

How open are our conversations?

@ EFA Summit Budva

With:



Emma Hay



Niranjani Iyer



My name is Seppe Degelin, I'm doing a research internship at The Festival Academy for my master's degree in Cultural Management at the University of Antwerp. In this report, I will talk about the EFA Arts Festival Summit in Budva and the workshop we did about openness.

EFA Summit 2026 - Budva, Montenegro

During the European Festivals Association (EFA) Summit in Budva, Montenegro, The Festival Academy (TFA) curated a deep, highly interactive, and alumni-led workshop dedicated to the complex theme of openness. Moving far beyond surface-level definitions, the session pushed an international group of festival leaders to examine the vulnerability, curatorial risks, and structural changes required to foster truly open cultural spaces.

The session was facilitated by TFA and represented by **Inge Ceustermans** (director TFA) and **Seppe Degelin** (intern TFA). **Emma Hay** (Senior Programme Manager at Edinburgh International Festival) and **Niranjani Iyer** (Founder and Director of The Pocket Company and d.r.i.f.t - Dharamshala Residential & International Festival for Theatre) were the leading speakers and led the conversation. Alongside all participating EFA members, we brought three distinct voices from our Alumni network, namely: **Mohammad Abasi** (director of the invisible centre of contemporary dance and UNTIMELY festival), **Roni Isola**, (Argentinean cultural manager, producer, programmer and arts curator) and **Salma Ja'eh** (Nigerian cultural practitioner and documentary photographer).



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Introduction games

To start the session and break down some social barriers, Niranjani led a cumulative memory game. Each participant had to share their name alongside a precise, everyday physical gesture. Subsequent participants were required to flawlessly repeat every single preceding name and gesture in sequence before adding their own. As you can imagine, this gets quite difficult in a room with over 20 people.

After the ice was broken and everybody felt at ease and relaxed, Emma and Niranjani paired participants up for a mentally demanding, face-to-face exercise. The partners had to hover their hands close together without touching, while maintaining continuous eye contact, and engaging in a rapid-fire Q&A. There was only one question that needed to be asked... 'Why openness?'. We were asked to keep talking without taking breaks. Every time the responding partner did pause, the prompter was required to immediately ask 'Why?' again. This format deliberately exhausted superficial answers, forcing participants to dig into their core personal and professional values.

The group concluded that without openness people shut down and lose their capacity for curiosity and empathy. Openness is essential because, without it, it is impossible to intellectually or emotionally engage with another person's perspective.

Breakout rooms

Emma then shifted the room into breakout groups of three. Everybody was asked to individually write down five distinct words they associated with openness, later sharing them within their triads and reflecting on each other's differences or similarities. Here it was interesting to see that everybody has a different approach on openness, but that it's very easy to understand each other's perspective about it.



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Provocating the group

As the last part of this session about Openness, the group was confronted with three provocations brought up by the TFA Alumni. Mohammad Abasi (who was with us in a hybrid setting) gave a geopolitical perspective on openness and challenged the room on physical boundaries. He argued that true openness demands making intentional space for those who are geographically or logistically barred from being physically present. Roni Isola gave a curatorial perspective and focused on festival programming, urging cultural leaders to step away from comfortable habits. He argued that genuine openness means programming unknown artists, venturing into unfamiliar territories, and embracing the real risk of institutional failure. Salma Ja'eh then delivered a systemic critique of power dynamics. She warned that simply inviting marginalized communities into a rigid, pre-existing institutional framework is superficial tokenism. True openness, she argued, requires a structural willingness to share and redistribute actual decision-making power.

Openness vs. Proprietorship

To wrap up the session before going back to the remaining events in Budva, Emma congratulated the cohort on their profound vulnerability, noting that their willingness to share set an incredibly high standard for the remaining days of the summit. Niranjani closed the workshop with a final question, asking participants to shout out the immediate opposite of openness. The room countered with words like limits, censorship, narrowness, dishonesty, and no space. Niranjani anchored the session by offering her own antonym: proprietorship -the systemic instinct to own, control, or protect a space rather than share it. She invited the participants to let these contrasting concepts "hang in the air" as they transitioned into casual conversations over coffee.



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