



**Your Royal Highnesses,
Your Excellencies,
ladies and gentlemen,
and most of all: esteemed laureates,**

Thank you very much for inviting me. I feel privileged to address you in Amsterdam, the capital of the current holder of the EU Presidency. It also happens to be my home town, so I am no stranger to this building and its surroundings. The Stadsschouwburg is a focal point for arts and culture in the city. In many respects it's emblematic of the way we define the power of culture: as a unifying force that ties together local and regional, national and international traditions.

We're in the Municipal Theatre of Amsterdam, home base of the Toneelgroep Amsterdam, the largest repertory company of the Netherlands. A theatre company with a world-class reputation, which plays on stages all over the world. And that reputation is still growing, thanks in no small part to its Flemish artistic director, Ivo van Hove. It makes me very proud to be here, on this stage. From the local to the regional, from the national to the international. It brings to mind something the Russian theatre-maker, teacher and theorist Konstantin Stanislavski once said:

'Remember: there are no small parts, only small actors'.

I never really understood why the café of this theatre was named after him, by the way. An excellent place for just relaxing; perhaps it is because the name 'Oblomov' was already taken by another café, back in the eighties?

Ladies and gentlemen,

The power of culture is crucially important to my Ministry, as it is to the European Cultural Foundation. Cultural exchanges help people discover the wealth and wisdom of other nations; they enhance dialogue and foster mutual respect and understanding between communities and countries.

Yet as we all know, culture and its power are no cure-alls. Culture can also divide people, antagonise them and set them against each another. It is something we see happening today in the countries surrounding Europe, in the so-called ring of instability.

- It is reflected in the debates about the eastern or western orientation of a country like Ukraine. A debate that has become remarkably heated in my own country these days, by the way. I would say it's up to the Ukrainian people to decide where they stand, but that's another story, falling outside the ambit of my remarks today.
- We see it happening in the Middle East and in Africa, in the words and deeds of groups like Da'esh, al-Shabaab and Boko Haram; in countries where works of art and culture, monuments old and new, books, plays and music are as much the victim of mindless philistinism as people are.

I know: some people would say that the Dutch revolt also started with the Protestant iconoclasm of 1566. I don't think it's something we should be very proud of. Yet I like to think the importance of the values over which the Dutch revolt broke out – the freedom of religion and the sovereign rights of the States-General in particular – compensate somewhat for the failings of some of their actions.



Culture can be used as a political tool, as happened in 19th-century Germany during the Kulturkampf.

In contemporary US politics the phenomenon of the 'culture war' is well known. And it is not making America great again, to borrow the slogan of one of the current US presidential candidates.

Of course, when I talk about culture wars, I am not talking about painters or artists fighting over theoretical or practical aspects of their work – a modern-day Van Gogh cutting off his ear in a fight with Gauguin, a contemporary Verlaine shooting Rimbaud or, more in the spirit of this location, a new Aktie Tomaat. In 1969, young theatre students, dissatisfied with the repertory theatre traditions of the times, started throwing tomatoes during a performance of Shakespeare's *Tempest* on this very stage.

The modern-day culture war is very much a political discussion about who you are and where you stand in modern society. And it is a kind of warfare that is rapidly gaining ground in Europe as well.

Politics in Europe is increasingly about identity rather than economy or ideology. Open dialogue about cultural differences is becoming rare, and cultural confrontation is gaining the upper hand.

It both stems from and results in diminished social cohesion, increased intolerance and mutual distrust.

The official motto of the EU – unity in diversity – seems inverted nowadays: our unity is dividing us. We are connected in so many ways that it becomes easier to find causes for division than for further cooperation and solidarity. And I think few here will disagree when I say that we urgently need more solidarity and more cooperation if we are to confront the great challenges of today. Stability, security and sustainability do not come easily: they have a price tag, and require constant effort. At international, national and local levels we have to seek inspiration from each other, and look for positive examples of what we can bring about.

The laureates of today show us how to do that. Krétakör's work is about the breaking down of barriers in Hungarian society. Medialab-Prado creates an environment in which Spanish people with various skills and talents can work together and empower one other. Both organisations are helping create tolerant, open and stable societies in which citizens can tackle social divisions and resolve collective concerns in a creative and inclusive manner.

Local initiative is key in this respect, focused on the will to make a difference in people's everyday lives, using culture and imagination. Both laureates are pioneers in their field. Through innovative teaching methods in theatre and media they use culture to bring people together, to foster dialogue, to raise awareness and to enhance opportunities for change. Change towards a more stable, more secure and more sustainable society.

In their own way they show that what Stanislavski said is true:

there are no small parts, only small actors.

Krétakör and Medialab-Prado are big in what they do. They deserve a big hand of applause.

Thank you.

