

UMORE AZOKA · LEIOA FESTIVAL OF STREET THEATRE

10 years of Street Arts

June 1995. With its eyes set firmly on the future, Leioa Council's Department of Culture embarks upon the adventure of organising a Comedy Festival with a programme made up of indoor performances. Three years later, in 1998, the tentative introduction of street performances begins. That year's success is undoubtedly the springboard for the major leap forward taken in 2000, with the start of a more ambitious project, namely, the Umore Azoka – Leioa Festival of Comedy Street Theatre.

Why in the street? Why a festival?

Although it is true to say that there was no festive programme in Metropolitan Bilbao or in the province of Bizkaia in general that did not cater for street shows of some kind, there was no common area for the performers working in this field to stage and present their creations and productions; there was no showcase in which potential "contractors" could observe the performances held.

With these ingredients, a large volume of production and contracting of street shows, Umore Azoka set itself the following ambitious goals:

1. Raise public awareness of the extraordinary contribution street artists make to the performing arts and to social interaction, increasing the appreciation of the work they do.
2. Contribute to the business development of the street arts:
 - Encouraging companies to produce shows that are ever more engaged and competitive, and facilitating their access to a showcase in which to display their wares.
 - Going beyond the festival's purely performance-based nature and stressing its commercial side, making a huge effort in terms of promotion and the attraction of visitors, so as to ensure that the artists involved reap the greatest rewards of taking part.
 - Promoting the dissemination, itineraries and coordination of street performing arts.
 - Favouring the creation of fora for professionals in the sector to meet, exchange ideas and information and share experiences.
3. Make Leioa a focal point for the street arts.

Humour... and a little bit more

As of 2001, coinciding with the 475th anniversary of the founding of Leioa, the festival took on a whole new approach, which was reinforced from 2004 onwards following the opening of the new cultural centre - Centro Kultur Leioa.

The street arts are now ushering in a whole new generation of artists, with backgrounds in dance, music, the visual arts or the theatre. They are becoming a form of entertainment that is breathing new life into the tradition of popular festivals and captivating ever larger audiences through the originality of their performances. At the same time, humour is beginning to share the stage with other genres within this urban art form that is now establishing itself as one of the more original artistic expressions, capable of sweeping away frontiers and bringing creators together.

Umore Azoka now caters for almost all the wide range of performances that choose the street as their stage; a **varied, ample and select programme** of Basque, Spanish and international output that places a special emphasis on the most modern and visual art forms.

Furthermore, Umore Azoka is firmly **committed to new creations** and cooperates in the staging of those shows that find Leioa to be the ideal setting for their premier.

In its quest to **promote cultural cooperation and the sharing of art**, each year it establishes cooperation protocols with other Spanish regions - autonomous communities - known for their street production.

It awards the annual **Umore Azoka Prizes**. A jury made up of experts presents an award to the best Basque street show and another to the best one from the rest of the world. Likewise, the organisation awards the "Umore Azoka" prize, which honours the work of those companies, organisations and/or persons committed to the street arts.

Our travelling companions

Over the course of these years, we have been graced by excellent travelling companions:

The **companies** - in an ever growing number, now amounting to around fifty. The first two editions of the festival were attended exclusively by companies from the Basque Country and Spain, whereupon it opened up to performers from all five continents; established groups and promising young artists seeking to show off their work: a blend of experience and youth that helps the Umore Azoka to stay fresh.

Leioa is a youthful town, undergoing constant growth and urban transformation, in which the street has become somewhere to meet, to enjoy oneself. So those who timidly approached to see what was happening in a square, at the end of a street or in some corner have now become loyal **audiences** that eagerly look forward to the start of the Umore Azoka and spread their enthusiasm to spectators from all the other towns and villages in Metropolitan Bilbao.

For several days, Leioa – with its slightly more than 30,000 inhabitants pouring into the streets – receives more than 50,000 visitors ready to enjoy a true party atmosphere.

Then there are the **professionals**. They are present from one year to the next over the four days the festival is held and during the rest of the year through the work coordinated by such platforms as COFAE (Coordinadora de Artes Escénicas del Estado), ARTEKALE (Asociación de Profesionales de las Artes de Calle, in the Basque Country), SAREA-Red Vasca de Teatros and the internet. This presence ratifies the major role that Leioa plays insofar as the street arts are concerned.

Hand-in-hand with **public institutions** (Departments of Culture of the Basque Government and of the Provincial Council of Bizkaia and INAEM), sponsors and numerous "accomplices" who share the project's vision, Umore Azoka has been growing in terms of its budget and unquestionably becoming the star activity in our town's cultural scene.

Umore Azoka today

It seems like yesterday... and ten years later we can affirm that for four days Leioa becomes a vast stage, a must-see event on the calendar, a showcase and focal point for the different players involved in the street arts: companies, creators, distributors, programmers, networks, audiences, media...

365 days of uninterrupted work for an enthusiastic team.

An opportunity to discover the latest creations in the street performing arts.

Moments to savour a city given over to art, transformed into a haven of fun and entertainment.

For another ten years at least.