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The Public Festival: Inspiration and interconnectivity at the heart of festivals

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Festivals have been around, and will always be around; no matter the political context they are embedded in, supported by, or hindered by. Why? Simply because society develops, it transforms, it is dynamic and it needs space for reflection and inspiration. Festivals are platforms for people to meet, and for artists to present their work, their creations. This gives festivals an enduring, quite independent mission and reason to exist: as long as festivals strive to offer a biotope for artists and audiences alike and point to questions which concern the way we live and want to live, they will be a fertile ground for a meaningful development of society – and an offer for serving the public well-being.

What are the challenges festivals are facing today? There are a series of very complex questions related to festivals' positioning us as human beings in an interconnected, global society, our relation to nature and the immediate surroundings, our stories of life so that as many citizens as possible can be part of the societal discourse, can be enriched, can be touched, can be heard, can be moved. Individuals, interest groups, nationalities, countries, even continents are interconnected.

What does this mean for a festival? Travelling across Europe for work and pleasure and meeting citizens from all walks of life has taught me that citizens, a term that connects individuals to some larger constructed community, are just people, everyday people, going about their lives. People connect with other humans and their human stories, real life encounters. Abstract theory and jargon are meaningless when they lack real life connections. Meaningful festivals of the future will offer possibilities for new connections among people: they invite people to travel in time and in space; they inspire to connect human stories, enriching them with new, unexpected, colourful stories!

It is about this task of festivals – almost a 'public' mandate to be part of a transforming society – that I am going to write about, from my personal point

of view, but also referring to some key statements by young festival managers because they will be the ones leading the festival business in the future.

I mentioned the need to connect people and to inspire them. A sense of belonging and willingness to build our future together is only possible if people know their neighbours and care about their concerns – so that an individual concern becomes a shared concern.¹ This requires knowledge about the others' concerns, so it requires interaction and the exchange of views. Knowing and experiencing new views adds value to one's own look at the world – it puts one's own views into perspective.

Festivals are part of these relations in the public area, of this relational network; and the public area becomes part of the festival stage. Festivals need to make new connections, install new rituals of connecting and working together, establishing new bonds, through their artistic offer, their take on history and their visions of the future! They look at what keeps people awake, what drives society, and they give artists, alive or as part of history, a platform for this inspirational practice. This makes festivals public players.

So how do festivals assume responsibility for their public role? In his book *Resetting the Stage: Public theatre between market and democracy*, published in September 2012, Dragan Klaić argued that arts institutions don't deserve public financial support without the certainty of continuous investment in education and evidence of intercultural audience development.

I very much share Klaić's belief that art takes part in the development of an inclusive society which is the foundation of every democracy. This is why developing an intercultural audience deserves financial support. I also agree that education plays an important role. But let's take a closer look at what is specifically meant by 'education' in this context, because for me, education is simply the way how we inspire one another.

Working with the audience is an important issue among every serious cultural institution, one that takes many different forms. Festivals are doing it: attracting new audiences and maintaining them year after year, and developing specific programmes for specific audience groups. Radically overt, daring to transform cities and communities, festivals benefit from the interlinked society, they transform the urban environments, they fuse established and upcoming artists, they think global and act local.

But what is the essence of the various kinds of audience development instruments that exist? Why work with the audience?

Audience development is not just a simple goal but it responds to the responsibility of a cultural institution to the broader civil society: the responsibility

to create a support basis for citizens. The question each festival should ask itself is: What kind of interaction do I want to create with the audience? What about the interaction between the artist and the audience? How do we succeed in building this type of support basis?

In everyday local life, festivals have always been concerned with the ways in which intercultural dialogue can take a tangible form, because it is anyway part of the artistic practice and cultural reality, both thematically as well as intrinsically: sometimes it is an underlying concern; sometimes it takes a more explicit form. During their creation process artists work very intensely on social relations throughout different sectors. They do so as citizens, not as teachers, and they do so voluntarily, without being asked. Artists choose to link an educational dimension with their creation process, at the final stage but also during the process itself.

It seems to me that 'education' is a true concept dealing with 'mutual learning', and as Klaić calls it: a concept to inspire each other, to 'fertilise' each other. The more diverse the involved actors are, the better the mutual learning process will be! An increasing diversity within an environment also enriches the creative process in a festival. This has an immediate impact on increased access to artistic work. So yes, a cultural institution needs to take care of the development of its audience, keeping the following steps in mind:

- 1** The moment when audience and artist meet is a moment of continuous development of citizenship. Thanks to a creation you reflect on yourself, on others, on your context.
- 2** Therefore, it is up to each and every cultural institution to create meeting moments between artists and the audience and to adjust its instruments accordingly - starting with the artist's work.
- 3** Festivals reach millions of people every day in theatre or opera houses, or in the public space. The artists participating in festivals are also citizens who are part of the 'network'.
- 4** As a result, the cultural world is part of civil society, of the formal and informal relational network; the arts institution is searching for its place in this system of overlapping informal relational networks.
- 5** Audience development is no longer a goal in itself. Contact with the audience is part of a festival's identity and how it presents itself in the public environment – know-how linked with a clear artistic-ethnic identity that the audience should take home.
- 6** This all creates a great deal of responsibility for each festival, in the public sphere, and in the context of the established public order.