

ASSITEJ XII

WORLD CONGRESS AND GENERAL ASSEMBLY 1996

Rostov-on-Don, Russia 1-8 October

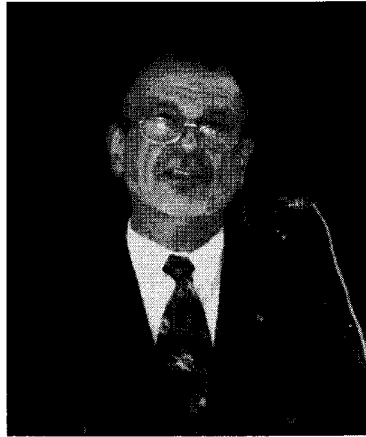
Standing on the tarmac in the freezing cold. I'm on Russian soil, my bags are missing and there's a lady pushing past me up the gang plank holding a plastic shopping bag with a crying kitten inside it. After some confusion I join her, boarding the Russian airline Aeroflot from Moscow to Rostov-on-Don, (later I realise why they were confused, I'd inadvertently shown my ticket to Barcelona).

On board the plane I find seat numbers mean nothing. Luckily my new Polish friends knew this and have saved me a seat in the front of the plane. There is no first class in once classless Russia. Parcels tied up with string are stuffed into every nook and cranny as it's not safe to check your luggage in, which is a bit disconcerting as I've asked for my lost bags to be sent on to Rostov.

I reach my seat. Half of the seat belt is missing, a plank drops down for a table and remains down for take off. The safety instructions will be good... there aren't any. Before I can take in the scenery outside the window, I notice some chewing gum holding cracked bits of window trim together. It then dawns on me why most of the Congress delegates have chartered a flight direct from Copenhagen to Rostov-on-Don!

At this point I wonder what was I thinking, coming all this way for a meeting of delegates of an organisation with an unpronounceable name in whatever language you speak. Just who would think you could gather 500 people from 60 different countries into a little town 400kms south of Moscow and talk Theatre for Young People (TYP)? ASSITEJ, that's who.

To distract myself from take-off, I focus on some facts and figures. ASSITEJ is a French acronym for



Michael FitzGerald
ASSITEJ World President (Australian)



Sara Miyares Ramos
(Cuba)



Kim Woo-ok
(Korean Delegate)

"International Association of Theatre for Children and Young People". ASSITEJ holds a World Congress every three years and this is the 12th. The last one was in Cuba and this one has been organised to tie in with a World Festival and a Fringe Festival.

I am attending this congress as an official Australian delegate and as a National Committee member of the Youth Performing Arts Association (YPAA, which is Australia's arm of ASSITEJ). I have in mind a number of goals; to represent Australian TYP at an international level; to see for myself what ASSITEJ is all about and if this French acronym is of any relevance to any Australian acronyms; to give a lecture/slide presentation of the work Barking Gecko has developed on the theme of humans and other intelligent animals; and finally to see the work of my colleagues.

Does ASSITEJ reflect what is happening in TYP around the world? Is it an organisation leading and influencing the development of TYP, or is it a bunch of dinosaurs who should have become extinct a long time ago? With 60 member countries something must be happening.

Travelling now with no bags but lots of questions, I was hoping to find both some answers and my bags. We had a smooth flight and landed safely. I quickly blended into the scenery wearing my cream trench coat borrowed from the Indian guest house in Moscow and carrying the signature plastic bag of all Russians. An actor (who we would later see perform in a brilliant performance of Hamlet), and his daughter (acting as his interpreter) meet us at the airport.

The first few days were taken up

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with absorbing Rostov, attending performances and meeting delegates from around the world. The Congress and Festival were quickly shaping up to be a great success while at the same time I was appreciating that it wasn't caviar and vodka for all Russians. The more I saw, the more I realised how difficult it had been for the Russian Centre of ASSITEJ to host this large event. It was very much like our journey from the airport into the centre of Rostov - full of potholes. Some small enough to drive right over, others so deep you must drive on the wrong side of the road and then there's the big ones where you have to completely divert down another street and end up going in the wrong direction. In the end we reached our destination, just as the Russian Centre of ASSITEJ in the end hosted one of the most progressive Congresses ASSITEJ has ever seen.

Meanwhile, I slept soundly on the Cruise Ship on the River Don and awoke to a three course breakfast which for the meantime did include caviar and vodka. Buses then drove us to the first destination of the day, usually one of three performances. (NB: The only other option for accommodation was the Intourist Hotel where you showered in brown water, and the heating often wasn't working but it was in walking distance to the main festival centre). The unofficial opening of the Congress was on the evening of 3rd of October, with a surprise celebration for Michael FitzGerald's 60th birthday. This was a poignant expression of what ASSITEJ is all about. Here was a man greatly loved for his support, hard work, diplomacy, and commitment to theatre for young people, the same qualities which ASSITEJ represents. A moving event for both Michael and all of the delegates. Michael was pulled up on to the stage by a pair of drunk Danish comedians and had to stay there while everyone who wanted to wished Michael a happy birthday in song, dance or whatever. The Aussie delegation managed to present a little item, not bad considering it consisted of three Artistic Directors, Chrisjohn Hancock (Lieder Theatre), Grahame Gavin (Barking Gecko Theatre Company), and Jim Lawson

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Delegate



**Kim Kyung-ik
(Korean Delegate)**

(Monash Uni Student Delegate Theatre), one Production Manager, Emma Bailey, and myself a Designer. Dare I confess the outcome? Using Babushka dolls, with drawn-on beard, we told the life story of Michael followed by a rendition of *Waltzing Matilda* in Russian. All in utter bad taste.

The ASSITEJ General Assembly officially began the following day on the 4th of October. Over four days a series of meetings were held covering a wide range of issues concerning the organisation and Theatre for Young People. Each country was represented by 3 official delegates with voting rights. Australia's delegates were; Jim Lawson, Emma Bailey, and myself. I found a lot happens at a Congress, much more than I have room to tell, so briefly and roughly in order as they occurred:

Welcome speech by Adolf Shapiro, President of Russian ASSITEJ.

After thanking everyone for choosing Russia for the 12th World Congress, Shapiro then went on to say; "in a diet of important events,

invented in the world this century, we should include children's theatre. Irrespective of how eminent the achievements in electronic communication means might be, nothing can replace living man to man communication which is the basis for theatrical action. A single soul finding a path to a children's soul is our aim. Theatre is the better way to a child's heart - for Theatre for Children to achieve success in the future it must be a required part of children's life".

After the typical business of all meetings had been dealt with, the main discussions began in earnest. Beginning with the most potentially explosive area - the use of languages. For some members of ASSITEJ the last 10 years have been a frustrating, painful and slow process and they were keen to see some changes.

In endeavouring to service all of the needs of each member country ASSITEJ has had to face some big changes within its constitution and in its understanding of what Theatre for Young People is. In doing so they have had to come to a greater understanding of each member and their differences. Being an international organisation ASSITEJ is constantly confronted with the cultural and political differences of each country. I was struck that if ASSITEJ which is based on tolerance and the expression of cultural differences, can't find a resolution to these difficult issues, then there is little hope for the world to find solutions to the global issues which affect us all.

A radical change to the use of languages.

At the Havana Congress, ASSITEJ Spain requested the inclusion of Spanish as an official language together with Russian, English, and French. The request was discussed by the Assembly and referred to the Executive Committee for investigation and report. For some countries this meant a further three years of working within a situation which was already intolerable and exclusive. A Language Commission was set up to examine the use of languages within the organisation and to present recommendations on the issue to the general assembly in 1996.

After extensive research and debate, the final proposal was presented at

this general assembly, and accepted with an overwhelming majority. The constitution now reads, in part, that the working languages at the General Assembly will be the language of the host country and English and at least one other language determined by the Executive committee according to the needs of the meeting.

The implications of accepting this proposal are wide ranging and will bring greater equality and empowerment to all countries and cultures.

Progressive changes

The second proposal was regarding who can become members of ASSITEJ. Previously only countries with fully professional companies of adult actors playing for children and young people could become members. While countries like Australia can easily meet this criteria, it excluded many African countries from becoming members of ASSITEJ. In acknowledgment of different practises a clause was added; "or professional theatre artists working in theatre for children and young people".

Working Programme 1996-1999

Over the next three years the executive committee's work will include five commissions in the following areas; Artistic, Congress, Communications, Publications and Finance and Statutes.

From a recommendation from Danish ASSITEJ the working programme will also include; investigating the possibilities of linking all the national ASSITEJ centres together in a web using the Internet (ASSINET). It is intended that money will be raised for this purpose so the project may include all countries equally. This aim could be reached with the help of sponsors or other fund raising.

1999 ASSITEJ World Congress 4-13 June

Norway and Germany presented themselves as possible hosts for the next World Congress. Norway won the vote offering Tromsø in the arctic circle as the location.

Elections

After six brilliant years as Secretary General, Michael Ramlose from

ASSITEJ Denmark is leaving this position. Ms Ulli Plichta from ASSITEJ Austria is the new Secretary General. Michael FitzGerald was re-elected as World President.

Honorary Presidents' Award.

Through his generosity to serve the organisation Dr Nat Eek, ASSITEJ Honorary President, has established this triennial award. Barking Gecko Theatre Company received one of the four Honorary Presidents' Awards. Grahame Gavin said in his acceptance speech, "I hope this award raises the status of children's theatre everywhere".

Theatre for Young Spectators (as it's called in Russia) is hard work, especially hard at the moment in Russia. "We haven't been paid our wages for several months already, the new performances are not financed... I sometimes think that nobody wants our TYS in Vogda. That's fearful, isn't it! Having neither theatre, nor art we go backward, we're sure to degrade. And that's not what one should desire, not at all!" Boris Granatov, Volodga TYS Director, Festival Daily Bulletin.

ASSITEJ International is now well equipped to enter the 21st Century as a progressive world organisation fighting for the development and support of Theatre for Young People. By the end of the Congress I had found my bags and the answers to my questions.

Finally an extract from a fax Boris Yeltsin sent to open the Congress. "Only five years are separating mankind from the 21st Century. That will be the century of our children and grandchildren, the age of those who perhaps today are entering the auditorium for the first time in their life, who will first see the magic realm of theatre. On the people engaged in culture and theatrical art, on your sincere love of the rising generation much depends the future of the globe. Every performance staged by you, your new meetings with the children are capable to sow the seeds of the future world in their souls - the world of harmony and prosperity." Boris Yeltsin, Russia 1996.

Lou Westbury

Lou was assisted by the Commonwealth Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body and The State of Western Australia has made an investment in this project through the Department for the Arts.

<p>CAROUSELLE PUPPET THEATRE 1997 Primary School Program</p>	
<p>Term 1 "THE GIANT" at the SPACE THEATRE TAKEOVER FESTIVAL</p>	<p>Term 3 "SNOW QUEEN" touring SA PRIMARY SCHOOLS</p>
	
<p>Dates: April 1 - 5 Book at BASS: 84002222</p>	<p>Dates: Metro Jul 21-Aug 15 Country Aug 18 - Aug 29 Call Phil: 08 83620288</p>
	