

JOHANNESBURG 2018

« Car le vrai rôle d'un festival est d'aider les  
artistes à oser, à entreprendre des projets... »  
Bernard Faivre d'Arcier

## Atelier for Young Festival Managers 23 - 29 March 2018

Speech by

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### Opening Ceremony of the Atelier for Young Festival Managers Johannesburg 2018

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On behalf of the Market Theatre Foundation and our partners, the University of the Witwatersrand and the Festival Academy, it is my pleasure to welcome our delegates to the Atelier for young Festival Managers that is taking place for the first time in Africa.

With more than 300 awards for artistic excellence and 2 awards for human rights, the Market Theatre Foundation is celebratory and critically reflective of its past, anchored and engaged with our present times and visionary about our future. We are delighted to be partnering with University of Witwatersrand and the Festival Academy to present a weeklong programme in which young festival managers will explore the meanings, purposes, outcomes and best practices of arts festivals; and how these festivals can give relevance and vibrancy to the societies in which they are presented.

In this week, as the young festival managers engage with each other, I hope that the discussions, workshops and roundtable discussions will explore both the role of festivals and that of the festival director because festivals are more than a gathering and celebration of the art-forms. In any society --- democratic or otherwise --- arts festivals must be arenas where critical debate and an exchange of ideas is encouraged. Arts festivals must both mirror and critically reflect on their societies but they also must be catalysts for provoking, challenging and re-envisioning their societies.

Effectively planned and presented arts festivals are social movements. The values and mission of a festival will define the nature and the sense of social participation that will either be encouraged or be constrained by the festival. No matter how excellent an arts administrator you are and no matter how academically qualified you are in the arts it is the kind of social landscape that you create around your festival that will define whether your festival is a dynamic social movement or just another event on the cultural event.

Too often, as festival directors we assume that our role is to curate a programme of excellence and diversity and to have a balance between the classics and the contemporary, the mainstream and the fringe. We think we've hit the G-spot when we tick boxes of genres, gender and geography.

I hope that in this week, the Atelier will challenge festival directors to re-envision their roles as change-

agents and provocateurs; and in so doing they will start off by identifying the gatekeepers in their festivals and how they can actively work to disengage and disempower the gatekeepers in their festivals so that the festivals instead of becoming tick-boxes for political correctness can become arenas for freedom of expression and freedom of creativity; and that artists can be given the spaces, resources and latitude for inspiring, challenging, transforming and growing their societies.

It is essential that we try move the identity of arts festivals as being merely cultural events. Arts festivals are bigger than cultural events! Arts festivals are vibrant and vital spaces for social, economic and political development. Arts festivals are spaces where critical reflection, engaging debate and courageous confrontation underlines an artistic and cultural programme so that those who are immersed in the festival and those whom the festival incidentally touches are constantly forming new opinions, rethinking their positions and redefining how they can engage with their society.

There is a direct relationship between arts festivals and the democratic processes of a country; and festival directors need to define where they stand in that relationship. Festival directors have a role to play as provocateurs that inspire controversy but they need to be effective managers of conflict. They must have a social compact with artists that allows artists to take risks, to disrupt and to breakdown the myths that hold society back. But, at the same time, festival directors must also have a social compact with artists that challenges artists to be accountable and responsible citizens. Festival directors hold in their hands the two most important freedoms i.e. freedom of expression and freedom of creativity because these two freedoms have the gravitas to challenge, break down and rebuild every other freedom.

Artistic and cultural rights are one category of human rights, along with civil, political and economic rights. The freedom for the creation and expression of artistic and cultural rights is central to a nation's identity, coherence, autonomy and self-esteem. One of the main challenges for festival directors who work in a space that is becoming increasingly globalized is how they can maintain and protect their nation's own cultural diversity and identity and yet at the same time be open to embrace the positive influences that come from outside of the nation because globalization and technological advancements have opened-up new opportunities for the ways in which we can encourage artistic and cultural exchanges between festivals across the globe.

International cultural exchange gives an incredibly dynamic impetus to festivals and to the societies in which the festivals are presented. In this week during the Atelier, you will come into contact with new people, ideas, circumstances, situations and places that will impact on the way you rethink your responses. In this week at the Atelier as you engage each other's minds and hearts, as you walk into the shadows of our history which remains locked in the Apartheid Museum and as you walk in our constitution precinct and imagine the possibilities of hope that our constitution inspires, and as you engage with other festival directors from Africa, Europe, the Americas and Asia, you cannot go back to your festivals untransformed.

During this week, you will be exposed to the diverse identities and cultures of the people in your group

and you will be exposed to the diversity of our city. You must fully engage with the complexities that all of it brings but you must strive to find that uniting thread that binds us together; and which can cultivate a sense of acceptance of the cultural elements of your own and the others too.

You must discover a new kind of *Cultural Democracy* that will inspire a vision about how the arts is a powerful voice for humanity to embrace differences, encourage tolerance, bridge the gaps between ourselves and to makes the world a better place that we can endow to future generations.

When you watch the play *HANI; THE LEGACY* at the Market Theatre next week, you will discover how through the arts we grieve the political assassination of a national loss and also how we find healing and hope through the creativity of the artists who have created and perform in the work.

The artists who created this award-winning production have evoked memories and imagination. They created the work from reflections and projections, from pain and survival, from loss and victory, from despair and hope, from anecdotes and scholarly research. In the darkness of the Ramoloa Makhene Theatre, *HANI : THE LEGACY* will offer you a unique experience of being personally engaged with the plot as it unfolds; and yet at the same time to have a public encounter with the actors who have the courage to play the roles which will give us a deeper understanding of the human condition.

Our artists are the canaries in a mine. We need to set aside our egos as festival directors and our programming must be responsive to the mood and the voices of our artists. Through poetry, music, dance, spoken word, drama and visual images our artists hold an incredible capacity to inspire, challenge, provoke and engage us. Our actors perform what academics teach in their lecture rooms. Our spoken word artists beat out rhythms about social justice for which public intellectuals hold the fort on radio, television and the print media. Our musicians sing lyrics that heal us and bring us together in far more effective ways than any politician can imagine doing. Our dancers create movements that stir and evokes in us the consciousness that all our hearts beat with the same pulse. The arts through all its diverse expression unites us in our common humanity because it allows us to be at the same time both the outsider watching in and insider experiencing the other. The arts immerse us in both the political and the personal; and you the festival managers who are the contractors, programmers and curators of all of these expressions hold the power to ensure that our arts festivals are results-orientated events through which we will be able to offer new hope for humanity.

Our voice as artists and as festival managers must also be a celebration of the human spirit in all its forms. As we watch how across the globe political, economic and religious ideologies battle for their positions and how the arts and artists are increasingly becoming the soft targets as festival managers we need to fight even harder to make our theatres, galleries, museums, libraries, cinemas and arts festivals the places where our society can express and document their hopes, fears, aspirations, experiences, disappointments, failures, pain and anguish. These spaces must remain as the heartbeats through which our communities can live.

During the years of apartheid rule in South Africa, the Nationalist Party government banned artists and their work but the resilience of the artists was driven by a unifying slogan that culture is a weapon of the struggle.

When the government tried to shut down exhibitions in our museums they tried to make us lose our memories. They did not succeed! Our artists and curators found new ways of documenting our memories.

When they tried to stop us from singing and dancing they tried to destroy our souls. They did not succeed! Our songwriters, singers, choreographers and dancers found new ways of rejuvenating our souls.

When they tried to stop us from performing our plays they tried to deprive us of our right to imagination. When they tried to ban our poetry and burn our books they were trying to take our voices. They did not succeed! What they learnt all the time is that voice and imagination of the artist can never be silenced. It re-emerges even stronger after any attempt to silence it.

The freedom of artists and right to creative expression should not be stifled but freedom of creativity and freedom of expression are not exclusive rights. They are defined by enormous responsibilities. The freedom, diversity with which it is allowed to prosper responsibly enhances the identity of a nation. The imagination and voice of the artist should be encouraged. It should be supported to prosper nationally and it should be exported internationally with an immense sense of national pride. The engagement of artists as ambassadors to promote a country's national identity and its spirit is the most powerful tool that will allow governments to make friends both at home and abroad.

Simply termed as "Cultural Diplomacy", the free exchange of cultural experiences and expressions between different nations is an integral form of soft power which relies on the ability to persuade, inform, educate and to combat ignorance about the other. Cultural diplomacy also aims to promote national interests through peaceful means. There is no better way for a nation to cultivate and utilize its cultural ideals than to put forward the best image of itself. For diplomats, entrusted with representing their nations' interests outside their borders, cultural diplomacy is the best companion. It is for this reason that cultural diplomats and their diplomatic missions are constantly wanting to engage with festival directors and their festivals.

Festival managers have their fingers on the pulse of the nation. They have the ability to listen to songs, poetry and theatre; and to read the mood of the nation. They have the vision to curate expressions and thoughts in dynamic ways that bring people into discussion to find solutions and resolutions. Festival managers can turn dead walls that have been devastated by poverty and war into canvasses that breathe and express new life. Festival managers can delve into the hearts of a people. They flow along with their bloodstream. They thrive best when they are immersed in the hearts and in the minds of the communities in which they function. But more than the inherent value that festival directors contribute towards defining our personal and national identities, festival directors are also important because of the vital role that they play to engage the arts to bring about significant economic benefits that enhances the quality of our lives in our villages, towns, cities and countries.

It is very rare for festivals not to be aligned with creating newer educational opportunities and increased access to the arts. When orchestras perform at festival very often the festival manager engages the musicians in a series of workshops for aspirant musicians. When authors are presented at festivals, it is the astute festival manager that will bring the author together in a workshop with young, emerging writers. When an esteemed choreographer participates in a festival very often he / she also presents masterclasses at the festival. There is absolutely no doubt that festivals are the bridges which join the classics and the contemporary, the young and the old, the emerging and the established.

Festivals inspire new works but they also grow newer audiences. The dynamic and pulsating energy of festivals can attract large crowds of funders, grantors, philanthropists and sponsors for the arts because festivals are a melting pot in which artists, audiences and funders can together concoct new ways to redefine their societies. Artistic practices at festivals often also create pathways for defining new artistic policies. Festivals are the incubators of new talent and festivals are also the preservers of legends and legacies.

Across the globe there is an increase in smaller and newer festivals. Each of these festivals create work for artists and they boost the local economy which indirectly offers hundreds of jobs to people who are not directly engaged in the creative sectors. When festivals thrive local restaurants thrive. When festivals attract tourists, guesthouses, hostels and hotels benefit.

At the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown, South Africa, where I was the Artistic Director from 2008 to 2016, I witnessed how the city's economy received a massive boost with each year's festival. Grahamstown was a city with more than 67% unemployment but the annual seasonal festival made a massive injection to the local economy so much so that the local businesses, schools and accommodation establishments could survive serving their small constituencies year-round.

The National Arts Festival in Grahamstown had major benefits for the city. It placed the city on the national and international map; and thereby it attracted tourism to the city. It improved the city's image and it gave the people of the city a sense of belonging, identity and pride. It stimulated the economy and it provided much needed support for a broad range of community-led programmes. Each festival offered visitors to the city the opportunity to get to know the local culture and to experience the essence and history of the city. It gave visitors the unique chance to interact with the local community and to gain a deeper understanding of the cultural, political and economic complexities of the city.

Along with the artists and the visitors that came to the festival each year, the National Arts Festival also attracted attract journalists, opinion leaders, researchers, academics, political leaders and cultural diplomats from various diplomatic missions. For the residents of Grahamstown, a major spin-off for them was that the local and provincial government knew that they would be attracting extensive media coverage so the city's and province's bureaucrats and political leaders also tried to make themselves visible; and to ensure that the city's amenities were in good condition. Potholes would be fixed. Pavements would be repaired. Lighting fittings would be restored. Trees would be trimmed and the city would be made to look as if it was functioning at its highest level.

For the small businesses in the town and the home industries, the festival offered trading spaces where they could sell their goods, crafts and wares. Ordinary homes offered accommodation at reasonable prices to visitors. Pavements became dynamic spaces where locals and visitors could meet and make new friends who would return to the city even when the festival had ended.

As a festival director I held an immense power. I was the axis around which the collective future of the city was being built. As festival directors, we rarely have the time to reflect on this power that we hold to bring together in the same space artists, opinion-makers, policy-makers, media, researchers, academics, funders and governments. In our own pursuit to foster global peace and harmony, we festival directors are the anchors which hold steady the cultural diplomacy programmes which can promote mutual respect and understanding between nations.

During this week in Johannesburg, I am certain that you will have a productive time engaging about your roles and your festivals; and that how you and your festival can build the creative industries and contribute to the way in which arts festivals can inspire new hope and solutions for the global community.

I wish you a successful Atelier. We at the Market Theatre Foundation look forward to hosting you. Our institution has played a dynamic role in our country's liberation struggle from apartheid. The arts in our country continue to build a new society. This year, as we celebrate the centenary of Nelson Mandela's birth --- a global leader who was committed to celebrating and respecting diversity --- it could not be a better time for us to bring the Atelier to Africa.

I thank you.