

## **The long path from an idea to the real project**

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## **The beginning**

As most cultural projects, Be SpectACTive! starts at first from the encounter of two people (the two of us), with different backgrounds but sharing the same values and interest in the arts.

We met in a conference, we started discussing about theatre and dance, about the challenges of working in an international context, and we decided to try and connect our different approaches and visions. On the one hand, Luca shared his experience as the Artistic Director of Kilowatt Festival in Sansepolcro, his way to design his artistic programme, and the special project called “Visionari,” where a group of citizens (or spectators) are involved in fundamental decisions concerning the same festival artistic programme. On the other hand, Giuliana, with her background as a curator and cultural manager of international projects, very often focused on the notion of internationalisation and geographical connections, either in her free-lance work and in more institutional contexts (i.e. the International Napoli Teatro Festival).

In 2012, we organised a meeting in Sansepolcro, Italy, called “Be SpectACTive!”. The aim was to browse around some of the most important European experiences of “active spectatorship” in the performing arts, where spectators had played active roles as “decision makers.” After a three-day meeting, we decided to gather some of those experiences in one common project to be submitted to the European Commission for financing. Our perception was that that topic would have been essential in our future cultural life and it might have been a central theme in the European cultural policies for the next few years. Starting with the people invited to that first meeting and including some new ones, we worked to build an international, production-oriented and sustainable network, involving innovative European organisations already committed to the active involvement of spectators. Among them there were European festivals, theatres

and research centres. Soon, we started perceiving that we were exploring a new arena of discussion and practice, and we felt the need for an active scientific research to be part of the project, for observing and evaluating the impact of our activities.

Therefore, we tried to present an innovative approach in terms of trans-local collaboration. Our aim was to deepen the engagement among artists, cultural organisations and audience, thanks to a methodology that would give audiences real agency and a sense of personal investment in the development of the cultural activities within their context. We fostered the collaboration across European organisations through a system of partnerships and co-productions. It was based on a residency program aimed to support the artists and their producers, while nourishing their artistic processes thanks to the interaction with local communities.

In 2013, our first application for the Culture Programme 2007-2013 (last call) was unsuccessful. However, some indications received from the EU gave us the feeling that a greater interest in the process of cultural democracy was arising, and that the need of paying more attention to audiences, either of citizens or spectators, was becoming clear. The confirmation came from the new EU program, Creative Europe, launched in 2014: there, “audience development” had become the new and strategic priority of the EU cultural policies. In August 2014, our new application succeeded, and *Be SpectACTive!* was approved as a large-scale cooperation project in the framework of the new Creative Europe Programme.

### **The genesis of *Be SpectACTive!***

Our successful application was conceived according to a clearer definition of goals and theoretical inspirations. For us, in *Be SpectACTive!*, the notion of “active spectatorship” had always been important: that was used to describe any process leading an

audience (namely spectators or citizens) to take on the role of *decision makers*, while being directly involved in carrying out a festival, a theatre or a dance programme. Our basic assumption was that people participation – and therefore spectators participation – increases when they are accountable, when value is given to their ideas, when their points of view are taken into consideration. If a person feels involved and responsible within a communal process, he/she will feel part of it and will commit to becoming an active agent, able to encourage others to be involved as well.

Starting from that assumption, the Be SpecACTive! project aimed to give audience a decision-making role, providing people with individual responsibilities, within a common space of creation. In our vision, we intended to create a context where the active participation of spectators would be emboldened, and the artists' creative work would be given potentially useful input.

In our view, the concept of active participation in culture was also linked to the notion of citizenship, both locally and transnationally. Dragan Klaić (2012) argued in his final book “Resetting the Stage” (2012): “What is needed in Europe [...] is a redefinition of public interest in culture and the articulation of instruments, criteria, procedures and resources that will implement these interests [...] This redefinition cannot be just a matter of national policy but needs strong regional and local anchoring” (p. 171)”. Starting from his assumption, in our proposal we fostered a *glocal* approach where the local contexts represented by the theatres, festivals and cultural institutions partner of the project acted as fundamental cultural links.

The Be SpecACTive! project was based on four main activities, such as:

- 1) creating (or implementing) active spectators' groups, in order to select over 100 shows to be programmed in the theatres and festivals part of the project network;

2) producing 21 contemporary theatre and dance shows, thanks to a program of 56 creative residencies, all based on the interaction among artists and groups of local audience, specifically targeted on to the topics of the shows to be produced;

3) developing an interactive web system shared by spectators and artists, allowing the former ones to follow the artists' creative processes;

4) creating a research project aimed to accompany all the previous activities, in order to evaluate the different effects deriving from the key actions, and to stimulate artists and spectators to exploit their in-depth interaction and its potential benefits.

Starting from these activities as the basis of the project, a few concrete exchanges among all the partners went on.

### **Changing context and contents**

After 2014, many events took place in the international scenario: the impact of the 2008 global crisis and its consequences in terms of austerity measures introduced by the EU; the huge emergency of migration; terrorism and the new forms of territories' defence introduced globally; Brexit; the rise of populist political forces worldwide.

In the international conference that we organized in 2016 as a satellite event of the European Culture Forum in Brussels, we shared with our colleagues running other EU projects at that time, the need to be aware of the general social and political scenario, and the role of culture in it. It was discussed the urgency – now more than ever – of fostering “the movement and the circulation of people and ideas”, overcoming the general tendency to “suspicion” among people, that was introduced globally following the first terrorist attacks in Paris and Brussels.

In the framework of the conference, the debate revolved again on the notions of “trans-locality” and “active spectatorship,” both crucial in the development of our project and in the artistic processes activated within the Be SpectACTive! network.

Two EU priorities, Audience Development (AD) and Audience Engagement (AE), were discussed in that framework as ways for increasing the number of spectators or for diversifying the audience. Also, we defined our strategies of AD and AE as ways to establish close relations between cities and local communities; as collaboration processes, based on qualitative relations among artists, art organisations and citizens, and developed through creative residencies, new art productions and performances nourished by diffused bottom-up cultural actions; as ways for overcoming the notion of “borders” by means of European art co-creation processes.

Throughout the Be SpectACTive! four-year project, theatres and festivals have been relating communities, citizens and artists across countries, becoming *hubs* where people and ideas have been meeting. In our strategies, the creation of an active spectators’ group in each city involved in the project was central. Those groups were in charge for selecting a few shows, to be presented in the theatre festivals or venues managed by Be SpectACTive!’s partners. Several partners made a national call for recruiting proposals, to be examined by the local active spectators’ groups. Through many local meetings and lively discussions, the spectators selected a list of shows and artists to be part of the programs. More specifically, activating local groups of spectators was the key to secure their loyalty towards the activities of the theatres and festivals involved in Be SpectACTive!. It also created a first community reference for all the subsequent involvement actions planned by the network, in first place for the productions, created through a system of multiple residencies.

Most of the topics explored by the artistic works produced by the Be SpectACTive! network concerned with general social changes. In each of the 21 co-produced shows, we tried to create a connection between artists and local communities hosting them during their creative residencies (2 residencies each for the 9 small-scale projects, 3 residencies each for the 12 large-scale projects). For instance, as Ahilan Ratnamohan (AU-BE), in his work, compared the billionaires' football and the passion of amateur players, during his residencies he met the players of the local team in Sansepolcro, Prague and London, brought amateur players in theatre to share his training, fed on their stories, followed a few matches of their local league.

Choreographers, dramaturges, directors, performers, actors explored the stories of citizens from different cities, their way of dancing and delivering their own heritage throughout movements, as it was the case for Michael Zahora (CZ), Bruno Isakovic (HR), Dan Canham (UK), Davide Valrosso (IT), Anna Reti (HU); the role played by the whistle-blowers in our societies, as it was the case of the performance directed by Gianina Carbuariu (RO); the notion of migration, as it was the case of the performances by Bridget Fiske (UK) and Michael De Cock (BE), and so on.

The memory and the future of social coexistence in Europe were the great themes of our productive action: Marco D'Agostin and Chiara Bersani (IT) took as the central theme of their work the concept of "Olympic truce", focusing on the cooperation capacity among individuals; Radu Nica (RO) investigated religion as a battleground for ideologies, but also as an opportunity for human beings to reach a higher spirit dimension; CK Teatro (IT) worked with the elderly, investigating their memories of the moon landing in 1969, to reconnect the wires with an era of great collective hopes.

Each and every residency was not just a rehearsal room where the artists were closed to carry out their research. It was also an opportunity to open their own creative process to a specific target of local citizens, who could contribute to nourish the artist's creative process.

As Pierre Bourdieu (1984) argued, culture can act as an “interminable circuit of inter-legitimation” (p. 53). We believe that spectators' point of view can contribute to widening the artists' gaze, and therefore to enrich their visions during the creation process. Obviously, artists will always choose what to retain and what to leave, nevertheless, in our opinion, art should be produced and created while keeping a dialogue with individuals and with their own time. Be SpectACTive! has been working to broaden that dialogue, involving as many people as possible, especially those coming from worlds far from the performing arts.

### **What we learnt**

In our new application for the second edition of the project we mentioned that at the beginning, in the trans-national framework of Be SpectACTive!, the starting point and the main challenge was connecting partners with different backgrounds, scales and practices, in order to experimenting forms and models of active engagement, through offline and online strategies. It is interesting to note how each artistic organisation is still implementing audience-centric practices, giving its own response to the participatory approach, in the light of the specific cultural context where it is acting.

In the framework of the project, both the participatory programming activities and the creative residencies' programme generated a few changes in the governance of some of the artistic organisations. For example, in some cases the cultural leaders