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SPECTACULAR EVENTS IN TOWNS AND REGIONS

by

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Overview

Seventeen years ago, Gad Weil created the company WM Événements which devises and stages spectacular events. He was behind the *Grande moisson* (Big Harvest) on the Champs-Élysées in 1990 (when there appeared to be fields of wheat growing in the Champs-Élysées) ; the *Train capitale*, an exhibition of trains also in the Champs-Élysées between May and June 2003 which in two months attracted six million visitors ; the *Incroyable pique-nique* (Incredible Picnic) where the French public was invited to picnic on July 14th, 2000 on a 'green' meridian line which was 'drawn' from north to south throughout the country ; and most recently, the Chinese New Year parade on January 24th, 2004. The town of Nice, which wanted to revive its famous ancient Carnival, has entrusted him with the Carnival's artistic management for some years. Some of the events in which he was involved have been commissioned ; others are projects suggested by WM Événements. Some are one-off events ; others take place annually. All require extensive expertise which local authorities do not necessarily have. Do these new-style events contribute as much to promoting social ties as events from yesteryear ? Opinions are divided...

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TALK : Gad WEIL

I come from a family whose members traditionally went to university : my father was a university professor and a research director at the CNRS (*Centre Nationale de la Recherche Scientifique* : French national centre for scientific research), and one of my sisters is a law professor. I was different. At the age of nineteen, having taken my *Baccalauréat*, I took part in the preparations for the Nancy University Theatre Festival which was run by Jack Lang and Lew Bogdan. They taught me my profession.

The learning years

What I liked best about this experience was not so much the theatre itself, but the sense of excitement which gripped the town of Nancy during the festival. It was an amazing atmosphere where everyone talked to everyone else. Immediately following this experience, I worked on the Nancy Jazz Festival. I was no more an expert on jazz than I was on the theatre, but I had caught the bug associated with working in a group associated with a cultural activity in the city centre.

I followed my girlfriend to Paris where she continued her studies, and for the next two years I completely changed what I had been doing up till then. I worked for *Action contre la faim* (Action against Hunger), a non-governmental organisation which had just been created by a group of French intellectuals including Françoise Giroud, Bernard-Henri Lévy, and Jacques Attali. I was extremely lucky, in spite of my youth, to have taken part in weekly meetings with these people who taught me a great deal.

After this experience and as a result of replying to an advertisement, I became the administrator of a theatre company, and since the salary was not enough to provide a living for my family, at the same time I became an assistant to Gilles de Bure, the director of the *Grande Halle de La Villette* (an exhibition centre in Paris for contemporary art). At the age of twenty-five, I took on my first managerial position at the *Maison de la culture* in Angoulême.

A year later, I decided to create my own company. I started out on my own, working from home. Gilbert Trigano gave me my first professional contract, working as a subcontractor for the live performances at the Mirapolis theme park.

First important activity

My first important activity occurred in Strasbourg, at the 1991 European Heads of State summit for which a huge cultural programme had been organised. Gilles de Bure suggested that I make a proposal which was accepted by the town hall, as well as about twenty other proposals. Four months before the event, the person in charge of the project, Loïc Hennequin, the Foreign Office general secretary, summoned us to his office on the Quai d'Orsay in Paris and said 'We have calculated that the twenty projects will cost sixteen million Francs. However, our budget is only eight million. What do you suggest ?' It was a real free-for-all, everyone naturally defending his own project.

Armed with a recommendation from Jacques Attali, I went to see the person in charge. I said 'The way things are is no good at all. You will have to select different projects but start all over again in order to create a single project within the budget which you have at your disposal.' Apparently, my argument was convincing and, as a result, he entrusted me with the entire project, but formally warned me not to exceed the budget. Since he asked me what reassurance I could give him, I suggested that our fees would be the guarantee that we would not exceed the budget. He agreed. This is how I won my first important contract worth eight million Francs. At that time, I thought it was unbelievable !

The Big Harvest

Some time earlier, we had been contacted by the CNJA (*Centre National des Jeunes Agriculteurs* : young farmers' trade union). They wanted to remind the France of 1989 that food shortages and lack of bread had largely been responsible for the French Revolution. They asked us to write a play about agricultural life. We objected, arguing that portraying farmers for an audience of farmers made no sense, and that it would be better to organise an event which was much more spectacular, such as the harvesting of a huge field of wheat in the Champs-Élysées. We did not manage to get the necessary financing for this to take place in 1989, and so the project took place the following year, which turned out to be a stroke of luck as there was much greater media attention.

The Big Harvest (*La Grande moisson*) was a battle of epic proportions : up till then, we had never done anything in Paris ; nobody had heard of us ; and nobody believed in this project. The harvest was scheduled for June 24th, St. Jean's name-day. On the 23rd, we went to get our wheat field which had been growing in tubs in greenhouses at Montesson (20 kilometres north-west of Paris), and had been placed on pallets. The first fifty lorries arrived at the *Bois de Boulogne* (on the western perimeter of Paris) where we waited for our police escort. When it did not appear, we decided to escort them ourselves on motorbikes. An unmarked car drew up alongside us and the policeman inside asked us what we were doing. 'We are delivering a field of wheat which we are going to plant in the Champs-Élysées', we replied.

He called his superior. A senior police officer arrived and asked us the same question to which we gave the same answer and showed him the document signed by the Paris police prefect. He started laughing. 'If they gave you permission, it's because they thought it was impossible !' We were given two riot squads to escort five hundred lorries.

Since there was not enough money, we had not been able to publicise the event. Now the news spread like wildfire : people picked blades of wheat and showed them to people in the underground, saying 'There's a field of wheat in the Champs-Élysées !' In the space of a few hours, five hundred thousand onlookers arrived. In the evening alone, one million spectators attended the Big Harvest.

On the same evening, the president of the CNJA, who was intimidated by the prospect of going live on television, said to me 'You go in my place !' This is how Dominique Menut, my associate at the time, and myself appeared on every television station.

A setback, and then off it goes again

After the Big Harvest, there were many events until a major failure led to the company going bankrupt. The event in question was a project organised by Jack Lang and Pierre Berger entitled *Jour de mode* (Fashion Day) : thirty fashion shows were to be organised at the same time throughout France. In the meantime, a change in Government took place and Jack Lang was replaced as Minister of Culture. As for Pierre Berger, he was in the process of selling Yves Saint Laurent. The project collapsed.

For a self-educated person who learned on the job, bankruptcy is quite an educational exercise. In a very time, I learned everything that one can and cannot do. For example, I had wanted to repay my debts by myself in my own way, whereas one should let the receiver deal with everything. I was condemned, with the remark 'You are morally correct, but legally wrong'.

Shortly after this, I set up my current company, WM Événements, which today has a turnover of seventeen million Euros and has thirty-five permanent employees. Depending on the number of events, the company can also include numerous contract workers in show business, and also the hospitality staff and accompanying personnel for more scientific or professional events. Since the event organisation is a very risky trade, as I have learned to my cost, we bought two agencies specialising in a more traditional sector of activity, namely corporate tourism. This involves the organisation of conferences or professional events. With the safety net of this more "traditional"

activity plus the fact that we own our own offices (situated in a former foundry in Pantin, northern Paris), we can sleep soundly at night, and this sense of calm enables us to organise our own projects as well as to reply to tenders.

Organising our own projects

One of the special features of our agency is that only half of our activity is dependent on invitations to tender : the other half depends on us taking the initiative and looking for partners.

The 'Train capitale'

The exhibition, the '*Train capitale*', organised on the Champs-Élysées in 2003, was one of our initiatives. I had written the scenario two years earlier when I presented the project to the SNCF (French national railway company), the mayor of Paris, and various sponsors. I presented the project, of course, to Alstom whose response was relatively reserved in view of the size of its participation. 'In any case, you'll have to go through us', they told us. I turned to Siemens and especially Bombardier whose managers I saw in Montreal. They were enthusiastic ; they were in the process of selling their TER (*Trains Express Régionaux* : regional express trains) to a large number of French regions and agreed to invest one million Euros in the event. I went back to Alstom and Siemens, and since they knew the amount which Bombardier was prepared to invest, they not only wanted to be partners in the event, but also the sole co-sponsors with Bombardier in order to keep this project between professionals in the railway sector. Réseau Ferré de France also took part in the event.

The closure of the 'France in China' year

A further example from last year is when I was invited to stage the Chinese New Year on the Champs-Élysées, and at the end of this event, one of the advisers from the Élysée Palace suggested that I organise a similar event for the closure of the 'France in China' year. The project is almost complete : it will cover two kilometres of the Great Wall with fabric by French artists and craftsmen, and will launch a highly original and very festive event *à la française* for one hundred thousand Chinese over one weekend.

For this operation to be feasible, I have to find about fifteen local authorities and a similar number of companies that are prepared to join us. To achieve this, we have to convince them that this event, which will only register with the public, but will also make an impact by promoting the creation of private and public partnerships. Local authorities are very interested in the Chinese tourist market which is predicted to explode in the near future.

Managing traditional events

We are also commissioned to manage events which have existed for decades. I took over the management of the Nice carnival, which has been in existence for one hundred and twenty-one years, and the *Carrousel de Saumur*, which is one hundred and fifty-six years old. This gives us certain responsibilities with regards to the popular cultural heritage. In fact, these events are much more difficult to organise than a specific event, or even events which we have invented ourselves.

The Nice carnival

In 1997, during the celebrations of the take-over of Monaco by François Grimaldi in 1297, I met the mayor of Nice. He started by asking me if I would agree to carry out an audit of the Nice carnival. At the end of our conversation, he asked me if I would manage the carnival. A few days later, he organised a meeting with the presidents of organisations and trade unions : these included hotel keepers, taxi drivers, restaurant owners, carnival workers, the chamber of commerce, and so on. He said that the carnival was old-hat and out of date, that nobody was interested in it any more, and that as a result, he was going to put an end to it. This announcement was met with unanimous protests from the audience. 'In that case', he continued,

‘we will agree to keep it, but we will organise it differently. I have asked Gad Weil to do just that : he is the person who organised the Big Harvest on the Champs-Élysées, and he has just finished organising the Grimaldi celebrations with Prince Albert.’ From that moment on, at the end of every carnival, we congratulate ourselves and agree to repeat the exercise the following year.

When I started managing the carnival, the background was complicated. The cost of the carnival was twice the current budget which is six million Euros. The previous mayor, Jacques Médecin, as well as his father Jean, had transformed the carnival into a sort of magic box which provided a livelihood for a huge number of people in Nice. Many families of carnival people earned in one month – more or less legally – enough to live on for the next six months. The permanent employees were made up of about sixty people who criss-crossed the world getting ideas from other carnivals. In view of the new legislation, this very paternalistic and very Mediterranean model had no future.

While I attempted to reorganise the carnival, I was faced with people’s memories and nostalgia : ‘In the old days, during the carnival, we fought with plaster and spades, it was good ...’. I had to explain to them that today, organising a plaster fight in the street is not acceptable...

Among the innovations I introduced, and the one which aroused most interest, was the replacement of the traditional material of the *Grosses Têtes* (caricatures with large heads) with a modern material, ‘plastayote’, which is very light and can be cut, folded and sewn very easily. Even the mayor told me that I was going a bit far. I suggested that we organise a public meeting at which I was criticised for scorning local traditions. I told the audience that I would only agree to revert to using the traditional material if, in accordance with tradition, it was their children and grandchildren who wore these *Grosses Têtes* weighing fifteen kilos each (as opposed to six kilos with the modern material). For years, the *Grosses Têtes* have been worn by young people from the poorer areas of Nice who are paid thirty Euros for every procession. There was a long silence. From that moment on, there was no further argument.

The endless debate between tradition and modernity is often not really a debate at all. As far as music was concerned, for example, the people of Nice for their carnival were used to using Brazilian music from the Rio carnival, which of course was not at all true to tradition. However, there is a typical local instrument called the *pétadou* which is made from a hollowed out marrow covered by a stretched skin which is beaten with a bamboo stick. We found a specialist who gives *pétadou* lessons and makes one or two instruments per year. We placed an order with him for two hundred and fifty instruments ; we made a recording in an extremely modern studio, and then I transposed the tonalities of the *pétadou* onto Beethoven’s Ode to Joy. Today, it has become the official music of the Nice Carnival : fifty thousand people, including the mayor and the prefect, now dance to *techno-pétadou* music.

The ‘Carrousel de Saumur’

Until 2001, the army produced the *Carrousel de Saumur* event rather unprofessionally. The stands, which were totally obsolete in terms of today’s safety standards, were even assembled by the soldiers themselves. Many of the military personnel had their places paid for by the Ministry of Defence and the profits, which were far from negligible, since costs were minimal, were paid directly into the regiment’s coffers... Eventually, someone made the remark that this system was costly because they used the army, a professional body which had to be paid, and prevented the organisers using a volunteer workforce.

I was asked to manage the event which inevitably exceeded the budget, because we now have to pay for everything at the usual market price, including the stands, the staff, the lighting, and so on. The show, which lasts three hours, has virtually not changed, with performances from the *Cadre noir de Saumur* and various equestrian displays. However, the ticket price has soared from twelve to thirty-five Euros, an increase of 250 %. This has forced us to develop a commercial strategy and especially to work closely with tour operators and coach companies. With Saumur, it is not the show itself but really the economic model of the event which has had to be reinvented.

The accumulation of expertise

My profession allows me to come into contact with people and activities which are incredibly diverse, for example, farmers who grow the fields of wheat, locomotive engineers for the *Train capitale*, high ranking officials in the French army to organise Saint-Cyr Military Academy at Coëtquidan's bicentenary. I approach each new project with an open mind and sometimes even naively, but at the same time with a professional approach. As a result of our experience of all these events, we have acquired a certain amount of expertise.

One area of expertise is, of course, the concept for scenarios and how to stage events. However, we have also become experts in regulations. For the Nice carnival, for example, I painted a kilometre of road in the colours of the rainbow. Everyone, including the town hall, the *département* prefecture, and so on told me that it would be impossible. But I love doing things which everyone says are impossible. By thoroughly analysing the problem, one is able to undo all the so-called impossible knots and in the end, things become possible. At the end of the carnival, the mayor of Nice congratulated me on having been right, contrary to what everyone else had said. He also admitted that the only problem he now had, was the number of letters he was receiving from inhabitants asking him to paint all the roads of the city...

Another area of our talents is that we are now experts in labour law. We are able to answer questions such as 'what is the status of a volunteer?' 'How is he insured?' 'What is the situation if he is also unemployed?' etc.

We have also become specialists in security. For all our events, we work very closely with the prefectures, the police departments and private security firms. From the moment that a crowd gathers, one takes on an enormous responsibility. When we co-produced a show with giant caricatures of the stars of the Football World Cup in 1998, I remember a security meeting where one of the people in charge asked me 'What if someone shoots one of the giant caricatures with a bazooka from a roof?' I replied, 'In the centre of Paris, if someone manages to get up on a roof with a bazooka, do you think that he is aiming for one of the giant caricatures, or the President?' The question went unanswered, and we continued our meeting.

We constantly have to cope with the anxieties of the people with whom we come in contact. When one says to a mayor or a councillor 'It is wonderful that you have agreed to this event : it is a brave decision', he frowns and asks for additional time to consider his decision. Our aim is to reassure these people and to share all the risks with them.

Creating social ties

In 2000, we organised the Incredible Picnic on the green meridian line devised by the architect Paul Chemetov. For this event, we made a tablecloth six hundred kilometres long and invited nearly two million people to picnic, in spite of the rain. A few weeks before the event, there was a press conference, during which a very chic journalist asked Paul Chemetov 'Are you not bothered that there will be sausage skins and greasy papers scattered on your work of art?' Paul replied 'In thirty years' time our children will benefit from the trees on the green meridian. For now, the only thing which the French people will remember about this is this incredible picnic.' Then he added, purely for our benefit, 'You have a fantastic job : your activity is to create social ties.' I thanked him by saying that he had just given me the *raison d'être* I had been looking for over the last ten years. I asked his permission to use this expression. He agreed but asked that each time I used it, to cite his name. I do so with pleasure !

When I was sixteen or seventeen years old, my father sent me to a Talmudic school in the provinces, undoubtedly in the secret hope that I would become a rabbi. In some ways, my profession amounts to the same thing, but on a non-religious level : I belong to the large family of people who organise social life, and in the heart of this family, I am the one who organises the parties and reunions. Life has come full circle.

DISCUSSION

The pioneers

Question : *In which countries and when did this profession start to emerge ?*

Gad Weil : The management of corporate events was created about forty years ago when the first conferences and other professional events started. The British and Americans are way ahead of us in this field : five years ago, there were some British agencies which already had a turnover of one hundred and fifty million Euros. Currently, communication groups are in the process of structuring global event networks ; Publicis, for example, is creating a global group called Publicis Events.

On the other hand, France is very much at the forefront in the organisation of public events, thanks to certain pioneers such as Jean-Michel Jarre and his spectacular concerts, and especially Jack Lang, who created the annual *Fête de la musique* (festival of street music throughout France taking place on June 17th each year). He was the first person to have envisaged events which were the basis of a social and cultural policy. He enabled culture to break free from its traditional domain of museums and theatres, (only frequented by 14 % of the French population), and brought it to a more popular level where it is accessible to everyone. The bicentenary of the French Revolution, which was organised in Paris by Jean-Paul Goude, gave a huge boost to this type of event.

The inspiration

Q. : *From where do you draw your inspiration ?*

G. W. : In this profession, we work like sponges : like everyone else, we read books, we go to see films, exhibitions, and we listen to the news. We are currently living in a period of intensive change where everyone is looking for reference points : I try to share experiences which reflect what is happening. Right now, for example, I am in the process of preparing an event which will be called *Technostalgie*, and which will conjure up the curious ambivalence between our need for nostalgia and our appetite for modern technology. In a way, we are the mirrors of society, even if the mirrors distort certain images, since our method of making people think about various themes is to make them the subjects of large-scale events. We are very lucky to be able to organise events in the street, in other words in the place which is most favourable to emotional reactions, because it has no 'lid' : whether the weather is fine or not, whether the sky is blue or full of stars, the street is an extraordinary place.

Permission or dispensations ?

Q. : *In a world which is increasingly protecting itself against all imaginable risks, you still manage to organise events which transcend all the rules. Do you do this by weaving in and out of the cracks in the regulations or by getting dispensations ?*

G. W. : We fulfil our profession in a largely critical system, since almost all our events are 'non standard'. On several occasions, I have had discussions with ministers in order to determine the legal and fiscal status of an event : was the Big Harvest a country fair, a cultural event, or a protest event ? In the end, the SACD (*Société des auteurs compositeurs et dramaturges* : organisation to protect artists', composer's and playwrights' copyrights) agreed to recognise me as an author and street events' director, so that everything which I now organise has a cultural status... which is transparent in our VAT rate of only 5.5 % (as opposed to 19.6% otherwise).

To obtain the necessary dispensations, I have to convince the people with whom I am dealing, of my energy, tenacity, and fervour. Of course, it is essential that the project has some sense to it from a general interest point of view and is not just an excess of megalomania. Similarly, if I organised events with a commercial aim, I would never obtain this type of dispensation. Finally, of course, we take all the necessary cover as far as security services and insurance policies are concerned : our insurance and safety budgets plan have multiplied tenfold in the past fifteen

years ... For the *Train capitale*, for example, we planned walkways so that the public could see inside the trains without entering the carriages which were too old and valuable. Of the six million visitors, four people twisted their ankles when they climbed down from these walkways, and two of these lodged a complaint...

What about the disadvantaged areas ?

Q. : *The type of events which you organise would certainly be very useful to go hand-in-hand with economic and social change in areas experiencing difficulties. But one never sees any such events in these areas ; at the most, there are a few plays or some film festivals.*

G. W. : It all depends on the wishes of the sponsor : if an elected representative who receives a grant thanks to the Borloo Law wants to organise social events for an area in difficulty, then why not ? It is completely feasible to train young people in these areas and to help them to obtain a municipal employment contract. We would be ready to react to this sort of project but for the time being nobody has ever asked us to do anything like this.

Subcontracting the organisation of events

Q. : *Is the aim which you set yourself for these events – recreating social ties – not conflicting with the commercial subcontracting of the activity of event organisation ?*

G. W. : Subcontracting and professionalisation are not synonymous with the process of treating everything as if it were a product to sell. The process of subcontracting reflects the fact that today many institutions, whether they be institutes, foundations, private companies or local authorities, wish to organise events to meet a need or to fulfil an expectation, but do not have the necessary technical, logistic, economic, legal, fiscal or even media coverage talents within their organisations to do so successfully. Therefore, they delegate a public service to agencies like ours. Although we are a private organisation, we still become involved in the area of public interest. It is the conditions of the contract and the nature of the work which determine whether the project is of general interest or not.

Q. : *Do organisations or trade unions ask you for your services too ?*

G. W. : Trade unions, political parties and non-governmental organisations have been coming to professional agencies like ours for a long time to organise their events. The Big Harvest was the result of this kind of request. We were the ones who advised the members of the FSU (*Fédération syndicale unitaire* : trade union federation for teaching and research) to use large, coloured balloons to bring greater attention to their street rallies. I was also the advisor to Monsignor Dubost who organised the JMJ (*Journées mondiales de la jeunesse* : World Youth Days) in Paris in 1997. Every organisation today has no choice but to employ professional agencies in order to organise events of a certain scale.

Who pays ?

Q. : *In the case of the Great Wall event, I understood that it was the French government which financed the project and the sponsors who paid ?*

G. W. : The contribution of the government was limited only to get me to embark on this operation, and this is why they gave my associates and me an aeroplane ticket and three nights in a hotel to go to China. I was very enthusiastic about the idea, I wrote the script and I am now looking for sponsors to finance this event which will cost three million Euros. The State will contribute nothing.

I started out by convincing the twenty-eight members of the official committee of the 'France in China' year : these industrialists will contribute up to eight hundred thousand Euros.

I then asked the local authorities. The curators of ancient Chinese monuments are just like their French counterparts : they do not want any business logos on the Great Wall. Hence, the idea of covering the wall with colours from the different regions. The deal was that for eighty thousand Euros each local authority will be given one hundred metres of wall to cover as they

please, calling on artists and craftsmen to decorate it. All of this is to take place in front of one hundred thousand Chinese, hundreds of journalists and five hundred professionals in the Chinese tourist industry who will come to meet these authorities. For the time being, I have managed to convince eight authorities ; I need twelve to balance the budget. Since they do not always have a great deal of money, we help them to try to find the necessary resources. For example, one can highlight the cultural aspect of the Laguiole knives, wine, button mushrooms (*de Paris* !), and also appeal to private sponsors.

Q. : *For an operation on such a scale, you take a large financial risk ; and yet once you are committed, I imagine that you are obliged to ensure that the event takes place regardless ?*

G. W. : Not at all ; if I have not yet undertaken the expenses of the production, I can stop at any moment if I do not manage to raise the necessary funds. For this event, which will take place in the middle of September, we have fixed May 1st as the deadline. If, at this date, we have collected 75 % of the financing, we will take the risk ; if not, we'll stop everything. It is in the interest of our client : the event is our responsibility.

Professionals and amateurs

Q. : *You work with both permanent and non-permanent staff. How do you manage to mobilise both groups so they are all ready for the big day and so they do not become demotivated once the event is over ?*

G. W. : Apart from our permanent staff, we draw from a pool of contract workers in show business including artists, logistics people, sound and lighting engineers, continuity people, production secretaries, those in charge of production, and so on. Our database also includes a certain number of volunteers who follow us from event to event – ‘What are you preparing at the moment ? Can I take part ?’ – as well as associations, especially professional ones or para-professional ones such as the military, sports people, and farmers. On the evening of the event, there is a very clear difference between the professionals and the non-professionals : the former already start preparing for the next event, whereas the others are in tears because the event is over. This is a distressing time and we have to be there for them. We often organise a drinks party a few days later, with a debriefing which does not have much purpose but helps make the party last a few hours longer.

Q. : *I took part in the Incredible Picnic with my street choir ‘Bachiques Bouzouks’, on the Pont des Arts in Paris, and I remember it very fondly. But I also have a less agreeable memory : in 2001, when the association in my ‘quartier’ was in the process of staging a show in the gardens next to Les Halles in Paris, you arrived with a truly wonderful project which was to take place at the same time and in the same place as ours, and for which you approached all the associations in the ‘quartier’. Luckily for us, your project did not succeed : we were left with the impression that you wanted to steal our party, and that you had come to make money out of the social life of our ‘quartier’.*

Of course, you were much more organised than we were in that you borrowed rostrums, employed someone to work the PA system, and organised the procedure of the event, it was all very new and very complicated for us and we did not know how to go about it. However, gradually we too became more professional ; this year will be our fourth year. The event is called the ‘Jardin extraordinaire’ (Extraordinary Garden) and it goes from success to success each year.

When the event is over, no-one in the team cries, unlike the volunteers you mention who are distressed at the end of the event, which is understandable. When your company leaves at the end of an event which you have staged, these volunteers undoubtedly tell themselves that without you they would not have been able to do anything : they feel stripped of their clothes. We however keep our pride and the social ties which we have created among ourselves.

Throughout all these years, we have slowly established contacts with a large number of sporting and cultural associations in the ‘quartier’, as well as the schools, the music conservatory, and so on. Relationships based on trust have become established and have allowed us to hold constructive discussions in town hall meetings, notably in relation to the project to renovate Les Halles. In fact, I am certain that the reason we managed as a group to convince the

mayor of Paris to choose the architect we had wanted to renovate the area around Les Halles is partly due to this relationship of trust which we have woven around this event and which has enabled us to work together.

G. W. : The initial project emanated from the shopping centre at *Les Halles* and the Paris town hall, both of which were looking for an idea to enliven this area, in anticipation of the future renovation project. It was our idea to extend the event to the associations in the *quartier*. However, our proposition was judged to be too focused on social life in the *quartier* and it was abandoned. It so happened that this project coincided with yours, which may have been why you had the impression that there was some competition but this was an unfortunate accident. In reality, there is no competition between the events which we organise and the events in the *quartiers*, as is the case between professional and amateur sports : both exist side by side without any problems.

Social ties need time

Q. : *I find the idea that events which you organise in developing social ties questionable. Your events take place on specific dates, while social ties take a fair amount of time to become established.*

G. W. : During these events, people talk to each other like never before. For example, I remember a grandfather who was standing in front of a locomotive with his grandson on his shoulders, telling him his memories, and other people around were listening. The day of the Incredible Picnic, loads of people talked to each other, ate together and exchanged telephone numbers and addresses. Of course, I have no idea if these people saw each other again afterwards or if the social tie went beyond that day's meeting. The event is a sort of social catharsis which has the effect of making us feel less embarrassed and less inhibited to talk to people we have never met before, because we share a common feeling. The social tie is created at that moment : afterwards, people do as they please.

Q. : *In my opinion, the social tie is not in the event itself but in the preparation of the event, in that many people have worked together for months on end.*

G. W. : That's true. The best memory one has of a family reunion is not generally the event itself but the preparations, what went on behind the stages, what happened in the kitchen : these are the moments when people talk most together. But there are two different categories of social ties : those which are apparent during the event and which are a product of the feelings during the event ; and those which become established during the preparations between hundreds of people working together, both professionals and amateurs.

Presentation of the speaker :

Gad Weil : in the beginning of the 1980s, he received his training in the Nancy Theatre Festival, alongside Jack Lang. He was behind the organisation of the Big Harvest on the Champs-Élysées in 1990. This was followed by the Incredible Picnic on July 14th, 2000. He is in charge of WM Événements and works with its manager, Nathalie Morlot. WM Événements is a small business but with a high energy output.

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