

What culture without education? What Education without culture?

Anthony Haddon, Artistic Director, Theatre Company Blah Blah Blah, Leeds, was at the Informal European Theatre Meeting (IETM) in Bratislava, Slovakia, 23 – 26 April 2009. This report is for TYA-UK Centre of ASSITEJ . www.blahs.co.uk

Many of my colleagues in Yorkshire have been attending IETM plenary meetings over the last four years as part of a cohort organised and subsidised by Arts Council of England Yorkshire. There are two meetings a year usually in April and October hosted by different countries and supported by the indigenous professional theatre community. The meetings are focused on a topic, which in Bratislava was; **What culture without education? What Education without culture?** There are opportunities to engage directly with the theme through workshops and a plenary session. Workshops are based on the academic model where two or three people make presentations which look at different practices and models followed by a chaired discussion which invites questions from the floor. Alongside this is a programme of shows from the host country and the opportunity to explore the immediate environment through city walks organised by local artists.

The point of these meetings is not necessarily to engage with the theme, or go in search of the best theatre or to sell and pitch your company. In fact the strongest advice I got from the Yorkshire contingent was, “do not go there to sell your work” which seemed odd given that most of us survive by selling in some form or another. The point of these events is to allow conversations to happen and out of this something can grow. It is an open ended process which only begins to make sense after a second or third visit, so I am told, because Bratislava was my first. It already makes sense to me because I am involved in a lot of conversations with people mainly in education where we grow models of working together. One of the most successful examples of this for me is the Company of Teachers which I created with Mick Connell, Inspector for English in Rotherham where we recruit teachers to become a Theatre in Education team to devise and tour a participatory piece of theatre.

Making Connections

So, IETM is not about a buyer/seller relationship, it is about creating the conditions for a meeting of people around a shared agenda or direction or desire. For many people it is an opportunity to speak to colleagues who you know but never have a chance to really get together with and TALK and if you happen to go out to IETM with someone from your company you may find that you don't interact with anybody else in the meeting except each other. That is alright, it is allowed, there are no rules on this. There is something very mature about a

structure which encourages things to emerge and it reflects the conditions I try to set up in creating a piece of theatre. However there is still the challenge of making those connections with people from other countries which is made easier through everyone else in the world speaking English. The structure allows for chance conversations to occur and it just requires you to be interested in what other people do and for you to engage them in what you do without the use of publicity. People will do that in different ways depending on their comfort zones, for me, I found it easiest to make connections with other people by engaging in the debates at the workshops and continuing the conversations afterwards.

Through this I am talking to a Dramaturg in Slovakia who is looking for ways of making connections between two theatres and the young people in surrounding schools and an Artistic Advisor in Berlin who has been commissioned by the Danish government to look at ways of reconnecting young people's theatre back into schools. I don't know if anything will come out of these conversations but they were useful to have and there is no way I would have had them outside of IETM.

Follow up at Home

ACE Yorkshire has been proactive in encouraging and supporting artists to attend IETM through the guidance of Alison Andrews, one of our performing arts officers who currently sits on the IETM committee. The Yorkshire contingent meets two or three times a year to discuss issues coming up through the International Meetings and to plan for future events. One of the most important aspects of this group is the e-mail contact between group members informing each other of cheap flights and hotels and where each other are staying which leaves you feeling very supported. The group is chaired by Richard Sobey, Chief Executive of IOU Theatre who holds the group together through convening meetings at home and during the International visits as well as offering a consultancy with each organisation to focus on the relationship of international activity with long term aims.

*Part of a series of articles: **Sharing Practice***