
The Festival Internacional de Teatro de La Habana (FITH) and the Festival de México (fmx): between Place and Placelessness

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In our contemporary world, a sense of placelessness is related to the changes prompted by globalization, to the disconnections between people and place brought about by the speeding up of human interactions, travel, and the use of electronic means of communication. In other words, a sense of belonging is no longer connected to place but to the different affiliations people construct through time and space. This move has an obvious impact on human relationships and the implementation of festivals, as the conceptualization of space has implications for the way we construct our relationships with different countries, social formations, and human beings. In this regard, the term “heterotopia” is a useful tool with which to analyze spatial contradictions and tensions at festivals and to explain how senses of place and placelessness emerge at these events.

Foucault describes heterotopias as mirrors, providing a metaphor for the double meanings and contradictions contained in a space, or the reality and the unreality of spaces (that is, the inversion of relations that some spaces designate or reflect). Heterotopias are unreal places because the image that these spaces project does not exist. They are, however, still real because the projected image or imagined space materially shapes the way we relate to the actual place. Foucault lists several possible types of heterotopias or spaces that have double meanings. For example, a garden is a heterotopia because it is a real space that is intended, through its incorporation of plants from around the world, to be a microcosm of different environments. It contains the world in one place and, as such, is both particular and general at the same time. Museums constitute another kind of heterotopia because they are “linked to slices in time” (26). They deconstruct traditional understandings of temporality, either by accumulating slices of time or by putting together in

one place objects from different times. They enclose in one place “all times, all epochs, all forms, all tastes” (26). Thus, they exist simultaneously both within and outside of time (22-27).

According to Foucault, festivals are heterotopias directed to the temporal. “These heterotopias are not oriented toward the eternal, they are rather absolutely temporal [...] Such, for example, are the fairgrounds, these marvellous, empty sites on the outskirts of cities that teem once or twice a year with stands, displays, heteroclite objects, wrestlers, snakewomen, fortune-tellers, and so forth” (26). While the event is momentary, its effects can be lasting. This contradiction here also applies to the fleeting character of festivals in opposition to the continuity of daily life. Foucault also points to the accumulation of times and spaces to festival densities, that is, the amount and diversity of events, activities, places and periods represented or contained within a single festival.

Among the vast array of festivals in Latin America, the fmx-Festival de México and the Festival Internacional de Teatro de La Habana (FITH) help to illustrate the tensions brought about by the different senses of place and placelessness that emerge at these events and shed light on the relationships that are established between festivals and their host communities.

The fmx is an annual event that emerged in 1985 through the initiative of the Festival de México en el Centro Histórico, A.C., a non-governmental organization. The festival has sought to position itself as a contemporary event that brings innovation and unique work to the Mexican artistic milieu. In 1985, the fmx, formerly the Spring Festival, began as a local festival created mainly to support the renewal project of Mexico City’s Historic Center. The Spring Festival mobilized government, private organizations, and citizens to produce an event with the objective to rescue the Historic Center of the city from deterioration. In fact, part of the money collected through the organization of the festival was destined to restore art works that belong to museums and churches located in that part of the city.

Although the claim is no doubt arguable, according to its organizers, fmx-Festival de México is “the most important cultural celebration in Mexico City, and one of the most audacious and inventive platforms for the Arts in Latin America” (“fmx-Festival de México”). The fmx’s expansion has been achieved due to a strategy based on the diversification of activities and the quest for private and governmental sponsors. One aspect that has made the fmx so popular has been its wide range of events. While the first festivals included street theatre and involved music such as jazz, blues, salsa, boleros, and elec-

tronic rock, the event now consists of other genres and styles, such as opera, massive rock concerts, dance, literature, art restoration, children's activities, conferences, and workshops. This wide range of activities has allowed the festival to engage a vast range of audience from diverse social backgrounds. A special characteristic of the fmx has been a programming largely based on recognized foreign artists as a way to improve its global image.

The 26th season of the fmx was celebrated March 11-28, 2010, in Mexico City. The estimated cost was 35,000,000 Mexican pesos. Half of the total amount came in cash from CONACULTA (Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes) and the Secretaría de Cultura de la Ciudad de México, both governmental institutions. The other half was obtained from ticket sales, embassies, cultural and private institutions, the festival's board, and private sponsorships (Wolffer).

The 2010 fmx consisted of eight sections: Opera y Música, Radar y Mestizo Radical (experimental music), Artes Escénicas, Arte Electrónico, Animasivo (animation), Cinema Global, XCéntrico (alternative music), and a set of workshops and lectures. Each of these sections was curated by an individual or group with expertise in that specific form of art.

Artes Escénicas, in particular, is a part of the festival devoted to theatre and dance. In the 2010 edition, this segment included artists such as Savion Glover, a tap dancer from the USA, Romeo Castellucci from Italy, and Mexican performances such as *Malinche-Malinches* by the company La Máquina de Teatro and *Horas de gracia*, performed by the Compañía Nacional de Teatro.

According to the general brochure, the festival presented 198 artistic events at more than 60 sites in Mexico City. The number of foreign guests stands out in comparison with national companies and/or events.¹ Of the 198 activities, 51 involved Mexican artists (all from Mexico City), while 147 included artists from foreign countries. Of the 147 foreign productions, 108 originated in Europe, USA and Canada, 28 from Latin American countries, 9 were European co-productions, and 5 came from Asia. The Mexican events represented almost 26 per cent of the productions, while productions originated in Europe, USA and Canada made up more than 54 per cent of the total. This is a striking feature in a festival that changed its name to the Festival de México in 2010, the same year as the bicentennial of Mexican independence and the centennial anniversary of the Mexican Revolution.

Despite the different conceptions of space that coexist within the fmx, the notion of space as a receptor of Western cultural products dominated the

curatorship of the 2010 event. With an emphasis on technology and innovation, there were operas, children's activities, and art exhibitions, but one of the largest and most popular categories was electronic arts. The festival also featured talks and workshops designed to provide information and reflect on new media, technology, and their effects on society.

The fmx organizational prototype resembles what some academics have called the Event Management Body of Knowledge (EMBOK) (Silvers). This model considers five important domains for the organization of events: administration, design, marketing, operations and risks. It exemplifies a neoliberal way of tackling the organization of events in order to make business. In this model, festivals are considered cultural capital, a tool with which to obtain profits. Accordingly, festivals represent transportable recipients of cultural events inasmuch as they embrace the same model of organization and a similar kind of structure wherever they are located.

The fmx 2010 was a showcase of international performances offered to audiences for cultural consumption. At the event there was a diversity of "items" for all tastes; in fact, the festival aimed to be a complete global cultural mall. Eight sub-festivals provided art for all ages. There were some free events and different ticket prices for different cultural products. For instance, while the performance *Pasajes* by Teatro Ojo was free, *Malinche-Malinches* was not.

The FITH, to a lesser extent, is also a showcase due to the increasing parade of national and international companies. This festival first occurred in January 1980 under the artistic direction of Marcia Leiseca (García 23). Currently, it is an event that takes place every two years in Havana, Cuba, and some of the Cuban provinces. In its inception, the festival was dedicated to showcasing the diversity and strength of Cuban theatre, but it later came to include foreign companies and gradually developed into an international event that sets national and international aesthetics alongside one another. Its name has also changed. Although the event is still called the Havana Theatre Festival, the "international" tag has been used to present the festival since its 10th edition.

The selection of the national companies present at this festival is determined by a committee that includes members of the Department of Culture. After each festival, this committee travels around the country over several months to observe the performances produced in Havana and the Cuban provinces. Then, the committee comes to a final decision a few weeks before the festival opens again.

The FITH has a double purpose; it tours national companies in order to reach audiences beyond the groups' places of origin and brings foreign theatre companies to Cuba. The inclusion of a great number of national companies has been a constant feature in the history of the festival. In this sense, it is possible to assert the existence of a national festival within the framework of an international event. Put another way, Cuban theatre groups see the FITH as an opportunity to showcase works from the provinces in the capital and vice versa. This characteristic, present since the festival's inception, mitigates the lack of interchange between province and the capital at other times of the year. Marta María Borrás has indicated that "Buena parte del teatro que se realiza fuera de La Habana sigue apenas sin ser confrontado con el público capitalino, lo mismo sucede en cada provincia donde se hacen escasas las programaciones de propuestas foráneas" (72). Consequently, the FITH is used by Cuban national artists as an opportunity for exchange not only between foreign and national companies, but also between groups from the capital and the provinces.

Even though the FITH can be considered a reaction to the proliferation of a global type of festival, its objectives have also become blurred with the passing of time. In its beginnings, the FITH's intention was to show the diversity and vigor of the Cuban theatre. This national event was also a contest for Cuban theatre groups; an award was given to the best performance, though this award has now disappeared. The FITH has evolved into a showcase type of festival that incorporates groups of other countries and diverse artistic languages. In this way, the nationalist type of festival has been substituted by a space of encounter and confrontation between national and foreign artistic expressions.

The 2011 FITH general program included 83 shows, 47 of which were performed by Cuban companies. In contrast, 36 performances were by foreign groups from 16 different countries.² The event also brought together various trends and modes of making theatre, for example, children's theatre, cabaret, classic theatre, experimental theatre, puppetry and physical theatre.

A special characteristic of the FTH is that the Cuban government pays the expenses of national companies but does not pay any kind of expenses to bring foreign theatre companies to the festival. Subsequently, international groups have to look for support to cover the costs of their travel. On many occasions, the funds have come from national institutions or organizations, but, if this is not possible, the companies pay for their own plane tickets, accommodation, and food. Consequently, it is possible to claim that foreign

companies subsidize the festival to a great extent by exploiting their own labor. This generates peculiar circumstances in the festival's formation and drives the organizers to work hard to be able to bring and host foreign companies.

The limited presence of international theatre companies in Cuba gives particular characteristics to the FITH. For example, the international theatre events take place annually or biannually and, for many artists and audience members, offer the only opportunities to access externally generated performances. Thus, Cuban artists eagerly anticipate these festivals. In 2007, in relation to the XII Festival de La Habana, Marta María Borrás explains that "Espacios como este se hacen imprescindibles, más si tomamos en cuenta la escasa participación de grupos foráneos en nuestra cartelera, y con ello la poca vinculación del público con lenguajes divergentes a los explorados por el teatro cubano" (Borrás 71). Thus, the scarcity of links between the Cuban public and foreign theatre currents makes the FITH an oasis for the Cuban world theatre movement. The fact that for many Cuban artists the only possible contact with theatre made externally is mediated by these international festivals suggests that the festival is a driving force of artistic trends.

To some extent, the fmx and the FITH act as open and free territories. The festival organizers published a call for entries or invited artists and received theatre groups, audiences, and stakeholders. Along with performances, the festivals programs contained a wide range of activities, such as workshops and conferences. Sponsors and organizers fed the festival structures with events. By choosing and depositing performances and activities in the festival structures, the different stakeholders occupied the festivals' seemingly "empty" space. In this formulation, the task of organizers was reduced to selecting and supplying the festival with genres, styles, and topics.

From this point of view, both festivals are placeless recipients of human actions; they are open to occupation, fixed entities, free territories or showcases, which receive the flow of performances and activities from different parts of the world. Accordingly, the festival structure is immobile, while the contents—that is, the performances and activities that are set in this kind of vessel—are mobile and dynamic; the festival structure is a white canvas, a vessel in which it is possible to place international performances and activities.

It is possible to suggest that the idea of a festival as a mall that sells different cultural products permeates the international festival circuit. In essence, the festival remains structurally the same in different countries, generating a disjuncture between the distinctive sense of place in which the

event occurs and the generic, reproducible event. This model of festivals as vessels to receive human actions promotes the standardization of festival structures. Rather than foregrounding the connections between locals and place, a standard is applied in different communities without taking into account the particular contexts in which events are placed. In this sense, international festivals are placeless, disembodied of local or national characteristics. The lack of connection between the festival structure and the place in which the event occurs prompts locals to experience a sense of loss or the disappearance of attachments to place; that is, a sense of placelessness.

Nicola E. MacLeod argues, “While vestiges of ancient ritual remain in communal celebrations, the postmodern and locally decontextualised concept of the festival, which has flourished worldwide in the last 30 years, no longer focuses upon local production and consumption of meaning” (228). The tension that MacLeod brings forward is between place and placelessness at festivals. Specifically, she argues that the problem of placelessness is a result of the dislocation between festival and the host community. The move from a ritualistic practice rooted in links between people and place to an ethereal practice based on the same type of arrangements at different festivals reduces the ties people have with specific places. International festivals replicate in many parts of the world a similar type of convivial consumption (MacLeod 235); they are detached from local, traditional, or socio-political issues and contexts and lend themselves readily to a transnational appropriation of the host cities’ spaces. According to MacLeod:

The processes of standardisation related to globalisation are not restricted to tourism and its spaces, but also transform the everyday lives and spaces of “host communities” [...] Transformation is being linked here in particular to processes of “aestheticisation,” which provide a helpful approach to explore the growing role of festivals in urban settings. In this sense, the creation and consumption of cultures becomes the key function of postmodern cities competing in a global market. Tourism destinations are no longer simply regions favoured for their natural beauty [...] but are places marketed in term of their connections with events, people and contemporary themes. (227)

The gathering of people with the same tastes—that is, bringing together collectives of people who are linked by a cause, a series of values, a festival’s theme, ideas, or even lifestyles—seems more important for global festivals than connections with local cultures. Such festivals produce standard struc-

tures of conviviality or models of “aestheticization” because they create paradigms not only to make art, but also to experience the events.

In the *fmX* 2010, along with the cultural products offered in the festival came the rest of the services, including restaurants, hotels, galas, and cocktail parties, which complemented the experience. A party atmosphere ensued; the consumerist aspect of the festival had to be celebrated and buying and selling had to be enjoyable. The festival aimed to cast the entire city as arty, fulfilling the audience’s expectation for spectacle. The festival’s identity is then rooted in the snobbish style of art consumption, an “aestheticization” that does not take into account the city’s social context. This cultural mall also embodies the sense of placelessness of other global spaces, for example, airport lounges and hotel lobbies.

This sense of placelessness is not only produced by similar types of festival structures but also by the spaces and services provided by the host cities. Mexico City and Havana contain a series of standardized spaces such as malls, airports, and theatres that are replicated in distant places, such as London, Brazil or Singapore. The landscapes in which both the *FITH* and the *fmX* occur have to be adapted to suit visitors and provide festival attendees with recognizable facilities and services. Thus, the specificity of the landscape of each city—its physical appearance—undergoes changes to be able to host international events. This shaping of place and landscape to global standards contributes to the sense of placelessness at both the *FITH* and the *fmX*.

The implementation of an international festival in a particular locality does not guarantee that local needs are going to be covered, or that the social dynamics of the particular locality is going to be taken into account. The fact that international festivals have to respond to the needs of the organizers and sponsors rather than the needs of locals poses a significant problem. Global festivals intervene in the space of the host cities, bringing particular agendas that do not necessarily address the socio-political contexts in which they are placed. With its emphasis on internationalism, the *fmX* tends to diminish the value of other possible aesthetics. Since the event is funded by organizations or institutions with political agendas, for instance, the Mexican government, it lends itself to the sponsors’ socio-political projects—in this case, the renewal of Mexico City’s Historic Center.

The *fmX* was created to bring a “creative class” on board with the idea of producing a more “cultured and tolerant society”; indeed, the Historic Center’s renewal was designed to bring growth and investment. This kind of event “may attract a particular type of visitor who is actively seeking

the company of like-minded people, rather than that of local communities” (MacLeod 231). One of the main limitations of the *fmX* resides specifically in its dissociation from socially committed agendas. The 2010 edition of the festival did not include performances addressing caustic political issues. Perhaps companies that defend the preservation of human rights, such as those of gays or indigenous people, may be included in future editions to demonstrate tolerance and diversity of opinions, though their political positions are unlikely to be embraced. In the *fmX*, diversity and tolerance act as a cosmetic to beautify a lifestyle based on consumption, a kind of global festival lifestyle.

However, a sense of local place is never entirely absent at international festivals. The spaces in which both the *FITH* and the *fmX* developed, Havana and Mexico City, also imbued their festivals with a sense of singularity, a situation that exposes the heterotopic nature of festivals. One thing that makes a festival unique is its surroundings. Festivals take place in specific geographic locations that contain particular environmental characteristics and special physical features. These environmental characteristics provide festivals with special attributes that cannot be duplicated. Thus, both the natural and the urban environments bestow authenticity on festivals. Environments function as the background of the event, giving festivals charm and adding a particular atmosphere. According to Paul Makeham:

In a broader sense the physical spaces, architecture and design of cities comprise myriad performative qualities including tension, irony, intertextuality and self-reflexivity [...] Indeed, cities as a whole can be understood as sites upon which an urban(e) citizenry [...] performs its collective memory, imagination and aspiration, performing its sense of self both to itself and beyond. (151-52)

Makeham adds that “Performance and performativity are intrinsic to urban life and design. A mobile billboard; an illuminated building at night; a park fountain; an episode of road rage; a store window display; a queue—all of these comprise performative elements” (152). Thus, it is possible to suggest that the environment performs. The urban landscape and the natural environment have an implicit theatricality that infuses festivals with both enchanting and haunting qualities, causing emotional reactions in the festival participants. In this regard, enchantment suggests captivation, seduction and sensuality, while haunted refers to the disturbing emotions that the environment may arouse.

As the examples of Havana and Mexico City show, host cities endow festivals with a local performativity that results from a combination of their

unique environments and local interactions, a performativity that produces distinct emotional qualities and experiences for festival participants. The festival experience as a whole is attached to the landscape because the environment defines and sets the limits of the event. Festivals are not isolated events; they are part of a broader experience that not only includes the enjoyment of artistic activities, but also access to the natural and constructed environments, including restaurants, hotels, mountains, beaches and other spaces. The performativity of both Havana and Mexico City, with their advertisements, means of transport, and bodily expressions, among other elements, reflect particular constructions of locality and contribute to a sense of the local.

As MacLeod suggests, “It would be wrong to assume that a host community’s sense of its own authentic culture and identity is inevitably denied by these developments [exclusion of locals and elitism] in the creation and promotion of festivals” (231). In the case of the FITH 2011, the event also included debates about artistic problems and the social dimension of a festival encounter, which connects with local history and geography. Cuban companies such as Teatro Buendía have also used the exposure to international presenters and audiences that the FITH provides to create opportunities to develop projects in other countries. After participating in the Theatre Festival of Camagüey (in Cuba’s third-largest city) and the FITH, Teatro Buendía has been invited to present work in other festivals and countries.³

In this manner, the importance of international festivals for local groups lies in their role as mediators within the theatre industry. Sometimes, showing work in a successful festival is the only way for local theatre companies to get recognition. This situation can drive artists to produce more marketable commodities rather than strive for real artistic innovation, but, at the same time, a festival can offer a way to empower local theatre companies.

What the opportunity for such empowerment reveals is the multi-directionality of festivalscapes,⁴ that is, the contrasting outcomes and social relationships caused by the tensions between different agendas at festivals. Even when a festival points towards a convivial consumption of art and fosters the same kinds of artistic and social paradigms at different places, the sense of place and the agency of host communities are not completely vanished. The idea of an international festival as a standard construct suggests a tension with the particularities of the place in which the event is developed. The relationship between festivals and their host places is two-fold. On the one hand, festivals are standard structures that receive artistic flows. On the other hand, festivals are connected to the specificity of that particular space

in which they take place. That is, festivals seem to forge links between an area of ground and the people who inhabit it.

Festivals are at once actual and fictional places. They bring into one space, the festival city venues, many different times and places. It is precisely this dual nature that gives festivals a special status in societies; they appear as mirrors, as metaphors, as utopias for specific communities. Festivals construct dualities by accumulating performances from different regions or countries (as in the case of international festivals). They generate a fictional space and time within the real space-time of a community (for instance, the fictional space-time of a particular performance in opposition to the real space-time of the theatre with its curtains, lobby and lights). They bring together invented stories and situations with daily activities (for example, workshops and performances). In some cases, they are designed to remain in the collective memory of the target community, to preserve the memories of a specific local culture (as in the festivals to honour local figures or important dates/events that become a hallmark of the cultural development of a community). However, they are also ephemeral acts, fictional spaces that disappear as soon as the activities finish. Moreover, they can “create a space of illusion that exposes every real space [...] as still more illusory” (Foucault 27). For instance, when there is a gathering of people from many different countries, the festival can create the illusion of a place where disparate cultures coexist in harmony and, from there, a festival utopia, a site where differences between cultures are dissolved. They can also transform a local city into a fantasy city (a tourist center where the whole city is a festival) or provide the illusion of their functioning as “a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, [as happy], as meticulous [and] as well arranged” in contrast to the unhappy “messy and ill constructed” world in which we live (Foucault 27). Thus, festivals contain double spaces, often juxtaposing one and many places, real and unreal, normal and extraordinary, chaotic and ordered. As such, festivals are particular and general, original and standard, local and universal all at the same time.

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Notes

¹ The former Spring Festival had featured mainly Mexican artists, a festival characteristic that has been changing over the years.

² The list of countries and number of performances are as follows: Spain 8, Finland 2, France 3, Brazil 2, Argentina 5, US 4, Norway 2, Cyprus 1, Italy 1, Mexico 1, Ecuador 1, Germany 2, Chile 1, China 1, Turkey 1 and UK 1.

³ Recently, Teatro Buendía toured to the 2010 Latin Theatre Festival in Chicago. Mexican companies such as Teatro Ojo have also taken advantage of the exposure generated by fmx. In 2011, after showing at the previous year's fmx, Teatro Ojo's performance *Within a Failing State*, "in which abandoned government buildings and public spaces of Mexico City are refigured as sites of memory, activism and reflection on previous authoritarian abuses," obtained the Gold Medal for Best Work in Theatre Architecture and Performance Space, in the Architecture Section of the 12th edition of The Prague Quadrennial (Prague Quadrennial, 26 Sep. 2012).

⁴ Festivalscape was first coined by Yong-Ki Lee, Chong-Ki Lee, Seung-Kon Lee and Barry J. Babin in a 2008 article that defines festivalscapes as the festival environment atmosphere (56-57). This atmosphere, in turn, affects visitors' emotions, satisfaction and loyalty (57). As a consequence, a particular festivalscape has an impact on the festival's business outcomes. This notion of festivalscapes is largely related to the retail atmosphere that affects consumers' attitudes and behaviours (57). However, my definition differs substantially from that concept. I see festivalscapes as the constellation of contrasting social, economic, political, and artistic trajectories and flows impelled by local, national and transnational practices and discourses at a festival. Festivalscapes can vary radically from event to event due to the different ways in which distinct trajectories and coexisting narratives can be articulated in a specific festival.

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