



CASSANDRA
SOCIALY ENGAGED STORYTELLING

STRATEGY FOR EUROPEAN COOPERATION

The Cassandra Network

1. Introduction

The Cassandra project has brought together five distinctive storytelling organisations: the Amsterdam Storytelling Centre, Fortellerfestivalen in Oslo, the Warsaw International Storytelling Festival, Sagobygden – Land of Legends in Sweden, and the International Storytelling Festival at Alden Biesen in Belgium.

Each of these festivals represents a unique approach to storytelling. Some emphasize contemporary performing arts, others focus on traditional narrative heritage, multilingualism, community engagement, or professional development. While their identities differ, they share a common belief: storytelling is a powerful cultural practice capable of connecting people across languages, histories, and social contexts.

This document outlines how European cooperation between these festivals can be shaped. The aim is to identify complementary strengths, develop shared objectives, and propose practical strategies for collaboration.

European cooperation offers the opportunity not only to strengthen individual festivals but also to support a broader European storytelling ecosystem. By working together, the Cassandra partners enhanced artistic development, promoted socially engaged storytelling, and reached new audiences across borders.

2. The Diversity of the Cassandra Festivals

A central strength of the Cassandra network lies in the diversity of its participating festivals. Rather than duplicating one another's roles, the festivals represent complementary perspectives on storytelling.

2.1 Amsterdam Storytelling Centre

Storytelling as Contemporary Performing Art

The Amsterdam Storytelling Centre positions storytelling within the contemporary performing arts landscape. Its festival emphasizes storytelling as a professional stage discipline, with the storyteller seen as both performer and artist.

Performances are curated with a strong theatrical focus and often combine oral storytelling with music, movement, or other performative elements. Each festival edition is built around a conceptual theme that shapes programming and artistic dialogue. Thematic programming also allows the festival

to frame socially engaged storytelling within a coherent artistic context, encouraging storytellers to reflect on how their narratives respond to contemporary issues.

The Amsterdam festival functions as an international showcase for innovative storytelling forms and provides training, mentoring, and artistic development opportunities for emerging storytellers.

2.2 Fortellerfestivalen (Oslo)

Craft and Professional Exchange

Fortellerfestivalen is rooted in the Nordic storytelling tradition while maintaining a strong international outlook. Its defining characteristic is the equal importance placed on performance and learning.

The festival serves as a professional meeting place for storytellers, with workshops, craft sessions, panels, and skills laboratories forming a central part of the programme. It brings together traditional narratives, autobiographical storytelling, and contemporary performance in a dialogue between past and present.

In recent editions, thematic programming has also played a role in framing the festival's artistic direction. In 2025, the theme *Ignite* was used to evoke passion, urgency, and social engagement, guiding artist selection and encouraging storytellers to reflect on the purpose and societal relevance of their narratives.

2.3 Warsaw International Storytelling Festival

Storytelling as Artistic and Intellectual Discourse

The Warsaw International Storytelling Festival approaches storytelling as both an artistic form and a medium for intellectual reflection. Programmes are curated with strong thematic coherence and frequently address historical memory, identity, and cultural narratives.

Through its thematic approach, the festival often engages directly with social and political questions. The 2025 programme explored issues such as gender perspectives and queer narratives, using storytelling as a platform for dialogue and critical reflection.

The festival is particularly notable for giving space to Central and Eastern European perspectives and for connecting storytelling with broader cultural debates. By framing storytelling as a form of artistic discourse, the Warsaw festival expands the cultural and conceptual scope of the art form while creating opportunities for socially engaged programming.

2.4 Sagobygden – Land of Legends

Storytelling as Living Heritage

Sagobygden represents a unique model in which storytelling is deeply embedded in landscape and local heritage. Rather than focusing solely on performances, Sagobygden functions as a broader cultural ecosystem that includes legendary sites, museums, educational initiatives, and an annual storytelling festival.

Stories are connected to specific locations within the region, creating a narrative geography where visitors encounter legends in the places where they are said to have occurred.

Recognised by UNESCO for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage, Sagobygden demonstrates how storytelling can shape regional identity and cultural sustainability. Events often take place in small, intimate settings that encourage close interaction between storytellers and audiences, reinforcing storytelling as a shared cultural experience rather than a purely staged performance.

This place-based approach highlights how storytelling festivals can foster community participation and strengthen relationships between cultural heritage, landscape, and contemporary audiences.

2.5 International Storytelling Festival Alden Biesen

Multilingual Storytelling and Education

The festival at Alden Biesen is distinguished by its strong focus on multilingualism and education. Storytelling performances are presented in multiple European languages, allowing audiences to experience storytelling as a form of linguistic immersion.

The festival is closely integrated with educational programmes for schools, adult learners, and community participants. In 2025 informal formats such as storytelling cafés and open stages create opportunities for dialogue, participation and stronger links with the local community. Partnerships with educational institutions help embed storytelling within broader cultural learning processes.

Through its educational orientation, Alden Biesen highlights storytelling's capacity to foster intercultural exchange and lifelong learning.

3. Opportunities for international cooperation

A key theme emerging from the Cassandra project is the role of storytelling festivals as socially engaged cultural platforms. Storytelling has a unique capacity to foster empathy, highlight lived experiences, and encourage dialogue across social divides. When festivals deliberately integrate socially engaged storytelling into their programming, they can become spaces for reflection, civic participation, and cultural exchange.

In practice, several strategies have proven effective across the Cassandra festivals. Thematic programming provides an important framework by creating coherence between performances, discussions, and educational activities. When a festival articulates a clear theme, artists can engage more consciously with contemporary social questions while audiences encounter multiple perspectives on a shared topic.

Accessibility is another key dimension. Festivals have experimented with formats that expand access beyond traditional theatre venues, including free events in public libraries, outdoor storytelling gatherings in city squares, and performances in heritage landscapes. Some festivals have also introduced sign language interpretation or invited Deaf storytellers, broadening participation and acknowledging diverse storytelling traditions.

Professional development is closely connected to these efforts. Festivals support emerging storytellers through open stages, work-in-progress presentations, mentorship programmes, and opportunities to present work internationally. At the same time, socially engaged storytelling

requires specific skills, including ethical awareness, community engagement methods, and collaborative practices. Developing these competences is an important part of festival-based learning environments.

Community partnerships further strengthen these practices. Collaborations with youth centres, cultural institutions, municipalities, and educational organisations allow festivals to reach wider audiences and embed storytelling within local contexts. However, meaningful engagement requires time and trust and often extends beyond a single festival edition.

Although the Cassandra festivals operate in different contexts, these differences complement each other and reflect the richness of the European storytelling landscape. A particularly positive outcome was the creation of platforms for emerging storytellers. Participants developed socially engaged storytelling and presented their work within international festival programmes through curated performances, open stages, professional presentations, and discussions. In some cases, they were integrated into existing festival structures such as industry days or thematic programmes, and several developed full-length performances that later travelled to other festivals.

The project also highlighted the contribution of young storytellers, whose work addressed themes such as identity, sexuality, generational trauma, environmental responsibility, and political engagement. These perspectives enriched festival programmes and demonstrated the potential of storytelling as a medium for reflection and dialogue on contemporary social issues.

Co-creative and participatory formats were another important element. Open stages, workshops, panel discussions, and interactive performances encouraged active participation from artists and audiences, fostering a sense of community and direct engagement with the themes presented. International exchange and networking were strengthened through collaboration between festivals and professional encounters such as the FEST conference, creating spaces for feedback, exchange, and professional development.

The project also encouraged experimentation with accessibility and audience engagement. Performances in public spaces, libraries, and outdoor locations, alongside free and open formats, helped attract new audiences. Inclusive practices such as multilingual performances and sign language interpretation broadened participation and supported audience development, particularly among younger audiences.

Finally, the project contributed to organisational learning. Festivals reflected on youth inclusion and explored ways of integrating young storytellers more structurally into future programming, in some cases creating pathways for continued involvement beyond the project.

Despite these positive outcomes, several challenges became clear. One recurring issue concerned audience reach for emerging storytellers, particularly for international artists without local networks. Audiences were more likely to engage when new artists were presented alongside established performers or within clear thematic contexts, highlighting the importance of programme framing, promotion, and long-term audience development.

Another challenge related to structural differences between festivals, including scale, curatorial approaches, and focus areas. Each festival therefore developed its own approach to integrating Cassandra activities, requiring flexibility in planning and coordination.

The project also highlighted the complexity of community-based storytelling. While the ambition was to foster work rooted in deep community engagement, this requires significant time, trust-building, and facilitation skills. Given the limited timeframe, many projects developed from personal or peer narratives towards more collaborative or community-informed approaches. Interactive participation also required careful facilitation, particularly when addressing sensitive themes, to ensure safe and respectful dialogue. In addition, the relatively short timeframe limited deeper artistic collaboration between storytellers from different countries. Longer-term formats such as residencies or collaborative laboratories could support more sustained exchange and joint creation.

These observations underline the importance of continuity beyond the project period, including sustained support for emerging storytellers and the structural integration of youth participation within festival organisations.

Building on these insights, the Cassandra festivals can strengthen cooperation through several strategic initiatives. The circulation of storytellers between festivals is one of the most direct forms of collaboration. Each festival offers a distinct context, and touring across these settings allows artists to gain new perspectives while audiences encounter diverse storytelling traditions. A coordinated touring programme could support presentations across multiple festivals, with adaptations to different contexts and audiences.

European cooperation also offers opportunities to develop joint projects focused on socially engaged storytelling, including cross-border residencies, collaborative story collection, and community-based programmes addressing shared themes such as migration, climate change, and cultural identity. These initiatives would enable storytellers to work with communities in different countries and create narratives reflecting diverse European experiences.

4. Possible further steps

To move from exchange to structured, ongoing cooperation between storytelling festivals, a number of concrete actions can be implemented across the network. Some examples:

A coordinated touring programme can be established to support the circulation of storytellers between festivals. Each partner festival can commit to hosting at least one emerging storyteller from another Cassandra festival per edition. A shared selection process can identify a small group of artists annually, with each festival providing performance slots, technical support, and local promotion. Artists need to be supported in adapting their work to different contexts (theatre, outdoor, educational), and touring schedules can be aligned across festivals to ensure feasibility.

A shared thematic framework can be developed on a yearly basis. Festivals can agree on one or two common themes linked to socially engaged storytelling, such as migration, climate responsibility, or identity. Each festival retains its curatorial independence but integrates the shared theme into part of its programme. This allows for coherence across the network while maintaining diversity of approaches. Online editorial meetings between programmers can support coordination and exchange of artistic approaches.

A joint mentorship and training scheme can strengthen professional development. Each festival can nominate mentors (artists, facilitators, or curators) who contribute to a shared pool. Emerging storytellers selected within the network gain access to cross-festival mentorship, including online sessions and at least one in-person workshop linked to a festival or conference. Training modules are to focus on socially engaged storytelling skills, including ethical storytelling, community engagement, and participatory methods.

Residency formats also can enable deeper artistic collaboration. One or two annual cross-border residencies can be hosted by partner festivals or associated cultural institutions. These residencies are intended to bring together small groups of storytellers from different countries to develop new work over a longer period. The outcomes can be presented across multiple festivals, ensuring visibility and continuity.

A collaborative platform for knowledge exchange can be developed and maintained. This can take the form of an online resource hub where festivals share methodologies, case studies, and tools related to socially engaged storytelling, accessibility, and audience engagement. The platform can also include documentation of past projects, recorded discussions, and practical guidelines for working with communities. Each festival can contribute content on a rotating basis.

Partners can share communication tools and co-promote touring artists through joint campaigns. When possible, festivals are encouraged to align messaging around shared themes and highlight the international dimension of the collaboration. Specific attention can be given to reaching younger audiences through partnerships with schools, universities, and youth organisations.

Accessibility practices can be further developed through shared standards and experimentation. Festivals can agree on a set of minimum accessibility measures, such as offering a number of free events, including performances in public spaces, and integrating inclusive practices such as multilingual elements or sign language interpretation. Pilot projects can be tested in different contexts and evaluated collectively.

Community engagement can be supported through long-term partnerships. Each festival can identify one or two local partner organisations (such as youth centres or community groups) and commit to multi-year collaboration. International exchange can be integrated by connecting these local communities across countries through digital encounters or shared storytelling projects.

To support networking and visibility, professional encounters can be continued and expanded. Existing moments such as conferences can include dedicated sessions for emerging storytellers, pitching opportunities, and curated networking formats. Festival organisers can also meet regularly to evaluate cooperation and plan future actions.

Finally, a light coordination structure can ensure continuity. This can include a rotating coordination role among partner festivals, responsible for communication, scheduling, and monitoring shared initiatives. Clear planning cycles and regular check-ins will help maintain momentum and embed cooperation structurally within each organisation.



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