

Portugal in festivals: an exciting map of quality and diversity

Paula Varanda

Cultural mobility and settlement

REPORTING ON THE FESTIVAL SCENE in Portugal in 2015 is an inspiring assignment because of the considerable number, quality and diversity of consolidated events that have spread across the country. A mapping of these initiatives will generally mirror the demographic concentration near the coast, within the axis of the cities of Lisbon (the capital) and Porto (the second-largest city), accentuated by the rural exodus since the 1970s. This area is considerably better served by public transport, a higher incidence of industry or commercial business, and infrastructure such as universities, museums and theatres. Settlement and mobility directly depend on these conditions, which in turn affect the cultural development of our regions and metropolitan areas.

In the last 15 years professionals, policies and funding programmes have tried to compensate, with some degree of success, for the imbalance of this centred, bipolar and coastal orientation; thus several festivals are today distinguished by their fundamental development of cultural life away from the cities or towards the interior, which is much less populated and deprived of the conditions mentioned above. No less important, on the other hand, are the flows of people and ideas within and into the big urban clusters, which have been instigated by outstanding cultural festivals.

Festivals considered here are complex events that promote cultural experience and exchange, reflect on individual and collective identity, and may operate from local to international scales. To contextualize individual input for a wider panorama, attention has been given to festivals that applied for the EFFE Label. The selection of cases aimed to be representative of different models and geographic distribution, but it is far from covering the reality of about 130 festivals with artistic programmes in various disciplines, ranging from the experimental to the commercial, that run annually or biennially in Portugal. Following a period of significant emergence during the 1990s, the last 15 years have witnessed the exponential growth of the festival scene and most cases highlighted here developed within this period.

Decentralizing access and production

Bienal de Cerveira, in Vila Nova de Cerveira, in the Minho Region bordering Spain, was created in 1978 by a group of painters and sculptors who invited artists from the urban centres to make new work with residencies in this small village. They selected works from an international call (still ongoing) for exhibitions outdoors or in spaces recovered for the occasion. Throughout nearly 40 years of experience they formed partnerships with schools allowing exposure to younger generations of artists. In 2011, the organization adopted the label of a creative industry, thus securing substantial public investment and liaison with the sector of fashion and design. However, its early model, of settlement and exchange between professionals and the local community, has remained informative and was followed and developed by other projects later on.

Circular, for example, in Vila do Conde, is a small fortnight-long festival that prioritizes experimentation and interdisciplinary collaboration in contemporary performing arts. Finished performances are presented together with new commissioned site-specific work, lectures and workshops; this avant-garde programme generates an otherwise unlikely influx of spectators to the village, and creates employment that justifies the permanent residency of qualified professionals.

Party in the museum and the town as a stage

Although clearly committed to the contemporary and the artistic, another kind of approach is taken in the 40-hour non-stop programme of Serralves em Festa, organized by Fundação de Serralves. This foundation manages a mesmerizing 19th-century park and a contemporary art museum, which hosts some of the most notable exhibitions in the country associated with state-of-the-art performances in dance and music. During the festival, visitors (about 140,000 in 2014) explore the sites guided by a multidisciplinary programme of 200 projects that enable a collective experience of emergent aesthetic values and critical discourses from national and international artists. Visibility in a prestigious venue is crucial for the professionals, who can access a wide spectrum of the public, from residents to tourists, with a fair mix of class, age, gender and interests; thus the exchange is bi-directional.

Some 30 km south, Imaginarius is an international street art festival, now in its 15th edition, that welcomes a surge of visitors to Santa Maria da Feira. They watch and participate in an intense two-day programme of new circus, music, dance, aerial theatre, pyrotechnics and light shows that showcases European trends in street performance, and combines entertainment with satire and adrenaline. Numbers again speak for the impact of the event: 200 artists, 45 projects and 15 represented countries spread out and transform the town, which was historically an important trade route and today is a lively industrial hub. With educational programmes and new

co-productions, the organization also nurtures longer-term relationships between residents and Portuguese artists.

World music and eco-dancing

In the south west, the municipality of Sines has organized Festival Músicas do Mundo since 1999. With two-week consecutive editions during summer the event developed significantly and presently attracts approximately 80,000 visitors to the small town, with an eclectic world music programme of 40 bands. Enthusiastic audiences have justified this expansion, but financial support within QREN¹ has enabled essential resources for the development of the region of Alentejo. These responses allowed the festival to maintain the quality of an internationally acclaimed programme, focused on musicians who create with folk music either in traditional or contemporary fusion styles, that effectively enables audiences to discover cultural expression at an international level. While improving its infrastructure and scale, the festival has maintained affordable prices and autonomy from sponsorship by mobile phone and beer companies.

Transmission of social and traditional dancing with folk music, mostly European but also from around the world, is the brand identity of festival Andanças, which celebrated 20 editions in 2015. Visitors can see performances, plus dance and music experienced in workshops and balls. The festival is essentially participatory and associates communal living with embodied cultural identity. This sharing is also combined with an assumed ecological mission: the organizers promote sensible co-habitation with the natural surroundings, visible in the way they manage waste and the side-effects of temporary occupation at Barragem de Castelo de Vide. Sustainability of the festival relies on the attendance of 100,000 visitors per year, the infrastructure provided by hosting municipalities and a subsidy from the arts agency of the Portuguese government².

Networking excellence within the territory

A different design informs Terras sem Sombra, in the southern interior region of Alentejo, which was initiated by Diocese de Beja to promote its architectural patrimony. A heavyweight group of public funders and private sponsors enables the programming of ensembles of international reputation, which play sacred music in eight municipalities, such as Beja, Castro Verde or Moura. An elite audience that travels to follow this genre of music joins with the local population, resident ensembles and music students from the regional conservatory, and churchgoers, who attend concerts of erudite music in their house of prayer. High art and religious monuments are interwoven with rural life; together with each concert an excursion on foot to natural settings is organized, drawing attention to the region's biodiversity.

To a population living 100 km from the city, Festival Materiais Diversos has offered a multidisciplinary and international programme since

2009, with contemporary theatre, dance and electronic or pop music. A new route for the circulation of existing productions was traced (predominantly from Portugal, Brazil and France), but professionals are also invited to create work with local groups; the yearly event includes debates, workshops, and picnics in the surrounding countryside. The festival has established an informal network between two villages – Minde and Alcanena – and the town of Torres Novas, stimulating a refreshing model of intermunicipal collaboration. Thus this territory is now connected with contemporary culture, which enables an exchange between people who share ideas and experiences triggered by artistic inquiry.

Reality check in the city

Linking autonomous venues or institutions with specific programmatic agendas is an important function of independent festivals and, among several examples exploring this model inside the capital, Doclisboa has gained notability since 2004. This ten-day international documentary film festival mobilizes about 25,000 visitors to four competitions and several thematic retrospectives with distinctive film directors and world premières. The festival is a launching platform for Portuguese documentary-makers and promotes a forum on European funding and networking opportunities. Additionally, an educational programme for schools aims to promote, in younger students, understanding about cinematic language and techniques in addition to interest in documentary practice by revealing critical perspectives on international and local topics.

Another synergetic event in Lisbon is InShadow, which has opened a space for experimentation and discussion on still young relationships between body practices like dance performance and those of the moving image and digital technology. The festival hosts an international video-dance competition, installations, stage performances and workshops. The organization is also committed to inclusive artistic practice for people with special needs and has brought to the fore realities, debates and spectators that are underrepresented in our society.

Recently emerging in the island of São Miguel in the Azores is Walk&Talk. Venues, streets and unused buildings are occupied by public art, multimedia installations, walks in town, and talks about a dynamic exchange between 60 artists and 4,000 people (in 2012). The festival is singularized by a specific and place-oriented programmatic vision and mission, which questions patronizing or deprecatory views deriving from the island's peripheral position.

At the heart of routes and relationships

Mobility of ideas and experience is a keyword for the festivals described here. They stimulate professional migrations and population fluxes across the country, into the country and within urban or regional territories.

Another vital feature is the ability to establish cultural relationships between independent agents and institutions; the cultural, educational and tourism sectors; several venues and their resident population or surroundings; or between municipal governments and the central government, temporarily reducing political and social divides.

Promoters combine an understanding of local characteristics and needs with informed views on international trends regarding cultural experience. They acquire specific skills and expert knowledge in ways of articulating material and immaterial patrimony with the logistic and economic demands of this socio-culturally enhanced interaction, while undertaking the mission of introducing the new, the unknown and the inexperienced, either traditional, conventional or ground-breaking. The value of artistic production for individual and collective representation is acknowledged and art becomes a central means of communication. This commitment is distinctive from that of blockbuster music festivals, which emphasize consumerism and alienation; and from flower or gastronomic festivals, which celebrate local identity and unchanging traditions.

Condensed programmes with great resources might be criticized for excessively tangling artistic expression with leisure and endorsing cultural consumerism. However, they may efficaciously trigger collective catharsis and an empowering sense of sharing and belonging. Furthermore, they influence the development of more introspective models and lesser-known projects and artforms or genres. They are sometimes major commissioners of new productions, which later circulate in events with fewer resources, and they attract curators from abroad, particularly European, hence facilitating international circulation.

Smaller scale, long term and more strongly connected initiatives are, conversely, crucial to fill endemic gaps as we leave the cities behind; they increase the possibilities of developing self-awareness and knowing the other in ways that counterpoint the major sources of information today: media messages that shape and homogenize our opinions, desires and identities. For the professionals in the cultural sector these festivals are precious ways in which to sense the wider public they also work for.

Combining with political agendas is also another noteworthy potential result: some cases draw attention to the natural environment and constructed patrimony, while others bring substantial seasonal income from tourists or contribute to social cohesion. When these initiatives consolidate, governmental structures often claim credit, as they need examples to campaign with, and to some extent they are entitled to do so. Although it is the agents who operate in the terrain that take the risk, accommodate contingencies and drive projects to conclusion, the present scene is also the consequence of an active policy that stimulates local support and national and European funding. Well-known public participation in turn reveals a democratic society with access to culture that values cultural diversity; it is this sort of society, heterogeneous and involved, that underlies the notion of festivals described here.

Different models propel different methods, experiences and achievements; highlighting and valuing synergy and diversity are critical to understanding the significance of the map we can draw today. This “country” was non-existent 30 years ago and such a reality is evidence of its remarkable development in the new millennium. Moreover, contribution to distinctive visibility in a world map of cultural exchange is equally obvious: several artists have been involved in creative collaboration with partners from abroad (thus being part of international co-productions), and international festivals more regularly invite Portuguese programmers and artists to participate in their events; although this traffic is more intense within the European territory, connections with Brazil have become fairly active for dance productions. As visitors, other countries in South America are more often engaged with theatre or street performance, and the presence of artists from African countries is predominantly found in the music sector.

In the early 2000s, António Pinto Ribeiro remarked that substantial investment in contemporary culture was still needed in Portugal. He also identified the need for closer and pragmatic relationships between artists and communities, and for the integration of emerging ecological and post-colonial viewpoints in the planning of cultural programmes³. I find fulfilment of those expectations in the festivals currently taking place in the country. Celebrating and cherishing the cultural routes and relationships they foreground is essential at the present moment, when austerity programmes are relegating their priority and therefore jeopardizing their future.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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graduated from Lisbon's Escola Superior de Dança in 1994, where she was associate teacher in 2010–11. At Middlesex University she completed an MA in Choreography and Performing Arts and later registered as researcher, submitting her doctoral thesis about dance and new media in March 2015. She has written for Público newspaper (since 2004), *Alcantara* (2010), Daniel Tércio (2009), *Animated* and *Le Monde Diplomatique PT*, and she published *Dança é Crescer* with Caleidoscópio in 2012. She worked for the Portuguese Ministry of Culture (2004–07) and in 2008 became artistic director of Dansul, a dance for the community project in South East Portugal.

1. QREN – Quadro Referência de Estratégia Nacional – is the national programme that distributed EU structural funding for economic and social cohesion in Portugal between 2007 and 2013 (www.qren.pt).
2. Direcção Geral das Artes, from the state secretariat of culture (www.dgartes.pt).
3. This debate is entailed across several essays published in *Questões Permanentes* (“Permanent Questions”) (Ribeiro, A. P., Livros Cotovia, Lisboa, 2011, pp. 45–122).

EFFE is a European Commission pilot project for a European Platform for Festivals in the field of culture initiated by the European Festivals Association (EFA), the umbrella organisation for festivals across Europe and beyond.



An initiative of
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Editorial Team: Naima Delaere, Zachary Bishop, Ann Brokken,
Tamsin Shelton & Katie Sherman
Design: Stefan Loecx + Ingrid Van der Haegen

ISBN 978 94 014 3043 2

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