



Photo by M. Zakrzewski

THE FESTIVAL ACADEMY AS A TOOL FOR CULTURAL DIPLOMACY

“We all share fundamental human emotions,” says Virkein Dahr, participant in the Atelier Chiang Mai, Thailand, 2016. “These emotions keep us going and connect us through powerful shared experiences. The arts go beyond language and context; they have the ability to touch every heart. Many of us have echoed this conviction over the week. It feels very relevant, especially since we all come from diverse backgrounds and cultures, but share the same concerns.”

That is exactly what The Festival Academy (TFA), an initiative of the European Festivals Association (EFA), is all about. To give some background, the European Festivals Association is the oldest network of festivals in Europe. For more than 65 years, it has inspired festivals to network, collaborate and advocate for what’s important on a cultural level; this includes the expression of basic EU values, such as freedom of speech, mobility and cultural diversity. The Festival Academy is one of EFA’s main initiatives and combines EFA’s history and heritage with its future-forward vision. The Festival Academy offers various training formats in festival management to young, dynamic and passionate festival makers worldwide. All formats focus on the essence of festivals: art and the artists.

The Festival Academy's longest-standing training format, the Atelier for Young Festival Managers, was launched in 2006 by EFA. So far 11 sessions have taken place in Europe, Asia and the Arab world. This intense seven-day training programme brings together 45 young festival managers from all over the world. Some 10 renowned and experienced festival directors from top-notch festivals worldwide accompany the participants. The Atelier involves workshops, lectures, dialogues, debates and cultural outings that address the artistic aspects of festival management. Ateliers in 2017 will take place in October in Shanghai (China), in November in Merano (Italy), and for the first time, in Africa in 2018.

Festivals can be expressions of cultural diplomacy. They are places where people engage with ideas, ideological assumptions and values. The Festival Academy and its various training programmes are always connected to the world, bringing together people from all over to discuss and reflect on the role of festivals today. They pool this wealth of wisdom to tackle the issues with which festivals are concerned and examine their role in building communities, empowering citizens and broadening horizons.

Participants of the training programmes are fortunate. They are given the opportunity to widen their perspectives, challenge their views and learn from each other. The Festival Academy is a small step towards breaking out of established patterns, providing young festival managers with a platform to meet and to connect with diverse, creative minds.

Other programmes offer festival managers training in skills, people management and budget-making. That's not why festival managers participate in our programmes. They participate to reflect on the role of festivals today in a society in transition, and how to deal with this transition. It's about identifying the right questions and getting inspired and making alliances beyond the seven days, creating a community for the future with the alumni network. After our training, participants take home a sense of empowerment and a new global network now counting 450 festival managers from 67 countries and all continents.

In Brussels, the Commissioner of Education, Culture, Youth and Sport, Tibor Navracsics, and the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission, Federica Mogherini, have joined forces to put culture at the core, not only of the cultural policy but also of the foreign policy of the EU. This is a recent concept and a very important sign to the EU and the world.

One of The Festival Academy's future activities is being developed in the framework of this new cultural policy.

The "EU-China High Level People-to-People Dialogue" between the European Commission and the People's Republic of China offers a backdrop to The Festival Academy's launch of a new programme, the "Atelier for Young Festival and



Cultural Managers" in China. This programme, which aims to deepen Asia-Europe relations through international cultural exchange, was set up and developed in collaboration with the China Shanghai International Arts Festival. It takes place 17th to 23rd October in Shanghai. For 2017, it is supported by the European Commission through the newly set up Cultural Diplomacy Platform and by the Ministry of Culture of China.

With this initiative, The Festival Academy will establish a new cultural training network bringing China and the EU closer together. These training modules will bridge European and Chinese cultures in a cross-border, cross-generational and transdisciplinary learning and exchange environment. The activity encourages peer-to-peer learning, the sharing of ideas, the understanding and sharing of values, traditions and other aspects of culture or identity to strengthen relationships, enhance sociocultural cooperation and foster a broader community-building between festival makers and culture professionals from China, the EU and the world.

To conclude, networks are more important than ever. Meeting people leads to better understanding and alliances, which can take away fear. Festivals reach out to many people and offer a platform to act and react on basic rights like freedom of speech, freedom of mobility, respect for diversity, global intercultural dialogue, justice, equality, international human rights, peace and stability and the xenophobia that seems to rule the world today.

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