



**Asia-Europe cultural cooperation in the 'new normal':
What we learnt this year & the way ahead**

By Ambassador Leon Faber
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at
The Roundtable on
'The Digitisation of International Co-operation:
What Should Theatres Expect in the Era of New Globalization?'

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Good evening everyone! I am joining you today from Singapore where the [Asia-Europe Foundation, ASEF](#) is based.

For those of you who may not know us, we facilitate people-to-people exchange among 51 countries in Asia and Europe, including Russia. In the past 23 years, we have brought together more than 40,000 professionals & students from the 2 continents, to exchange ideas and experiences.

Culture has always been priority area for us. ASEF has been in the business of funding & facilitating multilateral cultural co-operation since 1997, and our vast constituency spans from Scandinavia to Russia and down to southeast Asia and all the way to New Zealand in the Pacific.

What might be interesting for you to know is that our work is publicly funded by 51 countries, including Russia, as well as the EU and the ASEAN Secretariat (that brings together 10 south east Asian countries). Together, these 53 partners make up the Asia-Europe Meeting, ASEM informal political dialogue process that set up the Asia-Europe Foundation.

In the area of culture, we work across all artistic disciplines including theatre. We disseminate resources for artists, set up masterclasses & training workshops, offer travel grants & commission new writing on the arts.

I would like to highlight that collaboration is at the heart of our work. Our mission is not merely to support artists to create by themselves...it is – in fact - for artists from Asia & Europe to create together.

Our expertise, therefore, lies in curating where & how artists and cultural professionals gather. So... you can well imagine that our traditional 'business model', which was dominated by face-to-face encounters gathering artists, has been severely disrupted.

I am sure you theatre folks well recognise this particular conundrum we are facing! Because, like our own work, theatre is unique in that, at its very core, it is collaborative and involves the magic of live encounters.



This Covid-created conundrum led us at ASEF to deliberate – over the course of this year - on how we could keep Asia-Europe cultural collaborations going, despite the overwhelming odds.

Today, I would like to share with all of you a little of what we learnt this year, thanks to Covid, and how we are adapting to the ‘new normal’.

We learnt very early on in the lockdown that theatre was among the worst hit sectors across Asia & Europe, as the heart-breaking decision was made to stop production & let the curtains fall.

Even where the arts went digital, as many genres have done with great success including theatre, we realised the urgent need to compensate cultural professionals for creating & sharing their work online. Particularly, the vast armies of freelancers - cast, creatives, production, technical teams – who make up the bulk of the theatre community. If Shakespeare's Globe Theatre had to call for urgent funding to avoid insolvency, we could well imagine the uncertainty facing smaller theatres and the independent artists who make it all happen.

We also realised that Covid is likely to exacerbate existing challenges, including that of unequal collaborations. The big question with collaborations has always been: who do you collaborate with and, on what terms? Inequalities persist even on a good day! Very often, visibility (rather than ability) determines who gets the chance to become a collaborator on a production. So, we asked ourselves: how to reach out beyond ‘the usual suspects’ to support emerging & more vulnerable professionals at this uncertain time?

With the digitisation of international collaboration, we became even more acutely aware of the equity problem. How, for example, do we make sure that a non-English speaking freelancer from a small city in the periphery has an equal chance to access a digital opportunity, as an English-speaking full-time staff of a major theatre company that is well aware of the grants & schemes being offered? How to make sure both benefit & develop their full potential – not one at the cost of the other?

On the other hand, I must add that we were also deeply encouraged by positive side effects of going digital.

Our living rooms had become theatres: so, we had the unimaginable opportunity to do 2 things very differently.

First, we could now extend our seating capacity to well beyond that of a regular theatre building.

And, secondly, we could bring completely new audiences to theatre. The U.K. Arts Council’s report “From Live-to-Digital” confirms that streaming does indeed appear to attract younger, less wealthy and more ethnically diverse members of the population.



So, we sat down at ASEF with our culture team to think about how we should adapt our projects and methods to the new normal. And, 2 fundamental principles for our future work emerged...

We agreed that we would strive to create equal opportunities for everyone working in the arts in the new normal, and in the best way we could within our means, of course. We did not want Covid to deepen the imbalances that already exist and we which at ASEF have worked for over 2 decades to undo.

We also re-affirmed the need to ensure ethical work practices in the arts, particularly in these difficult times. Creators should always be paid when they share their creations for the public to enjoy, even if virtually.

In line with these ideas, we are now piloting and testing virtual artist residencies, where artists are paid to take time to meet & collaborate with their peers from other countries.

For these pilot programmes, we also decided to give priority to young, emerging artists in the early stages of their career, namely those who are the worst affected by Covid.

Outside of our own projects and events, we continue to compile and publish information about all sorts of grants & funds now available to artists – this is through our arts website, culture360.ASEF.org. I would encourage all of you to please go have a look and use these resources.

In the coming weeks, we will be opening a call for writers to create new content for the culture360 arts website. We would welcome applications from those of you watching today & who write about theatre. It is our aim to commission and publish new knowledge on the arts, by giving voice to those who are not in the mainstream. So, please keep an eye on our social media: both that of ASEF and culture360.

And early next year, we hope to offer co-creation micro-grants for artists & arts managers from Asia and Europe, to create joint new works or texts and showcase them to the world using social media as our gallery. Our *Mobility First!* former travel grants are likely to transform into collaboration grants in 2021 and seed new & unusual connections across the 51 countries we work in. Think of this as an opportunity to travel virtually to countries on your bucket list & co-create with your peers!

We would be delighted to receive out-of-the-box proposals from the theatre community. We are particularly interested in supporting fresh talent, especially from countries and regions that are, unfortunately, still very under-represented in Asia-Europe cultural cooperation. We also strongly encourage freelancers to apply and those living and working in towns, villages and spaces outside the big cultural centres. We are also keen to explore mini pieces of theatre created for audiences who have never entered a physical theatre or seen live performances ever before.

Another exciting opportunity for our Asian and European young cultural professionals and youth across all sectors is the ASEF Young Leaders Summit (ASEFYLS), the official youth



platform of the Asia-Europe Meeting political dialogue process & which connects young people with the Heads of States from 51 Asian & European countries and the political Leaders of the EU & the ASEAN Secretariat. The 4th edition of the ASEF Young Leaders Summit will be part of the 13th ASEM Summit of Heads of State and Government next year in Cambodia. It will focus on youth leadership for “Sustainable Development in a post-COVID-19 World” & will be a hybrid project taking place virtually, in Cambodia & in Singapore, as well as across ASEM countries. Watch out for the Open Call for Applications which will be launched in the first quarter of 2021 – we are looking for young & creative changemakers and community leaders between 18-35 years.

Another youth opportunity is the the 23rd ASEF Summer University (ASEFSU) on "ASEM Cities of the Future: Developing Liveable Habitats", which will take place in 2021 in partnership with cities and local governments in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan. This is an experiential learning journey for students & young professionals to develop innovative solutions to societal challenges. Watch out for our open call next year.

The idea – as you surely understand – is to create more opportunities, greater agency for artists, and more equitable long-term relationships between Asia & Europe, while also making the arts more collaborative. So, watch out for the *Mobility First!* grants in early 2021.

Do write to us at culture@asef.org if you have ideas or would like to know more about us. We would love to hear from you on what we could do to deepen Asia-Europe virtual cultural co-operation in the new normal & also, how we could strengthen ASEF's relationship with the vibrant and vast Russian arts community.

Thank you!