

## The Future of European Festivals

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Even if we sometimes trace the word 'festival' back to its ancient root (calling to mind the traditional events of *Bayreuth*, *Orange* and *Verona*), the idea of the arts festival as we know it is relatively recent. The modern festival has evolved as part of the 'leisure society', with its extended summer holidays and its all-pervasive media. The theatre festival in *Avignon*, the oldest and best known of all the French festivals, was founded in 1947 by actor and director Jean Vilar. Yet Vilar would never have imagined the success and geographical expansion that the future would bring to the festival phenomenon. For him, the festival was just another one of the many methods he used to bring young people together to share his aesthetic and moral values.

Immediately after World War Two, festivals sprang up simultaneously in several countries. At the same time as *Avignon* and *Aix-en-Provence* were started in France, similar events in *Edinburgh* and *Recklinghausen* were born. This synchronicity implies that the festival is both a social and a historical phenomenon, one both rooted in and responding to the spirit of the times and to our consumer society.

Since then festivals have spread widely, to the extent that there are now innumerable iterations across the globe. Unfortunately it appears that we have now reached saturation point and these events more often than not have become formulaic rather than more individual creative enterprises. Aren't there too many festivals now? Hasn't the public got tired of the very concept of a festival? Has the festival itself dissolved into just another facet of the tourism industry?

It is important to remember that festivals can play a significant role in introducing new works to the public. All over Western Europe more and more plays struggle to reach a wider audience, mainly in the world of public theatre, in countries where theatre comprises a multitude of small companies working on a project by project basis. While countries such as Germany or those in Central Europe perform repertory theatre so that actors are assured work all season, in France there is an imbalance between the number of plays