



Co-funded by the
Creative Europe Programme
of the European Union



Fest Conference 2018

Ljubljana 27 – 30 June

Report

Eleven FEST conferences and I have been to each one. Such a change from the initial explorations to discover a purpose and an identity, to the current international non-profit organisation trying to make waves in Europe and administering a substantial project grant too. Wednesday evening was devoted to supper and welcome and general socialising. Ana and Spela had assembled a welcoming and very helpful team of volunteers and all combined to guide us around and make ourselves comfortable.

Thursday

We were welcomed by Ana Dusa as conference host. Her aim in hosting FEST had been to involve more of the Slavic countries and this was clearly successful, with delegations from Bosnia, Czech Republic, Croatia, Hungary, Poland and Serbia as well as an enhanced presence from Slovenia. Guy Tilkin, FEST Chair, then took over for the Council meeting. The Executive, having had a somewhat stormy ride after the 2017 conference in Ireland, decided to put the Council meeting first and to devote the whole day to it. It was generally agreed that this was a great improvement.

Fifty organisations were represented and many of the representatives were new to FEST conferences and the business was conducted in some detail so that everyone should be able to understand what was being done and how it was being done. We were reminded of the 4-year project, now moving into year 2, and the 6 strands of activity. The first year had been somewhat bumpy as the FEST finance base was considered too small to fund the 20% that FEST had to contribute. This was solved by loans from Executive members Abbi Patrix, Arjen Barel, Regina Sommer and one other.

The new FEST administrator, Katty Van Kerkhove, informed us that the papers submitted would all be published in the members' section of the website in due course so that all members could access them there. There were progress reports on the various strands of the EU project and discussion of how things should proceed for the next years. The financial base had been strengthened both by new memberships and the fact that Conference income could count but, in each year, FEST had to re-apply for the funding so that although funding had been in principle agreed for the next phase of the project, the conditions had not yet been received, so it was still not known if any adjustments might be required and how these might affect progress.

Year 1 had seen 56 project applications from 18 countries and of these, 30 projects from 15 countries had been approved. The subject for Year 2 was Heritage and for Year 3 (2019-2020) would be Education. Strand leaders Mimesis Heidi Dahlsveen, Veva Gerrard and Ragnhild Morch gave lively and interesting reports of their work and these will be accessible in due course on the website. We were reminded that applicants for grants did not have to be FEST members.

Regina Sommer presented the finance report and although the balance was not big, the year had been successful in achieving financial targets. Council was asked to approve the accounts. There were 50 voting members listed. The result: in favour 49, against 0, absent 1.



The next debate centered on whether strand leaders in the project could be paid for their work. Members of the Board and Executive Committee were volunteers and could not be paid. Working for the project was a different remit and could result in payment since it would use a greater amount of members' potential earning hours. After a long and tortuous debate, the Council voted in favour of payment: For 48, against 1, absent 1.

Next another thorny question: should strand leaders automatically be Executive Committee members? There was a question of conflict of interest, balanced by the communications nightmare that could arise if the two were not combined. Finally, it was resolved that the Council would elect the new Executive committee and entrust it with the responsibility to appoint strand leaders. There were four vacancies but as a result of a very close vote, it was decided to appoint 5 of the 7 candidates. The new management team is:

Board (unchanged): Chair Guy Tilkin, Secretary Abbi Patrix, Treasurer, Regina Sommer.

Executive committee: Remaining: Arjen Barel (Netherlands), Ikka Hautala Finland),

New: Ben Haggarty (England), Matteo Di Pierro (Italy),

Mimesis Heidi Dahlsveen (Norway), Ragnhild A. Morch

(Norway/Germany), Senem Donatan (Turkey)

Future conferences:

2019: Euregio Meuse-Rhin/Maas Rijn/Maas-Rhein, an official region part Belgium, part Germany , part Netherlands.

2020: Turkey

2021: Denmark

After thanks to the management and hosts, the meeting was closed.

After supper the evening was devoted to a performance by Damir Avdic and Erik Valencic "I, Anarchist." Erik, a reporter who had seen some of the darkest side of conflict in South Sudan, was at times very funny, and at others gave us a no punches pulled account of some atrocious events.

Damnir, punctuating his pistol-shot narrative with guitar chords showed us moments of glorious hilarity while looking constantly as though he would prefer to shoot us all. The performance was good and very powerful but, for many of us, a little longer than we would have thought necessary. All credit, though, to Ana and Spela for making it available.

So to Friday, with the administrative business behind us and the lectures and workshops to come.

Friday

The opening lecture "Tradition and Patriotism – Thought and Kitsch" was given by Bostjan Narat who would also be leading the band in Saturday evening's final celebration. He was concerned that concentration on the past and tradition left us dealing in "dead" things but if we engage in a significant conversation with those things we might create something new. He cited as example that, while his band professes to play folk music, it actually plays new compositions that people think are folk music. He was clearly somewhat uncomfortable to be using English rather than his mother tongue, as became evident in the subsequent questions when he could improvise rather than deliver a prepared text and was much livelier.

Next came co-host Spela Frlic on the subject of the spread of storytelling in the Balkans and her research had uncovered a very impressive volume of new activity in many places all, we noticed, by



inspired women. Do Slav men not tell stories, we asked? It is clear that here too, storytelling is growing and developing.

Our third speaker was Svetlana Slapsak, a professor of anthropology of antique worlds, gender and Balkanology. Sounds academic? No way! From her seat in a wheelchair she launched into a magnificent and enthralling account of her work and its impact on storytelling including traditions in which the stories came down through the women and they were the main tellers so that while the general patriarchal establishment largely side-lined women, they were in fact the main social group for entertainment. She was utterly at home in English and it is no disrespect to the other speakers to observe that this, coupled with her total commitment to her subject and very little need to refer to notes, made her address quite electrifying and inspiring. Afterwards she remained in the hall (willing or not, I never found out) besieged by admirers and questioners.

After lunch both on Friday and Saturday there were choices for the delegates: A long workshop for the whole afternoon (choice of three) or two short workshops, a choice of two.

On Friday, one of the long workshops dealt with issues storytellers face when narrating stories of concrete historical events while another was about digital storytelling and the third about group dynamic and the exercises that help a group to connect..

Short workshops were a story swap animated by Csenge Zalka (Friday and Saturday) "Telling stories, playing games" by Sam Cannarozzi and two sessions, one with Abbi Partrix, the other with Guy Tilkin, dealing with issues related to the competences for Strand 3 of the EU project (Abbi) and Applying for grants under the EU scheme (Guy). Feeling that my responsibility lay in keeping in touch with FEST business, these last were the two I attended. All reports indicate that all the workshops were interesting and inspiring.

Abbi, working with Veva Gerrard, explored ways of making a "competence profile" for a storyteller, the intention being to start to make a model curriculum for story telling training. The accompanying video sparked technical problems so that the workshop was shorter than intended and the planned brainstorming never took place. It would continue the next day.

Guy gave a detailed account of the types of project that had been given grants to date. Currently no applications were open. The new call would be for 2019/2020 when the subject would be Education. The point he set out to make very clearly was that these grants were not large and were not 100% funding but 60% with the client finding 40%. Also, they were all collaborative, not for individuals and the aim was that the funding should seed something that should be sustainable from its own resources in the future.

On Friday evening we went to the theatre to see an award-winning production: The Man Who Watched the World. It observed many of the most dreadful things that have happened or are happening in the world today. Some loved it. Some (myself included) thought that at over two hours long it was not a good theatre piece and could have accomplished much the same in 45 minutes. It was certainly a talking point and again, all praise to our hosts for offering us something stimulating even if not all of us enjoyed it.

Saturday

Four more lectures: first our host Ana Dusa on "Moving Away from Traditions – Storytelling Today". The use of the word "storytelling" can mean so many things these days. Again, I suspect this suffered



because of the language and the need to read from a screen. Ana's talk included excerpts from interviews with actors and directors on their understanding of storytellers and storytelling, the challenges, and why they chose to work in this form.

Next, we had Yves Marc on the subject of the use of the body in storytelling. While I agree entirely that it is good to know how movement and gesture and stage positioning work, I was completely baffled at his approach that superimposed choreographed movement and gesture on story as though it were a production. Cart before the horse, I thought to myself. It might have a theatrical purpose but for oral telling? I was not convinced.

Third was Hester Tammes on Storytelling Theatre in the Low Lands. She talked of the use of theatrical practices in storytelling with great zest and enthusiasm, twice calling Esther Kornalijnslijper (there is only an "H" between Hester and me, says Esther) to the stage to demonstrate her techniques. A very enjoyable presentation.

In total contrast, theatre critic Zala Dobovsek simply read her talk "Stage Storytelling as Therapy, Criticism or Search of Community" from a computer screen and made no apparent eye contact with us. I have to confess that I ran out of energy and patience and went for coffee.

In the afternoon, again a choice of workshops. Long workshop options were a session on Group Dynamic by Alenka Marinic, a voice workshop by Irena Tomazin or "Body of the Text/Text of the Body" by Yves Marc, being a continuation of work from his morning lecture.

Short options were the second part of Abbi Patrix on Stage 3 Competences, a second story swap with Csenge Zalka, a session by Ana Dusa on Contemporary storytelling practices and "The Inner Storyteller" by Ivanir Sibylla Hasson. I intended to visit first Ivanir and then Ana but after Ivanir's very beautiful and stimulating workshop I was obliged to throw myself at Ana's feet and plead to be excused on account of weariness, which she graciously permitted, but urged me not to miss the "passing the torch" ceremony later, where Slovenia would hand FEST to Euregio Meuse-Rhin. Passing the torch was, as always, a highly good humoured "ceremony" only there was no torch, so Sam Cannerozzi made a representative torch with a dragon flame and we all thanked and celebrated the host team and cheered the incoming team with great enthusiasm.

Finally to Kadeljevo Castle (was it really a castle, I never saw) where we were wined and dined and revelled to the music of Katalena (whose leader, you recall, gave one of the lectures) A memorable conference which, apart from the official Company business, offered us much to enjoy, much stimulation and much to think about. Many thanks to Ana and Spela and their excellent team.

Report by: Martin Manasse