

CULTURAL IDENTITIES: THE INTERNATIONAL THEATRE FESTIVALS IN EDINBURGH, AVIGNON AND SIBIU

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Abstract

The study intends to analyze three of the most important theatre festivals in Europe: Edinburgh International Festival, Avignon Theatre Festival and Sibiu International Theatre Festival, through what may be considered their main identities. Briefly discussing their history, I will focus on the cultural dialogue and on the cultural identities they promote and also on the way the audiences react to these modern events.

Theatre festivals need special conditions to exist and to have success and a good impact on the audience: all major European theatre festivals take place in rather small towns, like Edinburgh, Avignon, Salzburg, Bayreuth or, embracing (and being embraced) by the whole local community. It is important to explain the reasons for which this is a fact and to emphasize on the cultural policies that keep these festivals running and developing.

Keywords: theatre, festival, performing arts, identity, culture

Throughout history, people have always found different ways of celebrating the important events in their life: the changing of the seasons, the phases of the moon, the nature awakening each spring, the harvest of the crops, the new year etc. From the rituals in the far islands of the Pacific, to the Chinese New Year, from the Dionysian ceremonies in Ancient Greece, to the European carnival in The Middle Ages, myths and rituals have been created in order to interpret and celebrate what happened in the Universe. Even today, behind some figures in the popular culture (as Santa Claus), there are myths, archetypes and ancient feasts. Archaic communities used dancing, singing and story telling in order to transmit their story from one generation to another and in most agrarian societies there had been rituals that marked the beginning of a new season: most of them still are important and today they may belong to the popular culture.

Both in public and private life, people felt the need to mark the important events and to celebrate the ones that were remarkable; important occurrences in their societies became the landmarks by which they organized their private life.

Even now, when the society is branded by hi-tech and has lost much of its sacred part, when press and communication are global, when so many people have lost contact with religion and social patterns of the past, we still need events that would mark the local and domestic particularities of our life: they are an essential part of our culture, as never before in history. The large amount of leisure that the modern man has and the possibility to spend it according to his free will have conduced to a proliferation of public events, of celebrations and of entertainment. Governments support and promote the events as part of their strategies of economical development, of building up nations and of promoting certain touristic destinations. Many corporations and companies use events in order promote their marketing strategies and image. The enthusiasm of the different communities and individuals for their

passions and stake increase the area of the events, which can embrace whatever possible theme.

The modern theatre festival has had its debut in the 19th century, during the cultural events that took place in Bayreuth and this institution became more consistent during the Salzburg festival, at the beginning of the 20th century. Still, it was only at the middle of the 20th century when Western culture was mature and organized enough in order to sustain the needed forces for establishing the theatre festival that would decisively contribute to the cultural dialogue through performing arts. For that purpose, we need to concentrate on the three major European theatre festivals: Edinburgh International Festival, Avignon Festival and Sibiu International Theatre Festival. Although the first two festivals started in the late 40s, the festival in Romania started only in the 90s, when, as a young and fresh democracy, our country became the perfect ground for setting up such events.

The first edition of the Edinburgh International Festival took place in 1947 and was the result of a crises: in the years following the Second World War, European and British societies were still under the influences of the post war difficulties. It is very important to point out that even since the festival was nothing more than a project; its first director (Rudolf Bing) planned it as a global event, selling tickets in the whole world, bearing in mind audiences from all over Europe and even from America. The success of the first years meant more than an enthusiastic and receptive audience, not only impressive figures of famous artists that performed on local stages: it also meant artistic dialogue and an act of communication that transcended languages and cultures. To that end, all the communication around this institution and event catered for cultural landmarks that created unique moments in the theatrical landscape of the moment. The audiences at the Edinburgh International Festival had the chance to meet Japanese theatre and to confront the desacralisation of the European theatre with the way the Asian actors handled tradition and rituals on stage. On the other side, as an example, American theatre fascinated the audience with its directors' total freedom of expression and with the courage of the performances.

As the festival developed and it coagulated a parallel artistic movement (The Fringe), one can discuss the specific pattern of the Edinburgh International Festival and of the way it selected its artists and performances: the most important thing would be that, although it has always been very conservative regarding the ways of artistic expressions, it has always promoted only irrefutable names and productions in the modern performing arts.

Finally, it is crucial to remind the fact that Edinburgh International Festival does not mean only the establishment of a very important event, but also the cultural and artistic dialogue it brings along and the revival of the economy in the city. The parallel artistic movement in Edinburgh would be The Fringe, that gathers an impressive amount of performances, but in which the selection is not the responsibility of the festival manager with absolute power, but the access is granted by paying a fee. Even if this strategy for attaining the festival does not concentrate exclusively on quality of the performances, it is important to keep in mind it is very beneficial in terms of money (but this does not mean that The Fringe is only for arguable artists).

On the other hand, in France, the Avignon Festival was developed, ever since its first editions, as an event that would revive a medieval city that contained a unique place: the interior court of the Palais des Papes. Jean Vilar, the first and the most prominent and longest

lasting of its directors obsessively used this particular space in a series of monumental performances that became some of the most important moments of the French performing arts in the 50s. As it was initially set up as a local and national event, the Avignon Festival crossed the French borders and quickly gathered international artists and large audiences.

The 60s and 70s were not only the decades when the French festival consolidated its position; it was the time when the sparking society and its problems became parts of the events (as in 1968). As I said before, the Scottish festival was interested in having a somehow conservative artistic environment, but the French festival was more free and never hesitated to experiment and to involve in everything that meant the emergence of the performing arts and of playwriting. The first major moment of crises in the history of the festival took place when Jean Vilar passed away: it came with the need for reforming the artistic direction of the event and to reevaluate the venues. The use of the Palais des Papes in the performances became a dangerous fetish and the audience felt more and more estranged and stressed by the history of the place and of the formulas the performances used to practice. The answer for the new directors was to quickly target everything that meant innovation and the parallel festival, the Avignon OFF helped this new cultural policy. As opposed to the Edinburgh Fringe, the Avignon OFF was not so well organized and, sadly, there was serious competition between the two festivals in the French city and the audience could not always chose what was best suitable, as was the case in Scotland.

The true moment of glory for the Avignon Festival would come quite late, after 2000, with the crises in its modern history: the 2003 edition never took place, because of the complaints of the artists and of the technical crews in front of the government reform of the wages in the entertainment industry. These are the years in which the French Festival will concentrate on a fortunate combination between innovation and tradition that was reached together with the maturity that followed so many agitated years. The cultural dialogue gave birth to some important annexes of the festival: playwriting workshops (in La Chartreuse), The Jean Vilar Museum and the Festival Archive.

Sibiu International Theatre Festival was born in 1993 as an independent initiative of its director, Constantin Chiriac, during a very uncertain cultural context: the city of Sibiu was a province, very far from being the theatre capital of Romania and the Romanian audience still missed the maturity needed for evaluating the artistic expression by means that lacked prejudices and relations with certain outdated ideologies. Even so, the festival's first edition was a huge success, together with its clumsiness: it took place in March, when it was still cold and the weather is not suitable for outdoor performances and there were awards for the best performances, motivated by the strange need to make a top and to satisfy all the participants. Quickly, this approach changed and the following years, the festival took place in late May and early June and the management dropped the awards, as it was understood the fact that the most important award for an artist are the moments he is applauded by a large audience and the cultural dialogue that merges between the artists.

One of the most important accomplishments of the festival in Sibiu was the operation of furnishing the public space with theatrical performances. As the city did not (and still does not) have many large indoor venues, the organizers developed a specific section of the festival, for outdoor performances, in public spaces, where large audiences could enjoy street performances. The accomplishment is even more significant as there is a huge amount of

spectators each day of the festival (approx. 60.000), but that also brought along a refinement of the public taste and to the birth of a new generation of theatregoers. Of all the big European theatre festivals, the one in Sibiu has the youngest age group. The partnership with the local university is also important, as a theatre school was founded. This was a natural thing to do, in order to widen the festival, but it also contributed to the birth of a new generation of actors and of cultural managers that are now part of the festival staff.

In 2007, Sibiu as a European Capital of Culture was the moment when the festival put the city on the cultural map of the world. Even more than that, the number of audiences increased after 2007, which is very rare for an ex-Capital of Culture.

As for the way Sibiu International Theatre Festival generated a cultural dialogue and sustained it through coherent cultural policies and strategies, it is crucial to mention the Performing Arts Open Market, that is an annex of the festival and is a unique event in Eastern Europe, representing the institutional dimension of a cultural dialogue, under the strict influence of the market economy, as it is applied for the performing arts industry: the best performances will have the most sold tickets only if they are well marketed.

The conclusion of my article will be that there is needed a special kind of community for hosting a successful theatre festival: this would be preoccupied by multiculturalism and by art. Also, it would be brave enough to sanction the artists and the management of the festival if something goes wrong. The specific cultural dialogue would work only if the staff would have in mind audiences from different artistic environment, and the fear of losing the specific local identity would be exceeded. The main advantage of such a festival would be the revival of a city and / or community, as it was the case for Edinburgh, Avignon and also Sibiu.

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