



going dutch

Meet IFEA's New Chairman Charlotte DeWitt interviews Johan Moerman

He's tall, kindly, and always thinking. That's the first thing that you notice about Johan Moerman, the 2010 Chairman of IFEA's Board of Directors. While his native language is Dutch, he is also fluent in English and speaks some German and French, as well. He jokingly says he can say "good morning" and "thank you" in several other languages—useful for someone who has worked in almost forty countries as diverse as Azerbaijan, Poland, and Korea.

How did you first hear about IFEA, and what caused you to get involved?

When I was setting up Rotterdam Festivals in the early '90s, we were looking for best practices and partnerships in other countries. Hans Horsting, a respected colleague who worked for the Chamber of Commerce in Rotterdam, and now an IFEA Hall of Fame member, told me about IFEA. The first IFEA convention I went to was in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (USA) in 1991. It was an overwhelming experience, where I felt "at home," found new friends, and learned many new things. It ended with one of the best fireworks shows I have ever seen, shot from barges on the Ohio River and donated by the Zambelli family. There are experi-

For the leading association of festivals and events in seven parts of the world, it is a marriage made in heaven. In the 55-year history of IFEA, Johan Moerman is the first Chairman who comes from outside North America.

It gets better. Johan also has a degree in business economics and administration, which gives him the sort of left brain/right brain equilibrium essential to someone who has spent most of his professional life orchestrating urban cultural change. If one had to give him a job title, it would more likely be that of "Cultural Conductor" than his present title as Managing Director of Rotterdam Festivals, in The Netherlands.

These same skills—the ability to listen, to assimilate, to interpret, and to facilitate—coupled with his international perspective and his higher professional education at the University of Applied Sciences give IFEA a chairman uniquely qualified to lead the association towards a vision of a more globally optimized organization.

He is also uncommonly modest, which means that Johan's style of leadership encourages process without politics, for the good of the whole. It is a style more common to Europe than the United States.

Bio in brief

Johan Moerman is Managing Director of Rotterdam Festivals, the organization responsible for event and policy co-ordination in Rotterdam, The Netherlands. He started Rotterdam Festivals in 1994. Rotterdam has been recognized as the best event city in the country and praised for its con-

sistent and innovative festival policy.

Johan has more than twenty years of experience in the cultural industries. Before starting Rotterdam Festivals, he worked for the Rotterdam Arts Council for twelve years, eventually as Deputy Director before leaving to start Rotterdam Festivals.

Johan is a specialist in concepts that optimize the co-operation between cities and event producers and maximize the results for both festival organizers and city authorities. "Festivals help cities to strengthen their attractiveness and image," he says. "They increase the number of tourists, increase community pride, and develop neighborhoods." He is convinced that the key success factor is the way that all partners involved collaborate and stimulate each other to emphasize the unique character of the city and improve the quality of life of its citizens, and it is this philosophy of inclusiveness that he brings to the Board of IFEA.

Johan served as treasurer of IFEA Europe's Board of Directors from 1994 – 2002. He was invited to join IFEA World's Board in 2002, and was elected Chair-Elect in 2008.

In addition to his work with IFEA, Johan is also a board member of Rotterdam Philharmonic's Gergiev Festival and of Audiences Europe, a European network for people involved in audience development in the arts. He also works as a consultant for FEL, Festivals and Events International, a group of highly-qualified specialists in England, Ireland, The Netherlands, and Denmark.

ences that stay with you the rest of your life. This was one of them.

After Pittsburgh, my professional life changed forever. I became a part of a network of professionals that even today grows larger every year. We Rotterdammers were so positive and enthusiastic back then that we offered to organize the next worldwide IFEA convention in The Netherlands. It became a reality in 1992.

That convention (or conference, as we say in Europe), was also the birthplace of IFEA Europe and was an important step in establishing the direction of the international network our association is today. Those were the great pioneer days where, Charlotte DeWitt, CFEA, as the first European President, played an important role. I remember some great conferences, like the one at the Stockholm Water Festi-

val. I also remember discussions about "tone of voice" at these conferences. The Americans wanted to hear success stories but for some reason, Europeans were just as inspired by stories about failures and bloopers. But we bridged all the cultural differences and had a lot of fun at the end of the day.

What is your personal relationship with the international theme?

I grew up in a port city and in a house with a view on the river between Rotterdam and the sea. I was eight years old when I saw the big ocean liners sailing to Shanghai, Singapore, Baltimore, and Seattle. It made me realize that the world was bigger than the place I grew up in,

that there were other places, with other people and other ideas around us. For some reason, that was not frightening, but inspiring— the beginning of a life in which I had dozens of pen pals all over the world when I was sixteen and wanted to travel the world by the time I was twenty-four. But I never thought that I would become the chair of a wonderful international festival network in a globally united festival industry.

What role does internationalism and/or multi-culturalism play in the programming of festivals in Rotterdam?

Because Rotterdam is a port city, we are international by nature. There are 168 different ethnic groups living in the city, and in a few years' time, fifty percent of these 600,000 people will have parents who haven't grown up in The Netherlands. For this reason, international exchange is a natural thing to do in Rotterdam. Shanghai, St. Petersburg, and Baltimore, for example, are "twin" or "sister" cities. We have cultural exchanges with all corners of the earth. We celebrate a tropical Caribbean-style summer carnival, a big world music and poetry festival, one of the most respected international film festivals for independent filmmakers in the world, an annual festival for contemporary Turkish art, and many, many more events throughout the year.

What is your vision for IFEA?

Without doubt we're all focussing on the way we can survive this financial crisis at the moment. I have a great belief in the role IFEA can play in this. I am looking forward to the convention in St. Louis, Missouri (USA), where we will meet each other between September 15 and 17. We're all in the same situation. What could possibly be more cost-effective than to visit the convention and be able to talk with experienced colleagues who have to deal with the same problems as yourself – and without consultancy costs!

That does not take away the fact that we all need a vision that goes beyond the short-term problems, and this is where the international part of IFEA comes in.

Why is internationalization important for our industry?

I don't think the impact of globalization can be underestimated. We can no longer hide behind our safe borders. The internet created a worldwide communications system that goes beyond borders and political systems. Internationalization will be more and more visible in our

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towns, villages, and neighborhoods. The world will come to us, and world will be open for all of us.

In the coming years, IFEA, too, will steadily become more international. We will have members in every corner of the globe. Our international committee is already working on plans for international exchanges of talented staff-members and other ways to communicate on a global level. This opens an exciting new horizon– a worldwide network of event professionals from very different backgrounds who will inspire and help each other to realize our dreams and build our communities. In my opinion, this opens lots of new opportunities– for our lives, which will be enriched by many, many, new and wonderful experiences – and for our businesses.

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