

FLEX SPOTLIGHT SUMMARY: COLLABORATING WITH PEERS

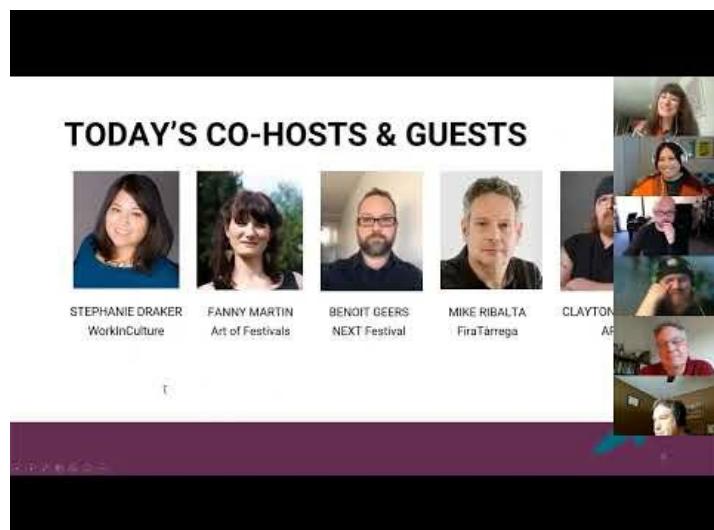
FLEX SPOTLIGHT SERIES - COLLABORATING WITH PEERS

The FLeX Spotlight Sessions were part of the [FLEX: Collaboration](#) training program. This 3-part series was geared towards those interested in learning more about how Canadian arts & heritage festivals can build and implement stronger collaboration strategies through international and local examples. Recordings of the entire series are available on [WorkInCulture's YouTube Channel](#).



Originally held on February 2, 2022, in this first session, ***Collaborating with Peers***, guests from European performing arts and outdoor arts festivals met with Ontario-based “context translator” Clayton Windatt to discuss collaborative frameworks, making space for conflict amongst peers, and growing, maintaining, and ending professional relationships.

Featuring: Benoit Geers from NEXT Festival, Belgium and Mike Ribalta from FiraTàrrega, Spain, with Local Translator Clayton Windatt (curator, multi-arts performer and filmmaker, Executive Director of ARCA), and Fanny Martin, Art of Festivals, and Stephanie Draker, WorkInCulture as co-hosts and facilitators.



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FLEX SPOTLIGHT CASE STUDIES

1 - Benoit Geers, Coordinator, NEXT Festival (Belgium)

SPEAKER BIO: Benoit is the central Coordinator for [NEXT Festival](#), an annual international contemporary theatre and dance festival in the cross-border Eurometropolis Lille-Kortrijk-Tournai & Valenciennes, organized by 6 French and Belgian co-organizing artistic houses and 10 to 15 associated partners. NEXT invites about 40 international artists every year to create and present in the cross-border region. They tour the Eurometropolis to present their work in more than 15 venues and interact with the public in workshops and gatherings.

ORGANIZATION OVERVIEW: [NEXT Festival](#) was created in 2008 with 5 initial partners across the transnational and bilingual Eurometropolis region (Lille-Kortrijk-Tournai, over 2 million people) to create more collaboration across the French-Belgium border. It replaced 3 pre-existing festivals to create a truly international contemporary festival on a horizontal partnership model: for 3 weeks in November, these partners co-produce a festival with a single mission, a co-created artistic program, a unified marketing strategy and ticketing system, and one budget co-managed by all partners. The initial circle of partners increased to include associate partners and represent a broad range of spaces and places. NEXT won the [EFFE Award](#) in 2015, with the jury praising their approach as “unique and very innovative”, especially as “other festivals could learn a great deal about collaboration from this model, especially across borders.”

THE FESTIVAL OPERATES ON 4 PILLARS THAT DRIVE COLLABORATION:

- Support & presentation of new generations and new trends in the international theatre and dance scene
- Presentation of leading productions & artists
- Programming on the cross-border region with a specific focus on audience participation
- Public mobility, new & vulnerable audiences, active citizenship & creative/artistic entrepreneurship

Programming is at the heart of this cooperation model, with all Artistic Directors from different venues coming together to create one coherent and ambitious public offering. This level of intense collaboration requires a lot of work, but because of the pooling of resources, it translates into a high level of efficiency, with over 55% of the budget allocated to artistic costs.



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2 - Mike Ribalta, Head of Professionals, FiraTàrrega (Spain)

SPEAKER BIO: Mike oversees the industry platform at [FiraTàrrega](#), a festival and international market for contemporary performing arts with a strong focus on outdoor and socially engaged practices.

ORGANIZATION OVERVIEW: Tàrrega – a town of 19,000 inhabitants in Catalonia, about 1 hour north east of Barcelona – welcomes 100,000 visitors during its annual festival, a celebration that takes over the entire city with over 250 performances by 50 companies during 4 days.

FiraTàrrega is also a meeting point for professionals to spark connections, promote relationships and provide information and resources to the professionals who form part of the creation value chain (creation, production, distribution, promotion, programming and diffusion).

FiraTàrrega is actively involved in many European networks ([Arts de Carrer](#), platform for Catalonia's street arts festivals; [Circostralada](#), the European circus network; [COFAE](#), the association for Spain's biggest performing arts fairs; [IETM](#), international network for contemporary performing arts; and [IN SITU](#), the European platform for artistic creation in public space).

LINES OF ACTION THAT HELP INFORM COLLABORATION:

- ▶ We provide economic and technical support to performing arts creators to generate new projects.
- ▶ We accompany artists, guide them in their creative processes and offer them spaces of trial and error with an audience.
- ▶ We mediate to find co-producers and partners who facilitate the development of performing arts creations and make them sustainable.
- ▶ We organize gatherings of sector professionals to publicize new creations and facilitate their arrival on the market.
- ▶ We select an international program to be performed in person in September before audiences and professionals.
- ▶ We involve the citizenry in creative processes.



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3 - Clayton Windatt, Executive Director, ARCA (Canada)

SPEAKER BIO: To make sense of these international frameworks, we experimented with a Collaborator-in-Residence framework with artist & cultural diplomacy specialist **Clayton Windatt** as our first “context translator”. **Clayton** is a mixed blood Métis, First Nations and settler arts leader living in Sturgeon Falls, Ontario, a 3000-population farming community on the highway between two relatively small urban centers, Sudbury and North Bay. He is the Executive Director of [ARCA](#).

ORGANIZATION OVERVIEW: [ARCA](#), a pan-Canadian network that connects over 1,800 artist-run centres artist-run centres in the visual and media arts, contemporary craft and architecture and collectives represented through 9 regional associations.

KEY INSIGHTS FROM DIALOGUE:

Building on the examples provided and the expertise in the room, we explored:

- the conditions for long-lasting, trust-based relationships to form and flourish, starting from opportunities to meet and get to know each other.
- the emotional investment required by healthy, dynamic collaborations, including honesty, transparency, generous feedback, respect of boundaries and recognition of emotional work.
- the importance of building a culture of consent right from the start, with frequent check-ins and realignment of shared purpose.
- the benefits of distributing resources and powers amongst partners.
- the need to develop feedback skills and to be able to critique and debate in a non-confrontational way.
- the limits of collaboration and the recognition that differences in values, scale or expectations may be irreconcilable.

CLAYTON'S OPENING CONTEXTUALIZATION:

I really enjoyed Mike and Benoit's sharing the **layers of collaboration and networking** that take place in their work, the **connections** that lead to consensus-building to make things happen at larger levels, like **acknowledging individual capacity** and how some things can be done if those capacities are **combined**, as opposed to looking at each other as competition.

I feel that there are a lot of systems in Canada and Ontario that have those kinds of structures where we're encouraged to collaborate. But **we're also encouraged to compete for funding**.



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There are structural aspects to the way arts funding works that go against collaboration. As a professional, you find how to navigate that and make it work for you - it's not as rigid as it may seem - and I'm interested in thinking about how to **shift towards optimism**.

I think it comes down to finding **working relationships that are healthy and make sense**. In other words, collaboration needs to be **consensual**. It needs to have a lot of **love**, make a lot of **sense** and have **mutual respect** and **mutual understanding** and **mutual benefits**. This has to be really clear for all parties, who need to find their comfort level in those working relationships.

There are opportunities, including right now with new funding streams, to **imagine these collaborations** - and I love keeping it at a **collaborative level** instead of talking about **merging**. We often hear how festivals or arts organizations should collapse and roll into each other - that it would run better if there were less competing elements. But it would also lose **autonomy**.

For me, all of the best collaborations that have taken place have all been very **relational**. I appreciate the organic process of **meeting people** and seeing the connections and wanting to make those connections make more sense. I'll also celebrate the fact that we've had meetings prior to this presentation. This is not the first time that Benoit and Mike and Fanny and I have all met to discuss how this would go. And I think that that's a really important aspect of trying to understand each other, because **without the time and effort needed to build that understanding between parties, it's almost impossible to say whether these things make sense**.

I'm also thinking of the idea of **formalizing associations**. ARCA is the federal group made up of 10 Association bodies. Those associations are both representation based, and region based. In Ontario, it's ARCCO, the Artist Run Centres and Collectives of Ontario. That association in Ontario has various member organizations, which are artists run centers paying membership fees and getting membership benefits. Then those centers have artists and individuals as their members. So, if you look at the layers of membership bureaucracy, there's people and then there's organizations, and then there's associations and more associations that could just keep going on. The power that comes from that hierarchy isn't just efficiency in communication or capacity building. **It's accessing a network that accesses larger networks**. People find out what each other are doing through networks, and that's really all that the network has to do, because the **enthusiasm** towards what each other are doing leads to developing relationships further. So, by just sharing, we find out what someone else is doing, which can fit or not in our own working spectrum, and those relationships will get pursued in that manner. **All it takes is sharing of information and effective communication** - that's the basis.



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I'm now thinking about how to **activate communities better through collaboration** and how to set out a really **healthy understanding of relationships between organizations**. There's also the question of **artist remuneration** - how can we collaborate towards higher fees and more sustainable income for artists?

CLAYTON'S CLOSING CONTEXTUALIZATION:

In conclusion, I'll frame our conversation in the context of the work being done here: acknowledging Indigenous people as the original keepers of this land, and trying to, from the government side, come up with better relationship structures, resources and collaborations.

I won't get into the long history of abuses that have happened, which are, for the majority, publicly well known. But as we're talking about collaboration, how to start and maintain them, I wanted to reflect on how to build **healthier relationships** - and **how to get people to not feel like the starting point is exploitation** when you're calling upon them. It's not simple: there's no way to just magically bypass all of the problems that are publicly known and that I alluded to.

So let's say you want to start a new relationship. The question is: does the other party want that relationship? What if they are getting preyed upon all the time?

A few years ago, the Ontario Arts Council was talking about putting resources towards getting the communication staff of the First Nations bands to receive the press releases that were going out for Indigenous artists. I had an intern at the Indigenous Curatorial Collective at the time working on establishing who in the offices was there to receive these things. We found out that there were only about eight First Nations bands that had a communication staff person. So this idea that all these people are there waiting, ready to take your message and share them with people - the majority of the band offices are not at the point of being able to participate in that way. They do not have the capacity. But everyone is trying to come up with partnerships, wondering why no one responds to emails - it's because they're probably sitting in a general inbox for months before it's checked. The capacity to engage isn't there and they're being asked too much. The new ICCA ED, Camille Georges-Usher, says that she's solicited to engage all the time. Even just taking those calls can be time-consuming. How can smaller organizations establish healthy programming with Indigenous people? **I would say, start in a relational way, start where you are, with your local Indigenous community or people you know, then make a plan to start building that relationship in a healthy way**



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WorkInCulture would also like to acknowledge and extend our deep thanks to our Curriculum Consultant, Fanny Martin of Art of Festivals, for summarizing and synthesizing this information.



Fanny is an international creative producer & facilitator specialised in festivals, networks, interdisciplinary projects and art in public space. Born and educated in France, she developed an eclectic freelance project portfolio in the UK before moving to Canada and founding [Art of Festivals](#), a creative company that designs transformative events to spark change and enchant everyday life. In collaboration with artists, educators, researchers, technologists and activists, her work focuses on producing memorable shared experiences, shaping change strategies, experimenting with participatory frameworks and designing learning & evaluation programmes.

