

Cassandra examples: Creating a socially engaged programme for your festival

Fortellerfestivalen Oslo (NO)

Fortellerfestivalen - The Norwegian Storytelling Festival 2025 took place in Oslo 3.-6. April. The festival's theme - *Ignite* - was inspired by the Cassandra project and the symbol of fire; representing passion, inspiration, transformation, anger, drive. The programme was curated as a way to explore how the art of storytelling can contribute to inspire hope and action in the face of both collective and individual challenges. What role can storytellers have in a time of rising temperatures, explosive conflict and heated debate?

The festival featured stories and storytellers with a literal or metaphorical spark; tales of historical and contemporary trailblazers; stories of personal passions, trials and political engagement; myths and folk tales about prophecies and desire; presentations of artistic projects with a social impact; and happenings around the fire.

Mentor Lina Teir worked with the programme committee to increase the impact of the Cassandra project through festival events. Performances from Cassandra participants were at the heart of the festival and gave direction to the rest of the programme. In addition to the Norwegian team, performers from Belgium and the Netherlands were invited to attend. The Cassandra stories were shared in two key events:

1. Through the Cycle of Silence

"Three countries. Three stories. Three silences broken."

A collection of personal, universal stories about shame, sexuality and objectification:

What's the difference? - Geoffrey van der Ven (NL)

Remember the first time you felt "different"? Neither does Geoffrey, but that feeling has grown familiar over time. In "What's the Difference?," spoken word artist Geoffrey van der Ven delves into the emotions of shame and personal isolation. Through storytelling and spoken word, he uncovers how these feelings shape our lives and challenges us to do the one thing shame stops us from doing.

Not Your Girl - Winter De Cock (BE)

Maybe we knew all along. Maybe we were warned by the old stories full of fantasy transmitted and performed two thousand years ago. Daphne is a girl who doesn't like men. She messes up her hair and makes herself dirty. But it doesn't matter how dirty she gets; she stays an object of desire for Apollo, who chases her in the forest. She runs away from him in vain. But when he is about to catch her, something mysterious happens... "Not Your Girl" weaves auto-fiction and myth, asking enduring questions of female objectification, agency and consent.

Modern Masturbation - Simen Segerberg (NO)

A story about sexual awakening. A story about growing up in a digital era. A story about connection, about disintegration, about sexual philosophy, about digital pornography. A story about love, sex and masturbation. And above all, a search to find out how all these things really work in a world where we spend as much time with our screens as we do with our partners.



Each of the stories were developed individually. However, presented in a shared space, supported by a unified simple lighting design and the active physical presence of the other storytellers, the overall experience offered a powerful confrontation with uncomfortable truths and a reclaiming of aspects of identity previously repressed in response to social expectations. This was further reinforced by the young storytellers' initiative to invite the audience to share and discuss their own written secrets, anonymously, in the same space. The activity was meaningful but risky, and debriefs with both the festival and the Cassandra team included valuable reflections on how to create safe boundaries for audience interaction in relation to sensitive subject matter.

This event was part of the festival's annual industry day for storytellers, educators, producers and other performing artists interested in professional development within oral storytelling. The performances were contextualised by a presentation of the Cassandra project and reflections about the process from Lina and Simen in conversation with a local storyteller. The targeted audience of performing arts professionals was chosen to inspire and challenge more established practitioners to consider the young artists' approach to their craft. It was also important to give space for critical dialogue and present the Cassandra participants as artistic peers, establishing them as part of the international storytelling community.

2. Stories from a World in Flames

“Through the art of storytelling, we open our eyes to what is, and imagine the world as we want it to be.”

In this free event at a neighbourhood library, two Cassandra stories created the context for a conversation about art and engagement, curated and led by the young storytellers themselves:

Breidablikk: Heartbreak, Norse gods and Statoil - Mari Qviller (NO)



The true story of how being dumped led Mari to walk all alone for 40 days across the Norwegian wilderness the summer before high school. We are invited to peek through the window of her childhood bedroom and embark on an expedition through the world's largest forest, a little detour to visit the least smelly part of old Norse mythology, and a helicopter ride out to the open sea at the edge of the world. “Breidablikk” combines autobiography, mythical storytelling, and satire to explore and expose the heroic story of the Norwegian oil industry.

How to Rebuild a Meadow - Hanna Asefaw (NO/ER)

What happens to soil on occupied land? Or to land that has endured decades of war and exploitation? What can we do to help the earth return to its natural state?

In the summer of 2023, Hanna travelled to Eritrea, the country her parents had fled from due to a war that lasted three decades. In the capital there is a "cemetery" of abandoned war vehicles, a reminder of the

violence the population has experienced. At the same time, nature begins to regain its place; rust towers turn green. “How to Rebuild a Meadow” is a story about a flower that had forgotten to bloom. And a boy. And resilience, resistance, hope, and loss. It is shared in honour of all the people who continue to coexist with, and take care of the soil.

Both of these stories have an environmentalist message, exploring people’s relationship to nature. They also underline how stories and imagination can be powerful political weapons when used strategically by companies, governments, artists or campaigners.



In the panel discussion Mari, Hanna invited other young writers and activists in their network to explore questions about the line between activism and art, and the opportunities and risks of working artistically and politically for change and liberation. This brought a notably younger audience to the festival.

Once more, the event ended in an invitation for the audience to use their own voices, this time through songs of hope and freedom led by Cassandra mentor Lina Teir, a local anti-fascist choir, Palestinian rapper Mohamed Elsusi and Mineya Ukranian folk group.



Committing to programming new stories from previously unknown artists was a risk for the festival, but it also gave clear direction in programming, raised expectations on the participants, increased our international collaboration and brought an energetic atmosphere of learning and openness to the festival. We also saw that representation had a greater effect than marketing or ticket deals when it came to reaching younger audiences.

In order to ensure that youthful voices and agendas continue to shape future festivals, the team has since appointed two younger members, including Cassandra participant Mari Qviller, to the programming committee.

Warsaw International Festival (PL)

The **Warsaw International Storytelling Festival (MFSO)** ([O festiwalu – Festiwal Opowiadania](#)) is co-financed by funds from the City of Warsaw, the Mazovian Voivodeship Government, and the state budget, including funds from the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage from the Funds for the Promotion of Culture.

The organiser of MFSO is "Grupa Studnia O." Association ([Studnia O Group and Mazovian Institute of Culture](#)). The festival has been held continuously since 2006. MFSO is one of the most important events related to the art of storytelling, not only in Poland, but also throughout Eastern and Central Europe. Each time the festival gathers about 1.500 – 2.000 participants. Every edition lasts 5 days, from Wednesday to Sunday, in the second half of November each year. The total number of artists is around 30, and the programmed shows consist of a total of 15 performances. There is a morning stage for organised school groups. The international program presents 5-6 foreign storytellers who perform in their own languages in front of Polish audiences, thanks to various forms of stage translation such as subtitles, performative translations on stage, hybrid forms, and simultaneous interpreting in booths (only 2024). The festival presents full shows of local artists in Polish, including deaf artists with interpretation into Polish sign language (PJM); available also for other performances.

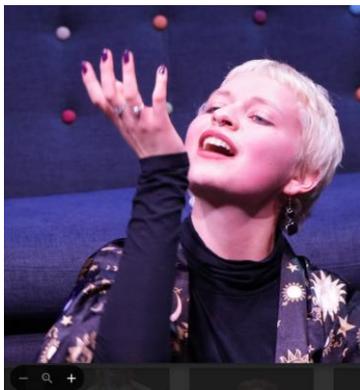
The festival also cooperates with cultural and educational institutions such as the Polish Culture Institute, the Faculty of Polish Studies, the Faculty of Modern Languages, the University of Warsaw, Mazovian Teacher Training Centre, the French Institute in Warsaw, the Foundation for Universal Reading, the Polish Academy of Sciences and the Polish radio channel 3, RDC Radio dla Ciebie (Radio for you).

Every edition is under a particular subject, and the festival has managed to present narrative performances from very different traditions, all of a very high artistic standard and original stage form. The festival for the last 20 years has hosted artists from Western Europe: France, Great-Britain (including Scotland and Wales) Brittany, Norway, Sweden, Germany and Belgium. It also presented the revived tradition of cantastorie from Sicily (Mimmo Cuticchio), the artistry of Arabic hakawatis: Lebanon (Jihad Darwiche), the storytelling traditions of Morocco, Egypt and Algeria (Malika Halbaoui, Chirine el Ansary and Nefissa Benouniche), the art of Turkish meddahs and ashiks (Erol Günaydın, Seref Tasliova), Kyrgyz manaschi (Rysbai Isakov), and the oloncho tradition (Kirill Nikiphorov).

The festival featured epics from various traditions – the Ramayana, the Odyssey, Manas, Gilgamesh, and stories inspired by literary works (Hans Christian Andersen, Bohumil Hrabal, the Brothers Grimm, Isaak Bashevis Singer, Miguel de Cervantes). The programme presented phenomena from the borderline between theatre and storytelling (Dido Lykoudis from Greece/Ethiopia with Aeschylus' The Suppliants and others). The English version of the 2025 program can be found here ([20MFSO Program A3 ENG digital](#)).

The main purposes of the festival are: presentation of both traditional forms of storytelling from different cultures, contemporary professional performances from Poland and abroad, promotion of storytelling as an equal form of art that draws on literature and theatre, but retains its own specificity, the introduction of the word *storyteller* (opowiadacz) into the Polish language, the improvement of various forms of stage translation of the spoken word; the development of the skills of Polish

storytellers through inspiring festival events, panels and workshops; and the integration of the community of storytelling enthusiasts: *the festival as a celebration*.



In the 2024 edition of MFSO, there was a presentation of the Polish young storytellers from the Cassandra Project: Dawid Pigut, Natalia Drąka and Wera Kątna. Their stories touch on issues important to many young people in our part of Europe, including finding one's place in the world, coping with longing, violence, and escape, as well as difficult relationships and questions about tradition and the search for its new form. Wera, Dawid and Natalia worked on their stories for almost eight months with the support mentors Adam Markuszewski and Agnieszka Ayşen Kaim, who represented the Warsaw Festival MFSO, a partner on behalf of the 'Grupa Studnia O.' Association in the Cassandra Project.

In the 20th MFSO in 2025, there was a presentation of 2 storytellers from the Belgian Cassandra team: Daan Arnauts and Winter de Cock. Their mentor, Tom van Mieghem, also accompanied the young storytellers. [Międzynarodowa scena debiutów: Cassandra, czyli słuchaj młodych! – Festiwal Opowiadania](#). They also took part in the Storytelling Night on the 22.11.25, when all the festival artists presented short stories.

The Land of Legends (SE)

The Land of Legends Music and Storytelling Festival is the oldest Nordic storytelling festival and has been held continuously since 1990. Organised by the regional music institution Musik i Syd and the NGO The Storytelling Network of Kronoberg, the festival aims to combine the art of oral storytelling with music across the Land of Legends region, spanning the three municipalities Ljungby, Alvesta, and Älmhult.

Held annually from Thursday to Sunday in the week before Midsummer, the festival offers a wide programme including storytelling performances, concerts, seminars, lectures, workshops, open stages, and international exchange. The festival typically presents 50–60 events, in 9 venues, featuring storytellers and musicians from Sweden as well as international guests.

The festival is financed through a combination of sponsors, regional and municipal support (Ljungby, Alvesta, and Älmhult Municipality), national grants from the Swedish Arts Council, and additional support from institutions such as the Swedish Academy, alongside ticket income. On the Saturday, the festival also hosts a children's festival day, where all activities are free of charge to ensure broad access regardless of participants' financial circumstances. This approach reflects our commitment to children's cultural rights (as outlined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, incorporated into Swedish law) and to wider sustainability goals, including reducing economic barriers to participation. We also offer reduced ticket prices for audiences up to 26 years old to strengthen youth access to culture.

A central tradition of the festival is the annual Mickel Award, established during the first Land of Legends festival in memory of the storyteller **Mickel of Långhult**, often regarded as a master of Swedish folktales. Mickel is remembered for reshaping local legends and folktales through a distinct personal voice, often with sharp social commentary on the lives and conditions of ordinary people in 19th-century Sweden. The award is given to individuals who have worked with distinction to preserve, develop, and share oral storytelling traditions, including folktales and local legends, with knowledge, commitment, and artistic quality.

Theme and co-creation focus: Community

Each year, the festival is curated around a guiding theme. In 2025, the theme was Community, chosen largely in response to the aims and methods of the Cassandra project. The intention was to highlight not only performers' stories, but also to create meaningful opportunities for the audience and participants to contribute with their own voices and experiences.

To support this, the festival programme was deliberately organised with events located close to one another, making it easier for audiences, artists, and organisers to meet repeatedly during the day. This increased informal interaction and created a stronger sense of belonging across the festival weekend, with artists and audiences sharing spaces in a more continuous way than in a traditional performance format.

Several festival events were designed specifically around participation and co-creation. The programme included an open call for the regional Storytelling Slam competition, as well as multiple open stage opportunities. We also drew inspiration from Irish céilí traditions, where the boundary between performer and audience is intentionally blurred. In this circle-based format, participants bring a story, a song, a poem, or another contribution, and share it when they feel ready—creating a communal space in which listening and performing become shared responsibilities. Something that both the artists and audiences noted contributed to a shared sense of community when reflecting afterward.

Another key element of co-creation was the opportunity to engage with living traditions through active participation. For example, the artist **Juhán Nilla Stålka** led workshops in joik, a traditional Sámi vocal art form, introducing participants to the practice and its cultural context through guided exercises and shared singing.

The festival also encourages cultural exchange beyond Swedish and Nordic traditions. **Neil Sutcliffe** taught traditional Scottish and Gaelic folk songs, while **Mara Menzies**, whose background is Kenyan-Scottish, led a workshop on adapting traditional stories for contemporary audiences. Later, she performed her show *Blood and Gold*, applying these methods to explore the legacy of colonialism and slavery through legend, myth, and fantasy.

Cassandra project integration

The Cassandra project functioned as a key touchstone during the 2025 festival. After developing their stories over almost eight months with mentor and storytelling pedagogue Jakob Elofsson, the Swedish Cassandra team—Meja Johansson, Meja Ohlsson Rodriguez, and Sarah Andersson—took part in the festival not only as performers, but also as contributors to reflective and professional dialogue around socially engaged storytelling.



In addition to presenting their performances, the Swedish team participated in a seminar where they shared their journeys into the storytelling community, including reflections on the communities and contexts they engaged with during their artistic research process. Their stories—touching on themes such as generational trauma, faith, domestic violence, and hope—strongly resonated with audiences and participants, generating feedback and discussion about how personal storytelling can be developed with similar depth and social relevance.

The seminar also included **Geoffrey van der Ven**, a Dutch storyteller with Nigerian roots and Cassandra participant. Geoffrey shared experiences from the project and his own pathway into the storytelling field. During the festival, he performed both his Cassandra story—addressing alienation, acceptance, and LGBTQ+ identity—and his spoken-word show **Nothing New**, which explores queer history in Africa and the ways it has been erased or silenced over time which ended with the audience engaging in an open format about the material with questions and own lived experiences.

The Cassandra performances were presented across **two days**, in two **40-minute showcases**. We aimed to give the young storytellers as much artistic agency as possible: supporting them with mentorship, and a safe working environment, while allowing them to test their work in venues and conditions they had not previously rehearsed in. In the final programme design, **Meja Johansson and Meja Ohlsson Rodriguez** chose to collaborate by performing in Swedish, with staging close to the audience. **Sarah Andersson and Geoffrey van der Ven** opted for a more traditional stage setup and performed in English.

Outcomes

Historically, festival-related projects have not always led to sustained effects beyond the project period. A key outcome of the Cassandra collaboration in 2025 has therefore been creating clearer continuity—both for the artists and for the organisation.

Co-creative formats such as open stage, slam, and circle-based sharing strengthened the festival's role as a meeting place, where audiences and artists contributed together and several participants highlighted a stronger sense of community across the weekend. At the same time, the Swedish Cassandra storytellers became more firmly integrated into the Land of Legends ecosystem: Meja Johansson and Meja Ohlsson Rodriguez took summer positions at Sagomuseet and are now involved in shaping the next festival edition, with Meja Ohlsson Rodriguez moving towards a future producer role for the next festival.

Organisationally, the project reinforced the importance of long-term planning and youth inclusion. By working with structured mentorship and clearer pathways into the storytelling field, we are strengthening the transfer of knowledge to new tradition bearers and taking concrete steps to renew the festival and its community beyond the Cassandra project timeline.

Alden Biesen International Storytelling Festival (BE)

Founded in 1996, the Alden Biesen International Storytelling Festival has grown into one of the largest multilingual storytelling festivals in Europe. It is unique because it focuses on language education, especially for secondary school students and adult learners. All the stories are told by native speakers, which makes the experience very authentic, both culturally and linguistically. The festival takes pride in offering top-notch, traditional storytelling. Most of the storytellers are experienced professionals, often middle-aged. While this ensures quality performances, it also makes it harder to bring in fresh, younger voices.

Cassandra did exactly that. The first international **Cassandra training** took place in Alden Biesen during the 2024 festival. The young storytellers received training and mentoring and had free access to professional storytelling in the evenings. But this was also a clear win-win situation. Since the festival mostly offers traditional storytelling, the young storytellers added a fresh view on new approaches and on personal and socially relevant themes. This presented a new challenge and opportunity to the festival organisers.



To address this challenge, the organizers introduced a new event: an **open stage night** on the final evening of the festival, giving young and emerging storytellers (including many students from part-time arts education) a chance to perform. Anyone interested could sign up to tell an 8-minute story, which was a great way for new performers to show their talent at such a well-known festival. Among them were also the three young participants from the Dutch Cassandra team. The event took place in the charming French gardens of Alden Biesen, creating a relaxed and cozy atmosphere. It also gave a boost to the networking and contacts to local cultural organisations.

This open stage night not only gave young storytellers the spotlight but also helped bridge the gap between generations and encouraged a more inclusive festival vibe.

The **Cassandra project seminar** was held in the afternoon to introduce the project to cultural organisations, professional storytellers and storytelling enthusiasts. The important role of the mentor in guiding the young storytellers through their creative journey was highlighted. It showcased how these emerging artists develop their stories and skills, followed by an interesting discussion on the meaning and impact of socially engaged storytelling. This session offered valuable insights into how storytelling can connect with social issues and inspire positive change.

Both the seminar and open stage were well received. People were excited to see new voices being included in the festival. In the end, the 28th Alden Biesen Festival stayed true to its roots of high-quality storytelling while also opening the door to new talent and cross-cultural exchange. These changes set the stage for even more vibrant and inclusive festivals in the future.



Each year Alden Biesen also organises a smaller annual festival, an autumn storytelling event '**Stories in the Park**'. Two of the Cassandra young storytellers (Ynys from Team Belgium and Samora from Team NL) were invited to perform. The theme, "Beyond the Border," explored how borders exist everywhere, whether physical, social, or emotional. Both participants took this chance to try out a new story, sharing fresh perspectives and experimenting with their craft in front of a welcoming audience.

Alden Biesen aims to give young storytellers from the Cassandra project opportunities to perform at various storytelling events and workshops throughout the year.

Amsterdam Storytelling Festival (NL)

The **Amsterdam Storytelling Festival** began in 2008 as the *Internationaal Storytelling Festival Amsterdam*, founded by Arjen Barel and Marlies ter Haar after they met at the Storytelling Theatre Days in Utrecht and decided to create a dedicated event celebrating the art of spoken narrative. The early editions took place on the ships of an abandoned shipyard in Amsterdam-Noord, offering an intimate and atmospheric setting for storytellers and audiences to connect.

Over time, the festival grew in scope and reputation, showcasing both national and international storytellers and expanding its audience. In 2012, the Stichting Storytelling Centre was established to support the festival and develop related activities, embedding storytelling more deeply in Amsterdam's cultural life. By 2018 the event had permanently moved to its current home at Podium Mozaïek in Amsterdam West, with artistic leadership taken on by Sahand Sahebdivani and Raphael Rodan. Over the years the festival has become one of Europe's most acclaimed storytelling events, featuring a diverse programme of performances, workshops and talks that highlight storytelling's power to connect people and cultures.

Stichting Storytelling Centre is a non-profit organization dedicated to developing the art of storytelling in the Netherlands and beyond. To fund the festival and its wider activities, the Centre used a mix of financial sources typical for arts organisations. In 2024 Storytelling Centre decided to stop producing the festival and since 2025, the festival is being organised by a new association, only dedicated to the festival.

Focus on young storytellers and context of the Cassandra project

Over the years, for the Amsterdam Storytelling Festival, investing in opportunities for young storytellers has always been an important pillar. The festival has consistently run talent-development programmes and for some time was also the driving force behind the election of the *Young Storyteller of the Year*. In recent years, the festival has offered students from, for example, the Mezrab School for Storytelling the chance to further develop their work and, under the guidance of the festival's artistic directors, create a full-length performance. This work is then presented at the festival and subsequently performed at other venues.

It has always been important to place this work within the right context, so that audiences know what they are going to see. Working with young talent inevitably involves a degree of risk: some participants are more experienced than others, and productions can fail. For this reason, it is important for the artistic leadership of the Amsterdam Storytelling Festival to programme most performances only after they have actually seen them.

Because the Cassandra project took place in Amsterdam for a full week and all performances by all participants were presented, we had to consider carefully how to frame this context properly, both to give the young storytellers a suitable platform and to manage audience expectations. This was challenging, as none of the performances were finished or could be viewed well in advance. After all, the work was still being developed in Amsterdam in the days leading up to the performances.

For this reason, it was decided to present the performances by the young storytellers in the days preceding the festival and to include them in the festival's promotion as a preview. This worked well,

although it proved difficult to attract large audiences. The artists in the main festival programme are generally already familiar to audiences (also because they regularly perform at Mezrab) and therefore fill a venue more easily. The young storytellers have not yet been able to build a name for themselves, particularly the non-Dutch participants. We also noticed that performances involving Dutch storytellers were much better attended.



This is something to consider when programming young storytellers at a festival. They have not yet built-up recognition among the general audience and therefore rely largely on their own networks. National storytellers often have such a network, whereas international storytellers usually do not. In those cases, it can help to programme them alongside a storyteller who has already established a reputation. Another option is to promote a young storyteller strongly based on the content of their performance, but this is only feasible when a festival programme includes a limited number of storytellers.

Co-creation

Cocreation has always been important in the Amsterdam Storytelling Festival program. Co-creation is about ownership: who takes which responsibilities, and how you work together to ensure that something becomes a success. In the Cassandra project, we felt it was important to give the participants a strong voice. For that reason, we did not work with directors or coaches, but with mentors, people who walked alongside the young storytellers throughout their process. During the entire gathering in Amsterdam, we also worked according to this principle. We left it up to the young storytellers to structure their time and decide what they wanted to do. Our role was mainly to provide the conditions: ensuring the presence of mentors, offering suitable rehearsal spaces, and providing a technically well-equipped theatre so that the performances could be presented in the best possible way.

This is a form of co-creation that festivals are particularly well suited to offer. Festivals are often able to provide strong structural and logistical support, but they should leave artistic ownership with the

young storytellers. Naturally, this is only possible if a festival also keeps other conditions in mind, such as potential audience reach (see above). Guaranteeing the right conditions is not always easy, and for us in Amsterdam it was also a process of searching and adjusting, but it is nevertheless a responsibility of European storytelling festivals to support the development of young storytellers in this way and, in doing so, to contribute to a vibrant future for storytelling as a performing art form.



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