

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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Managing Director The Festival Academy

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

23 March, Johannesburg, 2018

Dear Ambassador, thank you for hosting this welcome reception,  
Dear colleagues and honorary guests,  
Dear mentors,  
And dear participants,

I remember a moment, almost 2 years ago, I was sitting in a meeting I asked for with three African heads at a conference of the European Festivals Association in Wroclaw, a city in Poland, capital of culture at the time. It was the dreariest grey rainy European weather one can imagine, like it has been here for the past two days. One head was the Arterial Network head, one was representing Afrifestnet and one the African Arts Institute head. I was talking with them about a possible and first atelier in Africa, previously, let's say 2 years before conversations had been going on already with Ismail Mahomed, then director of the Grahamstown festival still and I wanted to pick it up once more. They were all looking a bit warily at me, which got me a little unnerved or irritated even. And I remember I said at a certain point, you will see we will meet each other in Africa for a first Atelier.

Some weeks after I learned the head of Arterial network was leaving, Afrifestnet was as good as non-existent and struggling with governance issues and the African Arts Institute was stopping all together. Sigh. And that was only the start of this adventure. The top of the mountain was not yet in sight.

Today I understand why they were looking at me like that. But I'm happy I was naive enough at the time to go for it. To believe in it. And here we are, with slightly better oiled fundraising competences in the African continent, balancing budgets experience and visa issues. But again. Here we are. And especially, 'here you are': 25 participants coming from 13 countries, mostly from the African continent. Exceptional.

I could not have done it alone if course. First I had a network supporting me, a European one, the oldest network of festivals, the European Festivals Association, which helps if you go knocking at doors. For money. In Africa, it seems. And then there were, was, some people, someone who believed in it as well and who raised with several festivals the option to host an Atelier, and after certain trials and errors; everything fell together. The Market Theatre, Wits School of Arts and here we are. Thank you Mike van Graan for sending that introductory email.

It is an anecdote, but an important one, because the reason we are sitting here, is because of a meeting in Wroclaw, the meeting of people, the relevance of networks/ communities is exactly that, meeting of people, not necessarily with a plan, or a concrete outcome in their mind, just the meeting and the spark it can generate in each other. It is about the motivation you feel and a belief in the possibility of something seemingly impossible. And that you are not alone in that. The European Festivals Association (EFA) is as I said the oldest network of festivals in Europe, existing more than 60 years, it is a network that keeps on reinventing itself, through several of its projects and initiatives as amongst others this Atelier for Young Festival Managers which EFA initiated in 2006 to offer exchange with the younger generation of festival makers and The Festival Academy which grew out of that programme.

The Festival Academy counts today more than 500 festival managers from more than 70 countries and all continents, a global community of future leaders, global change makers, you. People who all share a certain passion to work with art and artists, to create beauty, to dare to be fragile, to dare to risk.

I was at a conference in Basel recently organised by Pro Helvetia, 'Crossroads' which united an intriguing group of artists and art practitioners coming from all over the world, where an audience member asked one of the artist panelists who was talking about the challenges she faced in her country: 'But why are you doing it?' And she responded *'Because I don't know what to do else, because I need to, because I feel this craving deep down in my stomach.'*

And that is exactly what we are all working with and what is at the core of a festival: 'art and artists'. Art shows us different realities. It shows us beauty, it is fragile, breakable, and it speaks for itself. Art shows us that everything is changeable, that nothing is fix. It shows us pain but also hope. And it connect us to our being human, it questions, it makes us think, it lets us fantasize, it inspires. It makes us political.

And we need to be political. You are all people who will be able to influence the landscape in the coming years. What is your vision? What is your dream festival? Well we know the answer to that one, at least if you all read the papers you wrote on your dream festival in preparation of this Atelier. However small or big your festival or venue is, you have a platform to act and react from and to create a space for beauty, for inspiration, for questioning values, for human encounter. Use it!

I have read your very diverse papers with great pleasure and curiosity. You seem to be a group of real festival activists. What struck me is the importance of the community rising in many of them and that festivals have the power of creating and strengthening communities, even communal parks popping up in one proposal. I noticed the words culture, language, stories, narrative, belonging and also landscape coming back. Language being especially an important issue in African festivals. The importance of the social mandate, responsibility and messaging of a festival. I learnt that Kumushi means village and Fakugesi is Zulu for 'adding power' or 'putting on electricity'. I learnt that Setswana is a language which connects Botswana, Namibia and South Africa. And some things just triggered my curiosity: 'a conspiracy of clowns', I would like to be part of that I think, A Soweto bike festival, a Jazz festival on a 17 day cruise ship, A festival on sensational interactivity in Johannesburg's suburbs, a festival for blind and deaf people, one for refugee communities in South Africa and a festival where love would spread like a dandelion spore...just to name a few. I'm eager to hear and learn more.

As said before, you are here today with 25 peer colleagues coming from 13 countries, most coming from Africa. I'm convinced this will influence the conversations and shift the perspective of the relation between the economically more powerful Global north and the global south. The challenges of today need to be addressed globally. We don't know what the future will bring, and many things are not under control. But it is in the not knowing what is to come, and this uncertainty which creates room for fantasy, for new things, for darkness where there is room to make love, where new thoughts can originate. Exactly because we don't see it, because we don't know it. If you think all will be fine no matter what, that justifies doing nothing. But this uncertainty, this darkness leaves room to act. One of you expressed this beautifully in her paper talking about the challenges of uncharted territory in the arts and eco system of her country and the limited collective knowledge of the country's history and its resources and I quote *'It is quite possible that as producers and curators, with so little form to be accountable to, we are actually at the point of being able to imagine, and maybe even enact, our ideal festival.'*

In the world of today where in Europe for example, rising populism and right wing chauvinism are proposing easy solutions to changing realities, the role of the community is ever more important. Enabling a global conversation and creating a global community of festival managers is crucial. The problems Europe or other continents is facing are not the issues of one continent or let alone one nation, but need to be addressed globally. Solving Europe's problems are linked to solving problems in other parts of the world, and for this. We need to go beyond ourselves in dialogue, analyses, solutions and action. The Festival Academy is entering new territory with a first edition in the Global South. It is much needed to move the conversation between festival managers to a less wealthy part of the globe, to change perspective and to allow for a dialogue and think up solutions on how to run sustainable festivals in today's world with a more equal point of departure. Sustainability being used in very broad sense including audiences, programming, artistic vision, financing etc. Together with Mike Van Graan (President African Policy Network) who will facilitate the next 7 days, The Market Theatre and the Wits School of Arts, we have prepared a programme which faces the questions and challenges of festivals today head-on and which will allow for a much needed dialogue and thinking outside of known patterns.

One of our next Atelier applicants in Gothenburg said in her application, *'I expect a brilliant provocation and personal reset'*, which I think could be a beautiful description of what the Atelier can bring. 7 days is too short for real skill building, and the Atelier also does not aspire to do this, it is not a course on budget making, HRM, etc., those things you can learn somewhere else. But it is a place for inspiration, for making friends, for creating trust to set up collaborations afterwards, to think out of known patterns, to open your perspective. Not all of your expectations might be met, you might go home with more questions than answers, but I would like to suggest you keep an open mind, maybe you will receive things you had no idea about you would get out of this. Let go of your expectations, but take on a responsible attitude, this is your atelier, the mentors are there for you, so please direct it also into your issues, questions, challenges etc.

We have a select group of mentors here coming from all over the world, with already present today Carmen Romero Quero from Santiago a Mil Festival, Chile, Ismail Mahomed from the Market Theatre Foundation and Brett Pyper from the Wits School of Arts, both from South Africa. And arriving in the coming days: Mantse Aryeequaye, Accra [Dot] Alt and the Chale Wote Festival, Ghana, Cristina Fuentes from the Hay Festival UK/South America, Carole Karemera, Ishyio Art Centre, Rwanda and Annet Lekkerkerker from the Holland Festival, The Netherlands.

And many guest speakers who will share their experiences with you. But you are the key speakers, panelists in this programme. The idea is you learn to find your own answers and solutions. Commit yourself to the 7 days, drop your boundaries and share with your colleagues, be generous and think also about what you have to give, what people can learn from you.

And I want to come back to the beginning of my speech. It was a challenge to realise this dream and I'm delighted to see it become reality in the next days. We will continue also with a next edition in Africa in 2020 in Uganda and to further develop our aspiration to develop into a truly global organisation. As said, I could not have done this alone. I would like to thank very much The Festival Academy team especially with Laure Verbruggen; thank you for your creativity, your resilience, your humour and your belief to make this happen. Also Séphora who joined us last minute to come here, thank you for being here! Thank you to Ismail Mahomed for partnering with us and Brett Pyper for coming to Merano to observe and walk up Merano 2000 with me to get some perspective for this Atelier and to help put this programme together and for their respective teams with Yusrah and Kingdom. Thank you Mike Van Graan, who believed in it, helped initiate it, and redesigned the programme to bring about a brilliant provocation of minds in the days to come. I also would like to thank Kathrin Deventer, Secretary General of the European Festivals Association the Presidents of the European Festivals Association and The Festival Academy, Jan Briers and Darko Brlek and the respective board for their trust and support. Thank you also to all the cultural venues that invite us to their space in the coming days, all the guest speakers. And thank you to all our partners and sponsors: Arts Council Korea, National Arts Council South Africa, Belgian Embassy in Pretoria, Goethe Institute South Africa, Swiss Arts Council - Pro Helvetia Johannesburg, Institut Francais South Africa, DOEN Foundation The Netherlands, and Spanish Embassy of South Africa. And finally thank you, the Creative Europe programme of the European Union for their support.

Thank you all for your commitment, and I would like to end with a quote Rose Fenton, one of the founders of the Atelier more than 10 years ago and founder of the LIFT Festival in London, included in her closing of the Budapest Atelier and which has helped me greatly in arriving here today:

*"Until one is committed, there is hesitancy, the chance to draw back-- Concerning all acts of initiative (and creation), there is one elementary truth - the ignorance of which kills countless ideas and splendid plans - that the moment one definitely commits oneself, and then Providence moves too. All sorts of things occur to help one that would never otherwise have occurred. A whole stream of events issues from the decision, raising in one's favor all manner of unforeseen incidents and meetings and material assistance, which no man could have dreamed would have come his way. Whatever you can do, or dream you can do, begin it. Boldness has genius, power, and magic in it. Begin it now." WH Murray*

This is what it felt like to organise this Atelier in Africa, though Providence needed an extra push here and there and arriving quite late sometimes but it moved. I wish you all many dream(s) (festivals) to share in the coming days, and for you to find some motivation and inspiration here to make some of them come true in the next years! Because the Atelier does not stop after the 7 days, it is just a beginning, which can catalyse you in the darkness from which you can create.