

David Baile:

You're listening to *Meditations On*. I'm David Baile, Chief Executive Officer of the International Society for the Performing Arts. This special episode of *Meditations On* is the first in a three-part series recorded in front of a live audience at ISPA's 2023 Congress in New York City. We invited Ilter Ibrahimof, Artistic Director of Canada's Fall for Dance North Festival, to speak with three emerging arts leaders who have each in their own way broken with convention and challenged the world to embrace an expanded notion of what is possible in the arts.

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Ilter Ibrahimof:

Reem Allam is the brand-new Associate Director of Artistic Planning of the Arts Center at NYU Abu Dhabi. She has previously worked for six years as Executive Manager and Artistic Programmer of the Downtown Contemporary Arts Festival, D-CAF, in Egypt. Reem holds a UK master's degree in Arts, Festivals and Cultural Management from QMU Edinburgh, and has extensive experience producing and curating for several festivals and industry platforms in the UK and Europe. Through our conversations, I learned that Reem loves festivals, and believes in their potential to create collective consciousness, cultural transformation and economic vitalization.

Along with her generation having lived through already two uprisings in Egypt, she believes that arts and creativity is a political commitment to promote the right of artists to express themselves freely, even under difficult circumstances. As freedom of artistic expression is facing growing pressure, as more and more artists who work in different parts of the world are experiencing mobility issues, and as the Covid-19 pandemic continues to affect working conditions of the creative sector as a whole, Reem is dedicated to creating international connections for her community in Egypt and the Middle East, and joins us today to share her thoughts on essential ingredients on how to overcome fragmentation and address today's global challenges.

Reem Allam:

Thank you, Ilter. I'm very happy to be here today with you all. As Ilter mentioned, I'm from Egypt and I really love festivals. This is actually what got me into the whole arts field. The reason of that is that I really felt that it's a space where we finally look at each other as collaborators. A festival works when we enjoy something together. For once, I felt that we're not viewing each other as competitors or competing on something, but actually there is a spiritual connection that we're enjoying an art piece together. I really felt this importance of such a space, coming from a country where you had, as you mentioned, several uprisings and several ways to gather, but sometimes it wasn't always allowed. Festivals is a space to gather.

Then after those feelings, I felt I decided to do the masters in Edinburgh since it's a festival city and to find this degree in festivals management, which of course helped me a lot in my career. It was a start for international connections of then going and working in the UK and then working remotely with festivals in Germany, and going on jury boards and festivals in Europe like [Inaudible 00:04:06] and Poland [Inaudible 00:04:09].

All this really opened up a big career for me, but my main feeling then was that I wanted to go back to my region and to really see how I can use those international connections to serve the sector where I

come from. Since we're talking here about the urgency of now, and this is the theme of the Congress, I really felt that this was what was urgently needed to be done, because the sector was growing but still lots of developments were needed. There's lots of challenges that we'll be speaking about today.

I was very grateful that I came back to be the executive manager and programmer of a festival called D-CAF. D-CAF is basically a big international festival that hosts theater, dance, music from all over the world, but also it supports Arab artists by hosting a showcase called the Arab Focus. The Arab Arts Focus basically gathers international programmers to come to Cairo every two years and see different theater and dance pieces.

The reason why we started this initiative was that, as many of you know, visas or mobility is a big issue, so many Arab artists, they don't share the same opportunities of marketing and of exposing their work. It's great to bring international programmers who can travel easily, and they can come and they can actually experience the context. They see what the country is. They get a sense of all the lovely things and also the tense things, and they really understand the context. Also it was very, very useful for different Arab artists because it was a platform where they can connect with the international community. We have many successful examples of artists who went on to premiere their productions in the Avignon Festival in France and in Switzerland in [Inaudible 00:05:47] and several big festivals.

This brings me to a point also that I've been focusing on a lot, which is these connections internationally. One of the reasons why in our region we rely on international connection is that we don't have local support. To give you a bit more context, there's no ministry. There is a ministry of culture, but we don't have a local grant. We don't have an arts council like in the UK or in other countries. Really as an independent artist or independent festival, it's ironic, but it's actually easier to bring an artist from Denmark, for example, than an artist from Morocco, because the Danish embassy would support very generously, but the Moroccan embassy wouldn't have the economic power to support. At the end of the day, it's a global balance of powers, of economic powers, that affects everything. What we try to do is that make use of that to benefit both artists.

One of the examples I was happy to share with you today was a project we did in 2021. It was a collaboration between UK and Egyptian artists, and it was with the British Council and through [Inaudible 00:06:49] in the UK. It was about commissioning five productions that happened between one UK and one Egyptian artist. It was actually beneficial for both of them. It's not a way to just benefit one part of the world on the expense of the other, but actually both collaborating. I'll just give you one of the five productions, what it was about.

One of them was by a female choreographer in Egypt called [Inaudible 00:07:12] exploring dance underwater. In Egypt we have all kinds of beaches and we have two, the Mediterranean and Red Seas, so she was doing lots of dance underwater. She collaborated with a UK musician exploring sound underwater, and they ended up with a production that could happen in swimming pools. That was a very creative output, but actually he was very impressed, the UK musician, that he could work with someone and come to Egypt and give access to this kind of performance, and she also benefited from this idea of sound underwater. Those are the kinds of initiatives generally we've been focusing on.

Also, I wanted to say that actually, I feel now also that we're saying that ISPA is about the urgency of now and how we want to reach out, I feel out of the pandemic, since we've felt that we're so apart but at the same time we're connected, maybe now since it's a bit over and we're back, we can think of reaching out, especially with festivals that maybe did not have Arab artists on the roster and they want to bring new voices or to really showcase different voices. I think this is a great place that we could reach out and connect on that. I can give you further examples of those kind of connections that I really cherished.

One project was actually also with a UK artist, but this time it had to do with language. Some of you may have seen Every Brilliant Thing, which was a big production in Edinburgh by Duncan Macmillan. In Egypt we have lots of translations to Arabic of classical European texts, but there's no contemporary European plays being translated. We decided to translate it as part of a bigger project of translating an Austrian play by Elfriede Jelinek, really big contemporary European plays.

What happened is that an Egyptian production decided to do an Arabic version on stage of Duncan Macmillan's big hit, of Every Brilliant Thing. It's about suicide, it's about depression, and of course such a topic is universal and it's relevant for everyone. Actually, it was a time that we were just coming out of the pandemic and lots of artists in the region were losing their jobs, because basically when you don't have a local arts council and you cannot perform, then there's no sources of income. They managed to put on the show as an Arabic production, with a Syrian actress and Egyptian director, and it started touring in the Arabic region. It became a new performance that could actually tour in Arabic.

I think this is also important because we think of exchange sometimes as just bringing a ready-made show from a certain part of the world to the other part of the world, but actually we did this culture exchange with no travel. The British artist did not travel, but he gained benefit by having his play accessible in a different language and being touring still today in different countries, and of course gaining the copyrights of that. On the other side, the Arab side, the actress and the production team had a creative collaboration with a new script, and also they had the new source of income to travel and tour a new production.

There's a final example that I could also share about this kind of collaboration that I'm actually really excited about, because it happened during the pandemic and it was quite different. It was more in the film sector than the performing arts, but it was about creating a special experience. Because back in Egypt, actually during the pandemic, we were not big on digital. I think we touched upon it a bit yesterday, but accessibility of digital wasn't that great in terms of internet connection infrastructure, and it wasn't easy to change that in two years. Instead we started thinking of doing events that are smaller in scale and still rely on international exchange, and can be done during the pandemic.

One of the ideas I had, it was quite a crazy idea, but the best thing about the pandemic in my opinion is that we had the time to think of crazy ideas. We were not so immersed in daily, daily jobs, but actually we had time. It was about screening a movie called Honeyland. It's an Oscar-nominated film from North Macedonia, and it's about an environmental issue of the job of honey harvesting, and how in the movie, there's big businessmen who are threatening the environment and there's an extinction problem of bees because of the various situations.

It's a documentary. I decided to screen it in actually a honey farm in Cairo. It was organized in a way where it's done for a small group that goes to this honey farm. Once they arrive, they wear bee protection suits, because they're actually going to see live how the honey extraction happens in an organic farm, so they're seeing the good scenario of how you can take care of the environment. After they watched this live, then we had a community meal together called feteer. It's a traditional bread that is eaten with honey. That's how it's eaten. This time it was fresh honey that they just saw in the farm.

After they ate together, they watched the film, which was a very strong film showing the issue of honey and bees and all the environmental impact. Then we had a Q&A, and in the Q&A, you could really sense the impact of when it's not just about just seeing a film and forgetting about it the next day, but they actually immersed themselves in a location that was similar to the location of the movie. From the Q&A, you really felt the engagement of people asking and really wanting to benefit the environment, and to be better and how to be more organic. It was very inspiring. It brings me back to the point of why I love to work in the arts and this idea that by immersing ourselves, by really gathering, we could really go

beyond and transcend and think about issues and try to reflect on how we can create a more grounded, a more inclusive and a more greener society in that case.

Finally, also to give you a bigger context of I'm talking about Egypt, but also about the Arab region in general, is that the arts play a very important role, and that's because other platforms are not that accessible. For example, politically, it's not always easy to express yourself politically. I feel this is where the arts play a role. Especially in Egypt, I noticed that contemporary dance has been growing so much. It's the biggest. Actually it's growing more than theater.

I feel that it's because it's a space where you can really express yourself as young artists, but there's no text. There's no risk of getting censored or of anything happening, but actually you can let it all out. You can really express yourself. I feel the urgency of allowing the space of giving voices to people through movement, through arts, through dance, through all that. I'll be happy to connect with you all, invite you all also, if you're interested in giving space and giving voice to those artists that I feel are very eager and to express themselves and have already shown success in different countries around the world.

As a final, final note, as Ilter mentioned, I'm moving. I'm changing jobs. As I mentioned, I've been based in Egypt, and you can connect with me of course with any connections with the Egyptian festivals and artists, but I'm also moving to Abu Dhabi to work at NYU at the Art Center of NYU Abu Dhabi. I'm very excited for that, because it's still in the Arab region with this time really bigger resources and more abilities to connect as a region and with the rest of the world. I'd also be happy if you'd like to connect and would like to reach out about Abu Dhabi and future connections there. Thank you for listening. Thank you.

David Baile:

Meditations On is presented by ISPA. This live episode was recorded at ISPA's 2023 Congress in New York City. It was produced by Johnny Spence with live audio engineering by Rich Johnson. Our theme music is by Johnny Spence. Special thank you to Reem Allam and Ilter Ibrahimof, and to the Americas Society for hosting the recording session. You can listen to this episode as well as other ISPA media content on ISPA streams. To learn more about ISPA, please visit our website, www.ispa.org, and follow us on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.