of production risk assessment follows the same rules as the general risk assessment.

### **2.1 two functions of the PRAI documents**

Touring companies must inform theatres about the specific risks of the production for their own and the theatre's employees, other workers and audience before their visit. They must mention the measures taken to eliminate general risks and minimize residual risks. A PRAI document is a way to do this.

PRAI documents are becoming an instrument in liability issues, too. Employers are responsible for their own employees and equipment at any moment, so when a theatre company takes a show to a theatre they are responsible too. The touring company is to provide the right information to the theatre, and the theatre is to provide safe working conditions on stage in general. Both participants must come to an agreement about their mutual responsibilities. This can be described clearly in the PRAI document.

### **2.2 the making and approval of the PRAI document**

If the company is Dutch a general RAI document supposedly already exist. A PRAI document can refer to it. Foreign companies usually don't have anything like a RAI, but nonetheless they must make a PRAI document for the production that they take to the Netherlands. Up until now this PRAI document does not need to be approved by the POHSS. The person responsible however, usually the production manager or the technical manager, needs to have ample knowledge of safety and risk assessment at work. And to make sure that the person who produces the PRAI document, due to time pressure or whatever reason, declares that everything is safe too easily, the company's manager as the overall responsible person has to check and sign the document.

### **2.3 moving towards a standard procedure**

The Dutch government has decided not to describe the details of risk assessment at work in legislation, but in separate covenants per sector. These covenants must be designed by representatives of the sector in cooperation with their POHSS. Over the next few years covenants must be concluded with those sectors of the economy where working conditions still pose a high level of risk. Among those: the theatre business!

The covenant is not ready yet. Although the general rules are clear and tendencies are pointing in one direction, not all the details about the procedure for PRAI have been defined. The subjects to be treated in a PRAI document are the same as in risk assessment at the workplace in general. The governmental authorities have declared that in PRAI documents about theatre productions at least special attention must be given to falling from height, trapping and tripping, hearing damage through dangerous sound levels, and special effects. The exact forms, models, procedures, need to be developed by the theatre business itself, approved by the POHSS and written down in the covenant. A committee has started in 2000. Their work is still in progress, and will be so for the next couple of years.

Unfortunately the government won't allow the theatre business to wait till the committee has finished the job. The law is there, checks are becoming more frequent, warnings and fines are being given. In the worst case the government controllers order to stop the work or the show if safety on stage is not guaranteed or if the necessary documents are not there.

#### **2.4 practical directions**

A company on tour with a production must inform the theatres about the risks and hazards of the work for all participants during setup, show and strike. The company is liable for providing correct, appropriate and complete information to the theatre. A foreign company will usually do this through (and/or with the help of) a Dutch producer.

To make it easier for touring companies, checklists have been developed for different situations. An English document is attached to this article, made especially for a foreign company that takes, through a producer, their production to a Dutch theatre. The document enumerates the responsibilities of theatre, company and producer, and deals with the most important issues in production risk assessment.

Answering the questions of the checklist is a good way to make an inventory of the problems. The checklist is designed so that "yes" means that the issue has been taken care of; a short explanation can be given in the last column of the checklist. "No" means that there is still a problem; a more ample explanation is necessary, either on the checklist or in a separate document. N/A means "not applicable"; these issues do not apply to this production.

The checklist is accompanied by a manual with additional information per subject.

To be able to judge whether a risk has been sufficiently eliminated or minimized, ample knowledge of standards, rules and regulations is essential. A lot of safety regulations are the same (or at least similar) in many countries, so production managers and technical managers of touring companies are supposed to know them. Some basic information about general safety rules and working times in the Netherlands has been included in the manual. It would take a book to provide all the details. A foreign company on tour in the Netherlands can always consult the RAI responsible of the local producer, whose job it is to provide correct and suitable information to each touring company.

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Comments are always greatly appreciated! Please send an e-mail to [marijcke@wanadoo.nl](mailto:marijcke@wanadoo.nl).

Further reading:

Guidance on risk assessment at work.  
European Commission, ESC-EC-EAEC, 1996  
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