

9

Festival Leadership in Turbulent Times

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Europe is undergoing a period of transformational political change, with the post-war centre-left consensus that dominated the western nations breaking down and being replaced by a neo-liberal belief in the importance of markets in service delivery and a corresponding reduction in state intervention. Combine this with the financial crisis, which has meant cuts to arts and culture budgets in the UK, Netherlands, Italy, Greece and Hungary amongst others. Add in a touch of technologically driven change and then stop to consider the political, economic and social changes arising from the Arab Spring and the growing economic strength of Russia, Turkey and Kazakhstan on Europe's borders. There are opportunities and threats for all arts and cultural organisations, but what does this mean for festivals' leaders in particular? What do they see as the main issues? How are these issues affecting their vision, production and programming policies, their staff, funding, audience development and stakeholder relationships?

In times of great turbulence, leaders are the pathfinders who establish new ways of working. In Europe the auteur tradition has placed artistic leadership at the centre of decision-making, both within festivals themselves and amongst funders. Festivals' artistic directors are often independent cultural intermediaries, standing apart from the establishment but commenting on it; influencing both their own organisations and wider debates about legitimacy and value (Smith Maguire and Matthews, 2012). This is combined with the tendency of festival organisations to be quite small and entrepreneurial, operating what Handy (1999) calls 'power cultures', reliant on a central figure with a strong vision to make decisions. At their best, with visionary leaders, such organisations can create strong, supportive cultures that are flexible and that can react quickly to social, political and economic change. How then are these weather vanes responding to the post 2008 turbulent social and economic times in Europe?

The range of artistic festivals in Europe is considerable, so it might be thought that identifying shared issues and agendas across such a diverse field is a fool's errand. However, conversations with leaders from festivals across

Europe, supplemented by a small online survey [n=38] undertaken using databases from the European Festivals Association and the British Arts Festivals Association during the summer of 2012 indicate that there are three common issues that they consistently place at the top of their agendas: artistic vision and quality, audiences and income generation. The challenges these present are considered alongside technological, economic and demographic change.

A turbulent environment

Europe's economic situation has been dire since 2008; the Euro in crisis, indebted, lacking growth and with high levels of unemployment in many countries. In this climate making the case for public subsidy of festivals can be very difficult, so it is no surprise that festival directors have been thinking creatively about diversifying their income sources. Previous research across Europe indicates that financial and institutional support for festivals varies widely across the continent, with some festivals receiving almost all of their income from public sources and others almost entirely reliant on sponsorship or earned income (Ilczuk and Kulikowska 2007: 35-37). This places festivals in an interesting place in relation to policy makers – they are not entirely reliant on public subsidy, so can be an independent voice, but they might not be valued as highly as other cultural institutions. Diversifying income streams is at the top of festival leaders' concerns across the continent, indicating some uncertainty about the level of support they can expect from the public and commercial sectors.

At the national level, the approach and commitment of Europe's politicians to culture is changing rapidly. Since World War Two, most Western European nations have taken a benign approach to the arts, providing subsidy without overt artistic intervention (McGuigan 2004). Festival policy has largely focused on large-scale celebrations of national pride, or festivals aimed at encouraging tourism, with the latter often being initiated locally, but success being hailed centrally later, such as the *Edinburgh International Festival* in Scotland (Garcia 2004, Getz 2009).

For festival directors this is both an opportunity and a danger; the very point that requires sure-footed leadership. Do you accept the potential windfall that might come your way if you associate your festival with a celebration of national pride? Or do you perceive this as a dangerous short-termism that might leave you isolated if the political wind changes?

As can be seen from some of the other chapters in this book, festival leaders tend to be entrepreneurial. Jonker et al define festival entrepreneurs as being

driven, resourceful, explorative, focused on personal benefits and with good organisational and communication skills (2009: 387). The leaders interviewed and surveyed for this research shrugged off concerns about funding in the belief that their festival product was good enough and important enough that they would find supporters to finance it. This may be partly a desire not to wash their dirty linen in public, partly bravado and partly confidence, but it was surprisingly common as a survey response (50%), regardless of the political landscape in the festival's country.

Although it did not feature strongly as a concern, festival leaders reported declining national support in Germany, the Netherlands, the UK and the Czech Republic in the online survey completed in 2012. Festivals are turning to commercial sponsorship (although this source is also fragile and declining in some places) and some to individual giving. One leader commented "the Festival is seeking to diversify its income streams and increase revenue from corporate partners and private donors", whilst another said "most money is now from grants; sponsorship is less than before...", illustrating the complexity of the environments that festivals are having to contend with.

In some ways, festivals may be benefiting from the lack of consistent public subsidy and policy frameworks identified by Ilczuk and Kulikowska – as there are few policies about festivals, there have been few dedicated subsidy streams, so they have never been able to rely on this source of income and have had to think more creatively than some other parts of the public cultural sector about income generation (2007). In the survey of festival leaders undertaken for this study, an average of 45% of their income came from sponsorship and sales. Contrast this with the criteria for Dutch performing arts companies and festivals for funding from 2013-16 (Fonds Podium Kunsten, 2012), which for the first time asked for 30% match funding.

In the UK, the *Buxton Festival*, which produces rarely seen opera, survived its first quarter century with minimal subsidy. As a result, it has developed a culture of philanthropy amongst its supporters similar to those found in American cultural institutions. It has certainly benefited from opera's appeal to the older, relatively affluent audiences, but the main impetus to fundraise has always been a question of survival: without the Friends, there would be no festival. The Friends provide a significant slice of the festival's funding, sometimes as much as 10% of turnover. They paid for the production of an additional opera in the 2011 edition, for example (Jordan 2013).

Funding, however, is not the only reason for festival leaders to be concerned about a lack of relevant cultural policies and most are well aware of the need for good relationships with their municipalities. Festivals can be important