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Romaeuropa Festival: A Case Study

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Different combinations of conditions, circumstances and historical moments trigger festivals. One of the common denominators that characterises their origins and success over the course of time is the role of their founders. The birth of *Romaeuropa Festival*, provides us with a significant case study of visionary leadership.

The story of this festival began in 1986, just ten years after the creation of the *Estate Romana* (*Roman summer*), a programme of cultural events invented by architect Renato Nicolini, the Rome City Council politician in charge of cultural affairs from 1976-1985, which brought life to the city's streets and squares each summer with music, dance, theatre and film. During that period Rome, for the first time since the end of World War Two, was governed by a leftwing administration, led by mayors belonging to the Italian Communist Party (PCI). These were also the dark years of the Red Brigades and Fascist terrorism that bloodied Italy. The *Estate Romana* was conceived as an umbrella event, which was to bring together many independent initiatives from theatre, music, cinema, art and literature and smaller individual festivals, and which soon became a symbol of the rebirth of Rome and of the revitalisation of the deeply scarred city. Nicolini's idea was to enable people to regain possession of public spaces, especially in the historic city centre, by encouraging them to engage with the highly ghettoised suburbs, by fostering democratic access and participation in cultural activities. The initiative also sought to integrate different cultural forms and languages into its programme and to appeal to a variety of audiences.

The *Estate Romana* was an innovation in a city that seemed opposed to modernity and was rather provincial, a prisoner of its great heritage, where the expression of contemporary creativity struggled to find expression. In those years contemporary dance was totally absent from the city and there was only episodic programming of twentieth century music. The theatrical avant-garde may have enjoyed one of its best seasons, but it was confined to alternative indoor spaces, a phenomenon referred to as 'Roman cellars' to indicate its marginal position in the city's cultural offer. One can also say that

in those years Rome was not a significant centre for the contemporary arts, accessible to all audiences, unlike other Italian cities such as Milan, which at that time had a livelier, current focus. The *Estate Romana* was the background for the creation of a festival focused on contemporary creativity. It also suggested a model of public intervention in the field of large scale events, which produced a lively debate between, on the one hand, the proponents of this type of ephemeral action and, on the other, the supporters of cultural policies more aimed at establishing permanent cultural infrastructure providing a year-round programme. However the trigger for *Romaeuropa* was actually found in another fertile context: the European academies in Rome and especially the French Academy. One of the lesser known features of Rome is that it plays host to about thirty academies, mostly of different European countries, but also of countries on other continents, such as Japan, the US and Egypt. Based in and around places of great historical and artistic value, these academies host, for a period of a year or more, artists and intellectuals working in different cultural genres and disciplines. In this way they create a sort of continuity with the Grand Tour, the seventeenth century phenomenon that saw rich young European aristocrats, authors, writers and artists travel through Europe, and through Italy in particular, in order to enhance their education and knowledge of European classical culture.

In 1986 the director of the French Academy in Rome, which is housed in the beautiful Villa Medici, was the writer and director Jean-Marie Drot, who, after arriving in Rome in 1984, immediately became a keen supporter of French-Italian cultural dialogue and of the Academy's role as a 'living' place that communicated with the city. Encouraged by the cultural vibrancy generated by the *Estate Romana*, and convinced that Rome needed to internationalise its cultural offer, he decided that it was time to invest in the contemporary arts. In an interview with Eric Jozsef (2010), Drot indicated that the aims of the project included the desire to make Rome less beholden to and reverential towards the Vatican and to increase the city's engagement with and support of contemporary culture. To use an image recalled by Drot, the French Academy and the new festival were 'smugglers of culture', so that in the spaces they controlled they could be daring and able to experiment with the 'bold shapes of new artistic languages'.

Drot's idea soon became central to the festival. To make it feasible Drot persuaded three more people who shared his passion and vision to become accomplices in his project. These people's support was central to the successful development of the event. The first of the three was Giovanni Pieraccini, then President of Assitalia, one of Italy's largest insurance groups. Pieraccini was a patron who had created a large collection of contemporary visual

art for Assitalia and was responsible for several cultural sponsorships. The second key person was Monique Veaute, who at the time worked on music programmes for Radio France and was persuaded by Drot to join him at the Academy. The third key figure was Fabrizio Grifasi, a young cultural worker, who had already had seven years' experience in local cultural associations, events and free radio stations.

So it was that with a small staff, two sponsors (Assitalia and Eni, an Italian oil and gas multinational), the embryo of *Romaeuropa* was born as an association under Italian law. For the first four editions it was called *Festival of Villa Medici*. It took place in July (during the *Estate Romana*) and offered a multi-disciplinary programme of concerts, dance, video installations, theatre and poetry readings in the French Academy's gardens. By being an institution that has a public/private form of governance, *Romaeuropa* has developed a balance and been able to maintain its independence in artistic and strategic matters. The decision-making members of the foundation are the Italian Government, the regional and city authorities, representatives of some big companies (such as Telecom Italia) and many well-known figures from civil society and the arts in Italy and abroad.

The festival received criticism, especially from those on the left, who judged it as being too elitist. In France, too, there was dissent amongst some intellectuals, especially the historian André Chastel, towards the use of the French Academy, which he considered was too 'open' to Italian people. This hostility towards the festival is a version of the conflict between the ancient and the modern, a perennial issue. Despite these negative voices, the city and its people reacted positively to this experiment and seized the opportunity the festival offered to learn about the contemporary arts. The festival reported good attendance and the welcome attention of cultural institutions and communities. The response was so positive that the German Academy created its own similar event in Villa Massimo.

After four years the festival had grown in terms of audience numbers, attention by critics and partnerships. The *Festival of Villa Medici* decided to make a leap forward, taking advantage of offers of collaboration from the Hungarian, British and Spanish Academies amongst others and, in 1990, the Foundation *Romaeuropa* was established and the festival renamed. This successful model soon attracted the attention and support of many other countries, including Germany, which closed its own festival to join the foundation. *Romaeuropa* co-operated with national embassies and cultural institutes, in addition to the academies themselves. The festival became the glittering focus of the programming for the *Estate Romana* and a true international showcase. Not