

ARTS FESTIVALS'



Declaration on Intercultural Dialogue

AN INITIATIVE OF THE EUROPEAN FESTIVALS ASSOCIATION



Speech by Yesim Gürer Oymak

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Signing Ceremony Antalya in the framework of the EFA General Assembly and Conference 2008

Distinguished guests and colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great honor and joy for us to host this very important ceremony and welcome you all in this beautiful Mediterranean part of Turkey, Antalya which was famous for being a "Heaven on Earth" from the 1st century BC and which hosted many ancient civilizations such as Hittites, Lydians, Romans, Byzantines and Ottomans to name a few.

Anatolia has been home to approximately 200 cultures and 50 civilizations throughout the century. All of them produced remarkable examples of monumental, civilian and religious architecture. The rich cultural heritage of Anatolia spread to Greece and South-eastern Europe via Black Sea, Thrace and Aegean Islands.

The two significant builders of culture in the history of Turkey, namely Mehmet the Conqueror and Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, considered themselves as the offsprings of European culture. Mehmet the Conqueror gathered Italian Byzantine humanists and scientists in his palace after the conquest of Istanbul and had a great library built where you could find numerous Greek and Latin reference books. Bringing Bellini from Italy, he had the walls of Topkapi Palace decorated in frescoes and even commissioned his own portrait.

As the Turkish people made move towards the Western culture and towards an industrial society of modern civilisation, Atatürk said:

"The Republic of Turkey lays its foundation on culture. Our nation made a decision to use, both in essence and form, all the means of existence, in their entirety, that contemporary civilisation has made possible for all societies."

Today, dialogue between nations and cultures is the most vital tool in order to overcome cultural and social barriers, reduce the tension and polarisation between societies of different religious and cultural values. In a relentlessly globalising world that incessantly changes, shifts and innovates, migrations and the freedom of movement facilitated by borderless European Union led to a mass cultural exchange and dialogue within Europe. Encountering cultural difference cannot be avoided in the world we live, so a tolerant and respectful dialogue is the most important skill for all nations and communities.

The desire to understand and respect the difference of opinions, values and viewpoints between cultures creates the "dialogue". An effective dialogue is an enriching interaction and encourages the respectful sharing of ideas.

The role of cultural organisations, especially of festivals is more important than ever to help to teach us to transcend differences in race, ethnicity, age or creed and to build bridges between nations, local communities and individuals. They are perfect mediums for the freedom of expression, circulation of ideas and eventually to the creation of a peaceful and harmonious coexistence of different cultures.

Istanbul, once capital of the Eastern Roman, Byzantine and Ottoman Empires is a city renowned for its multicultural nature and remains a holy center for both Christian and Muslim worlds. The Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts strives to make a meaningful contribution to the rich multicultural, multireligious heritage of Istanbul, the unique city situated at the meeting point of two continents, where innumerable civilizations have flourished and diverse cultures amalgamated for almost three millennia.

Since 1973, the Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts has sustained its commitment to artistic and intellectual life in the international arena by creating global awareness through the arts. The Foundation's initial goal was to offer the finest examples of cultural and artistic works from around the world, while at the same time promoting Turkish national, cultural and artistic assets by creating an international platform of communication through the arts. Organizing the international festivals on film, Theater, Music, Jazz and the International Istanbul Biennial, the Foundation holds about 300 events and hosts 2500 artists annually. In its history of 35 years, more than 47,000 artists from 107 countries have appeared in Istanbul Festivals, approximately 7,000 shows have been attended by more than **7 million spectators** in total.

The Foundation received the UNESCO Arts and Culture Prize in 1992 and was honoured with the Kultur Preis Europa 2003, awarded to an institution outside the EU for the first time.

One of the importance of the festivals in turning a multicultural society into an intercultural one is that the festivals give artists **the opportunity of increasing and developing their artistic experience** through co-productions and artists-in-residence programs. Istanbul Festivals formed new fields for artistic creation combining international values with local ones with its collaborations with many international festivals, institutions and artists in the last 35 years.

Turkey, being home to innumerable civilizations throughout the ages, will surely be a fresh breath to EU with its multicultural identity. Since 2005, Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts broadened its activities still further to address the need for **better Middle Eastern-Western understanding, dialogue and interaction** and pave a new path for presenting a vision of culture and arts from Turkey. This idea gave birth to a series of festivals of arts entitled "Şimdi Now" in major European cities such as Berlin, Brussels, London and which will be held in other European cities to follow.

In its 35 years history, all Istanbul Festivals are proud to become a common platform to present local and the universal, past and present, and to reinforce values such as tolerance, respect for cultural diversity, freedom of expression in order to enrich dialogue between societies and cultures regardless of race, ethnicity, religions and belief.

Istanbul being chosen as one of the cultural capital cities of Europe in 2010 and the initiative of the Alliance of Civilizations launched by Spain and Turkey in 2005 shows how much Turkey is willing to contribute to intercultural dialogues and to promote respect between nations and cultures.

One of the first calls ever made for the intercultural dialogue was probably by the 13th century Anatolian Sufi saint and poet Mevlana Jelaluddin Rumi. His universal call still invites all individuals to come together under all circumstances regardless of religion or race. The decision of the European Union to declare 2008 the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue is a very important opportunity to create and reinforce the dialogue between different cultural communities in order to emphasize the importance of the harmonious coexistence by preserving its own identities.

.Our duty as festivals should be to turn intercultural dialogue into a long-term target and to create an environment of mutual understanding, tolerance, open mindness without creating any terms such as "ourselves" and the "others".

Observing the never-ending strifes and conflicts in the world, I would like to finish my words with famous quotation by Bernard Shaw:

"Without art, the crudeness of reality would make the world unbearable".

I would like to thank European Festival Association once again for having chosen Antalya to host this important ceremony. I hope you will all have time to benefit from the natural and cultural treasures of this "heaven on earth".