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Festivals: Why, What, When? A case study of Berlin

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The focus for this chapter is a reflection on the relevance and role of festivals in contemporary life. It is prompted by reading nearly one hundred applications from young festival managers who were applying to participate in a professional Atelier organised by the European Festivals Association. What became very clear from this exercise was the importance of reflection on why we invest so much energy into festivals. The applicants' submissions also prompted me to consider 'Who are we doing this for?' and more fundamentally to think about how to create, develop or sustain a festival in 2013.

This reflection is not aimed at, nor does it discuss or question the existence of traditional big events, such as Salzburg, Bayreuth, Edinburgh or Avignon. Their continued existence (for the foreseeable future) may be more or less taken for granted. Due to their cultural weight and longevity they have developed as important touristic events and, in this respect therefore, they are atypical and not central to the focus of this debate on festivals today.

But for the vast majority of festivals throughout the world, a spectrum which includes the well-known and active through to those in the early stages of planning, a basic question we should ask is 'Why should this festival continue or be created?' All festivals are (or should be) a unique response to a unique situation, every situation is different and these differences have to be considered carefully.

A key question is therefore: "What would be missing in the city or region without its festival? What does it add to the cultural, artistic or social life, which is not available in other ways/elsewhere?" Further questions would be: "For whom is the festival necessary? How is it a source of support for artists? In what way does it create opportunities for artistic production? Does it give something special or new to the audience? Can it help to develop a new audience and stimulate fresh ways of thinking about the needs of a city or region and its development, and generate new, shared ideas about its image and how culture can enrich people's lives?"

A festival in this sense becomes a process, integrated into the changing situation of its political context and, therefore, with the potential to contribute more than may be achievable by a festival that is an isolated event. This is even truer for festivals in a city that already enjoys a diversity of artistic projects throughout the year.

Berlin in the period 1960-1990 and its international festivals serve as an interesting example of this process for example in the origins, development and conclusion of two particular festivals with which I have worked: *Pantomime, Musik, Tanz, Theater* and *Tanz im August*.

After the end of Fascism and the Second World War, cultural life in the city was quickly re-established; theatres, concerts, exhibitions had already restarted as early as the summer of 1945, albeit sometimes in very provisional spaces. The inhabitants of the city longed to experience again the art and culture that for many years had been unavailable to them.

The political/social situation in the city had changed drastically and, to put it mildly, was difficult. The city was no longer in the centre of Germany but still in the centre of Europe. East Berlin was the centre of the GDR, but West Berlin was a distant region of the Federal Republic, completely dependent on the support of the Federal Government. To become a city with a future and an identity Berlin needed to clarify to itself and others its role in the complex geo-politics of the times; one that would reflect its position between east and west, where it was looking in both directions. For the Federal Republic, where for a long time Europe meant just Western Europe, thinking and acting towards the East was limited to defence and commerce. Berlin's role had to complement these areas and the resource that it chose to concentrate on was culture, strongly supported by the Allied Forces.

But even here East and West were already divided, mostly for ideological reasons. West Berlin newspapers tried to influence their readers not to support any activity controlled by the Soviet Regime – in practice, not to go to any cultural, artistic institutions or events in East Berlin. Against this background, the Americans decided in 1951 to create the *Berliner Festwochen* in West Berlin. Cultural policy-makers now regarded, and used, culture as an 'intellectual defense', and, despite encouragement to have nothing to do with 'the East', the Festival, a child of the Cold War, brought artists and their work from all over the world to West Berlin, including from Eastern Europe.

Another small but typical anecdote underlines the contradictions: the director of the theatre in which the *Festwochen* started invited his colleagues from the East to the opening night, but he was forced by the government to withdraw