

West meets East at Moscow world forum

Ian Chance

The Eighth ASSITEJ World Congress and General Assembly in Moscow must be counted a great success. Vastly different perceptions of theatre for young people were articulated; but the underlying bonds of humanitarian values and the desire for international understanding were greatly strengthened amongst people in our field.

The intense interaction of like minds from very different societies was enhanced by use of the pleasant and crowded Club and restaurant. Simultaneous translation facilities at Congress Plenaries and Commission meetings were superb.

Young people's theatre delegates from all over the world left Moscow more determined and with a stronger vision of the importance of their work. For this we have to thank the Soviet ASSITEJ Centre and the Government of the U.S.S.R. for recognising and fostering this ideal.

Message from Soviet leader

"The Soviet leader, Konstantin Chernenko, sends a message of greetings to the participants in the General Assembly of the International Association of Children's and Youth Theatres", announced Radio Moscow's World Service News on the opening day of the Eighth ASSITEJ World Congress in Moscow.

"The Soviet leader notes that theatre is designed to help children to understand and learn to protect and better this world, and to spread ideas of humanism and progress."

"Mr Chernenko stressed that the burning problem of today is to strengthen world peace and remove the threat of another war", the news item concluded.

ASSITEJ

THE Association Internationale du Theatre pour l'Enfance et la Jeunesse was formed in 1965 to promote the development of theatre for young audiences around the world in the cause of international understanding.

ASSITEJ is a category 'C' UNESCO organisation, meaning that while it is recognised by the United Nations and UNESCO it is not financially assisted by either. Category 'B' status (funded by autonomous) is currently being sought. The ASSITEJ secretariat is in Paris.

Carclew Youth Performing Arts Centre in Adelaide is the Australian Centre for ASSITEJ, receiving and disseminating information and maintaining contact with the organisation and its member countries. Carclew inherited this mantle, along with other responsibilities, upon the demise of the Australian Youth Performing Arts Association (AYPAA). Lowdown magazine is the official communica-

tion of ASSITEJ Australia, and all contributors are de facto members.

Australia was elected to the seventeen member-nation Executive of ASSITEJ at the 1981 World Congress and General Assembly in Lyon and subsequently at the Eighth Congress. Carclew has represented Australia at Executive meetings in Havana, Lisbon and now Moscow. Andrew Bleby has been our representative at these meetings having taken up the position, as President of AYPAA, in the footsteps of Geoffrey Brown and Joan Pope.

With Andrew now in Melbourne as Executive Director of the new Victorian youth arts festival, the day-to-day business of ASSITEJ communications has been taken over by Lowdown's Editor, Ian Chance.

Relies on Nat. Centres

ASSITEJ is not a rich organisation, its sole source of income being a small contribution from each of its forty-two member nations. This means that the organisation relies on the activities of individual national

THE SOVIET Government speaks loudly to its people in positive terms, one notes on arrival in Moscow — having had various billboards translated into exhortations to work unstintingly for peace; to work in cooperation for a better future; and to strive for world nuclear disarmament.

In the case of the dozens of street-banners welcoming ASSITEJ Congress participants to Moscow, the publicly expressed sentiments were quickly translated into determined action.

Eastern Europe makes a very big deal of its children and a world conference of theatres for young people was quite important enough for the Moscow bureaucracy to pull-out all the stops.

The street-banners and wide coverage in the media meant that the presence of the conference made substantial impact on the city. Our hosts went to great lengths to ensure the optimum conditions and status for the Congress and its participants.

This proved to be more than mere show. As we trooped from Moscow's palatial Children's Music Theatre to the older but substantial Central Children's Theatre (opposite the Bolshoi) and the Theatre for Young Spectators — as we shouldered our way

centres for its existence. It can only grow in strength if these national centres play a strong, active role and if they contribute to the international development of the field.

Such important activities include the organisation by national host centres of Congresses, Executive meetings and Festivals of World Theatre.

Publications also play an important role. Some of these include the Latin-American 'Boletín Iberoamericano' produced by the Spanish centre; an international bibliography of young people's theatre by Czechoslovakia; an international bibliography of 'Outstanding Plays for Young Audiences' from the U.S. centre, 'Kinder und Jugendtheater der Welt' published in four languages by the German Democratic Republic; and, in Australia, the magazine of performing arts for young people, 'Lowdown'.

But more than this, ASSITEJ provides a network of international exchange and support.

through capacity crowds at these and half a dozen other theatres — it became apparent that the popularity and status of theatre for young people was not in question here.

Big theatres, big companies, big shows, big audiences. State theatre for young people is, shall we say, 'big business' in the U.S.S.R.

A privileged class in the Soviet

A favourite Soviet aphorism runs: "In this classless society we have one privileged class, our children." It seemed that ASSITEJ Congress participants were to be privileged by association.

The Moscow Congress was a mammoth feat of organisation, attracting over four hundred participants from forty-two countries. A large Festival of Soviet Theatre for Young Spectators was also organised by the National ASSITEJ Centre in conjunction with the Congress.

The logistical problems of moving two hundred and fifty bemused strangers between up to five locations each day must have been formidable, to say the least. But the resources applied by our hosts were prodigious. Someone from the freelance team of thirty open and participating interpreter/guides was always at hand. Special buses were plentiful at all hours of the day and night and there was an abundance of ASSITEJ orientation material available on arrival.

All Congress staff were fully informed about our program and would go out of their way to help with anything from the location of the best poster shop to the decorum of the public bathhouse.

The task set to participants was no less formidable than that of the organisers. Over eight days it was possible to see eleven performances (of fifteen on the program), attend the six Plenaries and two Commissions of the Congress, see circus training, visit a school and sightsee — at least, the program *said* it was possible.

This is not to suggest that participants were shepherded onto a conveyor belt of activity or in any way restricted in their choice of movement — just that one could stay very busy attending the Conference full-time.

In her opening address to this year's Eighth World Congress and General Assembly in Moscow, ASSITEJ President Ilse Rodenburg stated:

"A new stage of international development has begun to which ASSITEJ must adapt itself. In many countries theatre for young audiences has found its way to becoming a permanent institution.

"The emphasis of discussion has shifted from the necessity of a theatre for children and young adults to what such a theatre can achieve and how, and which are the most effective means for ful-

filling its function. Unfortunately, educational points of view are frequently considered to be more important than artistic ones.

"ASSITEJ is not an educational organisation. For this reason, our main priority both now and in the future must be to concentrate on the artistic development of our theatre. The goal of our organisation is the same as that written into the statutes resolved twenty years ago, namely 'to facilitate the development of theatre for children and young people on the highest artistic level'."

Some of the British delegation did manage to squeeze in a football match (naturally); this writer started a pastime of getting lost while attempting interesting routes between venues — and the ranks of the General Assembly were noticeably swelled at performances and fetes.

Youth Theatres lead in popularity

The 'Festival of Soviet Theatre for Young Spectators' presented ASSITEJ participants with a unique opportunity to experience a great variety of productions.

There are around sixty theatres dedicated to young audiences in the Soviet Union, ten of which were seen by ASSITEJ participants.

Extremely high levels of professionalism are the order of the day, and it is said that theatres for young spectators are currently "the leaders in popularity in many Soviet cities, with both children and adult theatre-goers."

The productions we saw in Moscow were mounted on a scale that would tax the resources of the biggest theatre companies in Australia. Not one of the shows from the Soviet Festival seen by ASSITEJ participants had a cast of less than twenty actors. The piece de resistance was a show called *The Bluebird* produced by the Moscow Children's Music Theatre.

A fantasy ballet, *The Bluebird* featured some thirty superb dancers, a forty piece orchestra, half-a-dozen full set changes (plus the use of two stages concealed in the walls of the auditorium) and fantastic laser lighting effects. Who needs *Star Wars*?

This is without going into raptures about the futuristic two-thousand seat theatre and its attendant be-murled buffets, indoor aviary and outdoor sculpture garden.

Congress delegates leaving Moscow Children's Music Theatre.



The technical quality of acting and production of the work was generally enthralling. Stanislavsky rules, O.K.

Educational aspect of Soviet theatre for young people is stressed but TIE work (as we know it) was not apparent. It seems that schools are invariably brought to the theatre, so as to see a show in the best conditions that can be established for a 'theatrical experience'.

The Soviet aim is not only to help children to establish a sound ideological and moral world-view but also to raise their cultural level — "to inculcate good taste in them".

One director stated that Soviet children's theatre is always lofty, always pleasant, ignores contradictions and proposes positive humanitarian models (make allowance for translation here).

Bringing the masses to culture

State funded theatres for young people are over fifty years old in the Soviet Union. If the size and enthusiasm of audiences for traditional theatre are any indication it has certainly done a good job of 'inculcating good taste' — of bringing culture to the masses and, more importantly, of bringing the masses to culture.

Forty-five thousand people are said to attend theatres and concerts in Moscow every day. At a Sunday matinee of Moliere's Tartuffe, people were being approached for spare tickets all the way from the Metro exit to the doors of the theatre. Of course it was a full house — at twelve noon on Sunday. This was not considered to be unusual for a popular production.

To this gauche Australian eye most shows we saw had the vague air of museum pieces — otherwise known as 'high culture'. In bringing to the have-nots the things that the haves had, the Soviet Union seems to have entrenched an oddly bourgeois art-form as the people's theatre. But, as I observed, a particularly popular form it is, both in audience numbers and response.

One suspects that although Festival shows displayed variety in form (and while they may have been typical of the genre) they were selected by a powerfully weighted



Soviet Minister for Culture, Mr Demichez receives a commemorative album from ASSITEJ General Secretary Rose-Marie Moudoues and Natalia Sats.

group and may not have totally represented the variety of styles of young people's theatre practised across the U.S.S.R.

The one show that exuded a fresh verve and real enthusiasm for the subject came sight unseen to Moscow — 5,400 km from its home town of Irkutsk in Siberia.

“. . . not brought up to appreciate real culture . . .”

Perhaps it is true that only in the provinces can we shake off the stasis of tradition. But then, contrary to current Australian preoccupations, modern social-realism does not seem to be the driving force of much of the world's theatre for young people.

“Les Miserables” — Moscow Central Children's Theatre.



“Let us not confuse modernity with the passing whims of fashion”: declared Natalia Sats, doyenne of theatre for young people and director of the Moscow Children's Music Theatre, in her address to the ASSITEJ delegates.

“We should keep abreast of the times but not play up to the tastes of those mediocre young people who were not brought up to appreciate real culture and art, nor to be aware of the unbreakable connection between genuine aesthetics and ethics.” (Guilty as charged. Auth.)

At the Conference, business was proceeding. Resolutions were made, officers elected and, exciting news for us in Australia, the venue decided for the next Congress (see report these pages).

“Chukokkala — Latvian Republic.



Meanwhile the real business of communication was being done over lunch, in the foyers, at the club, and at the Commissions convened on various topics by the Soviet ASSITEJ Centre.

"The modern world"

The most energetic of these Commissions appears to have been the one entitled: "The modern world in playwriting for children and young people".

A draft resolution put to this Commission by the British delegation points to where some of the argument lay. It reads:

This working commission recognises the development of different approaches to playwriting. While acknowledging and supporting both the work of resident companies and individual playwrights, the Commission welcomes the emergence of new forms of playwriting for young people in which: (edited in part)

- * writers and actors take collective responsibility for content.
- * plays are written to be performed by companies with small resources (four to six actors).
- * plays are created in living contact with children and take place in the localities in which they live.
- * the plays, through artistic means, assist social and educational progress on behalf of poor and underprivileged young people.

"Let there Always be Peace" — Armenian Republic.



The problem for many delegates is that theatre for social change seems totally absent from their current theory of theatre for young people. On the other hand, theatre for social development is often held to be at its pinnacle in the classical culture, with all its associated trappings.

This perception in the case of Soviet delegates can obviously be put down to the fact that they had their social change in 1917 and are still waiting for the rest of the world to catch up. Although one Soviet writer was heard to remark that as long as while sixteen year-olds have to be imprisoned for anti-social behaviour there might be room for improvement.

The outcome of the playwriting Commission was a resolution almost identical to that above—
"Irena's Good Fortune" — Georgian Republic.

"Terem-Teremok" — Ukrainian Republic.

and a reminder to ASSITEJ delegates, from both East and West, that not all Theatres for Young People aspire to the realms of State Theatre Companies. The scale of operation of some small companies is not restricted solely by limited resources but is a matter of choice and ideology.

The growing number of representatives who spoke of these convictions included some from Portugal, Mexico, Sweden, Holland and West Germany, as well as the U.K. and Australia. Apparently this is not the first time that such matters have been the subject of discussion at an ASSITEJ Congress. Nor, in all likelihood, will it be the last.

