

## Transnational Festivals, a European Alternative: *Les Boréales* and *Reims Scènes d'Europe*

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At a time when concepts of European identity and integration are receiving increased critical comment, something to which Dragan Klaić devoted much of his attention, it is appropriate that research on festivals should examine and discuss the extent to which they are able to provide special opportunities for promoting knowledge, understanding and experience of Europe across borders and beyond. For those festivals that possess such qualities of 'Europeanness', such focused research should analyse those qualities and what can be learnt from studying the festivals that possess them. This chapter proposes to explore these important questions and themes through an examination of *Les Boréales* and the *Reims Scènes d'Europe* festivals. Analysis of the latter was undertaken in the context of the European Festival Research Project<sup>1</sup>, and of the former for a research project piloted by the Observatory for Cultural Policies in Grenoble for the Ministry for Culture and Communication of France<sup>2</sup> (Autissier and Deniau, 2013).

This chapter is also the continuation of an investigation published in *The Europe of Festivals* (Autissier, 2008)<sup>4</sup>. This analysed the role of cross-border festivals and cross-border festival 'twinning' schemes. It highlighted in particular the pioneering role played by events such as *Perspectives*, a live performing arts festival based in Sarrebrück (Germany), which operates in close collaboration with cultural organisations in Forbach and Sarreguemines (France), and of the *Mira!* Festival, which takes place in the south of France and which introduces its audience to contemporary work from Spain and Portugal. Also analysed were the blossoming cross-border initiatives between France and Belgium. From reconciliation to a culture of cross-border sharing, I believe such initiatives aim to promote borders as meeting sites, as well as places for mutual discovery<sup>5</sup> (Autissier, 2008, pp73-87). For the purposes of this chapter, I will examine two festivals that take place in regional French capitals, and

which aim to straddle European borders, criss-crossing the continent from north to south and east to west.

The two festivals, *Les Boréales* in Caen (Basse-Normandie) and *Reims Scènes d'Europe* in Reims (Champagne-Ardenne), have several features in common the first of which is that they were developed in regional contexts that were badly affected by World War Two. Normandy paid a heavy cost as the site of the landing by the Allied forces. Similarly, Champagne-Ardenne bore the brunt of the May-June 1940 campaign, in which thousands of people died. This conflict had a devastating impact specifically on the commune of Sedan and the department of Aisne. In addition to this history, both regions have also experienced economic difficulties. Basse-Normandie is one of the most agriculturally and rurally-oriented French regions, but here the fishing industry has suffered badly. Following the closure of its textile factories too, the automotive industry is currently the main source of industrial employment. The nuclear clusters in the Hague and Flamanville give the Cotentin peninsula a special role in the energy sector.

Champagne-Ardenne is one of the French industrial regions that were heavily affected by the economic crisis that has affected most of Europe since 2008. The manufacturing of intermediate goods, which was a strong feature of the region, was hit hard by the downturn in automobile production.

However, both regions benefit from a rich heritage and popular tourist sites, such as the landing beaches and the Caen Memorial. Hikers, champagne lovers and business visitors are all similarly interested in Champagne-Ardenne for the quality of its natural beauty and its location within Europe.

In this interesting, yet complex regional context, what role could festivals like *Les Boréales* and *Reims, Scènes d'Europe* play? In the following section, we will learn more about the origins of both festivals.

In Caen it began in 1951 when the Swedish Government sent kit houses and nurses to the city. This prompted translators and academics at the University of Caen<sup>6</sup> to see an opportunity for cultural co-operation and exchange and to develop the teaching of Nordic languages at the university, by establishing a programme in the spirit and name of modernity and peace. In 1992, *Les Boréales de Basse-Normandie* was established at the behest of the Norden Association, which had been set up by an academic, Eric Eydoux, and involved teachers and translators from Caen University's Nordic Languages Department. Initially centred on literature, with cameos by other artistic disciplines, from 1999 onwards, *Boréales* was organised by the Basse-Normandie Regional Centre of Letters (CRL)<sup>7</sup> and expanded its programme to include a wider selection of cultural and artistic activities. Although, partly because CRL was

at the helm, the focus of the festival was still on literature and translation, the idea was to promote awareness and appreciation of the multifaceted, multi-societal Nordic imaginary(ies). “We are not only aiming to present Nordic contemporary art, but also provide insight into the lifestyles, the know-how and the values of these countries (status of the child, parity, environmentalism, the promotion of peace...)”, explained Jérôme Rémy, *Les Boréales*’ Artistic Director in 2012. The festival contributes to reaffirming the Nordic identity of the Basse-Normandie, whose regional logo actually alludes to the Vikings<sup>7</sup>. Norman fishermen also recall their ancestors sailing away to Icelandic waters and Newfoundland.<sup>8</sup> The festival therefore offers audiences a different experience and perspective of the ocean to reflect on, one that is alternative to that familiar from films about World War Two.

Where *Les Boréales* involves extensive input by academics, *Reims Scènes d’Europe* is driven more by an artistic perspective. Both festivals depend on the involvement of specific individuals. *Reims Scènes d’Europe* was a product of the vision of the director and actor, Emmanuel Demarcy-Mota, Artistic Director of the *Comédie de Reims* in 2007. His idea was to invite three or four European companies each year and the *Comédie* built a new performance space for the purpose. Thus a festival was born: *À Scènes ouvertes*. In 2009, with the arrival of a new Artistic Director, theatre director Ludovic Lagarde, *À Scènes ouvertes* became *Reims Scènes d’Europe*. In other words, the affirmation of the European reference point became a selling point, something that is not common in the French festival landscape. The festival’s cross-border dimension subsequently became a central feature. Certain editions of the festival are themed and others feature specific countries, such as Sweden in 2010. The 2012 festival revolved around a ‘border and exile’ theme. For Ludovic Lagarde, the key challenge has been to develop the festival as an international repository of resources and competences, but also for the festival to serve as a platform for public debate about the meaning and importance of ‘cultural Europe’.

Another distinctive feature of *Boréales* and *Reims Scènes d’Europe* is how they unify the cultural institutions of the cities and regions involved. Unlike many organisations that preserve the exclusivity of their programming, the CRL of Basse-Normandie and the *Comédie de Reims* are gradually opening up to other local cultural organisations and collectively developing an annual programme. Twenty-four institutions in Caen and the surrounding region are festival partners, including the Caen Theatre, the *Comédie de Caen*, the Caen Fine Arts Museum, the *Arthothèque*, the Basse-Normandie Contemporary Art Centre and, of course, the Nordic Languages Department of the University of Caen. *Reims Scènes d’Europe* brings together six different, complementary