

TOWARDS A SET OF RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE PUBLIC AUTHORITIES ON FESTIVAL POLICIES

Derived from a speech by Péter Inkei, Director of the Budapest Observatory, at the final session of the EFRP – CIRCLE Round Table Conference “Festival Jungle, Policy Desert? The Festival Policy of Public Authorities”, held in Barcelona on 19-20 October 2007, and hosted by Interarts.

Put festivals on the agenda

The four sessions of the conference have confirmed the choice of the title of the meeting: alongside the ever escalating jungle of festivals, the reaction of most public authorities can be characterised by the metaphor of a desert. The national profiles and the case studies prepared for this round table festival could point at only very few instances when authorities have defined festival policies and worked along conscious strategy lines. A few more cases were identified where the need for such coherent policy was recognised and the intention is there to build and follow a festival strategy.

Therefore, the first and probably most important recommendation is that the issue of festivals needs attention. Festivals have established a firm position at the expense of more conventional and continuous manifestations of arts and culture. This position will most probably get more prominent only in the near future. National, regional and local governments need to define their festival policies, just as they have articulated theatre, library or museum policies. In other words, festivals need to be “emancipated” and policies concerning them need to be institutionalised by public authorities. Raising the awareness of the authorities about the weight and significance of festivals is the first priority, derived from this research and debate.

It is important to point at the utmost versatility of festivals, which distinguishes them from most other institutions of culture. There is much greater similarity among the theatre or library policies of different public authorities, than what one can expect in case of festival policies. Therefore, no blueprint can be hoped for -- this cannot be the task of this nor other conferences.

Define festival policies

Defining festival policies begins with the identification of the nature and density of the festival occurrence in a given country, region or municipality; assessing to what extent have festivals conquered various artistic fields. Precise mapping is not limited to the festivals where the authorities are major stakeholders but covers a broader scope of events. By scope the extent of the field is also meant: in the absence of generally agreed definition, each authority will have to decide for itself where to draw the boundaries of their festival policies.

When thinking about their festival policies, authorities need to be aware not only about the great diversity of this species of cultural activities, but also about the wide array of functions that festivals play. These events contribute to the quality of life, entertain and respond to the challenges of leisure, serve self-celebration of communities, catalyse social interactions, have effects on social cohesion, enhance inclusion of different groups of people but also of places, genres and issues from the margins, cultivate traditions, open horizons, have various economic implications, create jobs, boost spending and tax revenue, enhance a place’s attraction for the tourists, investors but also its own inhabitants, and last but not least contribute to the flowering of culture. Preparing or upgrading festival policies is also an opportunity for screening of these functions exerted by festivals in a given place. Some of

these just happen, as corollaries of festivals, other functions are the realisation of goals set by festival organisers, initiators and supporters – including public authorities themselves.

When preparing festival policies, public authorities should therefore take stock of their own goals to be served by way of supporting festivals. As in case of any policy making, priorities between various interests and aspirations need to be established.

Constructing festival strategies

Defining means, measures and resources is already part of setting a strategy about festivals. Financial intervention is the most obvious resource in the hands of authorities. In this context the predictability of public funding is at least as important as the actual amounts available. Consistency and stability are compatible with project funding as well. Funding uncertainty is the plague for festival organisers.

Besides funding, the demonstration of political attention is equally decisive. Creating trust is as important as setting up funds or budget lines for culture. By defining festival policies, authorities must consider forging various alliances. Alliances with cultural operators, especially with the initiators, spiritual and organisational engines of festivals – not infrequently difficult-to-handle personalities; co-operation with permanent cultural institutions, be it allies or rivals; other layers of the “subsidiarity-ladder” (national, regional and local governments); with businesses in various roles, ranging from festival owners to charity supporters, festival policies offer opportunities to build alliances with broad groups of people who will benefit from better prepared and more professional festivals.

Assessment, evaluation

Issues of assessment and evaluation should be envisaged already at the stages when festival policies and strategies are conceived. If the authorities succeed to define precise policy priorities and strategy goals, the criteria for support given to individual festivals will become clearer and will later lend themselves to translation into criteria of evaluation. Precise goals do not necessarily mean quantitative indicators. Often it is enough to have a more or less clear and consequent picture about the order of preferences of a given authority amidst the wide and rich range of goals and functions festivals are expected to serve.

It goes without saying, however, that exact indicators are of enormous help for each party concerned, for all those who implement policies, on both sides of the “counter”: grant givers, festival organisers, monitors and policy evaluators as well. An additional bonus is if indicators serve as benchmarks, enabling meaningful comparison with how other authorities handle their festivals.

In spite of the great many approaches at producing evaluation instruments that measure not just the realisation of goals set and promises given, but also the social, economic and other impacts of festivals, no really successful and internationally advisable tools are at hand. What can be recommended to authorities is to be careful with impact assessment – but never to give up the search for indirect and longer term effects of their festival policies.