

Big hART's ACOUSTIC LIFE OF ZINC in the Netherlands

On Saturday 24 September 2022, ICAF director Jasmina Ibrahimovic picked up Professor Kerrie Schaefer from Exeter University at Rotterdam Central Station. They drove all the way to the village of Budel, smack on the Belgian border south of Eindhoven. I joined them there right in front of the Saint Joseph Hotel, a former all-purpose facility for workers of the nearby zinc factory. Built in the second half of the 19th century, it included lodging, a clinic, a bar and restaurant and also a theatre. Although they would have preferred to set up in a proper factory space or a shed, big hART performed 'Acoustic Life of Zinc' in this historic auditorium.

But how on earth did big hART end up in a small community in the Dutch countryside? Part of the explanation lies in Tasmania, where this impressive arts, media and social change organization was founded over 30 years ago. In 2015, 2017 and 2019 they created 'Acoustic Life of Sheds' in 15 farm sheds across the island's Northwestern coast. The idea was to celebrate rural culture and heritage with site-specific experimental music and soundscapes. The productions were an enormous success. I am not quite sure how the management of the Nyrstar zinc factory of Hobart heard about it, but the connection with sheds, industrial spaces and celebrating work and workers is not a really big stretch. In October 2020, the partnership between Nyrstar, Northwest Support Services (providing regional support to communities and people with disability) and Big hART became a reality.

In the following months, electronica artist Paul Corfiatis, graphite artist & poet Jacob Rish, and bassist Curtis Poke with mentor Aaron Hopper, an accomplished guitarist, composer and sound designer, went to work. They produced film footage, integrated school children's drawings that were turned into animations, and they worked with factory workers and their families to create music and sound. They also involved young people with autism in the performances, which were held in industrial spaces of the Hobart zinc plant. The employees, their families and the general public received it with overwhelming enthusiasm. And that is where the CEO of Nyrstar international, the leading global zinc manufacturer with 9 plants on 3 continents, got the idea of bringing the performance over to Europe. Nyrstar's head office happens to be in Budel and was the logical first stop on a small tour that also included Belgium and France. In all these places, local material was blended into the visuals.

In Budel, 'Acoustic Life of Zinc' was performed by multi-instrumentalist Aaron Hopper and German percussionist Christin Neddens. It was a mesmerizing and occasionally trance-inducing experience that I hope the accompanying video does some justice. Catching up with Scott Rankin and hearing about their ambitious upcoming 'Songs for Freedom' tour, was an additional bonus. Never shy to raise the bar of their objectives, with these theatrical concerts Big hART aims to start a nationwide conversation about the disproportionate numbers of incarcerated indigenous youth in Australian prisons. The powerful songs have all been composed by inmates during music workshops led by Big hART artists, including Aaron Hopper. Check <https://www.bighart.org/> for updates on this exciting new project.

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