FESTIVALS AS EVENTIFYING SYSTEMS

TEMPLE HAUPTFLEISCH

The arguments for the festivalisation of culture in the world today (Kaptein 1996) seem to suggest that the arts festival circuit may actually in some cases have come to represent the theatrical ‘season’ in certain countries (e.g. see the chapters on Iran and South Africa). Though appearing to be a splintered and diverse season made up of a series of cultural ‘mini-bytes’, the festivals are where plays, performances and other arts events are effectively launched and displayed for the public today. Slogans like ‘As seen at the Melbourne Festival’, ‘Newly from the Edinburgh Festival’ or ‘The hit show of the Grahamstown Festival’ have become a standard and effective part of marketing. In other words, festivals are not only where the work is; it is where the artistic output of the actor, director, choreographer, etc. is eventified. It is where the everyday life event (performing a play, a concerto, a dance, exhibiting a painting, a sculpture, an installation) is turned into a significant Cultural Event, framed and made meaningful by the presence of an audience and reviewers who will respond to the celebrated event. Festivals thus become a means of retaining the event in the cultural memory of the particular society.

THE FESTIVALS AS EVENTIFICATIONS

However, there is also another, equally interesting, function which festivals fulfil in the broader society, based on what one might call the latent ‘eventness’ of festival itself as an entity – the festival as a cultural event which in its own way eventifies elements and issues of the particular society in which it is taking place. Considerable attention has lately been paid to festivals and pageants, particularly from this performance theory perspective, by researchers who look at the festivals as performances or as theatrical events in their own right. Such researchers tend to focus on the important and perhaps less conscious ideological imperatives lying behind particular festivals. (See, for example, Staub 1992; Kruger 1999; Martin 2000; Merrington 1999).

One can also look at a number of the current festivals in this way. So, for example, by viewing them as performances in their own
right rather than merely as markets for a series of specific cultural events, some festivals may be seen as celebrating particular (historical or life) events or particular ideologies and ideas. They do so by framing the events/ideas in a theatrical way, in exactly the same way a play might do.

A Van der Stel Festival tableau. Local women dancing a folk-dance in traditional Afrikaners/Dutch dress, re-enact the arrival of the Dutch governor of the Cape, Simon van der Stel, in Stellenbosch to celebrate his birthday. This tableau is part of a weekend long festival celebrating the founding of the town in 1685, and takes place yearly on the "Braak", the Stellenbosch town common, to the enjoyment of the crowds visiting the stalls and tents surrounding the space. Photo by the author.

A good and relatively straightforward example of this process over the years has been the Van der Stel Festival in the small town of Stellenbosch, near Cape Town in South Africa. This festival utilises a formal public ball and an annual open-air pageant to re-enact the festivities on Simon van der Stel’s birthday, when the 17th-century Dutch governor ostensibly visited the little hamlet named after him, and by re-enacting this visit annually the community celebrates the founding of Stellenbosch. The festival itself has no other specific purpose than that. However, though its outside trappings are those of any other festival (e.g. stalls, performances, eating drinking and promenading), over the years it has become a means of reconciliation, a festival shared by all the community, including the immigrant communities and the worker communities from the farms, etc.