

Arts Festivals Summit 2024 Usedom

The Festival Academy invites: The First Supper

14 May 2024, 9.00 - 10.15, Kaiserhof Hotel, Heringsdorf, Germany

Hosted by: The Festival Academy

Participants: Festivals, Artists, Cities and Regions participants from the Arts Festivals Summit 2024 were invited

Introduction

In recent years, EFA and The Festival Academy (TFA) have joined efforts to bring Alumni to the Summit. This year, 29 Alumni from 20 different countries participated in the Summit, including Argentina, Australia, Bangladesh, Belgium, China, Egypt, Finland, Germany, Iran, Italy, Malta, Montenegro, Netherlands, Nigeria, Palestine, Portugal, South Africa, Spain, Syria and Ukraine. The Summit has become a key moment in our calendar to bring together Alumni from different Ateliers, to connect and strengthen our global community further, and also an opportunity to connect with the European festivals.

Within the Summit programme, EFA engages TFA Alumni in different sessions as notetakers, caretakers, etc., and TFA together with the attending Alumni design and facilitate their own session for the European delegates of the summit. In this session, we try to bring the essence of the Ateliers: bringing stories and realities of the festivals and the arts from different parts of the world in the European festival making context and continuing our mission of empowering festivals for social change. The session also provides an insight into the methodology and facilitations formats used in activities of The Festival Academy.

The First Supper

The session of this year was titled 'The First Supper': a dinner party held during breakfast time where conversation is the only course, and the guests are festival makers from all over the globe. The session was inspired by the long table format, a hybrid performance-installation-roundtable-discussion-dinner-party, a room setting where participants are placed around a long table with empty seats – and where participants have to take a seat at the table to join the conversation, being free to join or leave the table (discussion) at any time.

Alumnus Bruno Estima (Festival Papagaio and Wetumtum, Portugal) opened the session with a body warm-up, including exercises with clapping, beat, and building up eye contact. Once the ice was broken, Estima gave the group the following thought to take away: “How often do we agree to statements without asking ourselves if we agree with them or if they make sense for us?”. This prepared the group for the conversation that was about to start, precisely with a provocative statement.

Before that, Alumnus Sada Malumfashi (Open Arts Development Foundation, Nigeria) and Sepehr Sharifzadeh Golpaygani (NH Theater Agency, Iran/Belgium), explained the etiquette (code of conduct) of the long table conversation to the group:

- This is a performance of a dinner table conversation
- Anyone seated at the table is a guest performer
- Talk is the only course
- Be mindful, English is not the first language of most of us, assume best intention
- No one will moderate, but a host may assist you
- It is a democracy
- We don't tolerate racism, ethnic discrimination, ageism, sexism, queerphobia, transphobia, ableism, class or religion/belief discrimination, comments on people's bodies or any form of harassment or discrimination.
- To participate, simply take an empty seat at the table
- If the table is full, you can request a seat
- It's ok not to participate
- If you leave the table, you can come back again and again
- Be aware of how much space/time you take
- Feel free to write your comments or drawing on the tablecloth
- There can be silence
- There might be awkwardness
- We can agree to disagree, but we reinforce our commitment to remain respectful in our treatment to each other
- There could always be laughter
- There is an end, but no conclusion

Immediately after, the first statement of the exercise appeared on the screen:

Statement 1: ‘Festivals are programming “artists at risk” for moral whitewashing’

The first comments didn't take long to arise: What is risk? How do you define it? How do you define who is an artist? How do you define risk?

Some of the participants at the table identified themselves as artists at risk and remarked that for them, it was non less important to discuss how festivals can help.

Another question that followed on from this among the participants was: Does it matter to you as an artist at risk if a festival programmes you for their own moral benefit or for ticking boxes (e.g., receiving targeted funding for programming works from countries at risk)? Do festival programmers really look at the person and their art, rather than the labels they carry?

Then another question was raised: What should a festival do when an invited artist becomes at risk during the event? Participants claimed that there is a need for festivals to have more guidelines and networks of support for festival teams on how to react to these kinds of situations.

Another perspective on the topic was the fear of organisations and programmers to programme artists from certain regions (e.g., Palestine) because the risk is redirected to them.

Statement 2: 'Programming of artistic work from a different cultural context is inherently voyeuristic'

Some participants responded by emphasizing the importance of context, noting that if the program was of high quality, it could avoid the feeling of exploitation. They agreed on the necessity of raising context awareness and aiming for equality in conversation and partnerships. In some cases, local art scenes are perceived as less developed by others, highlighting the importance of understanding cultural backgrounds. Festivals should learn and be informed about the context of the countries of the artists they are inviting; Festival should have a programme that goes beyond framed labels.

Another participant raised the question: Is the voyeuristic approach beneficial because it provides an opportunity to showcase your work? Some participants argued that promoting the value of projects is essential to making diverse content sustainable. Work from different cultural contexts should be integrated into a larger project framework.

Statement 3: 'Sustainability means financial sustainability.'

A participant coming from the African context highlighted that most of the funding for creative arts in his country comes from the West, creating an inherent inequality. As an artist or producer, there is pressure to conform to Western criteria and trends, such as the topics of decolonisation and queerness, rather than producing unique art. This can lead to the exoticizing image of certain countries.

Another perspective from the continent was that artists at risk are being supported by entities that are not at risk. As an African artist, there is pressure to address decolonising topics, whereas sometimes one is considered too European-looking. This can perpetuate trauma and pain, rather than fostering genuine artistic expression.

Another question for some of the participants concerned festival making in war situations: How to make a sustainable festival under a war or conflict situation? How can festivals be sustainable under such circumstances? Participants agreed that besides everything, there is still the chance to work through collaborations and integrate festivals from such situations and bring them into different cultural contexts.

Then participants asked themselves how they can manifest real solutions: "We all in this room are adults, we have so many layers, we look at each other with all these frames, with pre-established ideas etc. ... But we can create ideas for the next generation by creating situations in our festivals where different artists can meet and work together as humans, for a longer time. We can create situations where we dive into the things that connect us. I am asking myself: how can I manifest solutions? Bring the kids to the concerts, bring them to see a performance - not just to see the performance but also to meet the artists, meet other human beings from different contexts."

Concerning the topic of artists at risk, there was a reinforcement of the idea that there needs to be an acknowledgment of the reality of what an artist at risk is. This means recognising that some artists are

too risky to be programmed while others are not considered risky enough. There is an inequality of risk and of pain too. Festivals must allow for different stories, letting artists work around their pain and risk without labeling the entire body of work from a region as "art at risk." There is no single story in any place, and one artist does not represent an entire area. Festivals need to programme diverse artistic works from each context.

Participants agreed that artists at risk don't want to work "for you, but with you". Festivals somehow can reproduce the micromodel of colonisation.

Therefore, promoting stories is very powerful. If festivals invite artists from other regions, they should integrate stories about the artists, their backgrounds, and their lives. Besides of addressing the risk of programming certain artists at risk, the need for the world of festivals to reflect about where this risk is coming from was formulated by some of the participants.

Another creative way to participate in the discussion was through the tablecloth. Participants drew and wrote keywords, thoughts, and opinions on the table. The paper is a big canvas that documents some of the results of the experiment.

There was no real conclusion to the session, but a manifest of clear need for an alternative plan where festivals can change the old power structures. We have a great capacity for creative minds, making it invaluable to have different perspectives to be heard and listened to.

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