

Who Is Organising It? Importance of Production and Team Members

Written by Andrea Kuhn, with feedback given by Matthea de Jong, Lena Hendry and Abdoulaye Gaye

How many people does it take to organise a festival, and what do those people do? This chapter will look at the most important jobs at a festival, as well as discuss how to structure and organise everyone as a team.

Production Department

First, we will look at an easily underestimated aspect of festival organisation: production. Of course, there is a job connected to this area: the production manager. Make sure to assign this task early on so that you will have someone to look specifically at all aspects of production. Your festival will be a much bigger success if you do; having a production manager can prevent many slightly embarrassing moments that can easily arise if there is no one to keep an eye on the larger whole of the festival because they are each paying attention to the details of their particular job.

And that's exactly what the production department is for. Production gives a "face" to your festival by integrating all the work that everyone is doing in the back-

ground into a smoothly running whole for the public to see. Production creates the look of your event and makes sure that everything is where it should be, when it should be there. It is the link between your festival and its audience. Production is like design—ideally it combines form and function.

Some of its tasks intersect with other departments, such as the technical coordinator or the PR and graphic design people. Production will scout and decorate venues (be it a regular cinema, a football pitch or a courtyard); it will put on shows, ceremonies and special events, organise awards and possibly also organise ticketing. You might not need or want all these different kinds of events at your festival, but even if you organise "only" screenings, you still might want to create an inviting and nice atmosphere; you can do this even in improvised venues by dressing them up a little. You might consider having chairs and a table for a discussion after the film, keeping a bottle of water on hand for your guests, or thanking them with some flowers, etc. That's what production is for.

The more events you organise, the more difficult it can be to stay on top of things. Often it is the little

things that are forgotten. It is therefore vital for this part of your festival team to plan and get organised early on. So let's get more specific.

Planning

Before you start with the actual hands-on work, you need to plan thoroughly what you will need in terms of manpower, materials, and money (or, in most cases, how much money you can spend and what you will realistically be able to get with it). Do this planning well in advance, as it is probably the most important stage of festival preparations.

Permissions

Permissions are an important part of the planning process and usually need to be taken care of well in advance of everything else. You might need a permission to set up your festival as a whole (from a censorship board, ministry of culture, local authorities, etc.). Talk very early on with the people in charge to find out what they need for permissions—or, if you decide that such an official cooperation is impossible, how you can work around that obstacle.

Often you need permissions for quite mundane tasks like hanging a banner in a public place. Again, try to obtain these permissions well in advance and figure out if there are additional costs involved. For some venues, you might need special permissions as well. For example, if you build extra stands at improvised venues,

you might have to observe building regulations. Since permissions can be an essential part of finding suitable venues and advertising your festival, they are typically handled by the production department.

Venue(s)

When deciding which venues to use, production will look at the places in question in terms of capacity (for instance, an opening ceremony might require a bigger place than a regular screening), convenience and attractiveness. Production will discuss these elements in close coordination with the technical coordinator (see chapter *"The Nuts and Bolts: Technical Production"*), and will also plan events at specific venues according to their technical possibilities. For a travelling film festival with constantly changing screening venues, this is quite a task that requires a lot of planning ahead and visits to specific venues. For a bigger and more static festival, this might require finding a number of venues for different uses. If you want to go all out, here are some things to keep in mind when planning for specific venues and events:

Screening Venues

How many people do you expect to show up at your screenings? Based on that, make sure you have venues big enough to get people in, but don't overplay your hand. There's nothing more embarrassing than having a big venue and a very small crowd. Be realistic for the first edition of your festival; you can always expand the following year.



Volunteers are an important part of the festival team at Nuremberg Human Rights Film Festival in Germany. Photo: Archive of Nuremberg HRFF.

Choose a venue that is already a popular place, easily accessible (by public transportation), and accessible to your target groups. For open-air screenings, choose a popular, central place.

Venues should be chosen in order to provide audiences easy access (in the evening, by foot or public transport), also considering the economic resources available to people trying to reach the festival. If, for example, the festival is easily reachable by foot and close to home, it will be easier for low income families to get to a screening, even at night. If the festival is far away, your audiences would need to take public transport, which is an additional cost. If your program is at night, it may not facilitate participation, especially from youth, the elderly, and women—unless the festival provides bus passes and escorts for security in the evening to get back home. You might need to consider other security issues as well when picking your venue. Please consult the *“Film Festivals with Guts: Security and Censorship”* chapter for more information on this.

Can you get all the electricity you need at the venue you choose, or fit in a suitable generator? Extra electricity/power supply may need to be purchased to supplement the existing supply. It is very important when choosing a venue for the festival that electricians fully check the electrical system of the venue to verify it is secure. If the venue of choice already has some or most of the technical equipment you’ll need, all the better.

Identify areas that you can use for promoting your festival inside and outside the venue. If you are screening in a building or an enclosed space, let people on the outside know what’s happening inside, and show them what event they are attending once they are inside. This becomes particularly important if your venue is part of a larger structure like a university or a multiplex cinema. Help people find their way by guiding them with signs that are easily detectable and that share the logo/artwork of the festival. Orientation is very important especially for international guests who might not speak the local language and cannot easily ask their way around.

Special Venues for Shows, Ceremonies and Special Events

Find the most suitable venue in terms of seating capacity and existing technical equipment; for special events, the requirements might be very different from a general screening. If you want to include a reception before or after an event, consider whether you have a suitable space at or nearby the venue, or if you will have to transform the space itself. And if so, how much time do you need for that, and what will you do with your guests in the meantime? Perhaps a little drink will help them pass the time while a sufficient number of volunteers stack chairs and help the band set the stage for a short concert, etc. If you need to transport your guests from one place to the next, make sure you’ve organised a shuttle service or private cars.

Festival Centre

The festival centre is usually the place where your guests can meet and where they can get all the information they need, from their accreditation to tickets. It might be where guests come together after the last screening of the day or where they choose to hang out during the day because they know they can always meet someone there. If you want to have a festival centre for your festival, location is very important. The festival centre should be easy to reach for everyone and clearly identifiable. Don't forget to state opening hours in promotional materials.

If possible, the festival centre should be in a location that offers free Wi-Fi and has all the technical equipment your team will need to run a festival office—computers, internet, printer, xerox machine—or that your guests might need to use. The festival centre might provide separate spaces for your guest services and your press office. If so, make sure these areas are easy to find. Decorations in the festival centre should make your guests feel that they really are at the heart of the festival. This can include festival poster and banners, but also posters and promotional material of the films that you screen.

Decorations

Think about dressing up your festival to give people a sense that they are attending a special event and to create a consistent look for your event. Decide on

a festival logo which might include specific fonts and colors; use these as a guideline for all other aspects of production. To decorate your festival you can use everything at hand, from flowers to plastic banners to roll-ups to handmade decorations. There is no best way to do it, just keep in mind that all elements share a general design, colors, etc.

To save on your budget, you should look for elements that are easy to assemble/disassemble, easy to transport and reusable at different locations or for the next festival edition. Banners, for example, are both great for PR and provide helpful orientation for your guests. If some materials will be used outdoors, prepare them according to weather conditions. Banners, for example, must survive gusts of wind, rain, sun or snow depending on where you're located; be sure they come with loops or eyelets for fastening them to structures. Find a good printer well ahead of time and make sure that everything is ready at least two weeks before the festival.

Ticketing

Even if you are offering admission to your screenings for free, it can still be helpful to use tickets. Tickets can help you control the number of guests in relation to available seats, and it can help you to keep track of audience numbers. If you decide to use tickets, the production department should find the best place to hand them out. For instance, if people have to pay for tickets, selling them at the entrance can cause a

bottleneck. Selling tickets takes some time and requires enough space for the rest of the crowd to wait for their turn. In this case, it can be useful to have a separate place for your box office and entrance control at the door.

If you use tickets to control your audience numbers, you will need to think of a system for people with special passes such as festival guests or team members. How and where do these guests get their tickets? At special events in particular, you should keep some extra tickets handy for last-minute VIP reservations.

Awards

If your festival wants to give out awards, it is important to weigh the benefit of a nice design against the price you can afford for a statuette or certificate. Check for local talent to design your award; filmmakers will remember the awards that look specific to a place and event and not like catalogue pieces. Clearly define how many awards you want to present, and determine whether a cash prize is attached. If so, do you want to represent the cash prize at your festival and if so, how can that be done (e.g. a super-sized cheque)?

Event Planning

To organise a special event, you should set up a system for inviting those guests who are not filmmakers. Collect and check addresses of important people (VIPs) in your area regularly in order to always be up-

to-date. Send out the invitations in time and ask for RSVPs. Make a list of RSVPs to help you make plans.

Write a detailed, minute-by-minute schedule of special events you're planning and hand it out to all the technical staff and the others involved in the event. Don't forget: you're putting on a show! Always test-run any ceremony or complicated special event. That is the only way to find out if everybody knows what to do and if the technical aspects are actually working.

Ask Yourself:

- *Who will give a speech and when?* Don't forget to give everyone instructions on time limits or your event might go on long after everyone in the audience has fallen asleep. Make sure everyone knows when they're meant to speak.
- *What kind of media do you need (PowerPoint slides, film clips, etc.)?* What equipment do you need to use them (consult with the tech department)?
- *Who will moderate?* Choose wisely—a famous host will give you extra publicity, but ask yourself whether they are the right person to moderate an event on sensitive issues like human rights?
- *Do you need translations for international guests?* Don't let your guests sit through a two-hour ceremony without understanding a word! How will you organise the translation? For a small number of guests, a whispered translation might work. For more guests you will need translation equipment and to organise a pick-up point and system.

- *Should there be flowers for special guests, the moderator, etc.?* If so, where will you place them during the ceremony, and how will they get into the hands of the person for whom they're intended? If the flowers are not already on stage, have someone nearby who will hand them to the moderator.
- *What should you do with awards?* Again, where will you place them during the ceremony and how will they get into the hands of the person for whom they're intended? If they're not already on stage, have someone close by who will hand them to the moderator.
- *How, where, and when should pictures be taken by the press and/or your own photographer?* It's usually a good idea to plan specific photo opportunities—such as a group photo of all award winners—immediately after the ceremony and/or a short moment after each award, when the award winner and the jury representative both face the camera. Make sure to have good photos of the important people at your event (politicians, funders, sponsors, award winners, etc.); these photos will be very helpful, both in your press work but also when you want to get those same VIPs on board for the next festival edition.
- *What should you do with funders, cooperation partners and sponsors?* These people and organisations have helped you to put on the festival. Respect that, and give them an opportunity to showcase their contribution. This can be in the simple form of projecting their logos on a screen at some point during the ceremony and having the moder-

ator mention them. The most important contributors can be offered the chance to make a short speech—just remember to give them a time limit!

Whom do you want to address?

In general, you should be aware that you have at least three target audiences for everything you do in production.

- Donors/politicians/press
- General audiences
- International guests/filmmakers

Make sure you determine who needs what, and prioritise those demands.

Donors, politicians and members of the press might expect to be treated as VIPs and might define the success of your event by a certain amount of glamour, grandiosity, etc. After the opening ceremony (if you have one), they usually don't show up again until after the award ceremony (if you have one). For this reason, those kinds of events should look a bit bigger than regular screenings.

While glamour might also be a concern for general audiences, they are primarily expecting good content, discussions, and organisation, etc.

Filmmakers and international guests are normally most interested in the cultural specifics of your area,



Volunteers at the ticket counter at Freedom Film Fest in Malaysia. Photo: Archive of Freedom Film Fest.

and are less interested in streamlined production value and glamour. Still, do not underestimate how much filmmakers value quality screenings of their own films.

A filmmaker spends a lot of time and money in making their film the best it can be, and while they usually understand technical limitations due to rugged screening conditions, etc., they need to know that you are doing the best you can in terms of screening quality. In the same regard, if you put on debates about their films, make sure you have knowledgeable people to moderate them.

Team

The success of your festival depends very much on the team that organises it. For starting festivals, it is usually good to have a core team of two to three people. With a small team like that, expect to be multi-tasking!

Team Positions

Even if you have no money for staff and everyone is a volunteer, it is important to both identify specific areas of work for each person and to distribute responsibilities for particular tasks. Depending on the size of your festival and staff, you might need some people to fill several positions. Here's a short overview of positions that could be vital to the success of your festival and which you should determine well in advance. More often than not, one person fills several of these positions:

- *director(s)*
This person is usually the “face” and the spokesperson of the festival with tasks such as overall fundraising, representing the festival at other events and teambuilding.
- *programmer(s)*
This is the person or the people who watch all the films in order to select the festival program.
- *program coordinator*
Once you have decided on the program, you will need someone to get in touch with all the rights owners of the films, and have them send the screening masters to your festival in time. Quite often, screening masters arrive just in time from another film festival; in that case, the program coordinator has to arrange shipping with the other festival. The program coordinator is also responsible for sending the screeners back right after the festival. Again, this often has to be coordinated with another festival, not the rights owner. A program coordinator requires excellent organisational skills, good English skills to be able to communicate with contacts worldwide and knowledge of the most suitable courier companies in your country.
- *technical coordinator and team*
They make sure that everything runs smoothly on the technical side.
- *production department*
This was explained in the first part of this chapter. The position requires creativity, organisational skills and good team spirit, as they will have to work with different departments of the festival.

- *guest coordinator*

The guest coordinator is the link between your festival and all invited guests, especially international guests. Great organisational and communication skills are required as well as good command of English both in writing and in conversation. This is the person who arranges everything for the guests including accommodation and transport (plane, train or otherwise and transport from/to airport, etc.). To make sure you can always reach your guests if necessary, ask them for their mobile phone numbers in advance and give them yours.

Guest visas are very important to arrange before the festival:

- Organise this in advance! Visas can take forever. It often takes quite some time for your guest to get an appointment at your country's embassy and then the visa process itself can also take a long time. Generally, the visa applicant has to apply for and pick up their visa in person.
- Guests coming from certain conflict regions may face additional complications such as the arbitrary closing of borders and/or airports, or unsurpassable roadblocks. Keep that in mind when timing their trips and always have a plan B in place in case they cannot make it.
- Keep in mind that a guest might have to travel to another country to get the visa if your country doesn't have an embassy or consulate in your guest's home country. Make sure they understand that element.

- Research your country's visa requirements well in advance and pass the information on to your guests.
- If your country's visa can be purchased at the point of entry into the country, everything will be a lot easier, but you should prepare your guests for the process. For instance, they will need to bring or exchange a certain amount of money to obtain the visa, and perhaps passport-size photographs.
- Keep your guests on their toes about this! They usually underestimate the time it takes to get a visa and because of this you can end up without the guest.

Write a welcoming letter/e-mail to your invited guests at least one week before they are due to arrive to give them important information such as:

- The details of their travel arrangements (flight numbers, hotel name and address, pick-up details at airport)
- Important mobile numbers (e.g. guest services, director)
- Their personal schedule (including screenings, Q&As, debates, press interviews)

Prepare a guest map for each individual guest and give it to them upon their arrival. This can include:

- Guest activities (if you have any planned)
- The welcoming letter (see above)
- City map
- Festival schedule and catalogue

- Vouchers (if available)
- Pen (if available)
- Useful information about your city/country (how to obtain internet access, emergency phone numbers, good restaurants, specific customs, etc.)
- Information on which films will be available in English (subtitled or English language)
- Their accreditation/name badge

Accreditations/name badges are usually also handled by guest services. If you want a printed photo on accreditations, ask your guests for them beforehand so you'll have enough time to prepare them. You'll need lanyards or some other device to attach the accreditations. It is useful to print important phone numbers on the back or include a second card with the numbers so that everyone always carries them around. Don't forget that your team will also need an accreditation.

- *press/communications manager*

Find someone who has good media contacts and also knows how the system works. Great communications skills are paramount for this position. Your press manager has to "sell" the festival and they need to know who needs what materials and when.

- *location manager*

Always have a staff member at each screening! You need someone in charge; this person has to make sure that everything is running smoothly and has to intervene when something goes wrong. Good communication skills and strong nerves are defini-

tively assets. Usually this person will make sure that the screening starts on time, and that the projectionist, guests and moderators are on time to their specific venue. The location manager will also make sure that chairs are put in front of the screen for a Q&A, that microphones are ready, water is served, etc. They are the micro-managers of each venue.

- *translators*

Translators are specialists. If you decide to have an international festival, you can't manage without them. Catalogue texts will have to be translated and Q&As might also have to be translated into English (for the guests) or—if you're a travelling festival—to and from the local language to the festival language.

- *moderators*

You have to find a good balance between someone who is confident speaking in front of a crowd, interviewing people and handling controversial discussion versus someone who is also knowledgeable in both filmic questions and the subject matter at hand. Be aware that some media professionals, while able to handle interviewing and speaking in front of a large audience, might lack the sensitivity required in human rights contexts.

- *volunteers*

Volunteers can take over all positions that require fewer specialised skills and less knowledge of the festival. They usually work only during the festival or start shortly before the festival begins. Choose them wisely: they might be the heart of the festival, and a happy crowd of volunteers can be vital for a

good festival atmosphere. Your core team will be on board for a quite a while, will deeply identify with your event and know all about it; others, such as your volunteers, will join you for a shorter period of time and have less knowledge about your program, structure, and the rest of the team. Treat them accordingly and create a structure that brings them up to speed on the things they need to know. Hold orientation meetings with volunteers before the festival so that you can explain the philosophy of your festival, the key tasks that await them, and introduce them to the key players of the festival. A little introductory sheet with the names of the most important people and their function with photographs will help them to identify the person they are looking for from the core team.

Be realistic about what to expect from your volunteers. In societies without a pronounced culture of volunteering and internships, or where people struggle to make financial ends meet, it might be difficult to even find volunteers, let alone reliable ones. Be sure to clearly communicate the benefits of volunteering (e.g. developing organisational and team skills, contact with interesting international guests, and a chance to see loads of films). Be clear about volunteers' responsibilities and their role vis-à-vis the core team. Perhaps you can arrange with local universities, high schools, etc. for students who volunteer at your festival to receive extra credit. People might not have time to volunteer extensively, so try and split up jobs into smaller assignments or organise shifts according

to regular business hours or school curricula so that people can join you for a shift after work or school.

Criteria for Jobs

If you're looking for staff, expertise is of course a wonderful thing, but in a low budget film festival other qualities might be almost as important. Everybody needs to be reliable, even if they're not getting paid. Team players are always an asset; creative or technical geniuses are great, but if they cannot work under pressure or around people, it can complicate things a lot. Identify jobs by their relationship to the public: a behind the scenes job might put more emphasis on organisational skills, whereas a position that requires direct interaction with your guests and audience will require stronger communication skills.

Team Structure and Coordination

Assign clear responsibilities to your staff. If someone cannot carry out a task for which they are responsible, they should hand the job over to someone else who will be able to take care of it. Your team structure doesn't have to be hierarchical, but someone needs to be able to get things done when necessary.

Most festivals start each festival day with a staff meeting. This is when you go over the events of the day (or even better, the following day to give you time to make adjustments if necessary) to see if you still need to organise anything and if everything has been taken care

of. This includes the technical details of the screenings (including Q&As if you have any), guest services (who will arrive/depart that day, who needs transportation, who has an interview where and when, etc.) and other organisational matters.

Create a good atmosphere for everyone! Each team member, including volunteers, should feel that they're part of something special, not just cheap labour. They should proudly represent the festival and take it on as their very own. This will help them feel responsible for the success of the festival and ensure friendly and helpful interaction with your audience and guests.

Share Information!

Establish clear communication structures. You have to create a structure that can be used to pass information on to each other. The more informed everyone on the team is, the less errors will be made and the better prepared you will be to react if something does go wrong (and something always does!).

While no single person can know everything, everyone should know who will have what information, and how they can be contacted if necessary (via a list of phone numbers, names, etc.)

Hopefully your festival will run for more than one edition, but even then your team—especially the volunteers—will inevitably change. To ensure consistency, create checklists that summarise the most important and regular tasks for each position that can be used by next year's team/volunteers. They can be adapted and changed based on experience to improve them over time.

Stress

Working for a low-budget film festival demands a lot from everyone involved. Things will get hectic and things will go wrong both before and during the festival, so you should be prepared to deal with high stress levels. Don't take your stress out on volunteers or on other people further "down the food chain" from you. To help keep your team motivated, it's important not to take people for granted; make everyone feel important and part of the festival. Their additional motivation will help reduce errors and create an atmosphere where everyone can deal with problems more easily. Sometimes something extra like a shared dinner for everyone right before the festival can work wonders at bringing everyone closer and motivating everyone that extra bit.

Never forget to thank your team—they deserve it!



Working meetings of a festival team are essential for smooth preparations. Photo: Archive of Karama HRFF.