



## SOCIALLY ENGAGED FESTIVALS

A storytelling festival can be more than a cultural event. It can align entertainment with participation, activism and change, and function as a platform for dialogue, visibility and empowerment. Socially engaged storytelling, when effectively paired with audience development strategies, can lead to increased awareness, sustainable audience relationships, and cultural and social change.

To be effective, socially engaged storytelling should be accompanied by strategies that ensure the message reaches the right people and sparks meaningful engagement. So, apart from offering meaningful voices, festivals also play an important role through audience development: the process of attracting, engaging, and retaining audiences. They can foster community connections, create spaces where stories serve as catalysts for dialogue and empathy, amplify diverse voices, and create immersive cultural experiences.

Below you can find a 'menu' for festival or cultural event organisers to pick from when they decide to introduce socially engaged elements. For practical Cassandra examples please have a look at the short panel presentation (15' Zoom) at ...[LINK HERE](#)

### Vision and values

- As a festival organiser/curator it is important to define the festival's vision and core mission: e.g. "To use storytelling as a tool for social change, empathy-building, and community empowerment." and/or "To showcase socially engaged storytelling as an art form."
- By blending oral/traditional storytelling with contemporary themes, festivals make complex social issues more accessible and relatable. Therefore a next step is to anchor the festival in values: e.g. inclusion, justice, diversity, gender equity, cultural memory, cultural & civic participation.

### Ethical and socially engaged curation

- By presenting stories rooted in lived experiences the festival fosters empathy and understanding across social divides. To this end the curator can showcase socially engaged storytellers (local and international) who highlight the values and social issues related to the festival's vision. Such emotional resonance can inspire audiences to act, volunteer, or support related social initiatives.
- Festivals also can amplify marginalised voices and invite storytellers from underrepresented or silenced communities to share their narratives publicly, ensuring diverse voices are heard. This creates a stage for perspectives that challenge dominant narratives and bring social issues into mainstream awareness.

- Ethical curation also involves an ethical context, shared decision making and informed consent with storytellers, fair pay, and care for storytellers before, during and after performances. Socially engaged festivals should also remain aware of power dynamics between curators, storytellers and audiences, specially when working with vulnerable or marginalised communities.

### Experimenting with formats and participation

- Beyond traditional storytelling, festivals can include interactive storytelling, participatory theatre, digital story labs, or co-created story circles. These methods highlight storytelling as a collaborative practice that belongs to everyone, not just professional performers.
- Storytelling sessions can be followed by discussions, workshops, or panels that encourage the audience to reflect on the social issues raised. It is even possible to pair performances with conversations involving activists, educators, and policy-makers. This transforms storytelling from passive entertainment into active engagement.
- By offering storytelling workshops and/or training labs - skill-based sessions on oral storytelling, digital storytelling, spoken word, or participatory theatre – one can empower individuals to tell their own stories and to share their experiences and advocate for social change.
- In this respect it is worthwhile to consider offering a year-round program (story labs, school residencies, community storytelling projects) so the festival becomes a hub of continuous engagement, not just a once-a-year event.
- This can turn the festival into a living laboratory for social practice, a knowledge sharing space between artists, academics and communities and/or a platform for documenting best practices in socially engaged arts.

### Community partnerships

- Many festivals partner with community organizations to ensure co-ownership for the festival. They invite local residents, activists, advocacy groups, NGOs, and cultural workers to not just attend the festival but to collaborate and co-curate sessions.
- A festival can also engage in interactive & site-specific storytelling and partner with local neighbourhoods, museums, cultural centres or public spaces to host pop-up story sessions. This strengthens networks between cultural institutions and community-based initiatives, turning the festival into a hub of civic participation.
- Festivals can link to ongoing initiatives (community storytelling projects, school programs, activist movements), inspiring long-term engagement and ensuring that the energy generated doesn't fade once the event ends. This positions the festival as both a catalyst and amplifier for broader, sustained change.
- Audience development should be present as a strategy by e.g. identifying the target audiences (youth, educators, activists, policy makers, local residents), and developing outreach methods (via schools, social movements, community media ...). A focus on long-term relationship-building could imply pre-festival engagement (story collection, local listening sessions ...) and post-festival follow up (newsletters, attendant networks, invitations to cooperate ...).

## Accessibility & inclusion

Audience development also requires a low threshold access to the festival. To this end the festival can provide:

- Multilingual storytelling or live translation.
- Disability access (sign-language interpretation, captioning, sensory-friendly sessions).
- Safe spaces for sensitive storytelling (trauma-informed facilitation).
- Reduced/free entry for community groups, youth, and vulnerable audiences.
- Digital and hybrid engagement: online storytelling for remote audiences, podcasts, social media storytelling campaigns, ethical archiving of stories for public access.

## Promoting socially engaged storytellers for other festivals

- Festivals committed to socially engaged storytelling can actively support the visibility and circulation of storytellers in other cultural contexts. Promotion in this sense is not only about marketing individual artists, but about strengthening an ecosystem in which socially engaged storytelling is recognised, valued and programmed more widely. This can take many forms: recommending storytellers to partner festivals, highlighting their work in professional networks, and articulating the relevance of socially engaged storytelling to contemporary cultural and social challenges. This way festivals can help ensure that these storytellers reach new audiences, contexts and opportunities.
- Socially engaged storytelling gains strength when audiences and programmers understand the processes behind the work. Festivals can support this by producing high-quality documentation (videos, interviews, feedback) that captures not only performances but also their social impact. Such materials can be shared with other festivals, cultural platforms and networks, offering programmers concrete insight into how a storyteller works, what audiences they engage, and what conversations their work can spark.
- Promotion also involves preparing storytellers for new contexts. This may include offering mentoring on how to present work to programmers, supporting the development of adaptable formats, or helping artists reflect on how their stories can resonate across cultural boundaries.

## Evaluation

Do not forget to measure both artistic impact (audience reach, quality of performances) and social impact (community engagement, new partnerships, participant empowerment), to discuss the outcomes with all stakeholders and to act accordingly.