

Vincent Baudriller, president of the EFFE International Jury,
on festivals in today's Europe

Where difference becomes commonplace, the Europe of culture is renewed and a political Europe is invented

Comments gathered by Eric Vautrin,
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IN THE AFTERMATH of the devastation of World War II, Europe became a byword for hope, and thereafter came to represent the effort to remake the continent as a land of peaceful coexistence among countries with long and often antagonistic histories. And like the festivals of Cannes, Avignon and Edinburgh, from the moment the war ended, festivals expressed the urgent necessity of reconstructing a common, shared history, beyond the horrors and wounds of the war. It is also significant that the Prague Quadrennial was founded in 1967, a few months before the Prague Spring. The festival concept has been a precursor to the very idea of Europe.

While these new manifestations of culture have not resolved socio-political issues either then or now, they have always been one place in which the idea of harmonious coexistence has presented itself directly as a question and as a challenge. It is not a question that is resolved by culture, but it forms the core drama that anchors festivals in their time.

Since the end of the war 70 years ago, the European economy and the common market are active, functioning realities – problematic as they may be. But how far along is the political venture of the European Union, together with one of its outward expressions, culture? Current events in Europe and around the world remind us that the question is as important as ever and merits our close attention. The internal management of Europe as well as its outward stances, its positions, and its responsibility in world economic, ecological and political issues continually demonstrate the need to advance this project. But the Europe that invented democracy as well as tragedy, perspective and the encyclopaedia, and which has been formed around the concepts of critical thinking and reflection, has a multifaceted, ever-evolving identity. This Europe exists by virtue of its diversity, and indeed may have no form other than criss-crossing differences, themselves merged into one spirit of mind that combines intellectual rigour and openness to the unknown. This tension between critical thinking and openness is both a vulnerability and a strength, and calls for perpetual re-engagement, re-examination and reformulation of the very concept of Europe. There is perhaps no better definition of the European spirit.

But perhaps the most striking image of the realization of the Europe of culture is an image that encompasses the People's National Theatre of Jean Vilar and the dissident plays of Václav Havel, the absurdity of the Romanian Eugène Ionesco and the Irishman Samuel Beckett, the disconcerting figures of the Englishman Francis Bacon, the dance melding music and geometry of Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, the tragic enigmas of Romeo Castellucci, the exalted bodies of Krzysztof Warlikowski, and the micro-societies of Christoph Marthaler, which are at once zany and fateless. This is a Europe that is united in diversity and projected into the future, that is critical and creative, open-minded and demanding.

There is not presently and perhaps never will be the expectation of a shared living space that goes beyond difference, or the invention of richly diverse identities not defined by the exclusion of difference – this would require ceaseless attention and implementation, maintenance and reformulation. Seen from this perspective, for Vincent Baudriller, President of the EFFE International Jury, former director of the Avignon Festival and current director of Théâtre Vidy in Lausanne, the objectives of festivals have not changed, and their unique ability to draw a crowd that is curious to encounter “the other” is as relevant as ever.

Indeed, creating art and experiencing art encourage an interest in things that are different, unique or foreign. Festivals bring together a diversity of artforms at a particular place and time, offering visitors who pass through a succession of widely varying experiences. Visitors are stimulated by their own individual motivations to discover and share the festival experience in a spirit of openness – an experience whose appeal and enjoyment are derived from its very diversity. A festival is thus a particularly suitable way to concretely, intensely, personally, intellectually and physically bring to life and transmit the idea of a European culture in which abundance, the impulse to share, confrontation and exchange all originate in difference. In this way, festivals provide expression to and a concrete experience of the Europe of culture that rejects all impulses towards isolationism.

Vincent Baudriller recalls one festivalgoer who was so caught up in the special excitement of the festival as opposed to his annual programme that he was inspired to see performances in each of the languages of Europe and the world – he saw live theatre, dance, music, opera, visual art and cinema – sometimes all in the same day. He did all this on a very tight schedule which he had set aside just for himself in order to break out of a rut and go exploring.

Festivalgoers must be put into an open state of mind by the event itself, and this is the responsibility of the festival. When the ambience and energy of an event stimulate a visitor's curiosity, he or she is much more likely to venture into new, unknown territory than visitors who are on their weekly cultural outing. Everyone knows to expect the unexpected along with the scheduled events at a festival, and that's part of what gives them their charm and appeal. As such, festivals are also a stage for audacity and inventiveness, and this is true for festivalgoers as well as for artists. In the

view of the director of Théâtre Vidy, who has created the *Programme Commun*, a ten-day festival for the various theatres of Lausanne, it is precisely because festivals encourage a spirit of openness among visitors that they provide artists a context that allows greater creative freedom, and encourage risk-taking and inventiveness as well as the renewal of and questioning of assumptions.

Moreover, in most countries, it is often only possible to see foreign productions at festivals, for the performing arts at least. And there is no doubt that since the 1990s, new media, democratization and advancements in transport combined with the political enlargement of Europe, in particular towards the East, have all promoted the development of international festivals, which are now powerful accelerators of the circulation of artists and their works. They have thus contributed significantly to expanding the horizons of artists and their works of art.

For artists, festivals are also an opportunity to experience and carry on a dialogue with different cultures, histories, languages and artistic languages, through encounters with new audiences, as well as with other artists they rarely have occasion to meet. It is thus a special opportunity not only for audiences but also for artists. A festival can be a welcome opportunity for exchange, dialogue, meetings, innovation and the transmission and renewal of their art.

As microcosms of Europe representing a point in space and time, festivals are the expression of a Europe of culture on the move. And because festivals serve as forums for encounters, dialogues, exchanges and sharing, they demonstrate that the Europe of culture is a step ahead of a political Europe, while at the same time constituting its first crystallization. Seen from this perspective, support for the development of festivals by the European Union is critical: it will ensure that this richly diverse Europe of culture never ceases to be possible, active and lively – nor will the still-new idea of a European political project, founded on necessity and openness, diversity and dialogue.

From a group of 897 candidates assembled by specialists, EFFE granted its label to some 760 festivals in 31 countries, and an international jury then selected 12 outstanding festivals to be honoured with an EFFE Festival Award. For Vincent Baudriller, the endorsement of European festivals provides the opportunity to recognize cultural events of all sizes, each operating in its own country, at its own level and in its own chosen discipline in the defence of creativity. These festivals not only ensure the circulation of cultural products, they also take the risk of creation, engage in productions and support artists. Furthermore, the selected festivals all have international aspects and ambitions in their programming and sometimes through the audiences they attract. Through the gatherings and flows of people mobilized and facilitated by festivals, they are a very concrete realization of the Europe of culture. As such, each of them champions political issues such as defending the diversity of artistic creation and assumes their responsibilities in relation to their audiences and their locations. They are often innovative

in their approach, in the forms of public gatherings they initiate, the bridges they build between audiences and the works, and the discoveries they bring about, all through an imperative sense of commitment to inclusion of the greatest possible number of people – points mentioned by the jury. All speak of a spirit of openness to the world, of difference, and of the diversity of artistic forms and languages, and they inculcate this spirit in their audiences. Finally, the jury members have been particularly attentive to the dialogue between the artistic forms proposed by the various candidates, particularly when another discipline – or at times an issue external to art – allows a particular artistic practice or the art itself, as it exists today, to be questioned. Works may be amenable to enrichment through criticism either because one practice reinvigorates or renews another, or because artists become involved in social or political issues inspiring them to invent new forms, new languages or new formulations. The aim of the EFFE International Jury and its President was for the label to recognize those who encourage speech and discussion, and who thereby participate in transforming the world and contemporary society – those whose eyes are on the future.

The EFFE Festival Award recognized 12 festivals among those bearing the EFFE Label; they were not, however, selected on the basis of a competition. Rather, the award involved the selection of significant examples – heralds rather than heroes – which taken together create a striking image of the diversity that characterizes the Europe of culture in general and the relevance of the idea of festivals in particular. Certainly, the winners all demonstrate outstanding standards of quality. Whether they are veterans or new on the scene, enjoy a high profile on the international stage or have a more local audience, together they represent the specific challenges and the ever more current, effective and efficient power of the festival concept, of this unique moment in which artworks, artists and audiences cross paths during a concentrated period and at a specific location. While some are deeply committed to their locales and others are itinerant or cross borders, through their inventiveness they all demonstrate the multiplicity of possible approaches to encouraging encounters and exchanges.

Finally, they show that the invigorating vitality of culture, the taste for curiosity and diversity, the welcoming of those who are “other” and different has a place in the North and South, and the East and West of Europe. They single-handedly project the image of Europe, its diversity and its creativity, through gatherings featuring difference, exchange and encounter.

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Translated from the original French by Paula Loudenslager

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