

AN AUDIENCE FOCUSED FESTIVAL CASE STUDY

LUOGHI COMUNI 14 – “PLAY WITH US!”

by Etre Associazione (Italy)

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*This case study has been written by Erica Bernardi on behalf of **Associazione Etre**.*

Luoghi Comuni 2014 “**PLAY WITH US!**” was an audience focussed performing arts festival promoted by Etre Associazione.

Associazione Etre (<http://www.etreassociazione.it/fenetre/>) is a new network of Italian companies developing a performing art residency project in the Lombardy Region. Etre was founded in 2008 with the financial support of the Cariplo Bank Foundation, and it has currently 20 Residencies associated.

Etre’s main activities include:

- promoting and supporting the form of residency;
- encouraging culture and performing arts in modern society;
- creating connections and developing projects with other performing art organizations all around the world;
- providing services for our Residencies;
- presenting Luoghi Comuni Festival;
- planning projects on a worldwide scale.

Luoghi Comuni is a format-festival that Etre organizes every year in different cities of the Lombardy Region. Since its birth in 2010, it has been presented in Como, Bergamo, Brescia and Mantova, in accordance with the local Etre residency. Luoghi Comuni Festival has always focused on alternating performances with moments of study for operators, critics and audiences: every festival has proposed a different theme/claim.

For 2014 the festival (**LC14**) has been organised by Etre Associazione in collaboration with **Teatro Magro** in Mantova. The theme for 2014 has been *the audience* and the title was “Play with us!” LC14 festival took place on the 14th, 15th and 16th March in Mantova, involving its marvellous historical city centre.

Objectives for LC14 –

- To identify issues and to dedicate the festival to a need and to a common hearing: **the audience**
- To create a moment of visibility around the idea of audience development and to propose good practices in this field
- To propose performing arts creations which place ‘relationships’ with the audience as being central to the work (e.g. by work performed in unusual spaces)
- To present the last residence that joined Etre: Teatro Magro, which proposed to focus on the audience, because they were already working this way for other projects
- To keep Luoghi Comuni Festival as a short festival for only one city and focused on a strong theme.

Overview of LC14 –

Luoghi Comuni presented performances in many unusual venues including restaurants, a café, a dressing room, a shop window and a travelling car.

- 11 theatre companies were involved
- Audience capacities ranged from 150 at the largest event to just 1 person at the smallest event (one actor performed to one audience member in a dressing room every 40 minutes during a day).
- Some companies adapted previous productions for the unusual spaces, others devised work specifically for these spaces
- Overall the festival achieved 90% of the total audience capacity – way beyond initial expectations.
- Events such as talks, workshops and interactive events (e.g. an interactive ‘food’ tour of the city of Mantova and an invitation for participants to create a sensory ‘map’ of the city also took place.



Photos: Luoghi Comuni 2014

Staffing and marketing –

A small team of people ran this year's Luoghi Comuni Festival: 1 coordinator, 2 interns, 1 press officer, 1 business manager, 1 board manager (responsible for overall supervision of the festival) and 3 production managers.

There were two key strands to the marketing approach:

- 1) **Traditional marketing techniques** were employed. The press officer liaised with the cultural media community, print was produced (brochure and posters around the city). A brand was developed for the festival but it was later felt that the brand and the developed printed material was too 'abstract' for Mantova where the locals are less used to seeing cultural promotional materials – they needed a more straightforward message.
- 2) **Social networks** were utilised (via existing professional cultural social media networks). This succeeded in attracting a large professional audience to the festival. Twitter was particularly successful – particularly due to the interest of a popular cultural journalist who Tweeted regularly about the festival and created a sense of intrigue amongst the Italian cultural community.



Photos: Luoghi Comuni 2014

Target audiences for LC14 –

- 1) High school students: They participated in Teatro Magro's performances and they were general audience in other performances. High school audiences allowed us to naturally reach – other students, parents, friends and relatives
- 2) Cultural professionals: Some of them were involved in the festival's process and in its production; other cultural professionals coming from other organisations or festivals (and their networks) made up the general audience and they participated in the conference.
- 3) Journalists/media partners: Some were involved in the festival's activities, other journalists formed the general audience during the performances and in the conference – they were key to helping us reach and develop the general performing arts audience as well as other journalists.
- 4) Teatro Magro's audience (variable type and age): Teatro Magro's general audience also formed the festival audience. Social networks helped us to reach this audience and also their friends and relatives/networks.

Overall the general audience that we attracted tended to be younger (under 35 years) due to Teatro Magro's involvement.



Photo: Luoghi Comuni 2014

The planning process –

Planning begins a year before the festival.

Activity 1 - Call for residences and selection - From June 2013 to July 2013

Activity 2 - Connection with the institutions in Mantova and start up - September 2013

Activity 3 - PM and coordination - From June 2013 to March 2014

Activity 4 - Survey and research of spaces - From September 2013 to December 2013

Activity 5 - Performances' selection - October 2013

Activity 6 - Performances' schedule - From November 2013 to February 2014

Activity 7 - Communication strategy - From January 2013 to March 2013

Activity 8 - LC14 "Play with us!" Festival (performances, conference, mentor room) - March 2014

Outcomes from LC14 –

- The festival created an opportunity for people in Mantova to see performances in new spaces and in new ways.
- The festival sold out and demonstrated an increased demand for performing arts in Mantova.
- It created an intensified relationship between the actors, the performance space and the audience due to the nature of the performance spaces e.g. one actor, one audience member in a dressing room.
- Relations between the Mantova's audience and Teatro Magro have become stronger and the Mantova audience has broadened in Mantova. The strength of word of mouth was immense due to the unusual nature of the festival, resulting in new audiences for the festival and Teatro Magro.
- Development of a sense of belonging among the audience – festival organisers witnessed a more relaxed atmosphere amongst audiences, a different type of audience with a wider representation from across the community.
- Elaboration of an interesting format in the field of audience development with potential to develop further in the future.
- Higher takings than expected. The festival was practically a sell-out. Although a large proportion of the audience was from the professional cultural community, it was recognised that new audiences were achieved – they reached out to people who would not normally go to theatre due to the unusual nature of the festival. The community was certainly intrigued and there is potential to build on this in the future.
- Residences' and festival's increased visibility.
- Mentor room that gave the professionals the possibility to exchange opinions on cultural projects.



Photo: Pinnocchio, Luoghi Comuni 2014

Key points for effective practice -

For a travelling festival as Luoghi Comuni, the relationship with the territory (public institution, stakeholder, general audience) is fundamental, in order not to deliver a project that is 'forced'.

The festival cashed in more than expected – many events completely sold out, but the number of professionals in the audience was too high and the general audience was not prepared for booking in advance – they simply had not known what to expect. As word of mouth was very strong, this resulted in a high number of on-the-day bookings. This put pressure on the festival team in the days running up to the festival when it looked like sales were going to be low.

Proposing a festival that focuses on the relationship with 'Audience' requires strong planning for the venues involved: Luoghi Comuni presented performances in restaurants, a café, dressing room, shop window and a travelling car. There is strong added value to this but it also created lots of difficulties for the management and for the audience capacity (e.g. restaurant staff were not used to a paying 'performance' audience and their needs).

Communication and graphics were not too successful in relationship to the provincialism of the audience. They were too abstract for a small community that is not used to experiencing cultural promotional materials.

Future considerations for Luoghi Comuni –

- It is important that each organisation develops its own ways of reaching audiences, appealing to its own experience and to its own specific human resources, looking at the local community.
- Artists should be encouraged to think like their audiences and in Mantova Etre Associazione we have tried to bring this reflection.
- A new way to think about space is also fundamental to create a strong relationship between artists and audience: PRIVATO by Teatro Magro was an excellent example of this idea. In this performance one spectator was brought into a dressing room where he could assist the performer warm-up. In another production, "Hamlet Private", one spectator was bought into a coffee shop to experience a 40 min performance of Hamlet.

At Associazione Etre we feel that planning a festival around the concept of audience will continue to be the best way to approach the development of future festivals. We will ensure an audience development approach is at the centre of the artistic planning of future festivals particularly when audience development is now considered a key element of Creative Europe's guidelines.

by Erica Bernardi (supervised by Fabio Ferretti, Director, Associazione Etre)

For more information –

<http://www.luoghicomunifestival.com/2014-FocusOn/>

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