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I loved your programme, but ...

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Abstract

The International Features Conference celebrates its 50th year with a new name - the Audio Storytelling Festival. Those fifty years have seen monumental political, social and technological change in Europe, but documentary-maker Simon Elmes looks back at the people that make the event what it is, a place of dialogue, of learning and of often very robust feedback.

Keywords

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The British novelist, David Lodge, arguably made his name with a comic tale set in the bizarre competitive and often hilarious surroundings of the international conference circuit (*Small World*, 1984). And there's little doubt that such gatherings offer rich source-material for comedy, bitchery and, often too, surprisingly, real constructive dialogue.

In the world of the radio – or as today we must insist the audio – feature, the roster of international gatherings comprises an elite bunch. Small world, indeed. There's the *Prix Italia*, the grand old lady of international media competition, deeply imbued with its Italian heritage, scooting round the Italian boot on a Tui tour of memorable locations: Ravenna, Capri, Torino (for several years) and – in the years of tragic migrations – even Lampedusa. Every year, 'The Prix' as it's often simply referred to was subject to acres of scandal: rows at the highest level, directors sacked, political influence condemned, yadda yadda yadda. But we, the jury, did our stuff and prizes were duly and spectacularly announced.

Over in New York, they had their own fest, "but they just pay them to be there. Everyone gets a gong." So the snobbery-on-the-street went. In Chicago, Third Coast has done sterling work, ferreting out and garlanding a truly majestic range of audio work from home-grown makers – in a relatively short time Third Coast have regularly hit the highest of highs.

But over in Berlin, fifty years ago, a group of men – yes, all men in those days – got together to launch a gathering to rival The Prix. It wasn't – officially at least – competitive, though over the years programmes that received applause were quickly submitted to its companion-competition, the Prix Futura, today Prix Europa. But, setting aside the competitive spirit, what the International Features Conference (as it soon became) was, was a forum for discussion, exchange of ideas, new thoughts and trends and above all for learning. I was unbelievably privileged to be involved for a number of years in the IFC as participant and, more intimately, as a member of the organising committee. In absolute truth, my time with the IFC was the best of my career and, almost, of my whole life. Now, just why on earth would a gathering once a year, across four and a half days make such an impact?

The IFC – or Audio Storytelling Festival as in its 50th year it's been re-christened – is, above all, its people. At the heart lies one of its founding fathers, the remarkable Peter Leonhard Braun. Leo, as he's known to all, a famous and master programme maker became, in the words of German Wikipedia, the 'features-Pope'. Avuncular, forceful, wise – as well as being physically huge – Leo

has been for these fifty years the high-priest of radio feature. You might squirm as he told you your lovingly crafted work was 'a little piece' or that it missed its opportunities. You might feel badly at his gestures of despair as he dismissed your product of hours of hard work as 'trivial stuff' or some-such. But you learned. Boy, you learned. And when Leo put his arm round your shoulder and said, confidingly, 'not bad. That was not bad', you knew you'd truly made progress.

And that learning process is at the heart of what the IFC has always been about.

It's organised around a programme of playbacks of new documentary output, interspersed with plenary sessions on craft and production skills. After each playback, delegates gather in internationally mixed groups of about a dozen, charged with reviewing the programme, the discussion steered by a chair who then reports back to the maker. The maker participates too as a group member and so has to hear both praise and criticism face-to-face with her or his audience. It can be tough!

Discussion can become very rarified, yet it's not always been about complexity and sophistication. I remember many documentaries that have made their impact purely on the strength of their incredible story, well told. The tale of two Irish kids who managed to secrete themselves on board a transatlantic airliner and, undocumented, make out briefly in the Big Apple was sensational. The power of story triumphant.

Then again, with no such rattling-good narrative, there was the German production called, I think, *A Minor*, that embroidered a tissue of emotional response to that single musical key, a programme both surprising and subtle and exquisitely made. Or the Czech documentary about supermarket bin-scavengers, a rough but graphic original story emerging after decades of Soviet conformity.

And, indeed, in its fifty years, the IFC has lived through – and charted – monumental change in Europe: when Poland ceased offering documentaries about World War II and chronicled the plight, for instance, of exploited female migrant workers from the east, it reflected a broader social as well as political seismic shift.

The power of the original subject, the mesmerising treatment, the edge-of-your-seat narrative will always reap applause at the IFC. But most programmes are less world-shaking and, here, strong opinion runs rife. If social media are a forum for heated argument and vituperation, the IFC can be similarly outspoken – rarely as directly expressed perhaps, but nonetheless vicious on occasion. And when

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someone in a discussion group launches into the classic phrase – “I loved your programme...” – only to add the inevitable ‘but’, before delivering a heavy broadside on the use-of-music, the poor quality of the actuality, the too-linear narrative structure (‘where was the *dramaturgy*?’), we all really want to know what Features-Pope Leo thought. Continuity, experience and wisdom.

And, come to think of it, I’d never used that word ‘dramaturgy’ before in normal conversation until at the IFC I learned its precise significance for international documentary-makers. (‘Dramaturgy’ is a term usually of *literary* criticism but here applied to how an audio documentary is structured. British broadcasters rarely use it, yet in Germany and Scandinavia, it’s the norm.) The Danes have even developed a seven-part template for the ‘ideal’ dramaturgy of a feature. Go figure.

But if the IFC has been a wonderful forum for discussion, for opinion-forming, for exchanging ideas (the best producers always steal!), it’s also been a forum for wonderful friendships. Some of my closest bonds have been forged over an IFC glass of wine in a distant city, Hameenlinna in Finland, Sydney, Prague, Vienna, Cork, Bergen, Stockholm, Leipzig, Dublin – lasting friendships, renewed each year, and forged in passionate late-night discussions, or simply through exchanging latest news (‘what are you working on at the moment?’ – the classic IFC version of ‘do you come here often?’).

My first experience of these unique international gatherings was over thirty years ago at the IFC’s close cousin, the Prix Futura. Although strictly a competition, the attendant cast of the German prize is largely identical to the IFC’s, Leo Braun presiding. We were gathered, as so often, in the spiritual home of international feature discussion, the historic headquarters-building of Rundfunk Berlin-Brandenburg in Berlin’s elegant Charlottenburg district. Autumn meant the fall of the leaf and pavements were, as ever, thickly carpeted; there was a chill in the morning air as I made my way to the session where my fondly-crafted feature would be auditioned and discussed. Would critical applause greet my labours, as it had previously in the UK press? I was awed, yet confident.

I can’t now recall the actual words, but an Australian elder statesman of radio was first to speak. He delivered the most withering critique I’d ever heard, unmitigated by one ounce of appreciation or diplomacy. Like a snowball rolling down an Alpine slope, within minutes criticism had swollen to a chorus of disapproval. What I understood, as the pain retreated, was that international discussion is an art. You need to appreciate where people are coming from (often, quite literally) and be prepared to recognise that different broadcasting traditions

bring different approaches, attitudes and sensitivities. Increase your amplitude and understanding and – most important of all – be prepared to learn. Immersion in other people’s views expands one’s skills; you learn from the unexpected, the previously unconsidered.

In 2012, a couple of months before London staged the Olympic Games, the BBC played host to the IFC. I was honoured to be asked to take care of the precious institution. The responsibility! I insisted on ‘German quality’ sound in our Radio Theatre for the playbacks, and our fabulous crew of men and women who look after the historic Broadcasting House building were on point to shepherd the 150 delegates round the maze-like 1932 building, from Security to playback session, to discussion rooms, to breakfast seminars (‘can we afford to give them croissants?’). Looking after this sacred institution felt like being in possession of the Olympic flame for a week. When the ‘closing ceremony’ passed the baton to NRK of Norway, a flood of pride and relief broke over me as Kari Hesthamar uttered the words “see you in Bergen!” We’d got there.

As I say, the friendships forged at the IFC are luminous. And so, too, those friends and colleagues we have lost. René Farabet from France (reserved, refined and masterly in his opinions, as in his features), dry, witty Chris Brookes from Canada (always securing his bicycle against a nearby railing), jovial Wolfgang Bauernfeind from Berlin (‘a little glass of *rotwein*, thank you’) and Leslie Rosin from Hannover, cruelly taken from us too soon, and so recently.

And what places we’ve seen! The beachside sauna as the sun went down on a hot evening in Finland, the grand IFC dinner on an island in the middle of Sydney Harbour, the majestic view from half-way up a mountain over the beautiful port of Bergen... the IFC’s collection of spectacles is unparalleled.

So, in this landmark year, we salute and celebrate a remarkable institution and wish its participants another fifty years of vibrant ideas, passionate debate, lifelong friendships and undying memories. Thank you for letting me be part of your fun.

Author Details

Simon Elmes is an award-winning audio producer and editor. At the BBC, where he worked for over four decades, he was Creative Director of Documentaries. Simon was a member of the International Features Conference Committee for several years, and he is the author of several books on BBC Radio and on English language and dialect, including *The Routes of English*.