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Festivals
Open doors. Open minds.
Build societies!



“Open The Door”

An initiative of the European Festivals Association

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Interview with Jan Briers, General Manager Flanders Festival International

*Festivals are in a privileged position to provide the means for **everyone to experience culture**. Festivals open doors to new artistic forms, new performers, new audiences, unusual venues, unknown cultures, new points of view, new approaches to arts and the world, new social orders, new political discussions. Festivals have always been deeply rooted in society and contributed to its development and transformation. Today, festivals, next to their core artistic mission, are often having a ‘social agenda’. Can festivals do something to fight poverty and social exclusion (European Year of Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion)?*

Under the motto ‘Festivals: Open doors. Open Minds. Build Societies!’ in 2010, EFA states that festivals increase social inclusion and encourage participation.

The Flanders Festivals International is a regional festival comprising festivals in different Flemish cities. What is the one project in your festival that shows your social relevance?

It is more an overall policy for us at the Flanders Festival. In contrary to the Holland Festival which aimed at creating one major festival in the Netherlands, the Flanders Festival has always wanted to make festivals accessible to as many people as possible and therefore organise many festivals and events. Today, the Flanders Festival covers 80 different cities and communes and organises more than 550 concerts between June and December. We are willing to make our festivals accessible to everyone in all aspects: price, access for disabled and excluded people, broad range of venues etc.

In addition to this overall policy, we also implement specific social projects and events: for example we organise concerts for visually handicapped persons or a project entitled *Your key to Ghent Festival of Flanders*. The latter provides a number of tickets that only cost 1€. The remainder of the admission fee is funded by Ghent Festival of Flanders. Furthermore, there are a large number of concerts happening in the streets, which are for free. Many of our festivals implement projects for children. This is not something new; however, what we do – and what is quite unique – is that we do not only target children but we also include their families. Social networks are here to help us prospect families to make them get involved in our activities.

We have another project called *Music Masters on Air* (MusMA). It involves young and creative artists. It is a collaboration project which we started with 7 festivals in Europe – Ljubljana, Granada, Brno, Wratislavia Cantans, Estoril, Ankara and Flanders Festivals Brussels – and 7 national radio stations. It was implemented to help young artists to promote and distribute their creations at European level. The collaboration of festivals aims at encouraging these artists to create new work on the one hand. On the other hand, the project intends to contribute to the mobility, circulation and promotion of these artists and composers, assisting them in establishing or expanding their international reputation.

Concerning these projects, what kind of policy, specific ‘tools’ and ‘approaches’ do you apply?

For these projects, we work closely with social networks which allow us to approach more directly young and disabled people and give us advice on which concert or event they should attend.

This year, we have launched a project with young musicians. It is called Chanti. Several children’s choirs are created throughout Flanders. Half of the children come from poor families. Their first performance in public will be at the KlaraFestival in 2011 and the best singers from these choirs will then form an international choir which will perform in festivals all over Europe. A photographer will follow this international choir throughout the year. This project is generously sponsored by the bank BNP Paribas.

Our main target audiences are young, poor and disabled people, as well as people who just came out of prison or reformatory. However, we don’t implement specific events for them. They are attending the same events as everyone else. What is interesting is that they are not separated from the rest of the audience. We organise a kind of introduction to the concert, in which we tell them about the facilities - free access, free cloakroom and things like not clapping during a musical piece for instance. This is only to make them feel comfortable in coming to a concert they would normally not go to.

One way to reach out to them is through a comprehensive communication strategy: We try to make our communication material accessible for all in terms of vocabulary. We also use every kind of communication tools – internet including social networks (Facebook for instance), but also print material such as booklets, flyers, posters etc. We broadcast our concerts on the radio: thousands of listeners can experience and enjoy the concert. We actually receive great feedback from listeners who have never attended any of the events.

Although we try to use new tools such as social networks, we still use “traditional” ones in order to reach as many people as possible. You can still go and buy your tickets at the box office, get advice and choose your seat; you don’t have to do it on the internet.

Our objective is to really make our festivals accessible to everyone and get rid of all the barriers people could face. Even if people choose not to come in the end, the aim is to let them know that anybody can attend our concerts.

Finally, we have one person who is in charge of all the social issues in our festivals. This is a full time job and really needed if you want to have an efficient social impact. In bigger festivals, you can find a team of 2 or 3 people working only on these aspects of the festival.

Do you communicate/raise awareness on social issues?

We don't do that as a priority. What the KlaraFestival did last year (2009) is that all their posters/printed campaign were made of pictures taken in the subway in Brussels. The aim was to show people that this festival was made for them and within reach. No slogan, just the pictures.

What is the impact of these specific activities on your artistic / cultural / social environment?

I can think of one "story" that happened to me once – in the frame of the *Your key to Ghent Festival of Flanders*. I saw a rather poor man waiting in front of one of the concert halls and he asked me if it was this or that concert hall; which I confirmed. He explained that he was going to a concert here the same night and wanted to check his way and the time it takes with the bus to make sure he would not miss it. I think this is a really good proof that what we are doing is successful.

Who is supporting this extra activity?

We have a lot of different partners and sponsors. The bank BNP Paribas is very much interested in supporting our Chanti project. The Festivals Foundation also financially supports selected projects. And other companies which do not want any publicity.

What are the biggest challenges you face?

The main challenge I can think of is the Belgian administration. Nowadays, you have to pay a lot of taxes when you organise a festival. Of course you have to pay taxes for the artists, this is normal; but you now also have to pay for security, for technical material and many other things. Before, we used to have volunteers doing the security or building the stages for example. Today, you need a professional to check if this is done well etc... However, newspapers have been talking about this issue in the past 2 months, trying to raise awareness on how these taxes hinder our activities and make local politicians realise that this is a great burden that should not exist.

Are festivals recognised as social actors in Belgium?

Festivals in Belgium/Flanders are not very old. The majority of them are less than 50 years. They were created by the people who gathered to create such cultural events. Therefore, they are recognised as social actors that have the ability to bring people together. They also allow young artists to perform for the first time; they provide a great platform for artists to start their careers. They don't perform in concert halls straight away and the festivals are here for that.