

European Festivals 70 Years On Menu for Action under continual construction

By the 70-Years-On Thinking Group

**In the frame of the 70 Years Anniversary
of the European Festivals Association (EFA) 2022**

For the seventy years of its existence, the European Festival Association (EFA) has been continually evolving. At its birth, in the aftermath of World War Two, the organisation aligned with the need to rebuild Europe and the world with the arts. Now, seventy years later we are standing, partially, in the ruins of that attempt. We must admit that culture was and is vulnerable and instrumentalised by the political powers. Without transgressing from our remit, we feel obliged to state our solidarity with the victims of war to express our firm belief in the sovereignty and dignity of all people, to endorse the need to de-colonise the last empire and hear the voices of the oppressed.

The latest steps are logical developments for the Association. From an exclusive membership society, in an age when breeding artistic and social capital was a major role of arts festivals, EFA grew committed to more and more social, political, and even economic values and aims – parallel with the ever-expanding functions of arts and culture in society. Far from being a linear progression, opening and expansion have remained decisive features of the trajectory of the Association. As a mature membership organisation EFA has been, reaching out to a variety of new stakeholders in the past few years and has shown its engagement in a growing array of societal causes. This stance is likely to characterise the life of the Association in the foreseeable future, while at the same time providing activities to increase the organisational and artistic opportunities of its members.

In its capacity as a responsible and responsive body, EFA is guided by a Thinking Group, whose current members introduce themselves in the following pages. It is they who have shaped the European Festivals 70-Years-On Agenda for the next few years and have pledged to be around when this menu is put into action – an agenda that remains under continual construction. They help define the aura of the Association in its interaction with festivals (members primarily and thousands more through various projects), authorities, media, funders, fellow associations, and other partners and stakeholders.

The potential impact of festivals on society and their social purpose is at the core of this agenda. What makes festivals for issues that transcend their commitment to the arts? In fact, it is culture that is laden with such a charge in our age and festivals are an eminent medium to realise this mission and the capacity of the arts.

1 Festivals are among the most effective social hubs in modern life. They are colliders between artists and the audience, integrators between layers of society, where people interact and share views. Festivals are accelerators of processes and phenomena in the community.

The catalytic potential of festivals deserves to be harnessed to all kinds of causes.

2 Festivals are indeed festive events – or at least that is their normal intention. Even when attending requires effort or takes people out of their comfort zone, festivals are a resource that helps the individual perceive and realise the meaning of life. Visitors seek something different from the everyday, yearn for the unexpected, for joy and for emancipating experiences.

Festivals build on the intrinsic power of culture, and on the satisfaction that one receives from engaging with the arts.

3 Every performance is a unique act of artistic creativity. Setting up new productions is a hundred times more so. Beyond the respectable practice of catering to the audience with existing works, more and more festivals excel in producing something novel. Beside the content, it can be in the setting, the rendering, or the conception.

Festivals are hothouses of creativity.

4 Curiosity and keenness to learn are magnets for a great part of the audience. Festivals are places to disseminate knowledge whether as their main profile or an ancillary function.

The educational potential of festivals deserves increased attention.

5 From periodic sets of shows, most festivals have increasingly become stable institutions with histories of their own. Beyond the improvement of skills to communicate with the audience in digital form, the pandemic offered idle time to edit festivals' archives. These skills will help to record future editions to grab the live culture of the day and construct digital treasure houses for the future.

By documenting the ephemeral, festivals are conscious of their role in preserving the cultural heritage of the future.

6 Good festivals are prominent about clearcut sets of values. The best festivals excel in avoiding imposed creeds. They celebrate the independence of imagination and respect the right to disagree and to be or feel different.

Festivals are playgrounds for the plurality of values and appeals.

7 Festivals' ultimate master is their audience. Yet few festivals can exist without funders. Some shared ground is inevitable between supporters and the supported so long as it does not compromise the festival's purpose.

Preserving autonomy is key for festivals.

8 Festivals are arenas for the presentation of "foreign" cultures, places where the cultural – but also racial and social – outsider is welcome. By broadening visitors' horizons, especially when a casual environment allows for multicultural interactions, festivals are settings for field-level cultural diplomacy.

Festivals fulfil a mission by translating the alien into the familiar.

9 Few festivals are politically engaged. Yet inherently each festival is based on specific values that may carry a political message: being apolitical is also a political standpoint. EFA is not a partisan association, but its membership is distinguished by deep respect for human rights and pluralist democracy.

Respecting politically compelling principles does not turn festivals into political players.

10 What seemed to be a thing of the past, is back: we live again in a divided continent. Within this havoc, festivals are also cut off from visitors and performers. Our community feels united and calls for the respect of fundamental principles.

Festivals should help to overcome the continental rift with everything at their disposal.

11 Climate change and the pollution of the Earth are threats that require the transformative power of festivals, too. Sustainability is the order of the day on every agenda: in logistics as much as in the programming, not only in technical sense but in the message that the artistic content conveys. Every festival is a battle ground for saving our natural environment.

Festivals warn and care about the environment.

12 In a world overwhelmed by virtual interactions and digital gadgets, personal interactions and communication have increased value. Live events arouse shared emotions and offer relaxed connections outside one's usual bubble – or generational group.

Opportunities for interaction between artists, professionals, funders, volunteers, and segments of the audience can be fostered and exploited to the maximum.

13 While aiming at the highest peaks of artistic achievement, festivals are the most democratic arenas in culture. Their inclusive potential is second to none. Festivals are inherently made for combining equity and diversity; they are eminently instrumental at strengthening cohesion within communities, at reaching out to the otherwise unaccessed.

Increasing accessibility is key, in every sense: physical, social, financial, digital, and informative.

14 Festival managers work with a medium that offers more than fascination, entertainment, or relaxation. Culture is a powerful vehicle to generate effect in the individual and in society. Event organisers' code of conduct can breed inspiration, comfort, security, and equity onstage, backstage and among the audience alike.

By perfecting their skills, festival organisers will facilitate artistic representations with minimum interference and maximum efficacy.

15 Organisers of festivals are prone to be carried away by the enormous richness of the arts and the variety of causes to watch. Each edition is a challenge; whether to build on the capital of previous success or to stretch boundaries for new accomplishment. Festivals evolve, appear and disappear. Antennas are key, to feel the needs of time and place, the artists and the audience, and the community at large.

Be relevant! Festivals should resonate along the wavelength of their environment – and be the ones that define the amplitude.

In order that the Association can correspond in its operations to the standards implied in the fifteen guidelines, its radius of action. Seeking additional stakeholders and acquiring new skills of cooperation is inevitable. **The Association must grow into an alliance.** To define its purpose and format is the next task of the European festival community.



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