

AFRICA COOL

Paul Harman and Nina Hajiyanni attended the ASSITEJ Executive Committee in Rwanda

Rwanda is the land of a thousand hills, and Kigali the capital is spread out on the flanks of several ridges which catch the breeze and make for cool mornings and evenings despite being very near the Equator. We hit the dusty dry season but regular rains and the surprisingly temperate climate make the valley bottoms able to produce a vast range of fresh produce. Breakfast consisted of fresh pineapple, avocado, carrots and cucumber, washed down with locally packed mango and orange juice. Rwanda produces coffee and tea too. Blue Band margarine and sliced white bread are less appetising modern amenities. While great poverty is evident everywhere – the average cash income is 25p per day – careful land management means everyone can have an allotment sized patch to feed the family on rice, potatoes and vegetables. Milk is traditionally a sacred blessing given ritual respect but today it is available as UHT in cartons. Wealth is still measured in cows.

Exile and Return

Most of us remember the genocide of 1994 but there was a similar civil war in 1959. Both events created waves of exiles whose sons and daughters are now returning with skills from more advanced countries, from France and Belgium, Sweden and the UK. While NGOs and UN agencies dominate the streets, the economy is one of the fastest growing in Africa. Everyone has a mobile phone and along main roads we saw lines of a hundred people digging trenches for optical fibre, broadband cables – advancing at half a kilometre a day and providing work for poorer people. There is house building at a phenomenal pace, from roadside mud-block cabins for the rural poor to city developments of European style private housing. We stayed in a row of modern rented houses behind a high fence in the diplomatic quarter. Spacious if sparsely furnished.

There is a sense of dynamism in the small but growing cultural and creative sector. Our visit was planned to coincide with FESPAD, the Festival of African Dance hosted for the continent by Rwanda, and a major conference on Creative Industries attended by Ministers and addressed by successful music entrepreneurs from the US, academics and other specialists. The contribution of ASSITEJ members was modest, but proposed only sustainable and achievable projects. Yvette Hardie, ASSITEJ Treasurer from South Africa, led workshops at the Kigali Institute of Education, showing how teachers can deliver the arts in schools. Nina and I gave a two day theatre workshop for young actors, introducing a range of approaches to devising plays for younger audiences.

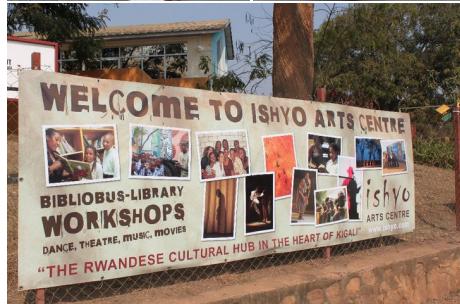
Heritage for All?

I met the newly appointed Director of National Museums, returned from the UK with a CV which includes time at the V&A. A theatre project involving the young actors we worked with may be the outcome of some intense sharing of ideas about modernising Rwanda's colonial-era museums. Should Rwanda's museums earn cash by selling to tourists – gorillas, genocide and grass palaces, or should the emphasis rather be upon raising Rwandan's awareness of the positive aspects of their culture, developing a confident and unified national identity?



Roadside musician near Lake Kivu...

...Carole Karemera director of Ishyo Arts Centre watches Nina's mask workshop



National Museum houses orphans who weave traditional baskets for sale



There are many tricky questions and dilemmas. President Paul Kagame looks unlikely to lose the election on 9th August but he is flooding the streets with posters, tee-shirts and flag waving supporters. His sudden decision in 2006, to kick out the French and join the British Commonwealth, created a profound shock to the system. Teachers were given three months to change the language of instruction in schools from French to English. Suddenly, an elite educated to a high level in Belgium and France finds itself demoted in favour of English speaking incomers from Europe, USA and East Africa. It does turn Rwanda away from the corrupt chaos of Congo and the rest of Francophone Africa. China is the new partner of choice and with good new roads, broadband and a new airport Rwanda is, as they say, open for business, especially to trading with East African neighbours Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania.

Whose Culture?

Culture is a step or two behind the tide of English, and the most accomplished Rwandan theatre we saw was *Littoral*, a rich and surreal text by Lebanese Canadian Wajdi Mouawad, delivered in excellently spoken French by talented and resourceful local actors. ASSITEJ EC member Hope Azeda runs a dance theatre company called Mashirika which toured UK with *Africa's Hope* in 2008, supported by the Aegis Trust. For me her work is an uneasy compromise, mixing powerful music and dance with less effective straight acting and serious storytelling. A more recent work presented to close FESPAD failed to gel and was no match in celebratory energy for the stunning *Drummers of Burundi* or a quite commercial dervish dancer from Egypt, whose spinning skirt lit up at the climax of his act. FESPAD also included some amateur dancers and singers from Namibia and a manic street dance crew from France.

Perhaps the most encouraging project we saw was *Ivuka Arts*, a hard-working collective of self-taught painters from disadvantaged backgrounds who also work with local children. Of course, high quality traditional handicrafts, beautiful baskets and carved wooden animals represent indigenous culture for most tourists; theatre of any kind is rare and only patronised by an elite. Hip Hop has displaced traditional dance and a cloud of African pop music fills the air wherever you go, competing in the bars with Arsenal v Celtic on widescreen TV. Evangelical churches of all varieties are filled with Sunday worshippers, singing hymns in the rich harmonies of Africa.

Rwanda is an old country with deep traditions of social discipline. In the 1920's, German colonists were replaced by less sympathetic Belgians, whose early census and classification of social groups into Hutu and Tutsi – the latter being people with more than ten cows! - planted the seeds of future enmity to be exploited by ruthless politicians. Decades of suffering are now receding in memory as a young population of 10 million Rwandans builds a new life. Cultural activity is a vital tool for social development – as important perhaps as the new optical fibre cables advancing into all parts of the country. Live theatre for young audiences may make a contribution tomorrow. Today Rwanda's young actors are only in the early stages of rehearsal.

The minutes of ASSITEJ EC meetings are made available online at www.assitej-international.org

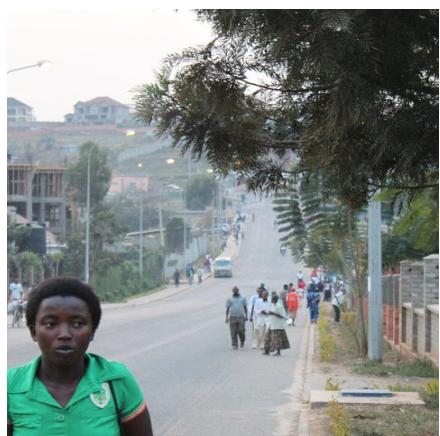
Paul Harman, August 2010

*Photos are by Nina Hajiyanni & Paul Harman
See all Nina's photos [here](#):*



Culture Minister meets ASSITEJ ...

...Children at Ivuka Arts rehearse



People walking everywhere ...

...English in Fashion



ASSITEJ GEARS UP

The Executive Committee met in Rwanda 26-31 July 2010. All except Kim Peter Kovacs of USA were present with the additional presence of Congress supremo Niclas Malmcrona and two members of the Jury for the Honorary President's Award for innovation in TYA, Yuriko Kobayashi (Japan) and Tulin Saglam (Turkey). Nina Hajiyanni was invited to attend as representative of the Next Generation group. Her report and recommendations were welcomed.

There is a new sense of energy and realism and our President Wolfgang Schneider brought a ten point plan for changes to the constitution, which are needed to bring us into the modern world of internet, email, facebook and direct contacts between artists around the globe.

Networks

The key proposal is to admit, as full members, existing and future networks of artists and activities, whether geographical and cultural, like the Ibero-American regional network or ACYTA in Africa, the Asian Festival Network, or new specialist groups like Small Size or the ITYARN research network. Key to the concept is that National Centres are no longer the best vehicle for including the widest possible range of artists in the work of ASSITEJ International. It is hard for some Centres to be truly representative and provide a channel for international exchange. For certain countries, like Belgium, Taiwan or Israel, internal or external realities make relationships within or between nation states difficult or impossible. The way forward is for ASSITEJ to work through a variety of networks to reach all artists who wish to be involved.

A detailed resolution will be drawn up for voting at the General Assembly in May 2011.

Flexible and Efficient

Another proposal appears less radical but brings both more accountability to the membership and also greater flexibility to the work of the Executive Committee. It is proposed that the President and Secretary General be directly elected by the members at the General Assembly while elections for Treasurer and Vice Presidents are to be scrapped.

After long discussion it was agreed that, while EC members will not be elected to named portfolios as needs change over time, we need each EC member to be responsible for leading one of the many projects or functions which need continuity of attention. For example; finance, various individual development projects, communications, public relations and relationships with other networks all need regular oversight and leadership.

Registration

My proposal to register ASSITEJ as a Community Interest Company in the UK was accepted. At present ASSITEJ International is not legally registered anywhere

Next EC Meeting is in Mexico, between 20th November and 1st December. Minutes of EC meetings are on the website at www.assitej-international.org



Nina examines a document...



... Mexico and Turkey revise a proposal



3 hour wait for Festival opening ...



...Obligatory group photo with Minister



Jury hard at work on submissions for the Honorary President's Award ...



...at our modest accommodation