

FACES - THE MULTICULTURAL FESTIVAL

By Börje Mattsson, Faces Festival Director. Photos by Faces.

At the change from the 1980's to the 1990's so much happened; in Europe, globally and even in South Africa. This was the end of the division of the world between the East and the West – and its concrete symbol, the Berlin wall, was taken down. This influenced everything. It was also the years when Nelson Mandela walked out of prison – and it was clear that the end of apartheid was near, the whole southern Africa would be free; after 400 years of occupation and suppression.

I myself and so many with me thought that a New Brave World was here, a dream was coming true. Finally people could meet people, all over old borders, and maybe finally build a new, better, equal world.

But our dream did not live for long. Here in Europe it was brutally crushed with the Balkan

war. Instead of a contradiction between East and West, a division of politics and systems, rose a new contradiction between ethnicities, even races, and even within countries – and much more brutally and bloody than the cold war ever was!

After the fighting and after the mass killing had finally more or less stopped, I had the possibility to visit Sarajevo in Bosnia. I was shocked and I was angry to see how normal family houses everywhere were destroyed, had some big holes in their walls and had exploded. There was clearly no military reason for it, the only aim was to kill the families in there – because they were ethnically “wrong”.

After it became clear – especially after we could see that a new form of ethnic racism was spreading also to the rest of Europe, and





took clear political forms – that what now was needed, also in our country, Finland, was to develop multicultural, multi-ethnic activities, where we would show that Finland is a multicultural country. And it is something that does not endanger our culture – but instead it is enriching it and our lives.

In 1990–91 our region, the West-Uusimaa, the southwest corner of Finland, received our first refugee-groups, from Kurdistan. It became important to give them space for their own culture – and for meeting the Finnish one. And some of the first smaller cultural parties were organised.

These needs and developments prepared the ground for the need and idea of making quite a new form of multicultural festival in Finland. Here all the different ethnicities in Finland would be given opportunity to take the stage and possibility to present their culture, on an equal base, with "respect". This included all cultures, like the older ones, as the Finns, the Swedish-speaking, the Sami people, the Russians, the Romani people, the Jews, the Tatars etc, but also the new ones, the immigrants and refugees, the Vietnamese, the Chileans, the Somalis, the Kurds and others.

We were two persons, Holger Wickström and myself, who started developing the plan for such a festival. We had no organisation, no money, and no people to arrange such a thing. We app-

lied for some support from the Ministry of Education in Finland, but it was denied. But when we got some promises of some possible support from one foundation, we decided the time had come to do it. We started the realization of the plans. The festival was given the name Faces – of which many at first said it was an idiotic and impossible name for a festival, but we stuck to it – and later it has become a name and a "brand" all know. With the name we wanted to say that at the festival we show the Faces of the contemporary Finland, and that face is a many colour one. Also, with the festival we are giving faces to all the ethnic minorities, that often up till then were looked upon as a group, "them", based on common stereotypes.

The first Faces-festival was organised in 1998, in the area of an old castle-ruin, called Raseborg. For this, we formed a new organisation by the name of Etnokult, and for this we got a third person, a brave woman to join us – as in Finland you need three persons to establish and register an organisation, an official NGO. And you need an organisation for any economic activities, to sign agreements etc. We still had very small funds, only the support we got from the foundation, and we had only us three persons to make the festival come true.

The first question was from where to get people to build the festival – we three were not enough! I had organised several rock-festivals

before, and I began to phone around to the best workers and roaders from them, and asked them to come and help me. Holger again was active in the youth-movement, and knew some good workers from there – and then we, through a voluntary-work organisation, invited young people – mostly from all over Europe – to join an international working camp to make the festival.

By these means we got together about 30–40 persons to make the festival. And we built and did all preparation-work ourselves – that was the only possibility economically. At the same time, we felt it important that the festival was totally realised by active, voluntary people, that wanted to do it, for "ideological" reasons, wanting to support the idea of multiculturalism – and not for and by money, or for and by commercial means – and aims.

So we did everything. We built the stages from wood, put together primitive toilets and kiosks for selling tickets, from plywood and

wood, made all decorations and canvases from old textiles we collected and painted, mostly with old paints we collected or got as gifts. We put up big tents we borrowed for workshops and exhibitions, and nailed and painted all the needed signs. And we cleared the woods for camping and other activities. And we got everything done and ready in time – and as we felt, also very beautiful – for the festival.

The festival started on a Friday evening, and quite a number of people arrived – it was looking good. But on Saturday, the main day of the festival, when we were opening up, selling tickets and the program was starting – the sky also opened up! An absolute downfall began and continued all day, all night – and the whole Sunday, until exactly at the last song by the last band the sun broke through, shining full from a blue sky!

But almost no new audience had arrived during this downfall, and the amount of people present was catastrophically small. One thing



was clear, the festival was going to be an economic catastrophe. And there was a clear danger that the first Faces-festival would also be the last one. But during Sunday afternoon, when one looked around, one could feel some sort of a wonder being born; there was so many different types of people present, dancing there, all together, all stratas of the society, all ages, all races and ethnic groups. And everybody soaking wet, with the water streaming down faces, but everyone was smiling. It was clear that something had happened here, you had a feeling and a togetherness that had never been experienced before. And one that we could not let die – we just had to find the means to survive economically, and continue.

During the coming weeks, I ran around to all banks in order to get a loan to pay our unpaid bills – and to my full surprise, one bank was ready to give one! We got two more nice persons to secure the loan – we had to give our personal security, as our organisation had no assets to use as security. But with that loan we then could save the situation. And the continuation of the Faces-festival.

So was the annual multicultural festival Faces a reality. From starting from nothing, and almost fatal problems it has now been organised already 17 times...!

The first year we had about 1000 guests. When the festival was at its biggest we had over 10.000. At the first festival we had two stages, when at most we had 10. And when at the first festival we had almost only music-programme, one art-exhibition, and one workshop we soon moved to have all possible forms of cultural expressions; theatre, dance, stand up, circus, fire-shows, graffiti, poems, and different happenings and installations. As well as many workshops, a bazaar with food and handicraft



from all the continents, and within the festival, a full festival for the children, called “Small Faces”. We wanted to break down the barriers not only between cultures, but also between the different forms of culture; getting cultures crossing. And by the time, we moved also out of just the “ethnic”-dimension, to reach all other minorities that often where sidestepped and discriminated; the in different ways disabled, the mentally retarded, the sexual minorities, and others. They were also given stages to perform, and present their cultures.

It was no longer enough for us to just show the multiculturalism, we also wanted to actively promote it. So we developed a lot of projects, like supporting painters in Africa, building a peace-centre in the destroyed Kozaraz-town in Bosnia, where all the ethnicities would meet, or repairing a youth centre in Banovic, with the same aim, or inviting youth bands from South Africa, to meet the youth in Finland and to tell them about the history of apartheid, and the township-life. At the Internet we are known also “in the west” by our “Virtual Gallery”.

Our concept with Faces – even if it was developed for Finland, and the situation here

– soon showed to be in demand also in other places, where the contradictions were much harder. So we started to organise, based on wishes brought to us, a Faces-festival in the Russian Carelian town Petrosavorsk. The festival was called “Carelian Faces”, where old Finnish, Carelian and Russian cultures meet. And we came back to the Balkan, from where the idea about Faces was born, and have about four times organised “Bosnia Faces”, a festival and forum where the Serbs, the Bosnians, the Croats will meet, with Finnish bands, and perform together. And we have, on the bridge combining the two parts of the divided Mitrovica-town in Kosovo, organised a one-day festival, named “The Bridge”, where the Serbs from the northern side and the Albanians from the southern side met, and began to dance together.

Today we are now discussing the possibilities of a Faces in Irak, or the Ukraine...

In all our activities we have had to work with very small budgets. The Faces festival has never enjoyed any large economic support from the public side. Around 70–80 % of the budget is made up of income we have raised ourselves. Many much more commercial festivals do get much more public support than we. We have also never had any big commercial sponsors, as it is not really in the line of an ideological festival as ours. We could never think of having e.g. Coca-Cola or McDonald as sponsors, not that they have shown any interest in us.

This means that even if our festival programmes were huge, with hundreds of artists and performers, everything has had to be done on a shoestring budget; we are completely dependent on voluntary work. Usually only one or two persons get a salary; our festival coordinator and press secretary, for 1–2 months. All the rest work for free, sometimes up to 400 persons.





The festival being based on voluntary work is a totally essential part of Faces, and its whole idea.

We have had better times and worse times – as we are totally dependent on ticket sales and that again strongly depends on the weather, because such a big part of the festival is outdoors.

The heavy economic burden and the problems of organising a festival out in the country – with no electricity, water or toilets – and the big expenses to get it all there, led to the decision that Faces 2014 was going to be the last one. So the name and slogan for 2014 was “The Last Waltz”, and we organised it more simply and more intimately than the recent festivals.

But it was such a success and with such a strong warm feeling (almost all performers

came a for free), and the public demand for continuing was so strong, that in the end I had to get on stage and tell everyone “We take it back – this will not be the last Faces!” With the strongest possible happy response from the audience!

So Faces continues; “On demand”. And that is a good thing – because also a new “demand” has arisen for the festival – but with a new task and a new message! In Europe we have seen something of the Old Cold War coming back, and leaders in both East and West seem ready to bring up the tension and confrontation again, forgetting their history.

Faces is needed now to convey an all-important message through culture – wanting and demanding Peace!