

Assitej Congress 2011

– A Bridge Too Far?

Every three years a city somewhere in the world is infested with theatre for children and young people. A thousand theatre-makers and enthusiasts from 53 countries – the largest numbers ever – met, debated, watched shows, argued, did deals, planned and plotted in Malmo and Copenhagen. The two cities are linked by fast trains over the amazing Oresund Bridge but any journey between venues took at least an hour and a half. So the final verdict must be that Congress 2011, Building Bridges Crossing Borders, was too big for comfort and intimacy.

For the more travelled delegates, many of the shows were old acquaintances, some better forgot. *Concerto for Roses and Thorns* really did take me to another world with a two-hour show based on the life and work of a people's poet from a dark corner of Brasil's recent past. The confident 'poor theatre' style, competence of performing and the seriousness of the message for young people about the constant struggle against oppression waged by the rural poor, challenged assumptions about the importance of slick production values and 'accessible' entertainment for young people.



Theatre Pero in Aston's Stones

But Swedish companies also gave me top quality experiences in which polished skills of execution were matched by appropriateness of content. Frankly, there are few UK TYA companies who can match these for sheer professional achievement. A combination of public money invested and a willingness of highly skilled performers to do the work. [Theatre Pero](#) with *Aston's Stones* used modest means but huge expertise in their delicate musical play about a child hooked on collecting things. *AB3* by [norrdans](#) presented a joyously full-on experience of classical dance, utterly without compromise. The precision of high energy acting in [Unga Dramaten's](#)

The Beatbox of the Heart would engage anyone of any age with the angst of discovering sex.

Politics

Of course when the World meets there are clashes of culture, attitude, ambition, people fight for recognition of their work, their country, their festival. Everyone has something to sell or buy, as well as being open to new discoveries. The formal politics happens in the General Assembly, where representatives of the 80 countries in membership of ASSITEJ, meet to debate policy and decide who will lead the organisation for the next three years.



Nina Hajiyianni, Wolfgang Schneider & Next Generation members

With the retirement of long-serving German President, Professor Doctor Wolfgang Schneider, and the election of South African Yvette Hardie to that leading role, a change of emphasis from North to South, male to female has arrived. A number of older members, like me, also retired or were not re-elected and new countries now represent a wider range of regions. India, Cameroun, Serbia and Iceland replace Korea, Austria, Israel and Denmark. Russia and Japan are back. Germany, USA, Australia, Argentina, Croatia and Mexico remain. UK's Nina Hajiyianni was elected with the fifth highest vote.

Perhaps the most controversial decision of the last Executive Committee in which I served was the expulsion of the French Centre of ASSITEJ. For years there has been a growing feeling that the strong and special francophone spirit in TYA has been absent, largely because very few artists in France have a positive view of ASSITEJ as an international forum for exchange and collaboration. Present at the Congress, however, were a large cohort of French presenters of

TYA, keen to re-establish a more open, inclusive and co-operative French Centre. Some distressing scenes as the president of the expelled French Centre lobbied the General Assembly.



Executive Committee 2011-2014

Wolfgang Schneider borrowed this quote from a UK participant for his parting remarks: "Get out While the Going is Good!" In Wolfgang's case it was a gently self-deprecating joke received by the Congress participants with great affection. Any organisation, which fails to see when change is needed, courts decline and an exodus of members. ASSITEJ has not only expelled a number of members for not fulfilling their obligations but has actually increased the total number of countries in membership, so we must be doing something right.

Research and Development

A conference of ITYARN (International Theatre for Young Audiences Research Network) attracted a record number of academics. Small Size and a host of other national and interest groupings organised meetings, social events, workshops and forums. Nina Hajjianni was a leading light in the Next Generation programme, Interplay young writers, the newly established *write local. play global* playwrights' network, all offered opportunities for specialist engagement.



Cia de Tijolo, Brasil Concerto for Roses and Thorns



Open Space at Congress 2011

The Open Space discussions on the future of ASSITEJ brought together a wide range of countries, EC members and Next Generation members in 17 focused conversations. UK's Disability Day was a notable contribution to the rich mix of events.



Whose Theatre is it Anyway? Installation

ASSITEJ is alive and full of energy. It is a warm family of artists and presenters, academics and administrators. A wealth of new projects are bubbling up as ASSITEJ finds more and more ways to encourage collaborations across the World. I am proud that TYA-UK is respected as positive contributor to the work of the international association.

Paul Harman

www.assitej2011.info

www.writelocalplayglobal.org

www.ityarn.org

www.smallsize.org

