

Atelier for Young Festival Managers 14 - 21 October 2012

Keynote Address

to open the

EFA Atelier for Young Festival Managers LJUBLJANA 2012

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[This version is laid out for public speaking]

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I am honoured to have been invited to contribute to this Atelier, *especially* as it is here in Ljubljana. I've been aware of, and inspired by, the important platforms that festivals in this part of the world have offered for many years now. I was also lucky enough to perform here too, as a singer (an invitation from Mita at Cancarev Dom) and found audiences receptive, intelligent and enthusiastic. Being both a *beneficiary* of festivals, and a *maker* of festivals – on the one hand I am invited to *create* them, on the other invited to *perform*, or speak as part of them, I get to see festivals from a few different sides. Of course I experience them as an audience member too – although I think you, the participants as young professionals in your field will have already recognised that you are no longer the average audience.

I'm sure all of us experienced festivals for the first time with a sense of excitement and wonder – so much going on, so many riches to enjoy and explore, and that pressing urgency that unless you put your mind (and pocket) to it, that you might 'miss out' on that once in a lifetime opportunity to see something that might (and indeed often does) change the course of your life. But your experience of festivals is starting to, or already has, *changed*. You find yourselves not only absorbed by the *content*, but perhaps partying less and observing more, as you now find yourself combining the joy of particular performances or exhibitions, with the professional noting of methodologies and strategies that you may wish to avoid or utilise in your own context. The best festivals, the most useful ones, are defined by their capacity to present new challenges and offer new perspectives on what we are doing in the arts – and sometimes, as I hope will emerge in our conversations during the Atelier, they give us an opportunity to see where the arts sit in the context of a particular society as a whole.

It's the same for the programme of the Atelier – it is always a two-way process, and we can never quite say what the outcome will be. As mentors and presenters I know *we* will get at least as much out of the participants as they may get out of us in the coming week. It should be understood at the outset that there are very few differences between us as mentors and you as participants, except perhaps in terms of experience. We are *all* participants in the Atelier, and the kinds of questions you raise in relation to your current projects are the same kinds of challenges we have to meet in our current projects. The main thing *we* as mentors can offer is a record of how we have dealt with these challenges in the past, and how we are dealing with them now in our current day to day to roles. Believe me, our ears and eyes are wide open for ideas and approaches which will inform our work too. It's a privilege to spend time in the presence of so much energy and ambition, from so many very different parts of the world, and I think we should ask the participants to stand, and applaud them for making this journey to Ljubljana to learn, to share, and to enjoy the exceptional riches of this local culture.

All of us, one way or another, are involved in mentorship in our own countries, in informal ways and as an adjunct to our professional structures; but the Atelier is special. It is like a festival in itself – a compressed timeframe into which so many ideas are squeezed that we emerge exhausted, but in some respects enlightened. There is nothing passive about this week to come.

Now I don't want you to get the impression that the Atelier is a *short-cut* to career opportunity, but of course we can't be unaware of your energies and intelligence, and I have to say that I have been able to offer opportunities to two of the Australian participants who attended the Atelier in Izmir.

In my case I commissioned David Finnigan to create a new festival of independent and alternative artists for our national Capital Canberra – it is a very young city compared to Ljubljana and will celebrate just 100 years in 2013: it is one of a handful of 'planned capitals' in the world. The thinking

behind commissioning David is a useful illustration of how festivals can be used for outcomes broader than just the sheer pleasure of the arts.

One of the myths about the Australian Capital has been that there are no significant numbers of young people there (odd, since there are three universities, including the highest ranking university in Australia, the Australian National University) and that there's nothing for them to do. One of the ways to bust that myth was simply to get a young artist to make the truth manifest. With his colleagues in Canberra, and bringing some Canberrans home, the collective David brought together over just 100 days, created 44 events for a ten day festival. They called it YOU ARE HERE, have had two editions so far, with a third coming up next year for the Centenary; and they have now formed a company with legal entity while the creators of the first three editions are now into succession planning and looking beyond 2013.

Now people know that there *are* young artists in Canberra and that they are doing good things, and that there are audiences for their ideas and invention. The Centenary celebrations have thus filled a gap in knowledge about the city, busted a myth, and spawned a new festival which we hope will exist beyond the Centenary celebrations and continue to offer opportunities for emerging and alternative artists in the region.

Brooke Small was also a participant in Izmir and she is now a part of our team and managing the many projects which directly engage with the community – very much the participatory aspect of the programme.

This idea of legacy is important – that a festival is not only an intense and immersive experience for a short time, but that the seeds that it plants continue to flourish and grow. This is manifest in the Atelier, the intention of which is legacy: it is a hothouse for the exchange of ideas which we all hope will gain strength during the Atelier and way beyond. With a rigorous and intentionally compressed timeframe, the Atelier allows hungry participants from a wide range of cultures and contexts, to feed from a feast of festival experience and expertise from across the world. And we hope, of course, that some of that energy will be shared with the artistic community here.

For all concerned, the Atelier is a formal framework in which we *all* learn and all take back these fresh and re-freshed ideas into our individual workplaces – for the benefit of audiences, community and artists alike.

Change is the natural order of the world – whether a flower over a few weeks, or a forest over a few hundred years, a human over less than one hundred – it starts with a seed, it sprouts, grows, blossoms, then withers or implodes and is gone.

Yet human beings seem intent on trying to build fortresses against this process: we build houses and monuments in the vain hope that they will combat time. Try though man has for thousands of years to deny it and confront it, *change* is still the only unchangeable fact of life. As much as I loved the motto I saw on a 1920s building in Chicago two days ago “All passes – art alone endures”, we have to admit that even most art is transitory, though perhaps the inherent need to make art is ever-present in human beings. My art as a singer is over the minute the breath passes over my vocal cords to set up sound waves that hit your sound receptors that connect to your brain to register ‘song’ – but it’s likely the deep desire to sing and the deep desire to create works to sing will endure.

At a graveside ceremony in Lucknow, India, just 2 weeks ago, I was prevailed upon to sing a hymn in memory of the man who designed the Australian Capital – the American Walter Burley Griffin who died and was buried in Lucknow. I thought the heavens might open up and crash on me, as an unbeliever, but no. I chose *Abide With Me* because of some specific lines – one of which is

Change and decay in all around I see
O thou who changeth not, abide with me

It is the definitive expression of humanity’s desire not to be ruled by change. Personally, as an itinerant worker with no real home for more than thirty years, and as a professional who has no idea what will ever happen once the current job ends (welcome oh foolish ones to our world), I have no problem with change: and that allows me to experience change as the most natural order.

Twenty years or so ago, we were looking at the massive migrations and conflicts in Eastern Europe as the Wall in Berlin collapsed and the European Union suggested unity across many countries. Now our focus is on North Africa and the Middle East, on wars and migratory flights which stretch in some cases all the way to the seas north of Australia where people take life-threatening risks to seek refuge and asylum.

At the same time, many parts of Europe feel fragile. Indeed *Democracy* itself is considered to be under threat. While even the title ‘the Arab Spring’ denotes a courageous and optimistic step away from dictatorship towards what is viewed as the golden prize of democracy, and while millions of human beings seek refuge and asylum in countries where they hope their human rights will be respected – countries with democratic systems of government; at the same time, many of those very countries are experiencing a dramatic turn to the right and to ultra-conservative governments.

We have chosen lives in the arts because of beauty, wonder, inspiration, self-expression and the sheer audacity of the human spirit when it is at its most creative, and can never afford to let that lust in us diminish, or abate; we can never afford to relinquish those moments, often very private, in

which we are wholly absorbed by the revelation which an artist has worked with such passion to deliver to us. But equally we must continually ask ourselves “Can we afford to divorce festivals from the human and social context, whether local, national or international, of our times?”

As my current major project deals with the capital of Australia, the seat of federal government, I have found it necessary, even in a context of ‘celebration’, to look at the symbolic role of the capital. Recent polls have found that there is a frighteningly large percentage of young Australians who do not particularly value democracy, and believe another system might work just as well. This is so strange when we observe so many young people wishing to come to Australia precisely because it has such an effective system of democracy where justice largely prevails.

Yet there are those who take it for granted. Therefore as I prepare a year-long celebration of the capital for its 100th birthday, I cannot help but include conversations about its symbolic role, the altruism and optimism of its beginnings 100 years ago, as a new capital for a new progressive democracy. I hope to cure some of the cynicism – and I unapologetically use the ‘festival’ opportunity as a platform for such discussion.

But this might not have been so for a different kind of director, happy *simply* to have a party; and we all know that often festivals *are* funded and supported *only* on the implicit understanding that they will *not* adopt a critical stance, will *not* include things which are sensitive for those who fund and support it. It is possibly one of the marks of civil society that it will support platforms which encourage critical points of view. This begs the question to all of us here tonight: is it incumbent upon all of us, given the privilege to create or inherit a festival, to place that event within a realistic social and political context? Or can we claim that, unencumbered by the dirtiness and messiness of day to day realities, the arts offer the kind of heart and inspiration that will allow others to go off and do the hard work at the coalface of conflict?

Can we operate in an aesthetic vacuum, as long as we are sure that someone else is doing battle on the frontline? Or do we also need to be overt in our concerns? If the revolution must include dancing, then is it OK for festivals just to provide fun? When Bernard Faivre d’Arcier offers his maxim that ‘the true role of a festival is to help artists to dare, to engage in new projects’, do we trust that artists, given a free rein and our support, will naturally come up with a wide range of subject matter that stretches from fun to critically important? Does it depend on which artists we decide to invite and to support?

We’re interested to know from all of you whether any of this matters, and hope that such topics will arise as you tell us more about your projects. There’s so much diversity here: in a time when most places are subject to economic restraint, and even crisis in some cases, how are the arts faring in

your region? From our multiple perspectives as festival directors, what do we make of excesses such as the staging of all of Pina Bausch's most significant works for the London Cultural Olympiad?

I have often said that festivals are all about excess, that the secret of a great festival is its compact nature, over a limited timeframe, with an overstuffed banquet to take pleasure in. We should emerge from such indulgence in some way changed – back to normal, but with a new perspective on life.

So, staging all of Pina's works is a great tribute to a great artist, a great accomplishment in terms of negotiating, producing, and delivering, and for those who were able to attend, I'm sure a great experience; but I look at the number of smaller companies closing down all over the world for lack of resources, see great ideas of so many artists perish for want of support, see communities of all kinds desperately in need of the hope, joy and enlightenment that the arts can bring, and wonder how useful such extravagance is. Did enough emerging choreographers and dancers and other creative spirits have the time and money to be able to experience this banquet? We are so happy that we have our first participant from Abu Dhabi, and it seems from that project paper that what is expressed is an active alternative to the massive brand – Museum island currently under construction there. We had wondered how much of local living culture we would experience within that grand plan.

I'm sure that you, as the next generation of festival leadership, have some opinions about that; and we would be interested to hear them. Are some of you simply lusting after the power and budget that would deliver such largesse, or are there other things on your mind?

As festival directors we develop enormous cultural cache through inviting the greats to our festivals, but the place and status of local creative forces is something we all have to think carefully about. To what extent are we using our festivals to ensure the cultural health and strength of the community which hosts our event?

It's great to see so much local focus in the papers you have presented to the Atelier, and we are looking forward to drawing out more of those details during the week.

This is an era when virtual connectivity has handed enormous power to the very localised story. These days a tiny project, in a tiny place, a song recorded in a bedroom, can spread rapidly throughout the world: it can be stupid and sensationalist and lead to celebrity, or it can be original and authentic, in which case it may stick around longer and outlast flash-in-the-pan fame.

The role of social media and its potential for political action is now well known: the opportunities for crowd-funding of less mainstream projects is now being investigated by the mainstream because it

has proved so effective. And a number of your projects reflect the use of these tools not only as a means of communication and participation, but also for their inherent creative potential.

Artists have always grabbed the best of new inventions and used them – from the invention of the printing press to the arrival of electric lights, from photography to holography. Of course artists in the 21st century will continue to experiment with new media – but that alone, that simple engagement with new media (however it continues to evolve) does not guarantee great or original work. As festival directors we must increasingly be careful not to be seduced just by the utilisation of new media, as fascinating as it often is; that old challenge 'excellence' still haunts us. Who is using the media in the most inventive, most beautiful ways, to produce the most inspiring work.

These days the words 'access' and 'interactivity' are almost necessities of public funding. Because most members of the public now have digital communication devices, they are convenient media for both communication and interactivity. And you never know when some kid just gets hooked into the arts via these media and becomes an artist of visionary dimensions and longevity. But again, the due diligence of providing wide publics with accessible platforms doesn't always equate with the production of enduring moments of inspiration. Nor does it always have to – as I said, fun is not forbidden in the world of festivals. But I always find I enjoy it more when fun has a sting to it, and creates a lasting memory.

We'll also be interested to hear from all of you just how you are dealing in creative ways with contexts in which money is tight. Simply asking 'how do I get more money' is possibly not the best use of your time here. We claim to be the most creative sector of society, we should be creative in this as well: though I'm not sure that we *are* more creative than, for instance, the scientists I have engaged with in Canberra. One thing is certain scientists on the edge pursue funding with as much passion and despair as we do. More productive are examples where people are trying to be creative around the way their projects can gain support.

For the festival I created for Melbourne, *The Light in Winter*, at Federation Square (we are currently preparing its 7th edition), I invited this year the Spanish artists (one of whom spends part of his time in Berlin) *Luz Interruptus*.

I had an interesting conversation with them. If Berlin is 'over' as a place where artists can find cheap spaces and get on with their work... where next? Instantly they said Lisbon – the economy is in bad shape, so there are lots of empty or very cheap spaces, and the independent arts scene continues to survive. In this special European context, artists are almost gleefully spotting the next economic disaster zone as it gives them the cheaper conditions they need to produce work.

They were much less optimistic about Madrid where they were lamenting recent by-laws which forced all venues to have a licence: in one instant, the musical and performative life of that city decimated. Such a moment is worth considering – how would we challenge the forced disappearance of lively venues in our own cities?

And we know that there are any number of places in the world today from where we can draw inspiring examples – young Japanese artists' responses in the Fukushima district, Irish theatre makers' responses to the dramatic decline of their once bubbling economy. What artistic traditions will survive, then, the current mayhem in Syria? We know that some of its architectural heritage has been destroyed forever.

But do we care about any of this – *should* we care about any of this? Do we really think that we are immune from what Resilience Thinking calls 'sudden disturbance' – natural disaster, financial crisis, political change and ad hoc unilateral decisions? Is it better simply to 'make hay while the sun shines' and simply cross our fingers and hope it doesn't happen to us? I don't think so. I return to the maxim we acknowledge in the major festivals of Australia – as festival directors we are simply custodians in the moment, and we must strive to leave the festival in better shape than it was when we were handed that privilege.

Maybe it's always best that upcoming forces of energy in the arts, like yourselves, *do* look only at the positives, the beauty, the daring, and leave the worrying about threats to others. On the other hand maybe it's just as well for you to be aware, to be able to discuss tactics as well as all the lively perspectives that your projects reveal.

The Atelier offers a splendid week for us to listen and learn about the opportunities and the big ideas, as well as the realpolitik of art and festivals around the world. We will certainly learn more about not only Slovenia and this region, its complex cultures and its unique festivals, but about all the places that you all come from. Despite the increasing opportunities to communicate in virtual space, geography is still one of the great inhibitors to artistic communications and might I say 'fellowship'. Festivals can offer vital and rare opportunities to see new and unfamiliar work, and for indispensable dialogue, face to face. The Atelier is the same – let's use the opportunity wisely.

While an artist can train in all manner of formal situations, to develop skills acquisition in all genres from dance to film, music to design etc, there are fewer opportunities for 'training' in festival direction.

I think most of us in the older guard made it up as we went along, and as we learn about the experience of young participants, there are certain parallels as you venture into new territories, trying to implement new ideas, but often without specific guidance. Here, as previous participants

have told us, they appreciate being able to work so closely with so many experienced festival directors, to ask questions and to hear the wide variety of stories we are able to offer about festival-making, our approaches, our successes, challenges and failures.

It would be well nigh impossible to teach 'festival direction' in this way in any one fixed institution or place. In this group of Atelier mentors and presenters there are more than one hundred years of festival experience – you don't ever get that in one place or at one time. The European Festivals Association initiated the Atelier because there is a real need for education and exchange explicitly concerning the programming of festivals. Everything claims to be a festival; there are festivals of sport and festivals of shopping (I saw one in Hong Kong airport) and just yesterday as I made my transit between America and Europe in the UK I picked up this "Heathrow Festival" – 14 pages of what you can eat at the airport, and 4 concerts over 2 months. The very title 'festival' is now under suspicion, so it's up to us to restore its credibility. There are many programmes that deal with and teach arts organisation and management, but almost none concerning the content and conceptualisation of festivals. Well now there *is* one – and it is powerful and effective.

Previous participants have confirmed that the great and lasting benefits of the Atelier is simply the unique chance to meet their peers from so many different countries, cultural, social and political backgrounds. The opportunity to speak at length with each other is invaluable – and as in previous Ateliers you will go on to establish your own rich networks. This creates a simple but remarkable context for the future health of global co-operation in arts and culture, and in so many wider aspects of society as the natural outcomes of artistic production.

So thanks to everyone who has so generously made it possible for us to gather here tonight in this marvellous city.

Over the last six weeks, since our launch of the Centenary of Canberra, I have been concentrating on that other city, our national capital, and have spoken in every state capital city on our continent, that's eight cities, and then Lucknow, Delhi, London, Washington and Chicago. I have been using the texts which will comprise the choral element of our newly commissioned Symphony No 3: Century by Australian composer Andrew Schultz (his first symphony will make its European premier in Denmark in January).

These texts are linked under the title Three Architects – all American – Griffin (who designed Canberra) is last, and the first two are by his inspirational teachers and exemplars Sullivan and Burnham (all three from Chicago). I think you'll find meaning in them.

BURNHAM – is sung by a children's choir:

Make no little plans,
They have no magic.
Make big plans – aim high,
In hope and work.

A noble plan, a diagram,
Once drawn is made.
A noble, logical diagram
Once recorded, will never die.

But will be, when we are dead,
A living thing,
It will insist:
Let your watchword be order
And your beacon beauty.

SULLIVAN is sung by an adult choir *to* the children's choir:

Do you, or do you not, intend to be architects in whose care
Democracy may entrust its dreams and aspirations?

I warn you the time left for an answer is acutely brief.

For as young as you are, you are not as young as you were
Yesterday
- And tomorrow?

Tomorrow!

GRIFFIN is sung by the combined choirs:

Unity is essential to the city-
So complex a problem requires a simple organism.

Purity in proportion, and unity in scale.

Eliminate the useless,
Eliminate what serves no role.

A general simplicity,
A maximum of repetition,
A maximum of rhythm.

Honest direct solutions.

A civilization of aspiring ideals,
So limitless,
Greater than any on earth.

Number, size, scale, elevation.

I wish us *all* a very productive, very useful, week – and of course, a lot of fun.

Thank you