

*Producing the AACT WorldFest: Management Challenges of the Biennial World
Festival Organized by the American Association of Community Theatre*

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Introduction

The growing worldwide popularity of international theatre festivals over the past several decades has contributed greatly to the development of the art form, and attracted the critical attention of scholars, arts managers, municipal planners and many others. With regard to the *artistic* impact these festivals exert, theatre practitioners have profited from scores of new and unusual venues for performing arts troupes, important and well-funded commissions supporting new work, hundreds of emerging networking opportunities, and innovative programs engaging local communities that boost promotional efforts. With regard to the management challenges that festivals pose, festival organizers now deal with new problems of multilingual contracts and performances, revenue-sharing with foreign ensembles and corporate partners, and visa arrangements with government agencies. These are only a few examples that reveal how global festivals are now helping to drive

and develop theatre arts today, and encouraging scholars of arts management to take a closer look at how these events are being organized.

We should note that the rise of theatre festivals in the 20th and 21st centuries represents a significant change in the way dramatic art has traditionally developed over history. Playwrights, for example, have frequently injected new ideas into theatrical practice (Shakespeare, Goldoni, Brecht). Designers, too, have played their part in re-vitalizing the art form (the Bibiena family, Josef Svoboda, Jo Mielziner). Often gifted actors and inspired directors have led the stage in new directions; and successful producers of the modern era like Cameron Mackintosh or David Merrick have scored significant impact internationally for their individual shows. But never before in theatre history have international festivals under the guidance of professional managers helped develop the art form to the extent that we're witnessing today.

Who are the organizers of these contemporary global festivals? How exactly have they managed to exert such influence on the art form? How have the management strategies in different nations—for sourcing talent, serving publics, integrating volunteers, accommodating artists, etc.—produced vital, long-standing, and popular cultural events? What have been the successful trends in financing and fundraising? What key differences can we note between urban-centered theatre festivals versus rural ones?

These questions and others prod scholars to conduct studies of festival management in academic journals. Occasionally these center upon *practical* aspects of management such as a festival's audience demographics or its economic impact on the local community. Other researchers have examined the *leadership* importance of festival organizers, noting the long-term role that global theatre festivals play in forming a national or regional sense of identity and cosmopolitanism. Still others debate problematic sociocultural issues to which international theatre festivals often give rise: cultural hegemony, economic exploitation, or cultural tourism.

This study sheds light upon some of these questions by regarding arts festivals through the lens of arts leadership. It uses as a case study one international theatre festival taking place biennially in Venice, Florida: the aactWorldFest;¹ and it examines a few of the key principles guiding the directors in 2018 to develop successful initiatives. This festival is affiliated with the world's largest amateur theatre organization, the American Association of Community Theatre.

In order to accomplish this, the study relies on interviews with key Festival organizers, with attendees, and with members of the international troupes--conversations offering unique insights into many areas of Festival operation, as well as assessments of the Festival's impact. The study also uses data from the management staff of the American Association of Community Theatre because this provides a helpful way of documenting the importance of aactWorldFest for the amateur theatre community in the United States. Site visits to the Festival in 2010,

2014 and 2018 will be used to help explain the growth and development of the event. Finally, critical comparisons with other contemporary global theatre festivals—principally in Europe—will help to place the study of this event within an international context of “best management practices” for festival operation.

Though a full study of management decisions cannot be adequately performed in the space of a short article, the specific topics addressed here on festival leadership practices include the following:

- the importance of partnering with a national organization strongly focused upon community engagement,
- the long-term objectives for organizing volunteers,
- establishing meaningful criteria for sourcing talent, and
- developing policies for workshops and residencies that enhance networking.

We should begin our study with a look at the context in which the aactWorldFest has developed in the United States.

Background of the aactWorldFest

The American Association of Community Theatre (AACT) is the largest amateur theatre organization in the world. It represents more than 7,000 member theatres in the U.S.A. and overseas, with more than one million volunteers. AACT also serves nearly 8 million audience members annually, involving more participants, presenting more performances of more productions and playing to more people than any performing art in the country. Each year, the association hosts its annual conference at a different one of its member theatres, as well as state and regional play festivals where member theatres compete for recognition; and every two years it showcases a week-long series of ten productions adjudicated as “best-of-show” from among all AACT member theatres worldwide.

AACT was established in the early 1950s, and assumed its current structure in 1986 as a nonprofit U.S. corporation. Its mission statement tells us that AACT wishes to “enable community theatres across the country to become the cornerstones of the creative life of their communities.”² The Association has presented annual, biennial and quadrennial festivals featuring the work of its member theatres since its founding more than a half-century ago.

It’s important to recognize in this mission statement the way in which AACT theatres are *strongly rooted in their local communities*: educationally, artistically and culturally. This is the single most important feature distinguishing the Association’s member theatres—and its drama festivals—from all other types of theatre produced in the United States.³ The national Association sets down clear guidelines for its member theatres in the areas of performance and production best practices, management structure, community education, and cultural contributions.

In the case of WorldFest, the past three iterations of the Festival have been hosted by the Venice Theatre in Florida. There, the Venice Theatre's experienced and dedicated volunteer Board of Directors represent many local businesses and municipal organizations, volunteering their efforts to supporting their community with a rich cultural environment. Additionally, the Venice Theatre—like all AACT theatres—are volunteer-based in their stage productions.⁴ The contribution of so many community volunteers (more than 200 for WorldFest 2018) helps provide management and production support for Festival operations.

We should also bear in mind the range of national resources that have always supported AACT theatre festivals. Since WorldFest's first edition in 1990, the Festival has also featured:

- workshops for AACT members and the public,
- competitive prizes for productions,
- adjudication of shows by professional judges,
- vendor sales and promotions,
- AACT membership meetings,
- community engagement activities⁵,
- social events and other functions.

Over the years, aactWorldFest has been able to appeal on many levels not just to the Association's members and visiting troupes, but also to general audiences and theatre practitioners around the country. And this wide range of different activities poses broad management challenges to the Festival staff.

What all of this means is that this Festival is uniquely positioned within the nurturing structure of the American community theatre network. That network bolsters WorldFest's efforts to schedule, promote, and manage Festival events and programs; the affiliation of the Festival with AACT also guarantees that the Festival's activities are strongly focused on impacting and serving the municipal venue where the Festival is taking place; and it ensures that all Festival productions conform to a set of "best practices" set forth by the national organization for safety, quality, and training purposes.

This service of the Venice Theatre—and all AACT theatres' service—to the local community is noteworthy in our discussion: the choice of shows these theatres present, their sourcing of talent and support staff, the training programs that they offer, and their artistic policies and accountability. Just as any artistic work will invariably reflect the historical period and society in which it has been created, aactWorldFest reflects the values and interests of the local and national artistic community that it serves.

WorldFest Staffing at Venice Theatre

The husband-and-wife team of Murray and Lori Chase have directed the aactWorldFest since 2010. Murray Chase has served for over twenty years as Venice Theatre's Producing Executive Director, and Lori Chase as Venice Theatre's Event Coordinator. Their decades-long *dedication to the cultural development of the city* in which their theatre is located testifies to their skills as arts leaders; just as *their roles as theatrical producers* accounts for much of the success of the management policies governing the theatre's annual season of plays.

The production season of this theatre is impressive. One of the nation's largest community stages, Venice Theatre presented seventeen full productions in 2018; fifteen booked-in regional and national artists; 16 - 20 local artists' cabarets and concerts; as well as outreach productions and tours. This total does not include the dozen productions invited to aactWorldFest (each of which enjoyed at least two performances) during the Venice Theatre's summer season. Thus Lori and Murray Chase, as well as their management staff, are well-experienced and resourceful when it comes to producing plays in the context of an international theatre festival.

Additionally, Venice Theatre fields a popular, comprehensive program of training for the local community year-round; so the special workshops, audience discussions, and other events that are part of aactWorldFest in the summer are little different from the normal activities managed by the Venice Theatre staff during its regular season. For example, VT serves its local public by offering twenty-six training classes annually for different age groups. It also supports technical apprenticeships and internships, a scholarship program, a season of plays for young audiences, a senior theatre touring show, a drama therapy program for students with developmental disabilities, and a creative dramatics program for disadvantaged children. The theatre's paid staff numbers twenty-four people (not including the teaching staff) who organize and run these programs year-round, including activities of the biennial WorldFest.

It is plain to see that Lori and Murray Chase rely heavily on their theatre's management staff to produce aactWorldFest. Looking more closely at the Venice Theatre's production support of the Festival, however, we can see how the Chase's leadership decisions for accommodating foreign ensembles play a key role in the Festival's success. International festivals, for example, often find it especially challenging to provide adequate technical support for troupes from all over the world.⁶ Some visiting groups come from developing nations, and lack the technology and "best practice" procedures commonly found in first-world theatres. Other troupes are "bare bones" groups without access to their own technical staff, crews and shops while touring. And quick "change-over" scheduling of the different shows is essential. It makes a great deal of sense, therefore, for hosting organizations like Venice Theatre to have a competent, experienced and well-equipped technical staff to support an array of theatrical productions from all over the world.

But more than just providing production support for moving plays on and off the stage according to a tight schedule, the Chases have also "gone the extra mile" to

accommodate international artists and make them feel welcome—an important explanation for the Festival’s internationally famous reputation. Rob White, one of sixty-four volunteer homestay hosts for WorldFest2018 remarked about the production support in Venice, while discussing the artists from the United Kingdom that he was hosting: “The British company raved about the quality of support they received in presenting their show at the festival: the professionalism of crews, and even the fact that Venice Theatre’s workshop staff was happy to rebuild a critical piece of furniture damaged in transit from the UK.”⁷

In another production support situation, however, Murray Chase’s leadership skills revealed the importance of having a remarkably flexible production team on hand in order to be certain that the needs of his artists were always given precedence over other considerations. This occurred in 2018 when one of the European troupes changed its mind about the performance venue as soon as they arrived: they requested they be moved to the theatre’s smaller “black box” stage. In this sudden turnaround with barely two hours notice, Murray Chase’s technicians added more than three dozen folding chairs to the Pinkerton black box, reducing the performance area. All the lighting and sound cues were re-cued from proscenium to a thrust configuration; and new stage platforming was assembled and installed. Finally, the box office scheduled additional performances to satisfy the demands of many playgoers whose reserved seats had to be changed to different days and times.

Few world festivals can accommodate the needs of invited troupes in such ways. Lori and Murray Chase’s artistic leadership, however, has developed skilled and flexible production teams that can frequently deal with such challenges—as Murray explained it, “This was the ultimate adaptation skill, executed to near-perfection.”⁸ This is a significant factor helping to explain why many troupes are eager to return to Venice for successive editions of the Festival, confident that the VT staff will be able to support their production needs once they arrive.

Murray and Lori Chase bring strong leadership skills to the table as the Festival’s producers. No newcomer to management tasks, he has guided Venice Theatre for more than two decades, and has also served as national President of the American Association of Community Theatre. His connections within the American amateur theatre community are therefore extensive, enabling him to source productions from American theatres, as well as meet the needs of AACT members for workshops, meetings, and the like. Additionally, Murray and Lori Chase have served fifteen years with AACT’s International Committee, representing the USA at numerous international festivals and conferences. All this experience has equipped them to recruit, house, present, and transport the amateur troupes they host in Venice.

To understand the importance of this leadership experience in managing a global theatre festival, we can also look at the accommodations the Chases have set in place for housing their global visitors. Unlike many international festivals that accommodate troupes in empty dormitories or hostels for only a few days,

aactWorldFest provides homestays with volunteer families during the entire week-long festival. This policy of social immersion in the community maximizes artistic sharing among the troupes and facilitates their networking on many levels. Maureen Young, Venice Theatre's Housing Coordinator, spoke to the importance of this:

We really try to make the groups feel immersed in our community by the quality of the homestays that we arrange. Home Hosts remain with the troupes all the time, and they often take their groups to local museums and tourist attractions. In fact, many times home hosts will get their groups together and throw pool parties and barbecues for their groups."⁹

Her opinion is supported by comments from many members of foreign troupes participating in the Festival. For example, Durga Bishwokarma, actress from Nepal's White Winter Theatre, remarked: "We visit many other festivals, but this festival in Venice is different. People are much more friendly here, everywhere we go. Everyone is so kind. Are all the people here in Venice so friendly?"¹⁰ And Sanja Kresojevič, a young actress from Maribor, Slovenia, reported her group's bonding "in newly-born friendships that will hopefully remain forever."¹¹

Finally, we should also note the key role played by Lori Chase who is also tasked as the Festival's travel coordinator, spending long hours making sure that all the visas for visiting troupes are properly arranged. Frequently she's also on the phone with officials from Homeland Security and the State Department. Few people are aware of the complexity of U.S. visa requirements, but challenges for foreigners seeking to enter the United States are now particularly stringent.¹² Artists and athletes from Asia or the southern Americas—Cuba, Venezuela, Guatemala--are especially hobbled by visa restrictions, and Lori Chase spends long hours facilitating visa arrangements.

Passport-holders from African or Muslim nations, for example, are particularly suspect. And Asian visitors from nations torn by religious strife (Bangladesh, Malaysia, Myanmar) also find it difficult to squeeze past border controls in the U.S.A. In 2018, ten of the twelve members of the troupe from Nepal invited to the WorldFest were denied visas at the last minute, so the remaining two actors had to distill their original show into a two-character version for aactWorldFest audiences to enjoy.

In addition to the staff of Venice Theatre who are well trained in producing shows, we should also keep in mind that the umbrella organization of the American Association of Community Theatre strongly promotes WorldFest to its membership and to the general public, even though AACT does not underwrite or financially support the Festival.¹³

For instance, AACT members eagerly register each year for the annual conference where they receive valuable training in specialty workshops, network

with other association members, meet vendors of theatrical supplies and services, familiarize themselves with the work of other theatres around the nation. AACT members also enjoy reduced prices for airline travel, hotel accommodations, entertainment and dining choices at the Festival. All of these benefits are provided by the WorldFest's association with the national AACT organization.

It is important to keep in mind that many international arts festivals lack this linkage with a large, well-defined theatre association. The strength of the American Association of Community Theatre underpins key aspects of the aactWorldFest: the Festival's community engagement strategies, the skills of its producers, its partnering with hotels/airlines/local vendors/etc., and the advertising efforts promoting the event.

Of course, larger and more famous international arts festivals (Avignon, Edinburgh, the Paris Autumn Festival, the Athens-Epidaurus Festival) play for much higher stakes in the global entertainment marketplace. Heavily underwritten by different governments (unlike current policies in the United States Congress), these festivals seek out the most famous headliners and well-known ensembles that will attract large numbers of global audiences, and contribute to their nations' prestige. For the same reason, these festivals are well-supported by corporations, foundations, city and state offices eager to partner with them due to the government "seed money" and famous artists on the program. Thus, these festivals can reach out to more diverse publics than simply AACT members who constitute the major portion of WorldFest audiences.

These large international theatre festivals are also organized by professional managers, and they are unaffiliated with particular theatres. In contrast to the aactWorldFest, their management staff frequently turn over on an annual basis, and this can sometimes lead to inconsistency in programming. For instance, many festivals try to present different events in multiple venues such as theatres, concert recital halls, and "found" spaces that often include street performances. This makes it challenging for spectators who must mingle with the general public in a large city and find their way through unfamiliar streets to locate a particular venue. By contrast, Venice Theatre's aactWorldFest centralizes all its operations upon only a single campus—the theatre itself—where performances, workshops, meetings and other events all take place.¹⁴

In summary, AACT's national organization that sponsors the WorldFest contributes greatly to the Festival's success in Florida; and Venice Theatre's infrastructure provides a solid base of support for all the Festival's operations. Although a small festival centering only on amateur stage productions, WorldFest has taken its place in the United States under the leadership of the Chases as an international festival whose values are shared by the many participants who engage with workshops, meetings, performances, and social networking events. A strong sense of community among festivalgoers results from this.

Sourcing Productions for the WorldFest

The central focus of aactWorldFest, like that of any international arts festival, has always been the artistic program. Both commercial and amateur arts festival leaders spend a great part of the year traveling in order to identify work that will appeal to their audiences.¹⁵

Murray and Lori Chase are no exception. They travel frequently to New York scouting plays for the Venice Theatre's regular season. They also travel to attend regional festivals of the American Association of Community Theatre in order to identify important shows suitable for representing the U.S.A. at the WorldFest (normally one show on each WorldFest program represents the United States).

With regard to inviting a U.S. production as a Festival entry, the Chases have a broad range of work from which to draw. In order to avoid "political" wrangling by rival community theatres and favoritism in selecting work, they rely mainly on the annual AACT competition circuit to narrow their choices.

Each year community theaters throughout the U.S.A. compete in regional festivals where troupes present one-hour shows that are judged and discussed by professionals in the theatre industry. These are typically 60-minute cuttings or scaled-down parts of shows that troupes stage during their current seasons. Winners of state competitions advance to these regional competitions; and every two years AACT hosts a national festival known as AACTFest, where the regional winners compete, and national recognition is awarded.

As past officers of AACT, Lori and Murray Chase are familiar faces at many of these events. The festivals (ten regions in all) are open to the public, and provide an excellent way for the Chases to watch a number of shows from U.S. theatres, and speak to directors over a period of a few days. Not only does the AACT competition cycle showcase work from all regions of the USA (and U.S. overseas military bases), but the productions are juried or "adjudicated" by critical judges according to strict production standards and AACT regulations.

Moreover, AACT's national adjudication process awards prizes in numerous categories, along the lines of the annual Tony Awards. The aactWorldFest also celebrates participating theatres in Venice with similar recognitions.¹⁶ The entire process, therefore, is designed to develop high-quality, diverse, and technically competent shows conforming to the best practices in the USA for stage production.¹⁷

The Chases locate international plays exclusively at European Festivals, where a wide range of work in many theatrical styles can be seen. When asked in 2018 whether he felt they might travel to Asia, Africa or the southern Americas to improve the international "flavor" of the program, Murray Chase replied: "I don't think so. I don't see us traveling farther than Europe because there are plenty of Asian, Caribbean and South American troupes traveling to festivals there."¹⁸

This strategy is questionable, however. Only one production in 2018 was Asian (Nepal)¹⁹; while a second selection, from Australia, was regarded, of course, more as a “western” offering than anything in Asian style or focus. Only two shows represented the southern Americas, one of which—from Argentina’s *La Compasiva Teatro*--had been seen in 2011 at an amateur festival in Norway; it had already appeared at Venice twice previously. So the production was no longer very original, even though it may have been “new” to first-time festivalgoers. Eight other productions came either from the U.S. or Europe; while one came from the Mideast (Israel).

Thus in 2018, 62% of the WorldFest program was Eurocentric, 15% was sourced from the southern Americas, and only 8% came from Asia, the Mideast, and Polynesia respectively. There were no troupes at all representing China, India, the Caribbean or Africa--all vibrant and creative regions of theatrical experimentation. On the other hand, the majority of the performances selected were certainly accessible to English-speaking audiences. And despite the Festival’s reliance upon Eurocentric work, the productions seen in Venice were highly praised by local reviewers, and were well-received by the audience.

This matter of “cultural balance” in AACT’s world festival points to an important question that has faced organizers of world theatre festivals since the late twentieth-century: should “global” artistic programs reflect a variety of cultures (“global inclusivity”), or a variety of the highest-quality and best-received theatrical productions regardless of their geographical origin (“artistic excellence”)? Persuasive arguments surround each position and the two camps are not necessarily mutually exclusive. The solution frequently assumes the form of a marketing decision: whatever strategy attracts and serves the largest public will dominate the program.²⁰

Economic constraints, of course, will govern the selection process in any case, and this may result in either a “diversity-inspired” globalist showcase or a “star-studded” artistic program, both of which can attract spectators. A festival’s advertising/public relations staff will be able to “spin” a festival’s focus and impact in either direction. But in the case of small festivals like the acctWorldFest that fields only twelve shows, it is not always possible to build an artistic lineup that successfully blends both goals.

When asked about this in 2018, Murray Chase pointed to his desire to serve mainly the AACT membership, the core group of aactWorldFest participants. This choice is important because it reflects Murray’s long-term goal of keeping the aactWorldFest focused on serving mainly the needs of AACT members. He noted that while the Festival’s public seeks a convenient “window” to theatrical differences around the world, festivalgoers are also AACT members attending their annual conference. As a community, they want to take part in committee meetings, regional planning efforts, networking events, election of officers, AACT reports, theatre training in workshops, and meetings with product vendors (theatrical

equipment, script publishers, etc.). This is the community that aactWorldFest serves. Thus when choosing shows to invite, Murray declared:

We also want aactWorldFest shows to convince people that theatre doesn't have to be 'flat,' that you don't have to always just find a script, pay for rights, hire the production team, etcetera. People should see all kinds of ways of staging theatre and think, 'Hey! That's really different and we could do that, too!'"²¹

Murray Chase's sentiments are echoed by many other AACT members. Tim Jebesen, Executive Director of the Midland (Texas) Community Theatre, enjoys the opportunities offered by aactWorldFest "to see works from around the world and learn more about the similarities and differences between our work and theirs."²² And audiences at the aactworldFest do seem less interested in cutting-edge production techniques, ethnic inclusivity, or theoretical perspectives than they are in practical considerations for improving their own theatres' artistic approaches.

When it comes to sourcing international shows to invite to the Festival, Lori and Murray Chase rely upon several amateur world festivals: the biennial "FITAG" in Catalonia (<http://www.fitag.cat/>), the giant quadrennial "Mondial" in Monaco produced by the International Amateur Theatre Association (<http://www.aitaiata.net/>), and the Liverpool International Theatre Festival in Nova Scotia (<http://www.litf.ca/>). Occasionally they also visit the Spots op West festival in southern Belgium (<https://www.opendoek.be/spotsopwest/2018>).

Although all of these festivals are long-standing and well-known, the largest one takes place in Monaco. This ten-day Mondial is by far the world's most prestigious international amateur theatre festival not only because of its location in the south of France, but also because of the variety of performances, the high-quality workshops, critical forums, international Congress meetings, and special events that one finds there. Murray Chase points out, however, that Monaco's joint international selection committee always selects productions more for their political and geographical importance than for their artistic worth. Striving to include work from all of AITA/IATA's world regions, he feels, degrades the artistic quality of many of that Festival's shows; and that is something he doesn't want to see happen in Venice.²³

Eligibility Criteria for the aactWorldFest

In addition to Murray and Lori Chase's desire to invite troupes displaying production approaches that AACT members might find artistically challenging, their oversight has set in place other well-defined standards to help guide the Festival. These are noteworthy to consider because they forestall many problems that often arise in festivals organized by managers lacking effective leadership.

Chief among these standards is the question of whether Venice Theatre can accommodate the scale of a production. With only two performance spaces--a traditional 432-seat proscenium stage with balcony, and a 90-seat "blackbox"--the Chases must be certain that a production can be technically supportable. How much scenery is required? What lighting effects can be created with the Venice Theatre's equipment? What are the sound demands? Do the actors need to interact with spectators in the audience area? Do the technical special effects, the combatives work, or the actors' performances conform to fire-safety codes and community standards? With all these factors to consider, it is essential that a festival's arts leaders make the commitment to see productions first-hand, and not simply rely upon press reviews, or DVD recordings (both of which are required for the application process).

This becomes especially important in the area of "aesthetic distance": how close does the production to be in relation to the audience. Some shows, for example, are best appreciated for their overall scenic impact, or special effects—such as musicals and dance recitals. Larger, proscenium-style theatres are generally better for this type of show. Other productions, however—particularly today in the era of "performance art" and experimentation—play better when the audience is closer to the performers, and the dynamic interaction between player and spectator is enhanced in a smaller studio-type of theatre. This testifies to the need for arts leaders to be familiar with the spatial possibilities, the artistic potential of the stage, since this will help to guide their choices in the selection process.

A second and more difficult standard guiding Lori and Murray Chase in selecting productions is the need to identify a show as an amateur, community-based event. This isn't as easy as it sounds because the word "amateur" is a contested term internationally. To some, the word is pejorative and means "low quality, inferior" entertainment as opposed to "high quality" professional work. To others, amateur simply means "unpaid," whereas professional artists are financially compensated for their effort. Some people (especially in the United States) feel that amateur talent simply means general non-union talent, while union "professionals" are dedicated to high standards as defined by experts in the field. And still others (especially in the southern Americas) regard as "amateurs" those who practice the arts in their free time mainly because they personally enjoy creative pursuits and cultural expression.

It is this latter group that conforms best to the notion of "amateur" as defined by AACT: "people who love" doing theatre, and who are not motivated by financial gain or stardom. This non-commercial focus of work is the bedrock standard²⁴ for inviting shows to the aactWorldFest, because it really does help to define a national or international category of playmakers who don't depend upon the theatre to make a living or promote their careers in the entertainment industry. As Jim Walker, AACT's Vice-President pointed out: "WorldFest feels different to me, a real community of theatres develops and grows during WorldFest. And it happens for the audience as well, not just the performing companies."²⁵

We should bear in mind that this “amateur” basis of community-focused theatre in the U.S.A. has few counterparts overseas. In many countries—especially in Europe—“independent” theatres will often be based in a given community but have no particular artistic or social connections to the locale. They’re organized simply on a profit-making basis, and often the box office drives their work. By contrast, AACT member theatres have Boards of local directors guiding a theatre’s policies, and volunteers committing time and effort to the success of events. These factors make a community theatre’s operations approachable and friendly as well as accountable and transparent as a nonprofit, tax-exempt organization. By contrast, actors in independent theatres often hope to “make the jump” from anonymous performers to professional acting on stage and screen (“the big time”). In doing so they make it difficult for ordinary people in the community to compete for roles and participate in an art form as a sort of cultural enhancement of their lives and communities..

It’s helpful to remember that those working in volunteer-based community theatre in the United States are often highly trained artists. Many of them are strongly dedicated to artistic standards and “best practices.” They may hold university degrees in theatre, have years of professional experience in industry centers; and designers, arts managers and directors may routinely work in professional settings in their community. But when they do work in community theatres, they share with the theatre the goal of promoting skills and values that strengthen the “social capital” of their community, and contribute to the development of everyone participating in their theatre’s programs. Community theatre arts leaders must be sensitive to these distinctions when selecting troupes to invite to an amateur festival.

A third guiding principle of the selection process is the requirement that international troupes must present work that is highly accessible to global audiences. On one level, this principle refers to the language the actors are speaking. Can the audience understand the dialogue without forcing troupes to translate their plays into English, or use surtitles (as is frequently done with operas)? One must also bear in mind that an important part of the audience consists of the foreign troupes themselves; so a truly global theatre festival cannot only present troupes sharing a common Anglophone language (Ireland, Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom). The Chases must make keen judgments when deciding which troupes to invite, which productions are likely to be well-received in Venice despite the language challenges.

The indigenous language of the artists also comes into play in other respects. The Chases try to ensure that invited groups have *some* fluency in English in order to profit from and facilitate the workshop activities, and to help with the artists’ immersion into the homestay accommodations with local families.²⁶ Lori and Murry Chase also encourage visiting troupes to translate into English the written programs handed to the audience.

Aside from the language challenge, though, the accessibility of any stage production also depends greatly on its *visual expressiveness*. The Chases are very well aware of this. In the 2018 edition of the aactWorldFest, the German, Argentinian, and Australian shows were all nonverbal and thus highly understandable and appealing to an international public. They were also what theatre professionals call “devised” plays: shows developed by the individual ensembles. This is an important and popular new genre that has recently emerged in the contemporary theatre, and the aactWorldFest producers were astute to include several examples on the program.

One frequently encounters such “non-literary” productions at global theatre festivals because organizers of touring productions are keenly aware that multilingual audiences are attracted to such work. However, the trend to present such shows unfortunately tends to place any script dependent upon a particular language at a great disadvantage. Thus, director-driven work seems to be privileged over author-driven scripts on many international stages today²⁷ because shows that are heavily grounded in a particular language tend to lack the cultural passport that a nonverbal or highly visual production might possess.

A fourth guiding principle of the selection process is that the Chases seek ensembles that will flesh-out WorldFest’s workshop program. All the invited troupes are obliged to stay in residence for the entire length of the festival and participate in workshops. Additionally, members of these troupes are often tapped to present workshops during their residency.

This is a noteworthy management decision because it augments the sense of a “theatrical community” that spectators, artists and production staff enjoy at aactWorldFest. With all of the troupes participating in each others’ workshop experiences, they get to know each other well, and learn to appreciate each other’s working methods. They also get to mingle and share ideas with the general public who can also enroll in the workshops. Artistic networking is therefore heightened. Unlike other international festivals where many ensembles arrive only a day or two early to set up and rehearse their shows, and then leave immediately after performances and discussions (“colloques”) to another booking, aactWorldFest artists become immersed in the Festival and its audiences from beginning to end.

It is interesting to note that some of the largest and best-known global festivals today are developing ways to “retain” their guest artists and ensembles by means of virtual reality. Avignon, for example, fields an expensive program called “Young Reporters Culture”: students who are trained in early June by professional reporters to document the Festival on video. During the Festival month in July these young people record performances, colloques, workshops and other activities; then post them on the Festival website where they remain throughout the year, taking the place of artists and ensembles who have left Avignon shortly after their public appearances. In this way the artistic discussions can continue beyond the short time

period of the actual festival. Organizers have discovered that when they *can't afford to house artists in residence* for the entire festival, they *can afford to offer the public a cyber-experience* with their artists at a lower cost. Similar programs are also in place at the Edinburgh International Festival and Italy's Biennale Teatro.

Finally, the fifth guiding principle of the selection process is the need to identify ensembles capable of covering their travel expenses, arranging their visas, and providing promotional materials in advance for publicity. Not all foreign troupes are capable or willing to do this. Larger professional-level festivals customarily include transportation and housing costs, but amateur international festivals by and large do not. The Chases are very hard-nosed when it comes to practical matters such as these. The aactWorldFest ensembles are obliged to cover their own costs of transporting themselves and their equipment to and from Florida. Venice Theatre, however, will greet artists at the airport or rail terminals, transport them and their equipment round-trip to the festival site, and provide lodging and meals as noted earlier.

Related to transportation costs are the visa fees and regulations imposed by the U.S. government. Troupes must pay for their visas, and satisfy the immigration regulations imposed by the State Department. Many large global theatre festivals, for example, have staff assigned to facilitate the visa-granting process; and when these festivals are government-supported (which is never the case in the U.S.), international artists and ensembles can travel more or less free of restrictions. The United States government, however, is especially suspicious of allowing certain foreign nationals to cross its frontiers. In the past, travelers from Cuba, Syria, Somalia and other nations have been absolutely barred from entering. This situation arose again at the 2018 aactWorldFest. As mentioned earlier, all the members of China's troupe were denied visas, as well as all but two members of Nepal's troupe.²⁸

Such costs can be a major hurdle for theatre groups, particularly troupes from developing nations. Occasionally a large festival like Monaco's Mondial will "sponsor" a group or two from an impoverished region because it wants that particular nation to be represented on the world stage; and the festival can afford to cover all their expenses. But smaller amateur festivals like the aactWorldFest will rarely be able to do this.

One major reason, of course, is the cost to the festival; but the management burden is also significant. For example, purchasing airline tickets for a theatre troupe can quickly lead to a nightmare of paperwork. The task of arranging visas, obtaining passport information, locking-down travel dates, and doing last minute changes can be Herculean. And the possibility of "no-shows" is ever-present, endangering not only the festival's program but also the money it has advanced for purchasing the tickets.

Invited theatres are also required to provide PR material about their production. Performance photos, a DVD of the performance, explanatory notes about the show, and press reviews are the usual components of the PR package that must be sent ahead, nearly a year in advance, to facilitate advertising efforts. Lori and Murray Chase also use these same materials when making their final artistic decisions about which ensembles to invite.

Conclusions of the Study

This analysis has examined only a few ways in which leadership decisions of arts managers can guide the practical initiatives that spell success for a festival. In the case of the aactWorldFest we can recognize the importance of

- building linkages with a national or international arts organizations;
- strengthening community involvement in a festival's programs;
- sourcing plays and workshop leaders with more than simply entertainment values in mind;
- facilitating the immersion of international visitors in the local culture; and
- placing backstage and front-of-house crews at the service of visiting artists and the public.

Several key areas of planning and preparation, remain untreated in our discussion. These include the crucial functions of fundraising, partnering with public and private sponsors, and developing the advertising and public relations campaigns. Additionally, the study has also ignored the Festival's overall impact on the cultural life of the city of Venice. Unfortunately, a fair assessment of each of these functions lies beyond the scope of this analysis, and must be left for future study.

The first conclusion we can draw from this analysis is that the high degree of community engagement by the Venice Theatre underpins WorldFest's success. VT's reliance upon unpaid, local, skilled volunteers, for instance, provides a valuable workforce to manage day-to-day needs of the Festival, and helps to involve the local public in Festival activities. Integrating volunteers into theatre operations (local transportation, catering, lodging, front-of-house audience services, etc.) is the major form of community engagement; it attracts media attention, and help to elicit financial support from local businesses and municipal organizations. Combined with the general attractiveness of experiencing unusual plays from around the world, the general public is encouraged to "buy into" the Festival's contributions to local culture, and perhaps become more involved with other activities of the Venice Theatre during the regular season.

Organizing volunteers in this way, though, might be a difficult strategy for other festivals to replicate. For one thing, it requires unique approaches on the part of the Festival directors for making volunteers feel they are welcome, and that their

contributions are valued. Also many larger festivals—commercial and not-for-profit—are unable to engage local volunteers because of union contracts or insurance restrictions. When speaking several years ago with Marie Collin, Artistic Director for theatre, dance and visual arts at the prestigious Paris Autumn Festival, I asked her why her festival didn't seem to engage with university students or local Parisians who might love to volunteer their time. She mentioned insurance and labor regulations governing festival operations, pointing out: "It's impossible because of security considerations."²⁹

A second noteworthy feature of this successful Festival is the vital connection between the Venice Theatre and the American Association of Community Theatre. AACT helps the Chases to produce this festival by arranging special airfares and hotel rates for participants, as well as by promoting the event year-round and attracting theatre-related vendors to serve festival participants. Publishers of playscripts, theatrical software developers for lighting and stage management, costume rental agencies, and other merchants promote their services with theatre practitioners who attend. Serving the needs of more than 7,000 community theatres is big business for licensing agencies like Music Theatre International, or suppliers like ETC Stage Lighting Equipment or Ben Nye Stage Makeup.

AACT is also a valuable resource for helping to staff the workshop and training programs that the aactWorldFest produces. Many of the workshop leaders in Venice, for example, are drawn from AACT member theatres across the nation. And many AACT members come to the Festival just for this sort of hands-on instruction because community theatres across the country are constantly in need of training their volunteer staff. "This is a fantastic experience for me," declared Trinity Bird, Executive Director of Michigan's Sauk Theatre. "My staff and I keep abreast of the latest trends and hone our skills when we enroll in these workshops at the annual convention."³⁰

Certainly AACT supports the WorldFest in important ways because the Festival helps serve the needs of the AACT membership. But WorldFest also impacts other theatres and drama practitioners across the United States because the Chases often arrange tours of some of their international ensembles to other venues following their success at the WorldFest. This is another illustration of the leadership skills that help guide their work as arts managers because it signals the importance of the work being done at Venice Theatre and by AACT. For instance, the 2018 Chilean entry, *Pichanga*, toured to the World Stage Theatre Company in Tulsa in August with the help of Murray and Lori Chase; and then it went on to the annual Fort Worth Fringe Festival in September.

This echoes the practices of other successful theatre festivals that are larger and better known. The arts leaders of France's Avignon Festival, for example, facilitate global tours of Avignon Festival productions throughout the entire year. The Venice Biennale has been developing "satellite venues" worldwide for Italian winners of its film festival since 2005.³¹ Here in the United States, the annual "Under

the Radar” international festival produced by the New York Public Theatre helps to arrange tours of several of its shows following their appearance at The Public. As Mark Russell, the Artistic Director, commented: "One of my dreams is to have a three-city *Under the Radar*. It would happen in three cities almost simultaneously. I think this work needs to be seen more." He shares with Murray Chase the notion of “. . . introducing American theater-makers to new methods for creating productions."³²

A third main conclusion we can draw from this study is that Festival leaders must utilize a clear set of standards and long-range goals when selecting international ensembles for their program. As we noted earlier, the 2018 iteration of aactWorldFest was not entirely successful in locating work from a wide range of world theatre, and this lack disappointed some long-standing AACT members. Ron Cameron-Lewis, an elected AACT "Member-at-Large" from Ontario, Canada, noted: "I'd like to see more from India, Africa and Eastern Europe." He admitted, however, "The problem is that chances are great there is one member of the company who is Muslim, and that shuts everything down at the border."³³

Perhaps this points to the need for arts leaders to provide special travel funds for poorly funded ensembles from impoverished nations, when they feel the work is important and should be seen. Murray Chase mentioned this possibility when discussing the policies of Monaco’s quadrennial Mondial, but arts leaders of amateur theatre festivals cannot simply raise ticket prices to accomplish that. Often supported by municipal and national funds, arts leaders are especially sensitive to limiting access to only wealthy publics.

Kathleen Maldonado, a longtime officer of AACT and a "Fellow" of the Association from Alto, New Mexico, remarked that she "would like to see more attention to bring in AITA/IATA international theatres" (from the International Amateur Theatre Association noted earlier).³⁴ Long a supporter of global initiatives promoting the work of amateur theatres, Ms. Maldonado is also a recipient of AACT’s “Mort Clark International Achievement Award,” and President of the North American Regional Association of AITA/IATA. A few ideas she has proposed for assisting global tours of amateur troupes include holding special fundraisers for setting touring resources in place, or requesting royalty houses to sponsor international tours of shows.

In summary, the aactWorldFest hosted by Florida’s Venice Theatre has emerged over the past decade as one of the most successful global theatre festivals in the United States. Though small, with only a dozen representative productions by amateur troupes worldwide, it has built a significant track record over the years. Under the inspired leadership of Murray and Lori Chase over the past decade, its numbers have continued to grow, causing the American Association of Community Theatre to move the WorldFest in 2018 from a quadrennial to a biennial cycle beginning in 2020.

Each iteration of WorldFest continues to offer a range of organizational meetings for members of the American Association of Community theatre; as well as numerous production-related activities and workshops geared to theatre practitioners of all levels of experience. More than that, however, the Festival also offers visitors easy and comfortable access to fellow theatregoers and international artists in a relaxed setting—an unusual opportunity among global arts festivals, especially larger ones. As AACT Vice-President James Walker noted earlier, one observes a growing sense of “community” among everyone at an aactWorldFest that steadily increases over the week-long event.

As a cultural expression of the values, interests and concerns of American communities, small and large, the aactWorldFest therefore presents a paradoxical success story. Like many European nations, the United States has recently undergone a transformation in its civic life that has tended towards greater isolationism from the world community. Critics have noted the deep political, racial and economic divisions emerging among the American population.

But despite this unfortunate sociopolitical situation, many of our nation’s *cultural* institutions display instead a unity of purpose, a positive outlook towards the future, and a renewed dedication to strengthening the bonds uniting our artistic and political communities. The aactWorldFest is a festival that certainly attempts this: over the years the success of its leadership strategies have enabled the sharing of ideas and values with others at home and abroad.

Perhaps it’s only natural and even desirable that global arts festivals should address this need for mending the social fabric of global societies. After all, these festivals serve and cultivate publics who seem deeply curious of other nations’ cultural expressions, and are eager to mingle with audience members from different world regions. Arts leader Olivier Py, the Artistic Director of France’s Avignon Festival, recently noted that culture is becoming “. . . more than just an attraction for tourists or a superfluous luxury, but a bond that would transcend class, a source of wealth to nurture.” And in his keynote introduction to the 69th edition of the Avignon Festival, he asked:

What is a successful festival? Perhaps it is a festival that acknowledges the way the world has changed and manages, thanks to the power of its artists and the enthusiasm of its audience, to welcome this change with paradoxical pleasure.³⁵

With this thought in mind, the 2020 iteration of aactWorldFest seems to be headed in the right direction.

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¹ The distinction between “arts leadership” and “arts management” is assuming a growing importance among scholars these days. As Johan Kolsteeg and Martin Zierold point out in their recent article: “Cultural leadership can be understood as being gradually different from cultural management. Managing a cultural institution is the basis, leadership is adding to that a responsibility larger than ‘mere’ management. While there can be management without leadership, there is no leadership without management.” My study focuses upon the *leadership* of arts organizers at aactWorldFest, attempting to identify a few key points of their “vision” guiding different management policies of the Festival. (“Mapping the Meanings of Cultural Leadership.” *Arts Management Quarterly*, No. 130, (January 2019) p. 7.

² Carole Ries, AACT President, in her welcome message on the AACT website: <https://aact.org/aacts-mission-purpose> (accessed 24 July 2018).

³ Theatre groups in the United States can be roughly categorized into three types. First, there are the *professional* theatres and theatre companies where artists are always paid, often according to a scale set by unions. Some of these theatres, such as Broadway, are commercial enterprises whose ticket prices reflect the desire to earn as much money as possible for their producers or backers. Others are regarded as repositories of culture like museums, symphony orchestras, and libraries, and are not organized as commercial ventures designed for profit (“nonprofit 501©(3) organizations”). Regional troupes like Chicago’s Goodman Theatre or San Diego’s Old Globe fall into this category, and there approximately 500 nonprofit professional theatres of this type. Their artistic standards are commonly regarded as extremely high, and they also have their own professional association: Theatre Communications Group (TCG). A second category of theatres and practitioners in the U.S. are community theatre groups and individuals. These are often referred to as amateur theatres; and they are entirely nonprofit, with the practitioners being largely unpaid and volunteer. Most such groups are members of the American

Association of Community Theatre, although a number of independent, often temporary and "pop-up" ensembles can be found in most American cities. A third very broad category of theatres in the United States can be best described as "semi-professional" because they are never union-affiliated--although members of actors, directors, technical unions often "scab" privately for these independent theatres because they do pay for talent. These third-tier groups have no national association organizing their efforts, prescribing policies for quality or management standards.

⁴ In many AACT member theatres, only the artistic and management staff will be paid. Normally the actors, house managers and ushers, production crews, etc. in community theatres are all community volunteers. In the largest community theatres, however, having union guest actors is not uncommon, due to the growing demand for more shows each season, and the growing demand for production quality.

⁵ To a certain extent, "community engagement" is a contested term today. Here it signifies a range of events and formal programs specifically designed to tie a Festival's activities to the local community, enhancing the cultural scene with the help of the unique and special artistic talent brought together for the Festival. For instance, special performances of Festival artists at local schools and cultural centers, inviting community leaders or artists to participate in certain Festival programs, helping local charities with fundraising events, utilizing local businesses to serve the Festival's logistical needs, etc. are valuable parts of the "community engagement" strategies devised by contemporary arts events.

⁶ For about ten years between 1985-95 I led groups of my university theatre students to various international festivals where their skills in the management area were much appreciated: to Caracas, Venezuela, Miami Beach, and Liverpool, Nova Scotia. At those venues they augmented the ranks of festival staff by helping with front-of-house management, backstage crew assignments, logistics transportation and other tasks.

⁷ Personal interview 20 June 2018.

⁸ Email conversation 30 November 2018.

⁹ Personal interview 22 June 2018.

¹⁰ Personal interview 25 June 2018.

¹¹ "A Week in America," *Spotlight* magazine published by the American Association of Community Theatre, v. 34 No. 1 (September/October 2018), p. 28.

¹² In the 21st century global artistic landscape, there is rapidly growing appetite among audiences and producers in the United States for the work of foreign performance groups. As Teresa Eyring, former Executive Director of the U.S.A.'s Theatre Communications Group, noted: "TCG receives upwards of 50 requests annually for visa consultations, on behalf of theatres bringing artists from other countries." "Getting Beyond Your Borders," *American Theatre*, V.32 No. 5 (May/June 2015), p. 8.

¹³ According to Jim Walker, AACT Chair of Festivals, "Venice Theatre actually pays AACT a small sanction fee to 'license' the AACT brand for aactWorldFest. All revenue and expenses are handled by Venice Theatre." Interview 5 August 2018.

¹⁴ It is fortunate that the Venice Theatre has a large and well-equipped facility to accommodate all of the Festival activities and social events. Many international

festivals lack such a facility that can concentrate their audiences, so their publics are forced to travel from venue to venue for the different exhibitions and performances. This is somewhat attractive when a festival takes place in an historical city (Paris, Edinburgh, Avignon); but it can become very challenging to tourists who may not be familiar with the locale. Venice's Biennale, for example, revels in presenting a huge amount of work in its thirty-eight different locales around the ancient Italian city (not counting the number of exhibits in the Arsenale and Giardini neighborhoods). The annual Paris Autumn Festival leads audiences to forty-eight venues all over the city. And in 2017 the Avignon Festival boasted fifty-two performance and exhibition sites, not counting the 3,000 performances of street theatre in the "Avignon-off" program running concurrently with the main festival performances. Of necessity, the websites of these larger festivals include major sections that identify each of the venues, provide travel directions and maps to them, even restaurant information and walking/bicycling routes to reach them.

¹⁵ For more information on procedures that other festivals pursue when sourcing talent for their programs, see my recent article: "On the Scene: With Mark Russell at New York City's Public Theater," *The American Journal of Arts Management*, September 2016.

¹⁶ There were 43 award presentations made to individuals and ensembles at the concluding ceremony for the aactWorldFest2018.

¹⁷ The state, regional, and national AACT play festivals have always been the association's most popular programs. Member theatres eagerly compete for awards such as "Best Ensemble," "Best Original Script," or "Best Stage Design." Individuals also crave recognition as "Best Director," "Best Choreography," or "Best Actress in a Musical." The awards are especially competitive at the biennial AACTFest, since national recognition can offer a leg up to gaining local funding of a theatre group and local publicity for a troupe's annual season of plays.

¹⁸ Personal interview 24 June 2018. In a later Email conversation on November 5, Murray added: "We don't target Asian festivals by pure design, but . . . timing and expense have been prohibitive so far."

¹⁹ The absence of Asian entries from the 2018 aactWorldFest was not entirely a failure of the Chase's selection method. In fact, the Chases had invited three other Asian productions that could not make festival appearances, for various reasons (Georgia, China and Bangladesh). And the show from Armenia—a "Eurasian" nation—was very well-received.

²⁰ Language challenges are always big factors in festival marketing decisions because publics need to find performances accessible. Simultaneous translations, surtitles and subtitles, and other strategies are expensive but necessary, and are in play worldwide. For a more detailed discussion of this issue, see my article, "Emerging Strategies for Community Engagement in Global Arts Festivals," published in the Fall 2018 edition of *"The American Journal of Arts Management"*.

²¹ Personal interview 24 June 2018.

²² Personal interview 4 September 2018.

²³ Email conversation 30 November 2018.

²⁴ Strictly speaking, there are often key individuals in community theatres in the U.S. who must be paid for their work, and AACT recognizes this: artistic directors,

designers and technical directors, musical directors, marketing and development staff, etc. But as a rule, actors are rarely compensated for their work in AACT member theatres.

²⁵ Personal interview 2 August 2018.

²⁶ WorldFest always combines the best *international* workshop offerings with professional-level *national* workshops from the United States. Workshop training, in fact, has always been a well-attended and very popular feature of this festival, as mentioned earlier. In 2018, for example, the aactWorldFest participants could enjoy 19 workshops, among which were the following:

- Dr. Chua Soo Pong from Singapore leading participants in staging Chinese Opera battles;
- Commedia mask characterization techniques taught by members of the Teatro Maner Manush of Rome;
- Broadway auditioning technique explained by actor Chris Rice from the cast of the New York production of *The Book of Mormon*;
- documentary political theatre techniques explained by Manuel Ortiz, Executive Director of Corredor Latinamericano Teatro, Chile;
- acting “Viewpoints” work taught by Donnie Mather of New York’s Atlantic Acting School.

²⁷ Productions like those of Italy’s Romeo Castellucci, France’s Olivier Py, the USA’s Robert Wilson, or Germany’s Rimini Protokoll have certainly been lionized on international festival stages much more than playwrights’ literary efforts. Shakespeare and Cervantes might seem to be two notable exceptions, although directorial *adaptations* of their work are always popular. The revolutionary ascendance of director-driven art rather than author-driven work on contemporary festival stages is an issue too complicated to be dealt with here, and certainly falls outside the scope of our focus upon festival management strategies.

²⁸ Strangely enough, the two Nepalese visas that were approved came through the U.S. embassy in Switzerland, while those artists who applied through the embassy in Nepal were all rejected.

²⁹ Personal interview, 12 October 2009.

³⁰ Personal interview 22 June 2018.

³¹ Presentations of recent and classic Italian winners in the cinema category of the Biennale di Venezia have taken place in special screenings in Brazil, Moscow, Croatia, the Phillipines, China and elsewhere for over decade. Partnering with the Italian Institute of Culture, the Biennale seeks to impact the world community of cinema lovers, aiming at “the promotion and diffusion of Italian cinema in the world.” News release of the Biennale, 14 March 2018, “Venice in Zagreb: the Fifth Edition, <https://www.labiennale.org/it/news/venezia-zagabria-la-quinta-edizione>. (accessed 6 November 2018).

³² Personal interview, 6 January 2016.

³³ Personal interview 28 August 2018.

³⁴ Email conversation 1 September 2018.

³⁵ “Editorial to the 2015 edition of the Avignon Festival, <http://www.festival-avignon.com/en/archives-2015>. (accessed 9 October 2018).