

POZNAN 2014

« 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 20 - 27 October 2014

Ghent, 28 October 2014

Closing Speech – Atelier Poznan 2014

Robyn Archer AO

Sunday 26 October

Good morning ladies and gentlemen

Michal and the Malta team, Hugo, Kathrin and the EFA team, fellow mentor (mine as well as yours) Nele Hertling, absent mentors, distinguished guests, and participants of the Poznan Atelier- thanks to everyone who has contributed so generously to such a lively week. In particular, thanks to you, the participants, for coming such a long way to share your ambition and ideas, your frustrations and aspirations – this is for us, the mentors, a privilege and an equal learning experience.

We are all here because we are involved in, and believe in 'festivals'. These gatherings of many people, in a compressed timeframe, with a surfeit of whatever they've come for – an over-indulgence of film, writers, food, wine, beer, music, theatre, dance – have existed for centuries. It appears to be part of the human condition that many people in any society enjoy a sense of excess, and gathering as part of a large crowd (not me, I gave up parties 30 years ago and am somewhat anti-social) . In a festival context, participants have the opportunity to come away exhausted, but somehow changed, tired and with hangovers, but possibly with renewed hope and dreams.

Indeed, this might well be a description of the *Atelier* where we gather in numbers, truly international, have a surfeit of ideas within a compressed timeframe, and emerge tired but re-energised, some of our positions altered, perhaps just as confused, but certainly not defeated – leaving with a feeling that we are not alone, and almost certainly with hope and some new approaches and strategies.

The *Atelier* has become a valuable forum for those who want to devote their professional lives to festivals.

As festival directors and managers, we are the guardians of the form. Bernard Faivre d'Arcier has pointed to the danger of a glut, an oversupply of things called festivals, and has drawn a distinction, as I would, between festivals which are simply a celebration of things we love and want to gluttonise

on, and those festivals which have an agenda for change and education, curiosity and adventure. Arts festivals occupy a different space from those which fit well into the Events agenda of any city.

Events are often rewarded according to numbers and tourism statistics alone; they are rarely interrogated about the quality of audience experience. Arts festivals require not just the good logistics and organisation, the clean books and thorough reporting which funders demand today, but also courage, especially behind the lines, where you have to argue with your Board, your city, your funders, that your mission is not just entertainment – supplying what an audience demands, but asking them to be curious, to be willing to treat art as the safest place for a dangerous conversation, and a place for the kind of understanding an increasingly troubled world needs.

I know that Nele said as much a few days ago, but I repeat... it's so strange that festivals are called 'political' only if they support and present works which advocate change - works which challenge the status quo. Yet festivals which only present works which support the status quo, which do not advocate and fight for change, are, of course, equally political. They implicitly state to their public that they are happy with the way things are- in art and society –and that there is no need to advocate change or draw attention to the difficult challenges we face in the twenty-first century.

Clearly this is a matter of individual choice and conscience. It is self-evident that many festival funders want to maintain the status quo because they are the ones who have the current power and status to afford festivals, and sometimes expect the festivals they fund to be loyal to the funders, and not challenge them. This is not always so. Some enlightened funders, corporate, philanthropic or government, fund artists and festivals to create and present work which does challenge and dispute and surprise – as well as delight and create awe in the possibilities of skill and story-telling.

Such backers understand the true value of the arts, beyond just the statistics – beyond the prosaic values of economic return to the city. Arts festivals cry out for altruistic backers.

Such backers exist, and it may be your duty to seek them out. Funders who need to show signs of good citizenship will seek *you* out – they will use your festivals to promote their own legitimacy. And that may well be of mutual benefit to both partners- it can be a perfectly healthy relationship. But you may need to excavate your society to find those who could be persuaded that festivals are a great platform for their desires for change – whether this be artistic, aesthetic, or have to do with aspects of society in the local, national or international space.

This is at the beginning... the starting points of garnering the support and backing you need, the endless rounds of conversations which Nele referred to, not just pitching for funds, but discussing your vision and convincing those, not necessarily in tune with your vision, that you are willing to

spend the precious hours of your still young lives on something the city, the state, the nation, the world and its citizens need. This is part of the responsibility you accept when you enter the world of festivals.

But it's necessary to contemplate the endgame too. You are unlikely to stay in the same role for your entire life - as in life itself, leaving is implicit from the start. If entering an existing festival, our prime goal must always be to leave the festival healthier than we entered it – more stable funding, enthusiastic audiences and greater opportunities for artists to create and show their best, most adventurous works. If creating a *new* festival, it similarly must be with the sense that you will endeavor to build in the strength from the start, for it to grow and endure for many years, past the period of our own guardianship– and have an energy and aesthetic not borrowed from somewhere else, but fresh and inviting to new audiences.

This lies at the heart of our participants' discussion around the sustainability of festivals. Is it possible to support and present unfamiliar works in new and unknown forms, by artists who are as yet unknown and uncelebrated – and still have that festival running in twenty years. time?

Attracting and sustaining audience numbers has been central to a number of discussions that have arisen during the Poznan Atelier.

In his opening address, Marc Ball pointed to the use of new tools to assess audience reaction, and warned that we must heed these if we are to attract ongoing or increased government support. This is practical advice, but I go back to Bernard Faivre d'Arcier's tenet which we discussed in the Singapore Atelier

When you serve the artist, you serve the audience

This means that if you support and present the very best of new work, by the artists you respect and admire, then you are encouraging your audiences to be exposed to the new, the unknown, the challenging.

They may not react well in the first place, but if you don't give them the chance to go beyond what they already know and love, then how does anything move forward? I often refer to the ugly, the unknown and the unloved: those creations which push boundaries and experiment with form and content. They have as yet only a small following, but we can't predict winners and losers; who knows which art will survive and one day be called great? The failed experiments also contribute, as in science, to the advancement of the genre – and they too demand our attention, even if it requires providing a careful context in which artists can fail with dignity.

Brecht/Eisler in Hollywood during World War 2

Oh sprinkle the garden

The green's taking heart again

Watering the thirsty fruit trees, give more than enough

Give more, give more, give more than enough

And do not neglect the shrubbery

Even though it bears no fruit

And is worn out

Do not forget that

Between the flowers

There are weeds

Which are thirsty too

Nor should you water

Only just the fresh grass

For the naked earth needs refreshment too

Refreshment too, refreshment too

Of course you cannot *ignore* your audience, but only to give them what they demand -what they already know and love, the beautiful flowers, the top of the canopy and not the weeds and the undergrowth- is to be in the world of entertainment, not arts. I do not disparage this cultural supply and demand transaction – it is the world I came from, and my childhood/adolescent/young twenties career as a singer was in this framework. But this was before I discovered art – and I believe that art is a different matter.

Discovering art can be both full of wonder and sometimes it can be uncomfortable – most growth processes are. It was for me. I recall conversations with my mentor, the late John Willett, principal translator and editor of Brecht, when I battled against the difficulty and obscurity of this Brecht,Weill/Eisler repertoire versus a more popular repertoire that I still believed would make me famous. In kids we call it ‘growing pains’ – they literally have pain because their bodies are changing. And we also know sometimes for some the pain of emotional growth, whatever age we are.

So, this can be a significant challenge in the festival framework – if your audiences are comfortable enough to afford a ticket to the festival, they may also now be in a bracket of citizens who have become set in their tastes, and not wish to be challenged. It may be why new form festivals for younger audiences can take more risks – the audience may still be growing, still in a mindset for change, and appreciate those arts and artists who revel in experimentation. For them change itself is exciting. Challenging audiences in a mainstream context is much trickier – but equally necessary.

But then again, we must allow ourselves the momentary humility of asking, ‘what’s wrong with staying the way we are?’. ‘Why is the notion of change so important?’

Well, I’d say that the world is ever-changing, and if we don’t continually update our world view, then we fossilize and are not truly engaged in the realities of the world we live in. For many, not just older people who have seen a lot, and may be running out of both physical and intellectual energy, but younger people too who have perhaps had unstable and difficult upbringings, it is understandable that they seek peace and quiet.

My parents’ generation experienced both the deprivations of the Great Depression and then World War 2. They wanted a stable maturity and old age – but my generation reacted violently to that. We refused complacency. We demanded change. So I think these cycles of quiet acceptance after the storm, followed by unrest, are inevitable – and while it may be sparked by public and international events, its genesis is very likely also just as much inside the very personal long-developing environment of one’s particular family in one particular era.

Places throughout the world change at different times and at a different pace. In the last one hundred years, humans have become increasingly mobile – more mobile than since the massive migrations of the middle ages. This means that very different cultures now live cheek by jowl in countries not originally their own. And mistakes are made, we unintentionally tread on toes – and this will happen more and more. We need peaceful resolution not only to intentional and overt aggression and misdemeanor, but also to the inevitable accidental insult and insensitivity.

Here, the arts can help, and therefore festivals can be invaluable in giving platforms to those arts and artists which make their work in the interests of not only beauty and awe, aesthetic brilliance and fun, but also in the interests of conflict resolution – in the interests of that thing which Nele continually upholds - the creation and maintenance of a civil society.

It's interesting to be quoting Bertolt Brecht when we have been conducting our discussions in the castle this week. In this next poem, the 'house-painter' he refers to, is the very same man who had the balcony built - the intended purpose was to use it to address the gathered hordes under his dominion. I won't pretend that our bad times are as bad as the *Bad Times* Brecht was referring to: for him and for millions of others it was the worst of times. But still, I'm sure that if you spoke to an artist today in Sierra Leone, or Liberia, Syria or nearby Ukraine, their day to day experience of plague, war and uncertainty would be every bit as horrifying as the times of war and disease in other eras.

This is what Brecht wrote:

'In Dark Times':

They won't say: when the walnut tree shook in the wind

But: when the house painter crushed the workers.

They won't say: when the child skimmed a flat stone across the rapids

But: when the great wars were being prepared for.

They won't say: when the woman came into the room

But: when the great powers joined forces against the workers.

However, they won't say: the times were dark

Rather: why were their poets silent?

I feel the same about festivals. These are powerful platforms for the public presentation of strong ideas via beautiful and equally powerful forms. As long as you strive, even within your own festival parameters of vision, mission and budget, to nurture and present authentic and original artists, then your festival will act as a much needed occasion of awe and inspiration, relief and release, of celebration and joy for the public you serve.

But if you have the opportunity within any given structure, to expand those parameters, to demand more of yourself and your organization and to accommodate artists and companies who feel compelled to make authentic work about the human condition, then you will get that rare and precious feeling, as Farai Elton Mjanana expressed yesterday, that you have done the right thing.

I wish all of you, the participants in the Poznan Atelier, the skill and the courage to make sure you use these platforms well, to make the stage available not only for celebration and joy, but also to artists with something important to say. I wish you the comfort in future years of knowing that your poets, your artists were not constrained to remain silent.... because YOU used all your gifts and your intelligence to allow them to say what needed to be said.

Brecht again:

"In the dark times

Will there also be singing?

Yes, there will also be singing.

About the dark times.

You who will come to the surface

Of the overwhelming deluge that covers us

Just think about our weakness of that dark time

Which all of you escaped

Yes we went as often changing countries as changing shoes

Through the wars of the classes despairing

Each time we found an abuse / And no sense of outrage

Nonetheless we realise

Even hatred of debasement can distort your features

Even anger at injustices can make your voice hoarse

Oh we who used to hope we'd created

A basis for friendliness /Never could be friendly ourselves

You thought when things are moving forward

So that man becomes a helper to other men

Look back on us with indulgence