

Atelier for Young Festival Managers 14 - 21 October 2012

Speech

at the occasion of the Opening Ceremony of the EFA Atelier for Young Festival Managers LJUBLJANA 2012

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Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good evening and welcome in Ljubljana to the fifth Atelier for Young Festival Managers!

All ingredients for these 7 days are prepared: we can start cooking together: the cooks are here, the kitchen is set, the ingredients are bought:

I like to compare the Atelier to a world kitchen:

- a kitchen that offers an immense range of artistic views and cultural backgrounds;
- a space to learn and reflect about realities we are confronted with, so diverse in their concrete context economically, culturally, artistically, and of course politically;
- The Atelier is about sharing and standing with one's ideas – measuring and checking one's own thoughts, and review them eventually;
- it is about the energy and honesty, and openness of individuals.

Each of these ingredients is an important element in the combination of the whole!

In the next 7 days, we will ask many, many questions about the role of festivals, about our times, and our own place in it!

"Start with yourself – but see yourself as a part of the whole!" – for me, this sentence symbolises the starting point of the Atelier.

To start with myself: I am a European. I belong to what I call "Generation Europe": that part of my generation which was in the privileged position to take the opportunities offered by ERASMUS programmes; cross-national studies; that generation which is crossing open frontiers; which enjoys the privilege to learn from so many different cultures. The European Union won the Nobel Prize for Peace for this achievement of the past 60 years just the other day!

Yet, there is a strong sense of looming social unrest and disparities within our societies and the need for solutions in Europe, and world-wide: What is it that we leave to the younger generation in 60 years time?

I just came back from Belgrade where the No Borders Orchestra was launched, an initiative that brings together the best talents from the region, from the seven former Yugoslavian republics.

The orchestra performed for the first time in front of an audience in Belgrade for the opening of the Belgrade Music festival. You have to understand the context of this part of Europe: these are musicians, who are now sitting next to each other and playing together, whose parents, still 15 years ago, were killing each other. They come from a time where Yugoslavia was destroyed, and borders were established. Can you imagine how emotionally, how strongly, how enthusiastically this orchestra played and was perceived by the audience?

This is what a festival stage is made for: This orchestra represents the change that we wish to see in the world.

I believe that, in Europe and on a global level, we need to achieve still so much: peace, citizenship, more equality, build transparent and democratic political systems and so forth.

If our generation, and if we as cultural operators, can play our part in these challenges, as modest as it might be, there is reason to hope that we get closer to achieving these goals!

I see the Atelier very much in line with our responsibilities in today's world.

We have therefore chosen to work with particular host cities: After Görlitz, on the German-Polish border in 2006, Varna on the Black Sea at the bridge towards the Arab world in 2009, Singapore, the hub towards Asia, and Izmir, on the Mediterranean Sea between Europe and Asia in 2011, Ljubljana has been chosen very consciously as a city in a country that embodies the change in Europe over the past 20 years.

Ljubljana is on the bridge between East and West; today, as a Member State of the EU, Slovenia is part of the legal space with open borders towards Italy, but imagine: one crosses four countries from Ljubljana to get to Belgrade which 20 years ago belonged to the same country.

We will certainly have the opportunity to speak about this political element because the urgencies, the contexts that you all represent, the questions, the challenges you are facing when running your festivals, are so varied and will lead discussions not only to the question of how to run a festival, but also why!

So here are the cooks – and the ingredients:

First of all: You – the participants. You came here from all over the world, from closer by and from far away: the US, Brazil, Israel, Georgia, Egypt, Abu Dhabi, Australia, Palestine etc! You came prepared. But let me tell you from my experience: you have to be open and flexible to engage, to confront yourself, and sometimes even to overcome crisis – just like in any other creative process.

Secondly, the mentors: They will raise key questions, discuss their work in depth, exchange on successes, but also – and especially – on failures: we will ask them why they did the kind of work they did, how they focused on the artists and their work, how they incorporated the local art scene as well as the international aspect and how they presented these efforts in their city and region.

Robyn Archer, Nele Hertling and Hugo De Greef are already with us. Tomorrow morning, Michal Merczynski and Fruzsina Szép will arrive. During the week, Bernard Faivre d'Arcier, Jonathan Mills and Gerard Mortier will join.

Without giving away too much of what this group of festival leaders will focus on, they all share the same point of departure: “The true role of a festival is to help artists to dare, to engage in new projects,” as Bernard Faivre d'Arcier formulated the core of the festival sense – and in fact the motto of the Atelier for Young Festival Managers.

The third ingredient: the 7 days! It is an exciting experience for all of us. We have quite a road in front of us and hopefully beyond the time in Ljubljana: we hope that these 7 days will be fruitful to you in your paths way beyond this week!

I share this ambition with Hugo De Greef, the mentor and general coordinator and moderator of the Atelier. He is not only my predecessor as Secretary General of the European Festivals Association, but above all the mind behind the programme and the set up of these 7 days. He gathered all the ingredients – the mentors, the participants selected out of 80 applications together with Nele Hertling, and set up the flow of the programme; quite a difficult dish, he was preparing there!

But of course, now it is up to you to start the conversation as of tonight!

Let me conclude by saying that it is very important for the European Festivals Association – a cultural network of 60 years old – that you, today's participants and participants of previous editions, truly make a difference. Keep on questioning the why and the how of arts festivals today!

If networks such as EFA are networks that keep on reinventing themselves, alert to what is happening in the world, I am sure that we can contribute with our bit to the processes of peace and understanding.

Let us be courageous, sometimes moral or radical; let us get our act together – and not be driven by the market without a conscience, by the logic of competitiveness of global economic exchanges that cannot bring us to the core of the matter: a better understanding between people living next to each other. Culture has to play its role here!

I have said enough – so let me invite Robyn Archer on stage to open the Atelier: Robyn embodies what the Atelier is about: she is an artist, she is an artistic manager, she is a public advocate for the arts – and she believes in sharing her thinking all over the world, as well as in listening to what keeps society awake. Robyn, it is a great privilege for us to have you with us paving the way for the fifth edition of the Atelier for Young Festival Managers in Ljubljana.