

SHANGHAI 2017

« 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 and Cultural Managers 17 - 23 October 2017

Keynote speech by

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Opening Ceremony of the Atelier for Young Festival and Cultural Managers Shanghai 2017
17 October, Shanghai, People's Republic of China

Honoured guests of the People's Republic of China,
Members of the Festival Academy,
Representatives from festivals across the globe,
Representatives of the media,
Ladies and gentlemen,

I send you warm greetings from South Africa. I regret that I am not with you today at the official opening of the Atelier in Shanghai. However, I send you my best wishes for a successful and inspiring Atelier in Shanghai.

I am confident that during this week, the city of Shanghai will offer the festival directors in the Atelier so many diverse cultural experiences and viewpoints that they will understand why in a world with so much global competition and conflict and so much war and political tension the arts and cultural festivals are not a luxury but an absolute necessity.

Festivals play a vital role in fulfilling our global need for increased intercultural dialogue and our understanding of diversity. The arts give us the opportunity to share the human values that make us empathetic to pain and suffering. It lets us celebrate excellence and innovation. It makes us pioneers of new visions. It makes us passionate in our commitment towards endowing future generations with a better planet.

Arts festival give us the opportunity to express ourselves creatively to engage with the politics of our world. Through our music, dance, poetry, songs, visual arts, theatre, film and other genres we speak about the same subjects that politicians and economists talk about in their political chambers and boardrooms respectively. While they speak essentially about power and their role in it we speak for the people who are disempowered and for the people who emerge as victors from their circumstances. Our voice as artists is a celebration of the human spirit in all its forms.

Our voice as artists is the mirror through which society both hears itself and sees itself. It is the images that we draw through our vivid imaginations that promotes understanding between peoples and which ultimately inspires societies and governments to better understand each other. In our theatres, galleries, museums, libraries and cinemas we document the hopes, fears, aspirations, experiences, disappointments, failures, pain and anguish of our communities. These spaces are the heartbeats through which our communities live.

Unfortunately, across the globe we are witnessing that as political, economic and religious ideologies battle for their positions the arts and artists are increasingly becoming the soft targets. There are lessons that the world can learn from our struggles in South Africa. 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. The government thought that we would lose our memories when they shut down our exhibitions but 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 failed! Our songwriters, singers, choreographers and dancers found new ways of rejuvenating our souls and inspiring our struggles.

They tried to deprive us of our right to imagination when they tried to stop us from performing our plays. When they tried to ban our poems and burn our books they were trying to take away our voices. We did not let them succeed! They learnt that voice and the 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 and the diversity with which it prospers 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. It persuades, informs, educates and combats 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 one of their strongest tools. It is for this reason that cultural diplomats and their diplomatic missions are constantly wanting to engage with festival directors and their festivals.

Festival directors have their fingers on the pulse of the nation. They listen to songs, poetry and theatre 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 directors can turn dead walls that have been devastated by poverty and war into canvasses that breathe and express new life. Festival directors have the ability to take shouts of protests and to turn it into songs that of victory and celebration. Festival directors 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.

Festivals are also always aligned with creating newer educational opportunities and increased access to the arts. When orchestras perform at festival very often the festival director engages the musicians in a series of workshops for aspirant musicians. When authors are presented at festivals, it is the astute festival director 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 old and the new, the young and the old, the emerging and the established.

Festivals inspire new works and they also grow newer audiences. The dynamic and pulsating energy of festivals attract large crowds of funders, grantors, philanthropists and sponsors for the arts. Festivals are a melting pot in which artists, audiences and funders together concoct new ways to sustain the arts. 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. When a city's festival economy grows then the artist is both the catalyst and the beneficiary for growth.

At the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown, South Africa, where I was the Artistic Director since 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 journalists, opinion leaders, researchers, academics, political leaders and cultural diplomats from various diplomatic missions.

For the local 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 for 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 the Festival's artistic 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 Shanghai, I am certain that you will have a productive time. You will engage about your roles and your festivals. You will discuss how you and your festival can build the creative industries. You will explore ways in which arts festivals can inspire new hope and solutions for the local and global community.

I also look forward to 2018 when the Atelier will take place in Africa for the first time. We at the Market Theatre Foundation look forward to hosting the Atelier in Johannesburg. We have a 41-year rich legacy of celebrating the arts. 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. Next 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 to bring the Atelier to Africa.

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