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## ***Mladi levi Festival – Reflections and Memories***

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I have always been a little suspicious about people who have never doubted themselves. Perhaps this is because, while I am still in the whirlwind of joy and enthusiasm over a new project, I am already picturing the worst-case scenarios. This state of uncertainty normally lasts until I find something that answers each doubt and at this point I begin to see the idea as realisable.

However, even I was not counting on the large number of doubters I met before the beginning of the first *Mladi levi Festival* in Ljubljana. "Another festival?" I was asked, "But why? Don't we already have enough? Who needs festivals and who actually attends them? After two or three years they all vanish into thin air anyway..." Not very encouraging. "There is too much of everything already... and in the middle of the summer? You're nuts! Nobody's there then, the theatres are all closed..." "Well, that's exactly why", I answered, "because the theatres *are* all closed, wouldn't that be the best opportunity? The venues are available and we can maybe borrow equipment; people get back from holidays and want to have somewhere to go, they want to spend some quality time socialising... Our festival will be different, open and not hermetic at all." They just doubtfully shook their heads.

It was by a lucky coincidence that at that time I met Irena Štaudohar. She had just left her editor's job at *Maska* magazine, as I had just left the Glej Theatre. We were both disappointed by the cynicism of the Slovenia arts scene and the politics, but at the same time full of ideas about what the theatre, what a festival could be like – a space without any bad feelings, where people meet, share, learn, get to know other cultures, other landscapes, other visions, where there is room for debate, experiment and development. An open space, where making mistakes is a legitimate possibility. After all, errors pave the way to changing ourselves and the world, right? Are we capable of admitting to ourselves that as a society we have gambled and lost? Or of finding new ways of tackling the challenges of the crisis?

Without Irena, I would probably have given up. We filled each other with enthusiasm, inspiration, got angry a lot, saved the theatre and the world

every day, had fun and laughed a lot – all the things we still successfully do today and, if necessary, in one single breath. She was the one who persuaded me: “Nena, you, and only you, are capable of changing things around here!” That shook me every time. I thought she might be seeing something that I was not, but eventually I started believing in what she saw in me. I know how pathetic this sounds, but it really was quite like that. And then we sat down in a cold little office at Rimska Street 2, like in some socialist realist film (the one and only storage heater we had broke down, but the rent was more than friendly), puffing in our cold hands, dreaming and selecting the programme.

Winter went and spring came, Irena got a job as a journalist, the organisation started. I came into the office earlier and earlier and went home later and later, and it became clear to me that I could not do it by myself. Mojca Jug heard I needed help and said: “I’ve never done anything like this, but I’m very interested.” “Let’s try”, I responded, “maybe we’ll get along.” Well, we’ve been getting along well for almost 15 years now. I accidentally (literally) ran into Ira Cecić in the subway at Rimska Street soon afterwards and quickly invited her upstairs. I still do not know how only the three of us managed to organise the whole first edition of the festival. I guess it was a mix of things: we were passionately devoted, the Mladinsko Theatre helped with the facilities and equipment a lot, as did the Dance Theatre Ljubljana and the Glej Theatre. We put up a completely new stage at the Ljubljana Castle, opening the festival with experimental theatre legend Ellen Stewart and Mayor Vika Potočnik. For something that hadn’t existed before, it was a major accomplishment. The head technician was Dušan Kohek and the technical co-ordinator Tomaž Štrucl, with whom I used to tour (Tomaž as lighting designer and I as touring manager of Betontanc).

We pulled out our top ten touring experiences list. Initially we focused on the quality of the programme and technical conditions, but it soon became clear that the shows that had left the most lasting impression were those where we had been able to stay for more than one day, where we were able to get to know local life, artists and audiences, nature and people. So, in that spirit we chose to do things differently. To create opportunities where we could invite artists to stay with us for as long as possible, even if, in practical terms, that meant offering modest accommodation in student dormitories.

The festival came to include many distinctive features. One example was the idea of holding a picnic in the countryside, at Ulovka, which turned into a kind of trademark, the highlight of the festival, where we would take artists, volunteers, critics and festival guests. And then there was the obligatory late night meeting point in the bar Druga pomoč. It was exactly at these places that a great many friendships and new co-operations came into being, in a