

Communication Management at International Shakespeare Festival Craiova. Cross-cutting perspectives

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Abstract

Through this analysis we aim to describe how the identity of the Craiova International Shakespeare Festival has been built over time. We will trace the communication patterns, the diversification of audience categories and the democratization of the festival's offer, as well as the evolution of communication strategies. An important stage will be the description of the communication barriers that the Festival's communicators have to overcome, as well as the techniques to attract certain influencers to take up and relay the message. The Craiova International Shakespeare Festival is already 30 years old, but its identity is still evolving. In our analysis we will highlight the stages of identity building as one of the main outcomes of the communication process.

Keywords: communication barriers, identity Shakespeare Festival, influencers, identity

Introduction

The "Shakespeare" International Festival, organized in Craiova for 30 years, is a festival-type artistic event, which relies on a monothematic approach. I have chosen to analyze this event precisely for the evolution of this concept, for the path it has traveled from a sense of profound inadvertence to the geographic and mentality space (a festival dedicated entirely to Shakespeare's works) to the status of one of the most important festivals worldwide dedicated to William Shakespeare, from outdoor communication traditional, through a few dozen posters distributed locally (in Craiova), and personalized invitations for specialists in the world of theatre, to an integrated communication, with an online activity that has catalyzed 16 thousand followers on Facebook, 3,669 on Instagram, 270 on TikTok, a monothematic approach, but with the diversification of artistic and performance formulas.

Chronological background

Through this analysis I aim to present the lines of force in the festival's communication program that have supported the risky work of opening up to other types of audiences, without this being tantamount to a rebranding program.

The first edition of the Craiova International Shakespeare Festival took place 30 years ago, in 1994. The event started on a biennial basis, and the concept was based in these first two and a half decades on an elitist attitude, even in the classical sense of the term (Damele, Campos, 2022). This can be seen from the type of performances and other events that made up the festival. The most important Shakespearean productions in the world have been brought to Craiova, in terms of artistic act, directorial value and critical success. Until the most recent editions (starting with the 2018 editions), the main event pillars were: indoor theater performances, theater workshops dedicated exclusively to theater specialists and students, book launches in the foyer of the National Theater "Marin Sorescu" in Craiova, books exclusively on Shakespearean themes and with limited print runs, given the specialized content. The festival's communication and promotion segment was also carried out in the vicinity of the theater, in the cultural press and, through press releases, in the traditional, general press.

Since 2006, the Festival has started practicing the idea of openness. Then, for the first time, the event went beyond Craiova and was organized in collaboration with the ArCub Association in Bucharest, so that a good part of the performances was staged in the capital, but not in Craiova. Also with this edition, but more evidently since 2008, the Festival began to be conceived along a "thematic" axis (according to the expression used by the creator and director of the Festival, Emil Boroghina), a focus on the sub-themes of Shakespeare's operas.

From 2008 to 2023, the axis and the messages were built according to the technique of the symbolic character, following the same elitist approach: the 2008 edition had the theme "Great directors great performances", the 2010 edition - "Shakespeare Constellation", the 2012 edition - "The world is a theatre, we are the actors", the 2014 edition communicated on the theme "Shakespeare of all", in 2016 the theme was "Shakespeare for eternity". Note that this 2016 edition, the 10th, was held in the context of the international celebration of the 400th

anniversary of the great playwright's death. The year 2018 has brought some small changes, which we believe are also reflected in the festival's architecture, including its focus and message. The management team now includes Vlad Drăgulescu, a young actor with several managerial achievements both in the private artistic environment (he founded the first private theatre company in post-Decembrist Craiova) and in the first-rank artistic management (as director for one term of the "Oltenia" Philharmonic, 2012-2016). The festival theme "Planet Shakespeare" proposes a more open attitude towards the general public. One can notice a shift in perspective, from a monochordal "Shakespeare" focus to an integrative perspective of the Shakespearean world in contemporary mental, cultural realities. "Planet Shakespeare" in 2018, which conveyed the idea of a complete world, with autonomous ideas and laws, but coexisting on the planet of our present. The 13th edition of the Festival (the one in 2022) will be organized around the theme "William Shakespeare - The Universal". The change of perspective is becoming more evident, with Shakespearean universality shifting the reading grid from the area of classical elitism to that of democratic elitism. This concept also coincided with changes in the structure of the festival. The original requirement to invite critically acclaimed performances to the Craiova stage has been maintained, but in addition to these, in addition to strictly professional workshops, there are open-air performances in unconventional spaces (disused halls, stages created especially for the festival), and the communication campaign is much stronger, becoming very vigorous online.

The paradigm shift is clear from 2023 onwards, when the frequency of the festival is also intervened (it seemed that there was an attempt to abandon the biennial frequency) and a type of event is organized, called "mini-festival", but which has the essential role of supporting the new, pragmatic, managerial vision, that of Shakespearean impact in the community. From the event aimed at specialists and heavy public, we move to a traveling scheme. The year 2023 brings the concept of Theatre Bridges. The event is organized in partnership by three cities: Kiev - Craiova - Timisoara and has a clear social implication. I quote from the declaration of principles of the edition:

"By the presence of the National Theatre "Ivan Franko" from Kiev (Ukraine) with the performance "Coriolanus" we are building a cultural bridge that will give a strong voice to the culture of the neighboring country, which is going through difficult times at the moment. The four-day program includes "Macbeth" at the Flabbergast Theatre in London, directed by Henry Maynard, a production in partnership with the European Shakespeare Festival Network, and "Richard III" staged by Bocsárdi László at the National Theatre "Marin Sorescu" Craiova. Thematically linked, the two plays are about war, crime and betrayal, inhuman brutality and monstrosities, injustice and the need to punish those responsible for the misfortunes they cause" (s.n, X.N).

"Theatre Bridges" definitely marks the change of focus: the integrative perspective, which we had observed in 2018, develops towards a pragmatic perspective and an insistence on the effects of art (i.e., theatre) in today's society. We are definitely leaving the zone of classical elitism, of art for art's sake, and entering the zone of civicism, activism, of the artist involved in the everyday.

The year 2024 marked the 30th year of the International Shakespeare Festival, Craiova. This edition amounted to over 300 performances and events and brought together some of the biggest names in world-class theatre directors of the moment, including Robert Wilson, Declan Donnellan, Peter Brook and Robert Lepage.

The new message of the International Shakespeare Festival Craiova

This change continues with the 2024 edition, when the theme is "Yes, we Will!". The festival has an explicit mission to involve the whole community, with or without a theatre culture: 'Communities Build Festivals'. The program includes the traditional, critically acclaimed performances in conventional spaces, but also many outdoor events, as well as micro-community events in the city's neighbourhoods, as close as possible to the ordinary citizen's home space. The two universities in Craiova are also included, with activities in line with their fields of activity. A Shakespearean village has been built on the racecourse in the "Nicolae Romanescu" Park, and VR technology (Shakespeare Dimensions, consisting in the construction of an immersive cube - a 3D scenographic experiment in virtual space, in which the Shakespearean universe from the play "The Tempest" is generated by new technologies) has been included in the program.

The axis of the message (Dayan, 1990, p. 45; Leduc, 1973, p.238) of the festival includes the idea of democratization of art, the theme, including the graphic representation, is an emotional invitation to see the Shakespearean opera adapted to the present community, it is an invitation to action, to involve the general, heterogeneous public in the edification of the whole cultural event.

Barriers in communicating the Shakespeare International Festival's message

The evolution of the vision, of the assumed mission, of the messages conveyed has a direct link with the communication barriers that the festival has had to overcome over time. In what follows we will review and critically address the main categories of barriers and analyze how the Festival management has chosen to overcome them.

First of all, we will focus on the language barrier, the most predictable in the context of an international event. Each edition of the festival has brought to the same place and at the same time theatre companies (including the technical staff) from all geographical areas of the world - from the Far East to Russian, Baltic, Nordic, etc. In the auditorium, during the performance, subtitling in Romanian or English was provided. It is, of course, quite difficult to follow subtitling in a performance hall, let alone subtitling such profound and complex texts as Shakespeare's. We can also see here a possible cause of the cultivation of classical elitism, which I mentioned earlier. Classical performances are difficult enough for a spectator who is not a connoisseur of the playwright's work to follow, so that during the performance he or she is left with 'only' the analytical contemplation of the various types of staging, the director's visions, the adaptation of the work to diametrically opposed cultural and mental universes - we are thinking here, for example, of the performances of the Japanese, Korean and Chinese troupes.

In the "Bath Chronicle" of March 15, 2006, Christopher Hansford writes: "To be honest, Shakespeare performed in Romanian sounds a bit complicated. Yet, surprisingly, it isn't. In fact, it turns out to be one of the most beautiful and worthwhile theatrical experiences this year. The performance of the National Theater "Marin Sorescu" in Craiova (Romania) is, in a way, both a concert and a play, because, if you don't follow the text that unfolds on either side of the stage, you can be enveloped by the melody of the Shakespearean verb in a foreign language" (*Gazeta de Sud*, 2006)

Leaving the performance hall, we will see that the language barrier persists, as all communication materials are bilingual (Romanian-English), but, moreover, the community with which a much deeper connection is being sought is not prepared with guidance messages at least in English. There is a lack of messages in any other languages in the online environment, with the exception of the Festival website, which has an English version.

Another barrier, perhaps predictable in such a context, is that arising from cultural differences. Indeed, each edition of the Festival has meant an infusion of exoticism in a city quite removed (until the world wide web era) from international trends, overwhelmed by provincial complexes and with too few cultural daring to give it a certain impetus for openness. Nevertheless, in promoting its editions in cultural circles abroad, the Festival has benefited from the substantial support of various partners, from media partners to the European Shakespeare Festival Network, the European Theatre Convention or the British Council.

The third type of barriers, technological barriers, has, in our opinion, generated the paradigm shift we described in the previous chapter. One of the main reproaches that came from the local community, i.e. from the local administration, from which the Festival expects and receives substantial logistical and financial support from the very beginning, was precisely the elitism and the impossibility for the general public to access the festival's offer, not necessarily in terms of theatrical education, but in terms of the limits of the performance halls of the National Theatre "Marin Sorescu". It has two halls, one with 700 seats and one with a maximum of 200 seats. While many of these seats were already booked by specialized audiences coming to Craiova from all over the country and abroad, the local community was in fact allocated only a few dozen seats. In our opinion, the concern for relations with the local community has led to this diversification of the festival offer. The problem has not been fully solved in 2024 either, because shows are also being brought in for small venues (stage performances, for example) and the seats are already sold out.

Here we could also include another technological barrier, namely the online purchase of differentiated tickets. The National Theatre's software does not allow the purchase of tickets by age or social categories (pupils, students, seniors), this can only be done through direct purchase at the Theatre's agency counter.

The generational barrier may continue to be a reality. If until 2016, the Festival was aiming at a specialized and even hyper-specialized audience, which meant raising a barrier in front of young audiences, who did not have the necessary competence to receive it properly and who were expecting a different kind of events. Implicitly and by the nature of the evolution of communication technology, the most recent editions adopt communication channels and techniques appropriate to the type of message they wish to convey. The Festival has accounts on the most important social media platforms, it has a modern website design, but it also communicates through traditional media - print, radio, TV, outdoor advertising, so that the integrative vision can be realized. We can suspect, without having concrete scientific evidence, a reluctance of the traditionalist public to this openness to the general public.

The barrier raised by financial resources is, we would say, immanent. With more funds, it would be possible to overcome language barriers, for example, more and bigger shows could be brought to Craiova, with technical performances that for the time being do not find their place on the Craiova stages.

The lack of feedback is not a barrier in the Shakespeare Festival's communication management. Through openness efforts, through the various types of open communication channels, a permanent connection with the audience is ensured and reactive mechanisms are implemented (most requests are for additional information about the program, reservations, locations).

The saturated communication environment makes communicators and their messages very vulnerable. The playful slogan, built on alliteration and euphony, the abundance of its own messages to the public, the identity that has tradition, notoriety and the positive image of both the main communicator and the Marin Sorescu National Theatre on its side, can be remedies for the escalation of the saturated environment, but also for the psychological and emotional barriers. The International Shakespeare Festival in Craiova is a cultural event that is highly appreciated by the community, including and especially by the community; it is expected and loved.

Audiences of the International Shakespeare Festival, Craiova

Craiova International Shakespeare Festival has long relied on an elitist program, with leading Shakespearean performances from around the world programmed exclusively in the Theatre's enclosed, limited seating. With the most recent editions, the Festival has added an increasingly pronounced community nuance and seeks to broaden its addressability from an achievers and integrated audience (Stanford Research Institute, 1978) to broader and more diverse segments. Performances held outdoors, in unconventional spaces, with more obvious social implications have been included.

If we apply the classic 1978 Stanford Research Institute (SRI) grid, today the audience of the Craiova International Shakespeare Festival is an urban, young, ambitious, ostentatious (emulators), inventive, experience-seeking (I-me-mine), direct experience-seeking, self-centered (experiential), mature, successful, societally conscious (societally conscious), young, ambitious, ostentatious (emulators), inventive, experience-seeking, experience-seeking, self-centered, mature, successful, societally conscious.

Applying F. P. Seitel's typology (1992, pp. 12-14, in Coman, 2006), we identify the following categories of audiences, in addition to the internal audiences (actors, technicians, management, including the bands invited to the festival), the Festival has formed a community, a type of external audiences that brings together: the local, regional community, audiences with access to cultural tourism (special transport lines are organized for the Festival), including from abroad. Depending on the resources available to the organization in 2024, the Festival's audiences are very diversified compared to the first editions. This year's edition has thus attracted primary audiences (students, university-educated audiences, spectators who come to all the festival performances), secondary audiences (audiences interested in a specific performance, a specific director, a specific company), marginal audiences (people who attend performances and outdoor events by chance). Changes, diversification and expansion also took place in terms of attitudes towards the organization.

In addition to the traditional audience of supporters (intellectuals, artists from different areas of artistic expression), the absence of online public interventions has also led to a change in the level of opponents (local community with medium and sub-medium level of education). The following is a significant leap, which particularizes this year's edition and which is the result of the openness efforts I described above. These are the neutral audiences, the audiences from other, marginal, popular entertainment venues. The immersive cube, the pop-up performances, the outdoor performances in unconventional environments, the strange, the unusual, the intersection of diverse segments of receptors and messages have targeted audiences that until the most recent editions were completely ignored. Until now, the festival was based on the traditional audience (spectators of the normal seasons of the National Theatre "Marin Sorescu" in Craiova, and even only specialists). In the last editions, through the events organized, great attention was paid to the future audience, high school students, through the same performances in unconventional spaces, through the diversification of the types of events (pop, rock concerts were introduced, which exceeded the Shakespearean topic).

Turning to the analysis of communication channels, I will also approach the communication of the Shakespeare Festival with the help of Bernstein's Wheel, precisely because the moment under question is one of profound changes, which are about audiences and how to reach them.

Having at our disposal a managerial report made by the manager of the Theater, Alexandru Boureanu (2021), we can see that the institution and implicitly, the Festival, have a general public in mind, such as: the local community, various ages, with higher education, the regional community (Dolj, Gorj, Mehedinți, Olt, Vâlcea), participants in cultural tourism, the shareholders of the National Theater "Marin Sorescu" in Craiova, 400 subscribers per season of the National Theater "Marin Sorescu" in Craiova, at least 10. 000 unique spectators

(traditional) / year, on the premises; at least 5,000 teenagers (colleges, high schools located in the Oltenia region); at least 4. urm.), all social groups of people over 35 years of age, theaterologists, specialists, critics, artists, theatre and press people, guests, participants in scientific events of the Festival and tourists visiting Craiova.

From the perspective of the types of channels with which the Theater and the Festival constantly collaborate, from its inception to the present, we have identified the categories described below. Local generalist media: Word of Freedom. General regional media: Gazeta de Sud, Jurnalul Olteniei, TVR Craiova, Radio Oltenia Craiova. Generalist national media: TVR and Societatea Română de Radiodifuziune, Regional/national/online cultural magazines: Mozaicul, Ramuri, Scrisul românesc, Familia, <https://revistarinocerul.ro/>, <https://teatrul-azi.ro/>, <https://teatrul-azi.ro/>, <https://revistatribuna.ro/>, Agerpres, <https://leviathan.ro/category/cronica-de-teatru/>, <https://agenda.liternet.ro/cronici/diverseteatru.html>.

The Festival has depended on and collaborated for all editions with local and national authorities: the Craiova City Hall and Craiova City Council, Dolj County Council, Ministry of Culture.

Equally relevant were and are also partners from the socio-economic area. And for the 2024 anniversary edition, we have more than 20 partners from the country and abroad, economic agents, universities, cultural institutions, etc.

I choose not to refer to the other audience categories and related communication techniques, according to the Bernstein grid, for lack of space, but also because it is appropriate to emphasize the evolution of the festival's communication techniques. In this respect, the Festival has grown a lot online.

Media analysis. Paid media. Earned media. Owned media

It is worth noting the way in which the physical, offline communication platform and the online environment were brought together with the help of the Shakespeare Caravan. Thus, in a novel way, through the Shakespeare Caravan, an ancestral way of communication, as a tribute to the coherence and resilience of the Shakespearean world.

From March 25 to April 30, three actors took a van bearing the Festival's identity to no less than 30 locations across the country, as well as Vidin (Bulgaria). With the stated aim of the Festival to "bring Shakespeare from the heart of the Craiova theater community to the heart of the communities in each city" and "to share a glimpse of the young, fresh and nonconformist spirit of the Craiova International Shakespeare Festival", the actors performed the show "The Complete Works of Shakespeare", but also issued the invitation to come to Craiova for the Festival. The audience reached offline with the help of the Caravan was then directed online, to the website and social media pages.

The Festival has a public relations office and communicates through press releases and press conferences. In addition to this, there is a community of reviewers, heavy public, commentators who refer to Festival events on a daily basis on their personal blogs, personal pages.

From the Digital Campaigns Report, we learn that over 4,900,000 people have seen the Festival's communications over 13,700,000 times. Over 600,000 reactions and over 220,000 video views.

There were 8 weeks of paid communication in digital (Facebook, Instagram, Google, YouTube) with the objective of awareness, in addition to sales tickets. 11 weeks of non-paid communication. According to the report, 652,988 people saw the ads 2,423,787 times. There were 490,375 reactions generated in Social Media and 16,223 visits generated on the festival website.

The Festival's messages are taken up on the social media platforms of the partners, but also of the heavy, primary, direct audience, and many media materials will be published in SpectActor magazine, the magazine owned by the National Theatre "Marin Sorescu".

In previous editions, there was no budget for the purchase of advertising space/time. But this year's edition focused heavily on young, peripheral audiences, as well as those outside Craiova. This was done through traditional media, but especially online, by outsourcing the service to SvadStudio. Most messages, including advertisements were run on the Facebook page (created on March 24, 2014), where there are no less than 140 advertisements. They contain information about the Caravan and Festival program, as well as how to purchase tickets. The Instagram page was created in 2018 has 603 posts and 3,669 followers. In my view, the shift from Facebook to Instagram may be an indicator of the Festival's management's desire to attract younger, peripheral audiences who no longer use Facebook. Nonetheless, this platform was the Festival's tribune - this is where the latest announcements, program information, as well as images from the previous day's highlights were posted.

One of the current communication objectives is to create a community, from the restricted niche of hyperspecialists to the more open zone of connoisseurs, then to those interested in the theatrical world in general, and then to the audiences interested in the cultural zone as a whole, without a specific artistic option. An

extremely important role is played by personal accounts in social media and in the blogosphere, without, to my knowledge, an official partnership between the festival and them.

Openness, democratization have received an infusion of authenticity, of deeply personalized discourse.

Identifying influencers in the Shakespeare Festival area has proved challenging but not without its revelations. Roughly from 2018 until this year's edition we can identify that category of 'consumer influencers' (Paul Harrigan et.al, 2021), who second the Festival with their own impressions, emotions, unfiltered personal perceptions. This personalized and authentic discourse provided and still provides trust, satisfaction, engagement and loyalty (Paul Harrigan et.al, 2021). In general, they, other than the group of theatre critics, who retain their role as official ambassadors of the Festival, write on their own blogs, social media short emotional impressions, often posting photos and peddling official Festival messages. Also, another characteristic is that most of them, if not all of them, are in any case loyal spectators (without being specialists) of the performances of the National Theatre "Marin Sorescu" in Craiova, the institution that organizes the festival, together with the Shakespeare Foundation: Anda Simion, Marius Dobrin, Iulian Fira, Simion Buia, Costinela Caraene, Dr. Eleodor Cârstoiu and many others.

I think we can also open a discussion on personal branding here (Y. Zhang et al., 2017). The group of researchers made several conclusions by studying the phenomenon of social media rebroadcasting. One of them was, following in the footsteps of Heath et al. (2001), emotional content, e.g. admiration, is sought and redistributed. Since 2018, the Craiova Shakespeare Craiova discourse has indeed changed its tonality, from the serious, similiacademic zone to the playful, emotional, integrative zone. The Craiova International Shakespeare Festival began to be communicated as a mood, and less (but not at all) as an infusion of academism and high art. These messages began to be picked up by social media audiences, contributing decisively to the resemanticization of reception. And here we also identified the influencers' need to communicate about themselves through the Festival message. Toubia and Stephen (2013) observed that some users distribute a certain type of content and not other content on social media in order to manage their personal image or brand.

This phenomenon is even more visible in this year's edition, an edition of many changes proposed by the Festival management. More than ever, the Festival is moving out of the closed and limiting space of the indoor stage and organizing open-air performances, including rock music concerts (in the Shakespeare Village). This type of content also attracts other influencers such as Andi Moisescu, who referred both in his show "Apropo TV" and on social media to this year's edition of the Festival and who stated exactly the new positioning principle of the festival: "This year promises to be not only interesting and elitist, but also spectacular and popular." (<https://fb.watch/rqkOT2seJ7/>).

As for the types of influencers, I don't think we can operate with the canonical categories, presented in the course (course 2, April 2024): mega influencers: 1M followers or more, macro influencers: between 100K and 1M followers, micro influencers: between 10,000 and 100,000 followers, nano influencers: between 1,000 and 10,000 followers. If we look at this typology, we notice that all of them are micro influencers, with the notable exception of Andi Moisescu, this year, on the Apropo TV page (123 K likes).

I anticipate as a possible next step, opening to mega and macro influencers, in the Festival's communication program. Until then, however, I can conclude that around the International Shakespeare Festival, in addition to the veteran reviewers, columnists, journalists, a community of micro-influencers has been built who identify with the message of the event, take the posts as such, communicate in real time impressions and contribute decisively to the Festival's broad program of opening to large and diverse audiences.

Conclusions

The International Shakespeare Festival is a cultural product that has managed to attract the energy of an entire community of supporters and a charismatic management team. Its messaging has (and continues to) bend with the zeitgeist, proving not that it can reinvent itself, but that it can adapt, grow with the audiences it serves. The paradigm shift to which we have referred does not conceal cleavages, violent ruptures, but reflects a natural, gradual evolution. This is why the inventory of communication barriers also shows a fairly strong connection between the organization and its audience, a proactive approach with extremely few conflictual elements. Even if it did not start with this idea, Craiova International Shakespeare Festival has quickly become a source of inspiration and an engine of empowerment for the whole region.

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