

If all the world's a stage, a tiny Frisian island is one of the busiest – and most eclectic – playhouses in show business. For 10 days in June, 50,000 people will flock to Terschelling Island where beaches, street corners, sand dunes, barns, boathouses, bunkers, farm sheds, attics, ships' holds and every spare metre of space will be transformed into performance areas for players from around the world.

BY NANCY TANGEMAN

Everywhere. And a little of everything.

Terschelling's Oerol festival



It all started in a little pub called De Stoep. Joop Mulder liked to hold small festivals in his establishment, inviting local poets, artists, musicians and entertainers to perform for his customers. Over the years, he began to go further afield for talent – bringing in performers from Amsterdam's Festival of Fools in the 1970s and adding more cabaret and music. It wasn't long before his pub festivals spilled out onto the streets. Before he knew what was happening, Mulder had an Arts festival on his hands – an Arts festival that eventually became Terschelling's Oerol (which means 'everywhere' in Frisian dialect) Festival.

This month, the festival celebrates its 25th year with 45 theatre groups, 43 bands, 25 street theatre groups and 25 landscape and visual artists participating.

Joop Mulder remains the festival's first and only artistic director, its resident historian, as well as its most ardent promoter. 'In the beginning, the festival was more music and cabaret in the pubs with street artists. Then it moved into site-specific theatre, moving off the streets into the natural areas of the island,' he recalls. 'In the 1980s we had a lot of English performers – they are very good in the streets. Now we have

more French, because they are more site-specific.'

As the festival started to grow, Mulder made a move that would shape its future. He asked the artists to work closely with the island's community, with the history of the island, for inspiration. This created a special atmosphere – something unique on the European festival scene.

'Oerol is held in one of the most beautiful parts of Holland, where culture and nature come together in one festival,' says performer Marc van Vliet. 'There are 50,000 people cycling over the island. You

can't see that anywhere else. You see all the international and new theatre productions. It is the leading festival in Holland.'

Van Vliet's troupe, TUIG, will perform for the seventh time in Terschelling this year. 'Our performances are about nature. We started with horses (*tuig* means 'horse's harness') and there are only a few places in Holland where you can work on a beach. The environment plays with you and gives an extra dimension. In the city there is noise and the streets are very different. It's always a big shock to play in a city after Oerol. It's completely different.'



PHOTO: ANKE TEUNISSEN



This year TUIG's performance is an installation piece 100 metres long. 'The meaning behind it is life's trail – looking back on life,' Van Vliet tries to explain. 'The audience makes their own show. They dare themselves to make music, turn lights on and make the performance. The problem is, we can only rehearse with an audience. It is a kind of adventure with a message.' (For both the audience and the performers, it seems.)

Van Vliet continues about the festival. 'Oerol is the best way, near our own way. The people of Terschelling know what you're doing. It's the most beautiful festival in Europe,' he says.

A cultural oasis on an island?

Terschelling's population has not always been excited about the festival, although the island has a rich, if sporadic, artistic history. 'In the 1950s, the island was home to sculptors and artists,' says Mulder. 'It is also where the CoBrA community started. But after that, it was not such an artistic community. Since the start of the festival, some of that has returned, slowly in the last few years, especially music.'

'Twenty-five years ago people kept their distance from the festival. Now they are completely involved. We brought in this new trend,' says Mulder, proudly. 'We've seen it slowly change.'

As trends go, Mulder is only the latest to affect change on the island, and he is definitely in good company. In fact, this year's festival theme, *Wanderers*, addresses the people or peoples who have influenced the island.

'The Greeks, the Romans and the Moors, the Saxons, Frisians and Franks, have all

left traces in European culture and, therefore, also on Terschelling,' says Mulder.

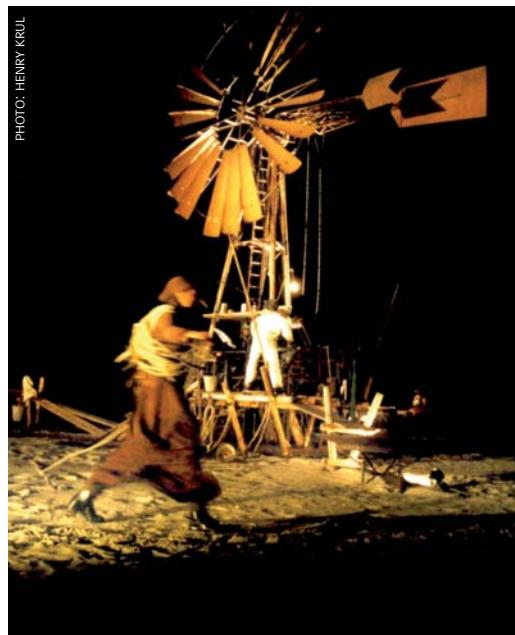
The music of Terschelling, he explains, has been influenced by Irish, Scottish, Celtic, Breton and Frisian sounds. Its dialects (Terschelling has three) contain a lot of words from Friesland, Denmark and England. (Terschelling has been overrun by the English a number of times.) And there are also island traditions such as *Sunderum*, which are thought to have their origins in Scandinavian or Germanic culture.

Says Mulder about the choice of *Wanderers* for this year's theme: 'Now that the world is once again in flux, we are seeing new waves of immigrants having a profound effect on our culture. The Dutch have been eating Indonesian fried rice for ages, and now many other Asian, African and Mediterranean dishes are being added to the national cuisine. Music and language are being interspersed with new sounds. More than this, however, we are being introduced to new habits: where we used to be awakened by church bells, these days it is the Azan resounding from a minaret.'

'Over the past 25 years, the Oerol Festival has been introducing new cultures to the island with the artists and visitors it draws. Oerol has become a new tradition. I'm the latest one changing the island with my Oerol Festival,' he says.

Imaginative and memorable

Speaking of bringing new cultural experiences to the island, Mulder has brought in some acts that seem to come from civilisations all their own. Like one of the performances he remembers best:



'It was in 1999, when the Frisian Theatre Company Tryater rewrote Henrik Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* to include the people and events of the island. They performed in the middle of the dunes for 1,400 people each night. They'd placed containers all over the dunes, under the sand, and performers would suddenly appear – coming up out of the sand.'

Groupe Zur, in 1997, had a performance about wind and that same year the *Mara Heckel Company* had an aboriginal performance – both of which made deep impressions on Mulder, and probably on the rest of the island.

His new favourite, however, is the French street theatre group *Le Phun (Pour un Humour Universellement Nécessaire)*. In its show *Les Gûmes*, *Le Phun* will take the audience on a tour through the fantastic, poetic world of plants and vegetables. 'They take you on a walk to get to a place where you become one with nature,' explains Mulder. 'Even though you might not speak French, you can still understand the performance. It is not textual theatre.'

Working – and learning – together

That is true of much of the festival's offerings. They are truly international – including opportunities for performers to work with each other. Van Vliet explains TUIG's experience last year: 'We had the last evening performance. We worked with a group from Amsterdam and a French director. We started on the beach



with nothing – only a little story. It was a work in process. The last evening there were 8,000 people and fireworks. We put the whole thing together in two weeks. We were honoured that the festival asked us to do that.'

In fact, an important part of the festival is its workshop function, unique among European festivals. For performers – especially those just starting out – it is important to be introduced to and seen by press and public. Oerol grants them the opportunity to give several performances per day, during ten long days, for a wide and enthusiastic public. Several groups, including *TUIG*, *Sjoerd Wagenaar*, *The Lunatics* and *Odd Enjinears*, have actually been 'hatched' at Oerol and maintain a high international profile.

This year's festival features more than 25 new generation theatre makers such as mime artist Boukje Schweigman; choreographers Club guy & roni; director and writers Gienke Deuten and Bram de Goeij; choreographer and director Jens van Daele; theatre maker Karina Kroft; writer/director Marije Gubbels; dancer Sara Wictorowicz; *TUIG* and the Zappfactory. Another highlight of the festival is the opening show of *Mechanique Vivant* in cooperation with *Art Ephemere*. In addition to French *Le Phun*, other special international guests include *Compania Gran Reyneta* from Chile. A full programme (in Dutch) can be found on the Oerol Festival website. A daily English summary is available on the island, during the festival. <



PHOTO: ANNA VAN KOOI

Don't forget the cranberries

Terschelling is the only Wadden Island where cranberries grow; so if you decide to visit the Oerol Festival, don't forget to try some when you're there. But if you're more interested in other aspects of the festival, here are a few tips:

The dates of the 2006 Oerol Festival are 16-25 June

Tickets

Tickets can only be purchased on the island. In order to buy tickets, you need a special Festival Passport, which you purchase on the ferry or at the entrance to the festival. Passports can be purchased for one weekend or midweek (€9) or for the entire festival (€14). Tickets are then sold for individual performances. Prices range from free to €12. (Children up to 11 years old receive a 50 percent discount on tickets. There are no other discounts.) Ticket sales begin on the island a few days before the festival starts. Only half the tickets are sold before the festival; 30 percent are sold the day of the performance.

When you buy a passport, you become a part of a Terschelling family. This probably won't get you a home-cooked dinner, but it will save you standing around in a ticket queue. When 'your' family's name is called or indicated on the notice board, you may buy your tickets. This leaves you free to explore the island while you wait.

Accommodation

There are few accommodations on the 30km by 3.5km island and 50,000 people are expected during the 10-day festival. So if you haven't booked a caravan or holiday house by now, bring a tent. However, there are usually a few hotel room cancellations just before the festival, so give that a try if you're averse to creepy crawlers.

Transportation

You'll be travelling to an island, so prepare to take a boat. Ferries leave from Harlingen in Friesland. The slow ferry (*De Friesland*) takes about two hours; the fast ferry (*De Koegelwiek*) takes about 50 minutes. Extra ferries sail during the festival.

The ferry trip is part of the fun – at least part of the socialisation process. These are the people you'll be spending the next few days with, so be nice to your boat mates. On the ferry you can purchase your Oerol Festival Passport. You can find ferry information at the websites listed below.

Parking is tight at Harlingen during the festival, but there are good train connections from Leeuwarden. Travellers from Amsterdam, Rotterdam or The Hague can make use of bus 350 from Alkmaar station to Harlingen.

Transport on the island

A bicycle is the most convenient way to move around the island. Some performances cannot be reached with public transport. You can rent a bicycle on the island (from €4 per day or €20 per week). Sometimes a refundable deposit is required. The bicycle rental company will transport your luggage for free to your accommodation. There are also busses and taxis on the island.

Good information

Oerol Festival: www.oerol.nl

Tourist Board of Terschelling: www.vvv-terschelling.nl

Terschelling Information Guide: www.terschelling.info

Terschelling.net: www.Terschelling.net (of course)

Ferry Schedules: www.rederij-doeksen.nl

Train Planner: www.ns.nl