

Merano 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 Managers 17 - 23 November 2017

Speech by

Inge Ceustermans

Managing Director The Festival Academy

Opening Ceremony of the Atelier for Young Festival Managers Merano 2017

17 November, Merano, Italy

Dear Mayor,
Dear Hermann Schnitzer,
Dear Honorary guests,
Dear mentors, and dear participants,

Just having returned from a 24 million population city Shanghai and an Atelier there, I'm delighted to find you all here today at The Atelier for Young Festival Managers in Merano, lying in the heart of the region of South Tyrol. Merano is a multicultural city mixing the Germanic and Italian culture, and considered as the gateway to the south of Europe. I also welcome you in the name of Mr. Jan Briers, the President of the European Festivals Association who will join in the next days and Ms. Kathrin Deventer, Secretary General of EFA who asked me to extend her words of welcome to you as well.

We are delighted that our partners Meraner Musikwochen/ Settimane Musicali Meranesi and Italiafestival, both EFA members, Merano Musikwochen already since 1988 and Italiafestival, since 2001 are hosting this 12th edition of the Atelier and the first one in Italy. This is framed in a bigger collaboration with Italiafestival who also hosted a Festival Readings in Bari and are hosting the third module of our production manager's training in Santarcangelo the end of 2018. Together with the Merano team, we have prepared an inspiring programme.

Merano is a genuine example of the peaceful coexistence of different cultures. This is also what the Atelier strives for, creating better understanding between diverse cultures; and we have all ingredients set: we are here with 22 participants coming from 14 countries and 8 mentors coming also from all corners of this planet.

The Atelier is a remarkable project, set up already 10 years ago by some remarkable people as we have here amongst us, Hugo De Greef and arriving in the next days Nele Hertling, Bernard Faivre d'Arcier and Rose Fenton. Passionate people who had not only a vision but who also did it. People who believed that maybe they had to contribute something to the young generation.

Today we are 10 years further and we look back: 10 years, 11 Ateliers, in Europe, in Asia, the Arab world and one special edition for festival and cultural managers in Shanghai China just now. An organisation The Festival Academy, a global network of today counting almost 500 festival and cultural managers from almost 70 different countries and a pool of some 50 experts, people who have and will influence the artistic landscape in the coming years. A high quality programme that attracts many new partners and interest.

Having looked back it is time now to move forward and into the future, again with a vision that is aligned to the world of today. With the first Atelier to take place in Africa in March 2018. With the extension of the pool of mentors with speakers from different regions as well from the global south so participants coming from there working in a totally different context feel better represented. To become a truly global organisation, in its activities and where they take place, the participants, through its governance and to give a face to this unique network, or better community not of institutions but of people, of global leaders, change-makers, you! To pass on knowledge and experience and to include alumni as speakers as well in the programme or young people in general as wisdom has (almost) nothing to do with age.

With the Atelier we are connected to the world. Exactly one month ago we were at this very time opening the Atelier in Shanghai, China, to find ourselves now in the secluded realms of this beautiful city Merano. A welcome change of scenery from high rise building to mountains covered by snow. And in about 4 months' time we will find ourselves in Johannesburg for the first ever edition in Africa.

It was a unique and very challenging experience to work within the context of China, today one of the biggest world powers, to bring in there a mix of people from all origins, different art disciplines, small/ large scale venues, beliefs, sexual preference etc. is quite a unique and challenging undertaking but a good step to creating bridges and better understanding. The challenges of this Atelier will be different. First as you have the privilege to be 22 participants, which will allow for much more depth and attention to the conversations and the issues you are dealing with today.

China was a learning process in being humble, in working in conditions and a set of values and belief systems not necessarily our own, or shall I say European. None of the values the EU stands for are to be taken for granted and are not necessarily the values or beliefs to be adapted by another country, region, continent, dealing with completely different challenges having such an enormous population to start with.

We cannot afford though to look at or face this challenges from a unilateral view. The challenges we face today have a global impact. If a president as Trump is being elected in America this immediately affects world policy. The decisions he is making, creates xenophobia and polarisation not only in his nation but worldwide, as with the North Korea-US military build-up of the past months, leaving Unseco, leaving the Paris Climate agreement and threatening the nuclear agreement with Iran, closing up borders and building walls. Also the EU suffers from xenophobia and current leaders that play on fear and polarisation. Look at Hungary, what's going on in Poland, Croatia, Brexit, Spain.

The question is what can we do? And what is our vision as festival managers working at the core of society and first of all with human beings.

For the first time in many years I spent my summer holidays in my own country, Belgium. It was a period of rest, reflection and looking at the world with new eyes. I had forgotten how beautiful my country can be. At a certain point I found myself at the 1995 geographical center of the EU. 15 countries had joined by then and a strange glass sculpture had been erected in the woods of this French part of Belgium. I was not aware that this was there and it reminded me of how remarkable and visionary this project was and still is.

Today the European Union counts 28 countries amongst its members and has alliances with many other nations and continents. Despite the debacles it is faced with, with growing nationalism, populist leaders, xenophobia, terrorism, Brexit etc., it still is one of the most remarkable projects in history and a very special and privileged place to be able to live in, travel in, enjoy culture in. Many dream of joining and even risk their life to experience that. Although the freedom and open-mindedness this project stands for, it is not necessarily what people experience upon arrival here.

We need to continue resisting prejudice and at the same time build at a new future that is everything but limiting. A future that does not reject but embraces differences, contrast and diversity. A future that is challenging and tests its limits and looks for new meaning. The EU today realises that we need to operate within this global context

if we want to face the current challenges and the project with the Ministry of Culture of the People's Republic of China is an example of that.

And that is also exactly why the European Festivals Association has been set up. For more than 66 years EFA is a network of festival makers that stand up for intercultural dialogue, for friendship and trust across all kinds of borders. It believes that the power of civil society cooperation and active exchanges is much deeper than (sometimes short-term, sometimes long-term) political frictions and borders. The power of arts and culture and of people working together goes beyond external restraints.

You are all privileged to be able to be here today, not everyone can travel so easily today because of visa issues or politics.

We have here with us in the next 7 days, Bernard Faivre d'Arcier, Rose Fenton, Nele Hertling, Marta Keil, Gundega Laivina, Michał Merczyński and Roberto Naccari. On top of that you will be immersed in the local cultural scene of Merano and you will meet many artists and cultural players from here. And this all under the coordination of Hugo De Greef who I would like to thank especially for his 10-year investment in guiding these Ateliers.

I invite all of you in the next days to take on a beginner's mind, to open up, to throw everything you've learned out of the window and to profit from this unique and privileged opportunity to learn from your peers coming from different backgrounds geographically, disciplinary, small/large venues etc.

And to allow to shift your perspective.

I saw an artist this summer, Ali Farka Touré, a musician from Mali, at Documenta, an art event in Kassel that takes place every 5 years in Germany, who says: *'For Some people, when you say 'Timbuktu' it is like the end of the world. But this is not true. I am from Timbuktu and I can tell you we are right at the heart of the world.'*

To start with that perspective, that all sitting here are at the center of their world and have equal rights as such to be part of the discussion, equal rights to resources, equal rights to be heard, equal rights to participate in arts and culture.

You can in the next days open up your perspectives, challenge your views and learn from each other. You are given a platform to meet and to make connections with a diversity of creative minds. So I invite you all to listen to each other and, to get inspired, to question yourself, your festival or your cultural venue and the work you are doing there, the choices you are making every day. To share about your challenges, your success, your failures. The Atelier is a fragile space where you can learn, grow, and set stones for beautiful friendships and new collaborations.

Be self-critical, be open and ready to share, mould these 7 days into what you want to discuss. What are your topics? What are your questions? Doubts? What are your daily struggles? This is your Atelier, the mentors are here for you. They will guide you but they will also respect you and your freedom. You also have a responsibility in this and you will need to engage yourself to direct this Atelier in the way you want.

And that is exactly what art is about also, because we should not forget the basis we all work from 'art and the artists' as the quote of Bernard Faivre d'Arcier refers to. 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 would the world look like if you had a magic wand? 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!

We don't know what the future will bring, and many things are not under control. This September I was at the Theaterfestival, a festival taking place in Brussels where the European Festivals Association is based, and which

makes a selection of the best theatre work of Belgium and the Netherlands, where a powerful young woman, Anne Breure, running a venue in the Netherlands did the opening speech. She had received three times less the money she needed to run her venue and decided to only do one third of the programme, opening what she called the 100-day House. Only 100 days long the venue would be operative, the rest of the time the lights would be out. She reminded me of a quote of Virginia Woolf *'The future is dark and this is the best thing the future can be'*.

For Woolf the darkness stands for not knowing what is to come, for the uncertainty of what the future will bring. For a darkness that created 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.

With the Atelier we are changing the world as well in bringing people together from different backgrounds, regions, beliefs etc. to have a dialogue together. As Robyn Archer said just recently at the Shanghai Atelier: 'Art is the safest place for a dangerous conversation'. Especially today we cannot afford not to talk to those we disagree with.

To conclude we would like to thank the host and co-organisers, Meraner Musikwochen/ Settimane Musicali Meranesi with its President, Hermann Schnitzer, Artistic Director, Andreas Cappello and Elisabeth Gamper, Italiafestival with its President Francesco Perrotta, for their work and collaboration to make this Atelier possible. Thank you to Laure and Pauline of The Festival Academy team. Special thanks goes all the local partners who allow us an insight into the diverse cultural scene of Merano and to our outstanding festival and cultural leaders who have shown perpetual enthusiasm for the Atelier for many years. We are looking forward to the next 7 days in Merano, to discover its artistic and cultural life, to broaden our skills, and overall to get inspired by one another!