

We had no idea how little we knew! The international literature festival: Ten years of a miracle

“Happily the fruit falls, when ripe, to the ground. As the poem falls to the paper: Creeps up, makes no noise, takes the pen, writes itself down, and disappears.” Like the poem that the late Syrian poet Fuad Rifka read at the International Literature Festival (ilb) in 2004, the ilb crept up on Berlin.

All of a sudden there it was. An apparition. A vision. At least in the eyes of the audience in a city whose inhabitants are spoilt for culture, with access to innumerable events. However, when it opened in June 2001, with a marathon of speeches that set a new standard, its sponsors and the Peter Weiss Foundation had already worked behind the scenes for several years. Charles Simic, a Serbian-born American writer, presented his “Weather Forecast for Utopia and Vicinity”, and prophetically/poetically outlined festival’s future programme. Nothing less than the whole world and its ideas, its sandstorms and summer clouds, were to inhabit the sky above Berlin from then on.

Above all, emotion! From day one the festival had a touch of megalomania and its impresario Ulrich Schreiber tried hard to turn criticism of the ilb’s confusing abundance into mass admiration. “The oversupply,” Joachim Sartorius promised when he opened the sixth edition with his usual laconic elegance, “triggers a certain calm once you reach the point of letting go”. Provided, however, that you can rely on the high quality of each and every single writer and event hosted by the festival. But wherever you turn, you will never be lost. Don’t expect TV hosts who can fill football stadiums with their conveyor-belt texts! Don’t look for fashionable trash from the bestseller lists, commercial life-management surrogates or populist boxing ring slams! You won’t find them. The only criterion Uli Schreiber and his advisors apply when inviting authors is the quality of good literature.

A quality that implies the unspoken but self-evident statement that all good literature bears a responsibility for humanity, a political conscience in the best sense of the term. She was “always one of the dissidents” said Isabel Allende when firing off her pyrotechnic display of

anecdotes. It wasn't just in the opening speeches of such moral authorities as Dževad Karahasan, David Grossman and Carlos Fuentes or the then-UN representative Shashi Tharoor and the charming activist Arundhati Roy. And it wasn't just in the panel discussions of the "Reflections" programme, dedicated to political debate, but in each work of fiction, each poem, each tribute to the beauty and expressive intensity of language, and even in the silliest stories. They all bear the potential to make us better human beings. "Women ... are more civilized than men – not only because women read far more novels than men do, but because ... reading accustoms them to seeing the world through the eyes of others", Nancy Huston claimed in her inauguration remarks in 2008.

Reverence for writers is not a noisy business. Of course there are poetry nights at the ilb which can get loud and passionate and in view of the considerable number of celebrities among the festival guests, the fans, too, make themselves heard once in a while. Nobel Prize winners, including Kenzaburo Oe, Nadine Gordimer, Doris Lessing and Mario Vargas Llosa, as well as potential Nobel candidates like Ko Un or the late Queen of Poetry Inger Christiansen with her exuberant theory of aggregates, have mounted the stage in front of Jakob Mattner's simple curtain. Jane Birkin whispered mementos of Serge Gainsbourg, the Scottish hardcore romantic AL Kennedy mockingly labelled herself a "lesbian undertaker", Portuguese grand seigneur António Lobo Antunes sang the post-colonial chorus of guilt, the flurry-haired libertine Michael Ondaatje mumbled taciturn "mhmms", Chuck Palahniuk, the poet of excess, told the audience that smoking is kind of spiritual, and the Irishman Matthew Sweeney enjoyed a glass of champagne and produced music from a suitcase trolley at a chip shop.

The best thing is when you're surprised by someone you don't know at all. "Be surprised!" could be the motto of the ilb, to paraphrase the title of Stephane Hessel's manifesto "Indignez-vous!" ("Time for Outrage"), and its sequel "Engagez-vous!" (Commit yourselves!). The festival is at its most exciting when it introduces tomorrow's stars: Colum McCann, Aleksandar Hemon, Tim Parks, Monica Ali, Kamila Shamsie, Sayed Kashua, Jonathan Safran Foer, Kazuo Ishiguro, Peter Carey, Jonathan Lethem, Nicole Krauss, Antjie Krog, Frédéric Beigbeder, Vikram Seth, Frank McCourt, Joshua Ferris, Khaled Al-Khamissi, or the Finnish-Estonian purgatorial feminist Sofi Oksanen. They were all here. Together with writers whose names are difficult to remember. However, who knows what we will hear from Rattawut Lapcharoensap, Natalia Śniadanko, Nicoleta Esinencu and Aka Morchiladze one

day? Spectators of the countless festival events rarely go home without feeling inclined to read more, immediately.

The festival's relaxing atmosphere provides important moments of well-being amid the seemingly anarchic chaos of simultaneities. Thousands of writers have been invited, and they all praise the perfect organization, the cordial care, the wine and the inspiring hospitality and, accordingly, declare it the best literature festival in the world. "Not everybody is lucky enough to have a festival that invites writers from all continents, where genres blend, and where you see poetry and reflection, day and night, the sun and the moon on one and the same stage", comments Abdourahman A. Waberi, a writer from Djibouti based in France. To be part of it means "to know that our world turns round", he explains. We, the visitors, may consider ourselves lucky to share his happiness.

Another important miracle of the ilb is the fact that even after ten successful years the festival appears anything but established. It is as confusing as it ever was and it has preserved its much-invoked charming chaos. Behind the programme's apparently overflowing bounty lies the possibility of empathy and discovery. And who needs stringency or an overview if magic is the only meaningful idea? To be enchanted and carried off into other worlds: nothing else matters. Uli Schreiber's enthusiasm is contagious. Nietzsche's dictum "One must still have chaos in oneself to be able to give birth to a dancing star" may well apply to the director of the festival, whose curiosity concerning foreign literature and new writers is as insatiable as it is admirable. "We had no idea how little we knew." With this humble confession Schreiber inaugurated the ilb focus on Africa in 2008. Alas, he could have said the same with respect to the literary scenes in focus in the years before and after: Arab, Asian, Latin American literature, and ultimately literature all over the world. Schreiber always convinced us that there is an undreamt-of literary abundance to discover.

With his irresistible passion he also motivates a host of interns and trainees every year. Their parade on stage at the beginning of the festival has become a trademark. He manages to gain non-conventional sponsors, who – in spite of the spite of accountants – sometimes prefer to give in kind, not in cash. Because of his achievements politicians can no longer ignore him, and have even shown up to deliver words of welcome at the start of the festival. But the literary industry lacks glamour. There are no elegant receptions, posh parties or VIP galas. A table, a chair, and a glass of water. That's all you need for a reading. A narrator, and someone

who listens. A translator, an actor, a host and maybe, to get everyone in the mood, a few twisted scales performed by the accordionist Aydar Gaynullin (“A present from the moon”), a lyrical cluster by Siberian guitarist Alexej Wagner, or a simple gong to tune into the silence of concentration.

After a four-year nomadic existence, moving from the HAU theatre in Kreuzberg to the morbid Sophiensäle in Mitte, the ilb finally found an institutional home in the premises of Berliner Festspiele in 2005. The run-down 1963 glass and concrete building, once used by Piscator’s Freie Volksbühne and located in the city’s no longer happening west, proved to be a stroke of luck, and not just because its manager is a literature buff, too. The main and the ancillary stage can be used simultaneously. Together with the inhospitable upper and lower foyers with their square upholstered suites and fashionably cheerless bars, this is the ideal shell to be filled with the polyphonic whisper of promises. The stand-up bar, euphemistically called “Café Nabokov”, fills up in silent defiance with the lives of those who find a home in stories.

Others move on to the marquee lounge, where sofas await authors, members of the festival team, guests and those audacious people who invite themselves. This is where the secret heart of the ilb beats. On saggy plush furniture from the props department they drink sponsored wine and coffee. This is where marriage proposals are made, as well as short stories which will never be published. This is where Eliot Weinberger holds court, at least until the tango begins, and the “only slightly dominant” Isabel Allende introduces her husband, who has just written a crime novel. Beauty and power, success and wealth – they count for nothing here. Because this is where the classless society of literature celebrates, where there is no private ownership, whether of cigarettes or of visions. This is the spirit of the International Literature Festival. A fantastic gift to us all. Ten years of a miracle!

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