

IZMIR 2011

« 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

24 - 31 October 2011

Keynote Address to open the EFA Atelier for Young Festival Managers IZMIR 2011

By Robyn Archer

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24 October 2011, Izmir/Turkey

Former Minister,
Vice-Governor
President of the Izmir Festival Foundation
President of the European Festivals Association
Colleagues, mentors from the Atelier, fellow artists,
Distinguished guests
Participants in the Atelier
Ladies and Gentlemen,

May I first add my sympathies and best wishes today for the people of Van province. Australia is no stranger to natural disaster, and our hearts go out to all those affected by the earthquake.

Secondly I extend my thanks to all of you involved in the generous hosting of the European Festivals Association's Atelier for Young Festival Managers in Izmir, the personal opportunity to visit Turkey for the first time and to meet so many new and interesting people in the arts. I have flown here from Canberra, Australia's national capital, and I bring with me greetings from the Turkish community there, led by Mr Abdul Celil Gelin. I also bring greetings from the Turkish Australian Cultural Platform which makes such a valuable contribution to *The Light in Winter*, the festival I created and direct for Federation Square in Melbourne.

I am honoured to have been invited to attend this Atelier and have to say that as in all good programs of any kind, it's always a two-way process. As mentors and presenters I know we will get at least as much out of the participants as they may get out of us in the coming week. It's a privilege to be allowed into the presence of youthful energy and ambition, and I think we should all applaud them for making this journey to Izmir to learn, to share, and to enjoy the exceptional riches of this culture.

The Atelier continues to grow, and deserves strong support: it's a truism to say that young people hold the keys to the future, and that is nowhere truer than here in Turkey where you have such a young and dynamic population. But rapidly changing global demographics and shifting parameters of mobility demand that those, like the mentors in this program, who have been so fortunate in their careers, address issues of succession and intergenerational change in an open and direct way. We can do this very effectively through the Atelier. All of us, one way or another, are involved in mentorship in our own countries, in informal ways and as an adjunct to our professional structures; but the Atelier is special.

It is a hothouse for the exchange of ideas. With a rigorous and intentionally compressed timeframe, the Atelier allows hungry young participants (in this edition from 26 countries) to feed from a banquet of festival experience and expertise from across the world. And we hope, of course, that a lot of that energy will be shared with the artistic community here in Izmir.

For all concerned the Atelier is a formal framework in which we all learn and all take back these fresh and re-freshed ideas into our individual workplaces – for the benefit of audiences, community and artists alike. For our hosts here in Turkey, it is yet another example of the way in which this country is engaging ever more deeply with Europe and the rest of the world. We all appreciate this chance to learn more about this place, its complex cultures and its unique festivals.

While an artist can train in all manner of formal situations, to develop skills acquisition in all genres from dance to film, music to design etc, there are fewer opportunities for 'training' in festival direction. I think most of us in the older guard made it up as we went along, and as we learn about the experience of young participants, there are certain parallels as they venture into new territories, trying to implement new ideas, but often without specific guidance. Here, as previous participants have told us, they appreciate being able to work so closely with so many experienced festival directors, to ask their questions and to hear the wide variety of stories we are able to offer about festival-making, our approaches, our successes, challenges and failures.

And it would be well nigh impossible to teach 'festival direction' in this way in any one fixed institution or place. In this group of Atelier mentors and presenters there are more than one hundred years of festival experience – you don't ever get that in one place or at one time. The European Festivals Association initiated the Atelier because there is a real need for education and exchange explicitly concerning the programming of festivals. There are many programs that deal with and teach arts organisation and management, but almost none concerning the content and conceptualisation of festivals. Well now there *is* one – and it is powerful and effective.

In addition, previous participants have said the other great and lasting benefits of the Atelier is simply the unique chance to meet their peers from so many different countries, cultural, social and political backgrounds. The opportunity to speak at length with each other is invaluable – and as in previous Ateliers they will go on to establish their own rich networks. This creates a simple but remarkable context for the future health of global co-operation in arts and culture – and as I will go on to say - in so many wider aspects of society as the natural outcomes of artistic production.

So thanks to everyone who has so generously made it possible for us to gather here tonight in this marvellous city.

The German poet and playwright Bertolt Brecht once wrote that

“the surest of all sure things is doubt”

yet one thing *is* for sure, and that is that we will never again in our lives gather in precisely this way again, and so it is our responsibility to make the very best of this perfect opportunity. The Atelier now, still in its youth, has an impressive list of alumni and there is no doubt it is creating an invaluable legacy. We thank you all in advance for your support of this program into the future.

I have been asked to say something this evening about the arts in general, festivals in particular, and the relative importance we give to artists and audiences in that context. It was Gerard Mortier who proposed the following:

“When you serve artists, you serve the audience”.

And we need to unpack this statement.

There is at present, in many and varied cities, regions and countries, an intense focus on audiences, and in one form or another, this aspect of arts and culture has been in question for a long time. We now have to take into account not only those audiences who are likely to be interested in what artists in all genres produce, the arts audience, if you like, but also those potential audiences who may not yet have encountered the arts.

The festival construct itself, applicable to all festivals, has been widely observed for many years now as a highly successful marketing tool. For more than half a century now, data has been gathered to show that people are more likely to attend a performance in a festival context than they are if that performance is a one-off: this especially applies to slightly edgier or riskier work. During festivals new audiences are created, and existing audiences get more adventurous.

But as useful as data-gathering can be in the financial and political context, and as necessary as it has become for most arts organisations to justify their existence, it can create *problems* for artists, as well as *rewards*.

During the last half of the twentieth century there were any number of approaches to government for justifying funding to the arts. It's a matter of perpetual grief to many of us in the arts, that the case is not self-evident. I will refer to the thorny matter of evaluating the arts a little later, but suffice to say here that I think we all understand that a civilised society's hallmark is in the way it regards and supports arts and culture as a core value to all citizens. A year or so ago I was speaking with one of Australia's (and the world's) most celebrated cranio-facial surgeons. He was reading Joyce's *Ulysees* and said he was going to use that book as a centrepiece to an upcoming keynote to surgeons. He said that you can have all kinds of professions – surgeons, engineers, judges etc – and they will all have infinite expertise and wisdom around their own patch- but it is only the arts which create *awareness* across the whole spectrum. I was grateful to this great scientist for his observation on my profession.

Unfortunately it is not a view shared at all times by all of those who have the power of the purse-string, and so over the years there has grown a perceived need at various critical times for successive waves of justification. One of the strongest has been *jobs*. The Arts create jobs. Well, it's true, when we think of what surrounds a theatre production – carpenters, lighting technicians, publicists, cleaners, caterers, ushers, ticket-sellers,

launderers, printers, drivers, on and on, in addition to the core group of actors, director, designer, composer etc ; yes, there have been some great studies that show how many jobs the arts create.

But that data-collection has had a couple of consequences: on the one hand you have an industrialisation of the arts to the point where arts boards have members with only business skills and no understanding of the way the arts work, and arts companies themselves are weighed down by the weight of paperwork, acquittals and statistics to justify their existence. On the other hand, it is often forgotten that without the first spark of creation... the author sitting alone with some concept popping into their brain... or the collective working through all kinds of material to arrive at what they will start working into a new production... it is often forgotten that without these, there is nothing around which all those subsequent jobs eventually develop. Without the art and the artist, nothing follows.

As Europe, and countries as close as Greece nearby, continues to face ongoing financial crises, it's worth recalling the first phase of that crisis in the United States of America. When it was announced that President Obama would be constructing a national stimulus package, lobby groups went to work to battle for a portion of that package to go to the arts. This was in the face of hundreds of museums closing their doors, and companies folding – most often because in that country where government funding is not the principle source of income for the arts, their vital philanthropic lifeline had been cut off – and that same well-heeled audience was also not going out as much.

I was speaking at that time in New York to the annual conference of American Performing Arts Presenters and found that their powerful lobbying was invoking FDR and the New Deal. At the time of the 1929 New York Stock Exchange Crash and the Great Depression, which we must recall had dire consequences, then, as now, for the rest of the world, Franklin Delano Roosevelt constructed The New Deal, and part of that New Deal was the WPA – the Works Progress Administration – which was the stimulus project of its time.

It included the arts, often by putting artists on a payroll to document the times. Many authors, film-makers, writers and photographers joyfully signed up for a working wage and projects which they found stimulating and satisfying, along with the feeling they were 'helping out'. But it has to be said that many also protested the idea that they had to work on prescribed projects deemed useful, rather than deserving to be paid just to continue the intense trajectory of their own work.

The Works Progress Administration was invoked by American Performing Arts Presenters and other lobbyists in the first wave of Global Financial Crisis, and if you google the WPA or New Deal and the Arts now, you will see that this idea has gained traction ever since in various forms and other countries. The lobbying proved successful, and although \$50 million was not a lot in the context of the billions of dollars in stimulus money – and probably quite out of proportion in terms of how many Americans are working or otherwise involved in the arts (remember every time you hear music, and you hear it many times a day from many unbidden sources, in each case there was a composer – we encounter the arts all the time) - nevertheless those in the arts took great heart that at least there was some recognition of the role of the arts in American life.

I talk about this now, because we are currently in another wave of justification – and its name is *community*. Many artists are happy to work in community and with social engagement. There is a new wave of young artists for whom pressing issues in a wide range of areas – environment, ecology, refugees, democracy itself – are integral to their work. But

in the midst of this good work and its great benefits, are we yet again going to forget the moment of creation, and the support of those whose *job* is simply an exercise of the creative imagination, something out of nothing, and uninhibited by social necessity.

If anyone dares to say that artists *must* be socially engaged, let's never forget that artists are also human beings and citizens: they also pay taxes and eat and thus support the food and power industries. They too pay bills, and raise children for the future. Of necessity they are engaged. Must they also direct their work exclusively to works that are also of direct benefit to society? I maintain they bring that benefit whatever they do.

I am wholly supportive of, and I frequently commission artists who wish to work in a context of social engagement. In Singapore Benson Puah threw out the challenge to Atelier participants – do you only work for your passion, or do you work for society? If your passion goes beyond individual creativity and you want a clear and measurable effect in the wider world – then there are smart ways to do this. There's an arts company in Australia called bigHart. They do beautiful projects all over Australia, especially in remote areas, and especially with outsider cultures – *GOLD* was a study of farmers having to walk off the land and leave their properties because of drought. Big hArt's usual practice is to train young people (most of whom who have had problems at home or on the streets) in a new technique (in this case interviewing) to record the stories. These projects have multiple good social outcomes.

And they do all this with virtually no arts funding. Their funding comes from social welfare, policing, reform etc because of their outstanding non-recidivist rate. One of their founding members, Scott Rankin, takes changes in government policy as a constantly shifting opportunity. He looks at changing government priorities and because the communities and range of artists and young people he works with is so vast, he can usually bend a project to these priorities and get it funded – in very large amounts I have to say. So this kind of 'start with the need' and be flexible enough to bend your art to that current need, works very well for some.

And indeed this kind of work, which intersects creatively with all the sectors in society, was the subject of the 5th World Summit on Arts and Culture which has just occurred in Melbourne. The summit ended by calling for new systems and structures wherein artists are at the heart of society, not at the edge; and a call for *every ministry* to have a desk for arts, culture and creativity, instead of arts being parked off to the side, isolated from the realities of day to day life.

But I would also strenuously argue for a holistic structure which also supports artistic endeavour per se. Dr Vilayanur S. Ramachandran has done extensive experimentation to show that the arts are by far the best means of enlivening all parts of the brain at the same time. No mathematical or scientific challenge can equal the arts – especially the shock of the new. It's something the same as Dr David David (the cranio-facial surgeon genius) claims about stimulating and creating awareness of the way the world connects. And the most important quality of such a structure would be Resilience – let me talk a little about that.

Resilience is defined as 'the ability of any system to absorb unexpected disturbance without wholly changing its nature and function'. We are currently experiencing a whole range of unexpected disturbances (economic, earthquake, drought, tsunami etc) and today Turkey, tragically, joins that group of countries where nature has asserted its mighty force again. The only way we can survive the onslaught of the increasing ferocity of these cataclysmic events, is to build greater resilience against them.

The arts sector (and others too, vehicle manufacture for instance) is found wanting in resilience today – we suffer in these crises and many go under. Will the arts play a part in rebuilding communities in Eastern Turkey? Or are the arts always deemed to be unimportant, or a luxury, when compared to these life and death situations. They should not be considered any less important than any other sector in our societies, and it should be strongly argued that the arts can play an enormous role in healing and communicating real stories, good and bad, in hard times. I have no doubt that music and singing, even if of the most sorrowful kind, will now play its role in the eastern province. Composers, singers, musicians are always present.

Resilience Theory comes first from economics, and then from environmental streams – and I use it for the arts. Do get a copy of *Resilience Thinking* (Brian Walker and David Salt, Island Press). Briefly every system is cyclical. A forest will grow beautifully for 150 years, then start to implode. If you have only taken care of the top of the trees, the beautiful canopy, and neglected the undergrowth, then you will be faced with chaos at the ultimate implosion. But if you've cared for the growth close to the ground then your forest will continue to grow without a huge period of absence or chaos.

The automatic response in the face of crisis is to let your undergrowth die, and shore up your tallest and most beautiful – it's exactly what you ought not to do. To build resilience you must maintain education, experiment, the smaller stuff closer to the ground – it's easier to maintain in hard times, and it caters specifically to your future growth and loyalties.

So – what is needed is a structure which does not topple when times get tough, which is built in a way that will also withstand this agonising roller coaster of good times for the arts (a powerful politician who understands the core role of the arts) and then bad times the minute an unexpected disturbance hits – a change of arts minister or a change in treasury, a financial crisis or an earthquake. And the only thing that will allow that to happen is to create an unassailable evaluation of the arts – something written into *everyone's* constitution – not just the UN Bill of Human Rights.

It would value a stable framework for artists to be able to continue their creative process, even when times are tough: if we don't maintain the motor of creative stimulus at the heart of society, at a certain point the ship is going to stop moving and actually start to go backwards or sink. We can't survive without brave creative thinking on all fronts, and nothing stimulates all those fronts like the arts. Our path ahead is not guaranteed by sticking to the middle of the road.

Therefore, in the festival context, it may be dangerous only to think about your market, your audience and how to serve it. It is equally dangerous only to emulate what has been successful in other countries. If you are only in the business of giving your market what it wants, or what other successful markets dictate, then how do you stimulate the creative muscle in your society: this will only happen if you expose them to the new. How do you expose people to the new? You support artists in the creative process, to come up with the new, and then you support the results of the creative process to get to the public. Then commerce usually grabs up the very best of those ideas (advertising, digital applications, fashion etc) and the innate creativity is even further dispersed.

It's a vast ecological network which will be starved of the nutrition it needs if you don't maintain constant creative process in the arts. In fact I often argue that this is the most legitimate avenue of government support – if you care about your people, you will not put the majority of your funding only into those things which people already know and love.

Because it may be giving them immediate pleasure or comfort, but it is not necessarily waking up their creativity or extending their awareness. If you'd like to do that – to have a creative, aware and awakened population, which will then work actively for a great society – you will see that the most essential function of the arts is to stimulate, and your funding goes to artists who continue to do exactly that.

If people already know and love things, then there is indeed a market, and some of that market ought to be able to operate on commercial terms. A government ought *not* to get in the way of the commercial and entrepreneurial transaction between supply and demand, but it should support those things which have as yet no market, but show splendid potential. This includes also the valuing and protection of fragile traditional forms as well, but they are often easier to defend and support.

When it comes to new forms and new energies, there's nervousness. This is what many of our young participants come up against – fear of the new and unfamiliar by those who uphold their own established tastes and favourites. New things have risks – experiments fail. But look at scientific research. Some scientists spend their whole lives failing – but no-one questions the value of their work. Those failures are contributing to the much greater and longer path to eventual success. Why do we not value artistic experiment in the same way, as an invaluable contribution to human progress, whether the specific project succeeds to please a public or not? To build resilience we need to be more robust in our arguments for the value of research and development in the field of artistic endeavour.

As to community, I believe we are in a time when young artists are more socially engaged. Especially in this part of the world, closer than many of us are to North Africa, we have seen extraordinary demonstrations of a new voice. We are again in a lively time when politics and society and issues of community at the grass roots level are intimately related to what many artists are doing and want to do. It's great to support that activity, but it will be greater if policy-makers develop a methodology for equal interaction of artists in the decision making and planning, not just developing policies to which artists are forced to respond.

And we ought not to neglect those great contributors to community who insist on working on their own terms, not because they are selfish, but because their most effective contribution will come when they remain true to themselves and their muse – your most skilled writers, actors, dancers and musicians, as well as those entering the new worlds of digital technologies and online art.

Festivals are often in a unique position to offer all kinds of opportunities to artists whose passion is to stimulate us, not just repeat things we already know and love, and often not with conscious social or community involvement in mind. In a sense 'community' is a loaded word – are artists not part of various communities? Where they live, where they buy food, where they work, where they send their kids to school etc? We can easily find ways for festivals to embrace broad audiences, I've done it for many years, but always with respect for that audience to enjoy things that are new and fresh and stimulating, not just feeding them the crumbs of worn-out entertainments.

We can also always find avenues for work which has arisen from community, when artists do engage in this way; inspired by the stories and courage of certain communities, this is often the most exciting work we can present. But we must also serve those artists who don't work in those overt ways, yet still have incredible value to community in that their difficult and painstaking process eventually comes up with new ideas and forms which eventually make their way into our lives. And we must develop a language to defend those decisions.

If we commission and support the kind of art which is genuinely creative, not just copying, not just recycling – and this goes for genuinely fresh versions of old work, or the creative placement of traditional work in a surprising context, or the commissioning of brand new work bristling with new challenging ideas - then we are doing the greatest service we can to our audiences, our community, our society. We are presenting them with the means to stimulate the creative muscle and awareness they need to go out and do all their respective jobs in a way that works towards a more engaged society, a clever society, and one receptive to new ideas.

Some of these artists will passionately wish to work in community and to see that effect close at hand and immediate; others will work in artistic isolation, but their ideas will be disseminated equally for the good of society. Having argued for art in community for twenty years now, it's terrific to see it being taken up with such enthusiasm in so many countries. Certainly I believe that Australia's new national cultural policy to be announced later this year will have this kind of emphasis, given the Federal minister's portfolio which includes both arts and regional Australia. But I hope in that generous sense of inclusion, we do not lose sight of the inherent value of the arts, and artistic process which is often extremely private – often the finest ideas, as in science, occur in this way and we neglect that process at our peril.

This is a very different approach from only looking at the audience, deciding what they like – so that they will buy tickets and you will have neat accountancy that adheres to the bottom line and verifiable economic development through tourism, attendant visits etc. If the arts go on relying only on their consequent benefits – jobs in the industry, contributions to community well-being, usefulness in education and health etc (all good things in themselves) or whatever other justification is required in years to come, then I believe we are not building resilience.

We just continue to sidestep the most difficult measure of valuing the arts – that is the inherent value of having people in your society working at the edge of new ideas and creativity, experimenting, sometimes revealing those experiments, sometimes those experiments succeeding, sometimes failing – but always making a serious contribution to society. This is an argument that needs to be developed, refined and passionately presented every time someone says 'these artists are just selfish and indulgent, doing obscure work we don't understand and making no contribution to our society'. Unless we have convincing arguments against that false accusation we will never have a resilient ongoing framework for the continuous support of creative endeavour. And we all desperately need it.

People love sport because it is measurable, because you can see obviously who won and who lost, who went faster or higher: you're on sure ground. But this is not the case with the arts. Art deals with that fantastic grey space where truth and beauty is up for debate and negotiation – it's unsure ground, there are no winners or losers, and precisely why it's good for the brain.

We, and that includes you participants in the Atelier, need to develop strong arguments also for elite artists, and elite groups of audiences – those who love intense fine music, or intense new music, those who are passionate about minority things rather than just the middle of the road. Everyone accepts the necessity, for the survival of the world, of biological diversity – I would argue the same for artistic and cultural diversity. If we develop into a mono-middle of the road always audience-pleasing globalised culture, then we are doomed.

I think the reality is that when we think about audiences or community in isolation, we don't necessarily serve the arts. It is possible, in times of bread and circuses, to please audiences without artists— sports, light entertainment, shows created merely to please and swell the stats. They can all bring pleasure – but I would argue you do not serve your audiences well if you only *please* them. You are not stimulating the curious and creative in them and thus not availing yourselves of the very best means to inject new ideas and energy into your society. But I do absolutely believe that if you serve artists you serve audiences. There are some, but very few artists who will claim they do not need or want an audience. Most work in remarkable ways to fashion their most imaginative work, and they want to take that before the public and share that awareness of the human condition with others – they want it debated and responded to.

The result of that invention and creative process is thereby shared with the wider world first through an audience, and they with others. Whether it's a creation to expose an audience to an apprehension of pure beauty in visual image, music or movement, or whether it's a hard political reality framed in the skills of drama and actors – art has a knock-on effect.

And even if the artist works in isolation, spare a thought for van Gogh – unknown, unloved, before his time, a tormented artist with little recognition in his own lifetime, and with only the support of his brother. Look what his works continue to do for us – how they elevate the human condition and make millions in the world respond to colour, passion and life itself. Have a look at the statistics, and the tourism benefits of the van Gogh museum. It took a while, now it's phenomenal, but the artist never saw the benefit – in fact he was often in despair, and died earlier than he should have.

Let's hope that history doesn't make fools of *us* – that we are not seen as the century that advocated the utilitarian use of art and artists, or art for the sake of swelling audience numbers, economic development, tourist statistics and bragging rights, to the detriment of conditions for those whose real value is contingent on a space for thought, sometimes isolation and experiment. Let's make sure we serve artists, in their own right. If we serve them to ensure continuing practice of creativity at the edge, then we serve not only audiences but we serve community, society and the world at large.

I wish this beautiful country all the courage it needs to make a stand and an important place for its artists as it steps more boldly and confidently into the world of the 21st century...