

ASSITEJ & NEXT GENERATION

Nina Hajjianni (UK International Representative elect for 2011-2014) attended her first ASSITEJ Executive Committee in Rwanda. July 2010.

OVERVIEW

ASSITEJ International is changing. The world network, which connects hundreds of theatre companies and thousands of theatre makers across 80 countries, is entering a period of reflection and self-examination. What the network is, what it can do and how it works across the globe and with its National Centres was the focus of the 5 days of meetings in Kigali, Rwanda, which took place around FESPAD (Pan African Dance Festival).

ASSITEJ International was set up in 1964 with a political drive to overcome the barriers between East and West, particularly in response to relations between the West and the USSR. The association has evolved but basically follows the same model as it did back then. Now there is a strong desire for ASSITEJ to be more artistically focused, defined by what it does for artists, rather than as a political machine or by what some people see as personality driven activity, particularly in relation to National Centres.

The value of networks like ASSITEJ becomes even more evident in places like Rwanda where a lack of resources and infrastructure for the arts and arts education is critically apparent. Despite this there is a strong sense of grass roots activity and talent in Kigali. Culture Minister Joseph Habineza spoke about the idea of wealth and of other oil rich African countries being *culturally* poor when it comes to arts and diverse arts practices. There is a need for space and support for artistic impulses to be grown. Rwanda has the impulses and needs more of the support. Networks like the African Arterial Network exist to provide crucial support for artists and organisations in order to avoid isolation and so that artistic practice can grow and develop <http://www.arterialnetwork.org/>

Africa contributes less than 1% to the world's cultural economy, and on a governmental level the focus is very much about developing culture as an industry. Hand in hand with this, there needs to be a priority for culture as individual entitlement. Governments have made this a policy commitment but putting plans into practice seems to be very difficult.



Culture Minister Joseph Habineza with ASSITEJ handbook



Local artists at Theatre and Development Forum

WHAT ASSITEJ DOES

Why should individuals and companies sign up to ASSITEJ in the UK? Arguably, as a show of solidarity with all the other countries. It may be that the value of this should be better known and articulated. ASSITEJ also has the capacity to undertake more visible advocacy in relation to the universal cultural rights of the child

The thing that ASSITEJ offers most on an individual level is internationalism - as an idea in terms of identity and also in practical artistic terms. International exchange is special and extraordinary.

I have felt part of an international community most in the context of world festivals, within ASSITEJ and in particular the NEXT GENERATION PROJECT. The EC meetings in Kigali were in English but involved discussion by members across 12 languages and countries. This is a unique environment with its own set of challenges and opportunities: The NG project is similar. Festivals are important showcases as is the World Congress, the jewel in the crown for ASSITEJ, but perhaps most importantly are opportunities for meaningful dialogue across cultures, which invariably lead to new understandings and ideas. Culture is an evolving phenomenon across the world and the arts explore and communicate a changing world and it's ideals and values. The possibilities of digital technology and social media make connecting with others more possible than ever before. This needs to be fully exploited by ASSITEJ as a world network. Theatre is also being *made* across divides with lines becoming increasingly blurred between actor and audience. This means the making of international collaborative work is also full of new possibilities.



Maria Ines Falcone, EC member talks about cultural development in Argentina

NEXT GENERATION – NEW FACES

At the 2008 World Congress in Adelaide, the Next Generation Project brought together 23 young and mid-career theatre makers, producers and arts educators from across the globe. This pilot project has been continued in an ad-hoc way, and will culminate at the next World Congress in 2011 in Copenhagen/Malmo where its impact and legacy will be shared.

The principles of fostering artistic talent, encouraging leadership aspirations, connecting younger people to ASSITEJ and providing space for artistic collaboration are well supported by the Executive Committee and the members at the General Assembly. From this project an even newer initiative has been born. NEW FACES is an international residency project, which countries (through their National Centres) buy into by offering placements with companies, festivals and organizations. They are able to advertise similar international opportunities for their own communities.

This exchange model is fluid, evolving and another example of how ASSITEJ as a network can lead to concrete, unique and valuable opportunities. The NEW FACES project is open to anyone under the age of 30 or to those taking their first steps in making theatre for young audiences. A press release will be issued in September about how companies and members can participate and contribute to the scheme.



Young actor in theatre workshop led by Nina, Ishyo Arts Centre

In reporting on the NG project in Kigali I made the suggestion that ASSITEJ look carefully at the achievements, limitations and possibilities of the NG project model in particular. That is, a supported international group of younger artists brought together in international contexts for a set period of time. I believe ASSITEJ should be running developmental projects like NEW FACES **and** NEXT GENERATION if it really does want to redefine itself as an active network and realise some of its huge potential. Good ideas for initiatives exist, the recent TABOOS IN CHILDRENS THEATRE project, which recently had a conference in Argentina, connected to research network ITYARN is another example of activity, which has international value and appeal. 5



Next Generation members comparing practice, SCHAXPIR Festival Linz 2010. Johanna Figl (Austria) leads the discussion

Next Generation members from Australia, Mexico, Denmark and Argentina contributed to the forum, which involved artists and academics discussing subjects such as sexuality and sadness as taboo subjects in children's theatre.

For ASSITEJ International the time has come to support the ideological will to do more with a strategic plan that empowers its executive members and necessitates serious sponsorship, and funding. ASSITEJ needs to organise itself so that the hard work, skills and commitment people offer within this voluntary, weighty organisation can be brought to fruition. Then it will truly be an exciting time for ASSITEJ International and its members across the world.



Children with poster of president Kagame, market, Kigali

More photos of Kigali, FESPAD and the ASSITEJ EC meeting can be found here <http://www.flickr.com/photos/ninahaj/sets/72157624541014959/>

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