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THEATRE FESTIVALS: TOWARDS A BIGGER THEATRE AUDIENCE

Introduction

Theatre and feast originally had similar meaning¹. We may agree that the Dionysus celebration was the first theatre and the first theatre festival in history, fulfilling the requirements of both scientific and applied festival definitions². It means that the first theatre was played at festival circumstances. In the 19th century, when renewing this framework for the arts “festival”, most of the festivals were clearly identified by their artistic field. Artistic festivals were emerging from local community culture, deriving their core artistic mission from it. Although the relative majority of today festivals involve various art forms, purely theatre festivals still have a considerable share among festivals.

Festivals are around wherever we live, work or travel; however, but the festival fever and festival observations are quite different across continents, countries and systems. Describing what a “festival” is and what not sometimes causes a frustration – but not in the case of theatre festivals that have a clear mission. Theatre itself is one of those artistic fields where the planning runs 1-2 years ahead; therefore the mission and the programming are the most important tasks of the artistic director of a theatre festival.

¹ The word *festival* goes back not so far, it has been registered first in 1589 (Harper, 2001). Festival meant local celebration in the 1600's and 1700's as reported by the *Gentleman's Magazine*. (Smith, 1982) The genre of festivals went through an anthropological shift at the turn of the 19th to 20th century, when anthropologists started to focus on the myth of community, and started to observe its realisation in archaeological and later in modern communities. In the meantime, the first generation of well known festivals grew up with clearly artistic mission: Szeged Open Air Festival, Bayreuth Festival etc. Mixed festivals came after the 2nd World War. Since then, the festival world had two booms in the 20th century; one around 1968 in the Western European countries and another one after 1989 in the Eastern European countries. This later one was probably followed by the world wide festivalisation.

² Falassi (1997) describes festivals as a “*periodic celebration composed of a multiplicity of ritual forms and events, directly or indirectly affecting all members of a community and explicitly or implicitly showing the basic values, the ideology, and the worldview that are shared by community members and are the basis of their social identity.*” While the official applied notion of festival in Hungary is “*festivals are special or festive event series*

- *with at least 3 programmes*
- *prepared for an audience,*
- *regularly organised,*
- *have clear starting and finishing date,*
- *their primary goals are mediation of values and community experience.”* (Wagner, 2007)

In this article I focus on the co-operation of festivals and theatre and on the functions of festivals in audience development. After a consideration of possible festival functions, a research conducted in April 2009 among Hungarian theatre festival directors is going to be presented³. 9 festival directors were interviewed, with the questions based on the terms of reference of the Novi Sad conference on International Theatre Festivals and Audience Development, in cooperation with European Festival Research Project (EFRP).

Festival functions

The need for research of the social and economic effects of festivals came into the picture for practical financial reasons in the early 1980's, in order to answer the question: *why spend public money on festivals?* Since then, much research has been done in different European countries, focusing on one or more societal functions of artistic festivals. A collection of festival functions in a society includes the following:

1. Community experience
2. The festival equals people (visitors)
3. Festivals collect the „best of” in different artistic fields
4. Festivals strengthen tolerance of different people, cultures, and subcultures
5. Festivals involve local people into a community experience which reflects their identity
6. Festivals promote local uniqueness against global uniformisation
8. Festivals often offer a mix of heavy and easy (valuable and less valuable) genres of arts. A festival sandwich may sell valuable productions to a wider public. This is the taste forming or educational role of festivals
9. Feast, pleasure and uniqueness. Festivals are unique moment in time, that bring everyday activities on a higher level
10. A festival organisation requires the co-operation of many local, regional and national and international organisations. Co-operation and synergy function
11. Festivals give floor to amateur art expressions
12. Festivals promote professional artistic co-productions and co-operations
13. Festivals help the economic recovery and infrastructural development. Revitalisation function.

(Source: Hunyadi 2003)

The function of audience development is not listed here; however it is there in a hidden form in functions 7 and 8. We do expect festivals to make people familiar with arts and culture and this process sometimes includes a sandwich of different art forms and stiles in order to be easily consumed.

³ A recent book, *Cahier de l'Atelier*, published by the European Festivals Association gives examples for audience development (De Greef and Deventer 2008).

Audience development in the Hungarian theatre festival practice

As mentioned in the Introduction, I asked 9 Hungarian theatre festival directors in an interview about how audience development is working in their practice and how theatres can benefit from it. For searching and selecting I used the new web site of festival registration (www.fesztivalregisztracio.hu), the site which was developed by four festival associations in Hungary, coordinated by the Hungarian Institute for Culture and Art (www.mmi.hu). The list contains 188 registered festivals, but only the following 9 have theatre related theme.

1. Happy Art Festival (Vidor Fesztivál), Nyíregyháza
2. 'Bartók +...' Miskolc International Opera Festival, Miskolc
3. Hungarian Theatre Meeting Pécs (POSZT), Pécs
4. Bárka International Theatre Festival, Budapest
5. Contemporary Drama Festival, Budapest
6. Hungarian Studio Theatre Festival, Eger (have not responded yet)
7. Theater - International Meeting of Free Theatres, Szeged
8. Alternative Theatre Review, various cities
9. Monodrama Festival, Eger

Going through the list of them, it is important to declare that all are clearly theatre festivals except Happy Art festival, which started its career as a mixed festival, but the major programme has based on theatre and it still has a competition of comedies. Another remark should be made on the geography of these festivals: only two of them are situated in Budapest, the majorities are in the Eastern Hungary and only one take place in the Western part of Hungary. Five festivals are organised by a theatre or have a strong collaboration with a theatre, while other four have no engagement with one specific theatre institution.

Not all nine festivals have an international scope. The most important international work is done by Miskolc International Opera Festival, Bárka International Theatre Festival, Contemporary Drama Festival and International Meeting of Free Theatres, while the rest five only occasionally include international elements into the programme.

Different concepts and programming models, methods of audience development programmes and strategic co-operations are being used in practice of these festivals. I am focusing on the different models that have become obvious in the course of this research.

1. Concept and programming models

Directors may run informal networks in order to collect opinions from public and international artists and other practitioners. Often the audience gives new ideas to festival directors. There are also trends in conceptualising a festival, for example in the 1990's the contemporary theatre was the leading trend among new festivals, since new playwrights and artists could not get an audience. Older playwrights started to direct plays, younger playwrights write different plays for the new contemporary festivals (also for different venues), while young students were raised up on all these.

As a general trend, major cities in Hungary have created their own new theatre festivals and expect these events to influence positively the image of the city. Specialisation is also recognisable. Szeged, where the traditional Open Air Festival is quite established, came up with a festival of free theatres (THEALTER), Budapest started contemporary theatre festivals (Bárka and Contemporary Drama), while Miskolc arranged for an opera festival, Nyíregyháza established a comedy competition embedded into a mixed art festival, Eger went for festivals of smaller stages (studio and monodrama). Pécs is a special case, since they anchored the former travelling festival called "Hungarian Theatre Meeting", which was originally a competition of best plays of the season, organised every year in a different theatre..

Model A. Director model (Miskolc Opera, Happy Art, Bárka, Monodrama)

The programme is set up by the festival director, based on the new productions of the season, which have been seen and appreciated by critics, play directors and dramaturges. Often the director visits performances before contracting them. Festivals are usually at the end or at the beginning of season, so it is a collection of the best (studio, monodrama, comedy) productions of the last season.

Model B. Artistic board model

There is one or more advisory board of different groups (e.g. board of young theatre people, board of editors of critics' journals, international board). In this case, lists are made by different boards and the director's role is to harmonise them during long negotiations. The expectation is to get the best available (inter)national performances, as for instance in the Contemporary Drama Festival, Budapest.

Model C. Influential artist model (THEALTER, POSZT)

The festival asks one specific artist, who understand the concept of the festival and makes his own recommendation for the festival director. This invited artist visits many performances and makes a

list, based on his personal impressions. It usually reflects personal taste of the artist, besides the concept of the festival – this is what makes festival different every year. Director negotiates with the available companies from the list and finally set up a programme, based on the availability and the artist's list.

2. Ways of audience development and education

Most theatre festivals target young people aged 18-35; other more conventional festivals try to entertain the middle aged people, while others (e.g. competitions) focus on professionals. Whatever the main target is, some segmentation of audience is done at almost every festival, some techniques are used to let the people living in the region know about the event.

A. Travelling artists model (additional programs in rural areas)

One way to reach people in different constituencies is to organise some extra programme e.g. street theatre in little villages in the region of the festival. Puppet theatre and street theatre tour have been very successful among children during the festival time in villages near Nyíregyháza (Happy Art Festival). Or artists associated with the festival go to schools and teach some lessons in music (singing lesson), or art (drawing lesson) in primary and secondary school.

B. New festival media (self generated audience)

Conventional forms of media are used by every festival; radio, TV advertisements and barter agreements are specified for different audience segments. In cities about 70.000-200.000 inhabitants the festival targets the local media. In some cases a local radio becomes the festival radio, broadcasting festival news and music. The regular city programme booklet usually becomes the festival programme booklet.

New media gets more attention by festival directors focusing on *self generated audience*. Festivals may involve local and international (EVS) voluntary workers and students and they can use their personal network in order to advertise the festival. Funzine, iwiw, Facebook are common tools for reaching an urban audience.

C. Education based models

Education programmes may target school generations and adults as well. Every spring in Miskolc they organise opera club for the audience in order to hold seminar series titled "Introduction into opera". During these lessons, interested people may understand more of the language of opera.

Others, like Contemporary Drama Festival in Budapest, developed a complex educational programme for schools. The “playwright’s school – school's playwright” programme has three main levels:

- The programme based on new plays written by a contemporary playwright. At first stage festival director sends out this script to secondary schools. With the help of literature teachers pupils read the text for literature classes and the playwright visits them and talks about the text.
- On a second level, if the script was welcomed, a young play director visits the school and hold rehearsals with pupils in order to stage 1-2 acts. The purpose is to see how this dramatic material works and to demonstrate the way and methods of rehearsing.
- On third level, schoolmates can create a part of a theatre performance based on the dramatic situations of everyday life. The playwright and the play director are there to help.

The main goal of this educational programme is to let the pupils see the background of theatre making, let them feel that theatre is theirs and it is about life and the programme teaches them how to decode contemporary theatre language. Children are usually taught how to argue on the issues raised by theatre. This approach has been having an enormous success in the secondary schools in Budapest, with a play *Hazatérés Dániából* (Back from Denmark) by Csaba Kiss becoming a topic of the final exam of the school. Some acts, worked out by children in this programme are played during the festival in a special session.

D. Place of a festival

A theatre festival can take place not only in a theatre venue but in different public and private places, stressing the image and identity of the festival. Contemporary theatre festivals go further, they usually have no stable theatre background, and they rather seek extraordinary places. In Budapest, the most popular are abandoned former factories near Csepel Island. Festivals outside Budapest regularly mix indoor and outdoor, free and paying programmes in order to get more audience, reserving the main streets and squares for the main programmes. In some cases there is a special policy behind this choice it. In the first years when Contemporary Drama Festival’s “playwright’s school - school’s playwright” programme engaged with schools, the organisers realised that only the best schools from the city applied for this programme. Afterwards they targeted schools from the periphery area and make programmes in their vicinity.

3. Benefits of festivals for theatres

Theatre organisations offering their venues to the festivals benefit from this cooperation. POSZT, Miskolc Opera, Monodrama, Happy Art and Bárka International Theatre Festival have a strong

theatre background and all have the main programmes inside a theatre building. I examined what changes, differences and common benefits were generated by this collaboration.

Image of the festival - and of the theatre

Theatres use the image revising function of the festivals, e.g. Contemporary Drama Festival is often asked to place programmes into Bárka Theatre (Bárka means ark, e.g. Noe's Ark) in order to re-enforce Bárka's image as a theatre open for the young generation's experimental and contemporary needs. Other cultural institutions, such as Trafó House of Contemporary Arts are to defend their progressive image and select productions of plays from the Contemporary Drama Festival program only if they are contemporary enough.

Prestige

Theatre increases its prestige by organising a festival. City leaders are usually satisfied when they see that the theatre is doing a festival in the summer holiday season, expecting a positive effect on tourism and on the image of the city. Prestige is also important in the artistic competition of professionals: to be listed in a festival programme, to be there, to be on a board... all this means prestige enhancement. And the prestige covers the hosting theatre organisation as well. A festival puts a city and a theatre on the artistic map of the country, strengthens the cultural connotation of the region, city, theatre and people living around.

Running a different theatre

Festival usually affect the hosting theatres and the way how they operate. Theatre people usually go on holiday (down to the Lake Balaton – sounds the magic word) from mid June until the end of August. New theatre festivals alter this life style and make them go to Pécs, Szeged, Nyíregyháza or Miskolc for a few days, off from the Balaton season. In Nyíregyháza, the technical operation of theatre changes a lot, since the presence of the festival means that the theatre stays open 365 days a year. Of course, there are no performances every day, but the ticket office must be open in July to sell tickets for the programmes at the end of August. Thus theatre becomes a socio-cultural phenomena, people get to know more and more about the theatre and its artists. Visitors can spend more time in theatre and they get familiar with an idea of going to theatre in the summer – which was unimaginable 20 years ago in Pécs or Miskolc. Technical staff also loves summer theatre; they meet with international technical staff which is a great community and professional experience for them.

Effects on theatre audience development

More people go to theatre in a festival city for sure. But how can it be measured? First of all, theatres include the statistics of festival visitors into the yearly number of audience. It is just a

technical issue, but according to the new performing arts law in Hungary (valid since April 2009) the theatre will probably benefit from it. In Nyíregyháza, theatre can realise higher number of registered audience and provide a higher number of performances. 20 years ago, a good production might have had 20 performances in a season, but today they usually run 30-40 performances of the same production, with the most popular productions performed over 100 times in 5-8 years. Education programmes also contribute to bigger theatre audience. In Miskolc indeed the festival director had to raise an opera audience, since it did not exist before. Since a reasonable percentage of the audience comes from abroad, it has become a fashion to go to the Opera Festival in Miskolc.

Artistic effects

Artists may benefit from the work done in the summer period – but not just in financial sense. Theatre Festivals are usually an upbeat or heydays of a season in Hungary. They give a special emphasis to the excellent work that has been done during the season. Local artists can experience other artists' works and artistic co-operations develop artistic competences. Sometimes a festival suffers from the burnout effect. In other cases local productions prepared for the festival can be played in the following season. Media attention is also influential, local media draw the public attention on the coming theatre season; people may pay more attention to the arts.

Festivals thus play an extremely important role in the contemporary theatre art. New international contemporary plays, staged for the Budapest or Szeged festival, may be invited by other theatres in Hungary (Kaposvár Theatre usually does it). Festivals affect the casting as well. In some cases foreign new plays were staged in a Hungarian theatre 3-4 months after the international festival. Many talented but not yet known international artists visited small festivals and became famous later, creating an example to be followed, such as Marius van Mayerhorn in 1999 with „Lángarc” (Feuergesicht) at the Contemporary Drama Festival. Festivals are a very good tool for disseminating new ways of making theatre.

Conclusion

In this short article it is impossible to draw a comprehensive picture of theatre festivals in Hungary, but it was a good opportunity to collect different practices, methods and approaches. In a follow up research more precise, more detailed and focused studies could be undertaken, including the sociological research of the audience development of the festivals. An international research on the audience development of international theatre festivals would be most welcome – we do hope that EFRP will create an opportunity to realise it.

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Annex 1. Interview questions

1. Feature of the concept and the festival programme (who makes the programme, when, how)?
Does the audience have any role in it?
2. What communication strategies are used by the festival to reach audience segments, target groups? How they reach out to different constituencies?
3. What kind of educational aspects are used by the festival? How do they nurture new audiences? (methods)
4. What kind of effects can be realised in the co-operation of the hosting theatre and the festival (strategy)
5. What benefits has the hosting theatre in increasing the number of visitors and in reaching different constituencies? How effective is the festival in enriching new audience? How do theatres use the festival and what for?
6. What opportunities do the festival offer for the hosting theatre in the field of artistic experiences?
7. Not all festivals reach out consciously and successfully to the new audiences, what best practices could you name?
8. What functions are fulfilled by your festival in which level?
(Give points from 1 up to 5, higher for the more relevant)

1. Community experience	1-5
2. The festival equals people (visitors)	
3. Festivals collect the „Best of” in different artistic fields	
4. Festivals strengthen tolerance of different people, cultures, and subcultures	
5. Festivals involve local people into a community experience which reflects their identity	
6. Festivals promote local uniqueness against global uniformisation	
7. Party or festive mood may involve people from uneducated social groups providing the first theatrical experience for many of them	
8. Festivals often offer a mix of heavy and easy (valuable and less valuable) genres of arts. A festival sandwich may sell valuable productions to a wider public. This is the taste forming or educational role of festivals	
9. Fest, pleasure and uniqueness. Festivals are unique moment in time, that bring everyday activities on a higher level	
10. A festival organisation requires the co-operation of many local, regional and national and international organisation. Co-operation and synergy function	
11. Festivals give floor to amateur art expressions	
12. Festivals promote professional artistic co-productions and co-operations	
13. Festivals help the economic recovery and infrastructural development. Revitalisation function.	

Thank you for your answers!