

# International Directors' Seminar for Children and Young People's Theatre, Cologne 4-9 July 2011.

*Kevin Dyer was selected by TYA-UK Centre of ASSITEJ to be there...*

**All that producers have to do is set up the right conditions for ideas to happen and for work to be made.**

My thanks and praise go to Assitej Germany and the Comedia Theater Cologne for doing exactly that with the International Directors' Seminar: perfect organisation; warm, open hospitality; project vision; and superb administrative efficiency all made for a truly memorable seminar. Before we directors got there, someone had made a lot of very good decisions and done a lot of hard work.

Actually it wasn't so much a seminar as an intensive week of seeing work, good conversations, working in small groups, working on text, and sharing practice.

The group of 27 directors from 20 countries was split into 3 smaller groups. Each group then decided how to spend its time - working on the text or not as they felt fit. The text offered to the group - who met 'anonymously', not knowing who the other participants were until we arrived in Cologne - was 'Missing' by Charles Way. This, to my mind is one of his very best pieces; it is a modern, urban twist on the Hansel and Gretel story. It's the story of a step-mother arranging for her step-daughter to be kidnapped in order to benefit from the ransom money. 'Missing' was there to support the starting suggestion that 'Money Makes the World Go Around'. Each group was committed to sharing work on the last afternoon but the form of this was not in any way prescriptive.

## Open Space

After being put into our small group, we (a Spaniard, an American, an Englishman from Wales, an Indian, a few Germans, a Croatian, an Austrian and a Swiss woman) sat in a circle and waited - waited for the silence to break and for us, somehow, to develop a way of proceeding. The organisers gave us no structure, no agenda, no leader. The tension was in the space in the middle of the circle and inside us all - a tension between wanting to lead and get things going (as directors do) versus wanting to give space to the others. This was, in many ways, a very fruitful dilemma as we examined, both as a group and individually, both vocally and silently, how groups work, how teams are made, how groups of diverse individuals are best brought together. This, of course, is at the core of our trade and practice. Normally the roles are clearly pre-defined however; here we had to sidestep, negotiate, create a new structure. And quickly too. Often I thought of David Hare's 'Fanshen' as the peasants try to make a brave new world in the aftermath of the Chinese revolution.

In fact, we soon agreed on a format and schedule that allowed each of us to lead sessions. It's always great for leaders to spend time as participants; we experience it from the other side and 'feel' what it is like running at another's speed, swimming with someone else's favourite stroke.

The international aspect of the week was key for me. Talking about money when there are people from the wealthiest and the poorest parts of the world, from the developed and the developing, from countries with very different *attitudes* to money, was profound and made me look not only at my own theatre practice but also my own life. I know that without people in the room from India for example, the conversations would have been very different.

Also of course being a Brit in Germany still has 'colour' to it. We have the background of 20<sup>th</sup> century history behind us, and when we were guests at Cologne town hall we were specifically shown a large photograph of the city at the end of the second world war. Cologne was almost totally destroyed by allied bombers. International reconciliation is one of the great stories of my life-time. (I have written about and worked in Ireland, South Africa, Poland and Iran.) The political, financial, mixed-up world we live in became very 'live' in Cologne. In the group there were directors from Iran and Israel and the USA; seeing them sitting, talking and working together was a powerful reminder of state political intransigence and individual human hope.

## Conflict is Good

I don't think there was a simple 'whole-group learning' that came out of the week; in fact there was no attempt at all to 'sum up' in that way at the end. As such the week was very open and very personal. In the group I was in, we co-operated and shared and listened and became very close – until the last session when we had left ourselves too little time to prepare our 'presentation'. We could not agree on purpose, content or form; and some people became frustrated and upset and angry. But there is learning in that – as people and as leaders. I am still trying to unpick why that last session went so badly wrong, but I think what happened – director's getting it wrong, people from different countries really wanting to communicate better - was a good thing, a real thing.

It is the questions that come up at these events that are in some ways more useful than the answers. Questions about:

- methods of organising groups
- the best ways to ask questions
- how to use finite time to make exciting theatre
- whether being in the hurry to making exciting theatre can be to the detriment of thorough thinking
- whether collective models of working have the advantage over director-driven processes
- whether dramaturgy really is worth it
- whether we know the value of money
- whether we are complacent in the west with the financial control we have in the world.

## Kids' Theatre Ghetto?

I was very interested in the 'house' of the Comedia Theater, a beautifully refurbished fire-station with two performance spaces, work rooms, offices, bar and very good restaurant. The theatre makes new work for young people but also puts on a lot of adult work – acting as a receiving venue. The adult work subsidises the core young people's work. This was a new model for me, a turning on its head of many British models. The non-core work not only brings in funds but also breaks down the ghettoisation of 'kids' theatre, drawing a much broader audience into a theatre for children and young people. This offers a real shift to me in how to run/fund a theatre for young people.

And what has stayed with me? The quality of Charles Way's script; international friendships; some really great start-of-play ideas – mostly based on personal stories of the first time the directors, when children, had money to spend. These stories of financial transactions mixed up with delight, guilt, pride, the mesh of family and friend relationships that turn around cash and ownership and debt, are waiting in my note book and my head to be made into a play. Also, José from Spain led a very interesting exercise where he was in role as a dictator and we had to perform our play (Charles' Way's 'Missing') to satisfy the censors - or have our funding cut.

Lastly, how important it is to commit to an idea; to work openly and without prejudice; to enter a space not knowing which ideas you are going to have; to trust; the importance of preparation to make a project run successfully; that being lost is the best way of finding your way.

## Thanks

So... thanks again to Assitej Germany and Comedia Theatre for their excellent work and the freedom they gave us; to Assitej UK for funding my journey; and to all my fine, honest, talented colleagues who I worked with, laughed with, and learned so much from.

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*ASSITEJ Germany organises the International Directors' Seminar in partnership with a host theatre. A UK participant has been invited most years since 1984.*