

CAMP-ing Together in Times of COVID... *and After*

FTA Fragments by Jessie Mill

Who we are

Based in Montreal, the Festival TransAmériques (FTA) is a contemporary dance and theatre festival. We program shows from all over the world, big and small, featuring both renowned and little-known artists by the public little-known, whose work we present with love and curiosity to festivalgoers. Most of the shows from Quebec and across Canada are new works, and many are co-produced by the Festival. We hope to see them go on to international renown. Festivalgoers can navigate through an eclectic mix of dazzling, generous and accessible works, and others that are more discreet, strange or elusive. We look for unexpected encounters, extraordinary experiences, emotional shocks – all resonances and twists on the present moment that make us pay attention to the world in new ways.

Hospitality Should Start on Day One

The FTA is one of the rare large-scale arts festivals in North America, and we are quite in demand among artists from all over the world. Reception and hospitality are part of the Festival's intrinsic values. We like welcoming artists, their new ideas and intriguing proposals. We meet with all those who request an appointment and try to answer every e-mail (we get a lot of those). What do we expect from that first meeting?

The family is not (part of) the catalogue

We are in contact with agents and managers who represent sometimes more than one artist. Naturally, the discussion may shift from one artist to another, from one project to another. There are also some creative circles we are close to, and "stables" of artists whose work is sufficiently coherent to talk about them together. But when we realize that an agent or manager is trying to promote their entire "catalogue" with multiple names, styles and projects, we happen to show some resistance and slow down the pace of our discussion. Although we find elective affinities and artistic kinships stimulating, we are quite reluctant to the idea of a catalogue.

Enthusiasm

Enthusiasm originally meant "divine possession" or "divine invasion", a sacred delusion that can carry away. EN-THEOS-OUSIA, "with God within". Luckily, we are enthusiasts! When we discover an artist and experience a powerful work, we quickly hop aboard that divine vehicle to share our emotion, with a big smile, to compliment and jubilate together. But the task of programming a festival requires more than just aligning a sequence of favorites into a timetable. Enthusiasm may or may not lead to an invitation. In that context, how should one receive the enthusiasm of a presenter? How to transform that enthusiasm into an ongoing dialogue rather than a sales pitch? For some time now we have been tamping down our enthusiasm, since its expression has led to misinterpretations or to undue pressure from artists or their representatives.

Healthy Criticism

In discussions with artists and those who accompany them, we all need to make room for critical thinking. In Quebec consensus is king, but it sometimes neutralizes salient discussions about artistic creation and production or presenting modes, questioning which is essential to our professions. To welcome dissenting views within organizations and between individuals, including artists and professionals, is to respect the complexity of the world we live in.

Gendered Negotiation

My colleague negotiates contracts with the agents and companies that we invite to the Festival. She told me that she writes down what comes to mind, then removes all frills, all emotions, leaving only what's essential. "The stripped-down, precise and exact message, what I want to say. Then, if necessary, I insert some polite curtsies. I have the impression that detours and kind words belong more to women, whereas raw, to-the-point messages are more likely to be fired by men."

Who is Not in the Room?

This question is haunting us collectively. Who are the artists in our blind spots? What are the marginalized artistic communities? Who are the people who don't attend our theatres but would like to? What sort

of bias do we reproduce as an organization? As individuals? And as for you, agents, managers and producers, with whom and for whom do you choose to form an alliance?

Writing, Texting, Calling, Knocking on Heaven's Door

Our worksites are diverse, ranging from theatres and rehearsal spaces to planes and trains, and all in-betweens open to meeting each other. What ethics should apply in each of those contexts? What can be said in a festival bar that we would never say in a business meeting? When is it better to wait a few days before sending an e-mail? To whom do we reserve the intimacy of messages via Messenger or WhatsApp, or text messages after 11 pm? When entering a restaurant that displays an "open" sign to discover all the kitchen staff, including the chef and the waiters, having dinner, we quickly realize that it may not be the best moment. Learning to read between the lines means noticing an "open" or "closed" sign on the person you are speaking to. Accept the fact that silent greetings are also part of a discreet, respectful dialogue.

Vanishing on Zoom

Videoconferences are killing us, but they are also saving the day. Some people are quick and clever, know when to speak, when to shut off their mic or their camera, when to make their presence known and their point of view heard. Others disappear, vanish, becoming extras on the set of our discussions. Those extras are often assistants, consultants and middlemen who make a symbolic appearance with their "big ears". Let us not ignore or forget them.

Rethinking Durations

For the past few years the Festival has been keen on getting more involved in the creative process, in stimulating research and artistic growth and development. In other words, we want to get involved in creating new works. Our role does not consist only of selecting shows, but also of create emulation in artistic communities.

The pandemic has allowed us to move away from work often too focused on presentation and touring

(putting a festival together is quite demanding) to reflect further on ways of providing artistic support, from conversations and residencies to in situ projects and sustainable development. This autumn we are working on several different scales. We treat conversations like projects. We imagine small shows on big stages. Our windows on the world are multiplying, from the real to the virtual to the real.

Togetherness

The current context offers an opportunity to radically question our ways of doing things. It's a moment to step aside, to regain flexibility. In the artistic ecology, our role as a presenter must shift toward creation, if only to ensure that the works to be presented will be ready by next year, or whenever we can once again meet our audience. Our privileges and comfort as an institution can only be legitimate if they help support the whole ecology of creating new works. And there is a limit to what we can do alone to support the artists. Today relationships with middlemen (agents, representatives, producers) are crucial, as they can help the implementation of complex strategic initiatives.

The Institution Should Work for the Artist and Not the Opposite

This season, two observations shed light on our actions. (1) The near future of live performances and their touring remains uncertain. (2) Our community is experiencing a period of extreme precarisation. How can we do our job in that context?

Breathing

We have set up the FTA Breathers, offering other ways to connect to artists and the Festival community in these uncertain times. Other means of stimulating research, artistic creation, the imagination and the emergence of new stories. It provides time to work, mostly without any production obligations or expectations of spectacular results. Multiple and flexible formats allow for artistic residencies, co-production investments, or support for research, sometimes on technical or dramaturgical levels. In all cases the FTA will share its expertise and resources available for the benefit of artistic projects. This autumn we will be providing

between \$4,000 CAD and \$15,000 CAD in financial support to some thirty artists.

Agents, Managers & Producers that We Admire

They are incredible. Each has his or her own style, for there is no recipe. He gets straight to the point. He is frank, concise and very transparent. Not one word is out of place in his messages. Don't expect politeness or witty repartee from him! She is always one step ahead. She opens doors, seeks out opportunities. She is a builder and a gardener. The two of them belong to the same house. They know how adapt their messages to the context and the circumstances. They know their grounds. They will tell you that this artist is just what you need, but maybe not this other one. They have our trust. He clearly likes the arts, and his critical eye is impressive. He knows how to talk about other artists as well as those he is promoting. We like to ask for his opinion about shows whenever we run into him. It's all quite mysterious, this work where intuition is also a gamble, where utopia and ambition get confused at times. Practicing this trade in your own community requires sometimes even more tact and humility.

Mill, on behalf of the FTA team

