

REPORT - OR An Eyewitness's View

Four Australians attended the Congress with the delegation led by Margaret Leask. Other delegates were Sharon Levy ( former assistant to AYPAA ) Nigel Triffitt ( Yellow Brick Roadshows ) and Michael Champion ( former teacher ). These three were already travelling in Europe and chose to attend the Congress for various reasons while M. Leask's trip as representative for Australia was made possible by financial assistance from the Australia Council. Fortunately we all arrived in West Berlin at approximately the same time, and we shared the experience through Checkpoint Charlie together. Our first impressions of East Berlin remained with us throughout the week - depressing greyness and an atmosphere of tension.

Saturday April 19 After arriving in East Berlin we went to the ASSITEJ centre, manned by four people under the leadership of Madame Ilse Rodenberg, a Vice President of ASSITEJ. Just opposite the centre is the Theater der Freundschaft, the main children's theatre in East Berlin, where we saw most of the performances during the week. We were welcomed and given a very complete kit each of information and programme details. After settling into our respective hotels we went to a 5 pm performance at the Theater der Freundschaft of THE STORY OF THE DESERTED DOLL by A. Sastre. With the exception of one play, all the performances we saw were in German with audiences of young people. We received a programme and synopsis in English for each play. THE STORY OF THE DESERTED DOLL, for children from the age of six, is similar to the Caucasian Chalk Circle story. This was beautifully staged with a set which frequently revolved as scenes took place in various parts of the 'town'. There was great attention given to detail and to creating a flowing or rushing movement of people and events.

The planned evening performance was cancelled, so we had an opportunity to look at the programme and plan our week, as it was obvious that all of us wouldn't be able to see everything. We began making contact with a few people ( particularly those sporting name tags ) but the orientation period took a little while. We were immediately aware that language differences would limit communication.

Sunday April 20 In the morning we attended a concert given by the youth Symphony Orchestra at the Maxim Gorki Theatre. We were officially welcomed to the Congress by members of the executive of ASSITEJ. The concert was pleasant but we were disturbed by the apparent lack of joy and enjoyment in the young players.

In the afternoon we went to the Komische Oper for a performance of the children's opera, THE THREE FATTIES by W. Rubin. It had an enormous cast and very elaborate sets. Everything was very colourful and quite splendid and full of action, but it was too long ! Even the magnificent travelling theatre brought on stage didn't dispel this opinion. We became aware during the week that the length of productions in East Germany would not be acceptable to young Australian audiences. Our experiences and conditioning is obviously very different to that of the children in the Eastern parts of Europe. It seemed significant that they were called the 'young spectators' ( or is that just the way it's translated ? ). Throughout the performances we saw the audiences were generally attentive but very quiet. The plays are mostly very verbal, and the audiences seemed used to listening without really contributing. I think they keep watching and participating as two separate activities whereas we try to combine them. THE THREE FATTIES was guest directed by Natalia Saz from Russia. She has been a leading light in children's theatre there for years. It's obviously possible for personnel

exchanges to take place in Europe, and I understand guest directing and teaching is fairly frequent.

In the evening we attended a performance of DON QUIXOTE, adapted from Cervantes, at the Theater der Freundschaft. This was suitable for 12 years and over. It was very simply staged with some excellent acting. We did become aware, however, of the heavy message or didactic purpose imposed on the stories presented, and aware that little was left to the imagination - hence the length of the productions. We were also aware of the distance between the actor and audience - at least the little direct relationship between them in most of the productions we saw. It was often like watching a scene through a shop window display. However, DON QUIXOTE was enjoyable, and because of the language barrier we were more aware of the visual aspects which were exciting.

About this time, as we talked with other people at the Congress, we became aware of a distinct East/West difference in philosophy and response to the theatre we were seeing. Participation and involvement became significant words for discussion.

Monday April 21

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The morning marked the official opening of the Congress in the House of Volkskammer - a terrifyingly formal building which offered translation facilities. The Congress was opened by the Minister for Culture of the German Democratic Republic and Madame Rodenberg. The Executive and delegates were identified and reports were given by the General Secretary and the Treasurer.

Two papers were then presented on the theme of the Congress - "The Professional Actor and School". The first, by Jose Geal ( from Brussels and a foundation member of ASSITEJ ) didn't break any new ground - unfortunately it was difficult to assess because of the poor translation. He discussed the terms professional and amateur and the problems of relating the artist to the school. The figure of the pedagogue ( an apparently European phenomenon which will be discussed in my full report ) was seen as an important link between the actor and the young audience. He pointed out the need to consider the value of productions for a spontaneous public rather than an obligatory audience ( ie school audience ). He felt the pedagogue and theatre people should work closely together.

The second paper, by Dr Christel Hoffmann ( GDR ) discussed the ideology involved in thinking of children's theatre as an educational process. She argued that theatre is not a continuation of education by other means. The attitude of the actor is not and cannot be that of a teacher. The actor 'learns' rather than 'teaches' when working with students. Questions and answers need to be productive on both sides. The actor must 'cause' children to discover themselves and he needs pedagogic skills to the extent of engaging children in exploratory games. She felt an important area of discussion was in the pedagogic training of actors. Dr Hoffmann also spoke on the development and experience of the child and how we can help this. She feels the emancipation of the child is valid only up to a certain point - from which guidance from adults is essential. She believes the development of children must go hand in hand with adults and it must work across generations. It is necessary to recognise that a child's experience is no more stupid than an adult's - only less. We need to realise the extent of a child's experience then utilise it, but how ?

Following these papers we were advised that the next day there would be three discussion groups to extend the ideas presented.



The afternoon was the General Assembly for members of ASSITEJ. While there were 34 countries represented ( approx 250 delegates in all ) only 27 countries are members or official centres of ASSITEJ. It was good to feel Australia was an official member and could participate in this session. M. Leask attended the Assembly, while the other delegates had the chance to see some of Berlin.

The Assembly dealt with Constitutional details - the major one, which Australia spoke against, was changing the International Congress from every two years to every three. Unfortunately the once every three years won, which seems a great pity as the Congress provides such a tremendous opportunity to meet people and make contacts that to reduce that opportunity seems to work against the aim of ASSITEJ. It was distressing to be made aware of the politicking and obvious antagonism existing between some points of view. There was conflict over the method of nomination of centres for the executive which wasn't really resolved. Many felt that some executive members had been in their positions too long and that it was essential for young countries to have a voice.

The sixth Congress was announced for April 1978 in Spain. It was decided that the annual membership due should be \$100 per member country. ASSITEJ publishes, from Paris, a journal three times a year with articles and information. As a member we receive a couple of copies per issue.

From this meeting it seems essential that Australia be an active and vocal member in order that a wider conception of children's theatre activities be made known to the world. At present it is a very limited view as presented by ASSITEJ - as it is dominated by countries whose traditions and attitudes seem to scarcely touch concepts of participation and drama and theatre in education as we know it.

This meeting led to further personal contacts and alignments - one was made aware of with whom it would be valuable to talk and share ideas. Throughout the Congress translation difficulties were apparent and misinterpretations occurred frequently. This made everyone aware of the fuzzy 'definitions' in this field and the need for clarification of basic concepts and terminology before much advance could be made.

The evening performance was a guest production from the Theater der Jungen Welt, Leipzig, of ROBBY CRUSE by H. Schmidt. It was a modern GODSPELL-like version of the Robinson Crusoe story with heavily socialist overtones. For audiences nine years and over it became fairly monotonous - both musically and visually - and, especially because it used adults playing children, was much too long for what it was saying.

While it appears that much of our response was negative, it must be remembered that language was a considerable problem. At the same time, the concentrated experience of seeing twelve productions in a week was a valuable one, and gave us considerable perspective on children's theatre in this part of Europe. It also stressed the magic of visual effects - when language has no meaning one is very sensitive to movement, colour and expression. So much can be said visually, but this is often expensive. I think we were presented with 'show' pieces - most of which were fairly traditional - chosen perhaps because the stories were familiar. Obviously, too, the problems of touring companies from other countries limited the scope of our viewing.

Tuesday April 22 At the Volkskammer we were divided into three groups to discuss the papers presented on the previous day.

- (1) Led by Brian Way ( Great Britain ) on 'Participation of the Audience in Professional Children's Theatre' ( attended by Sharon and Nigel )
- (2) Led by Madame Ladika ( Director of a school of creative dramatics in Yugoslavia ) on 'The Play of the Actor and the Creative Play of Children' ( attended by Margaret )
- (3) Led by Natalia Saz ( Russia ) on 'The Role of the Professional Theatre in the Whole Educative Process of Children' ( attended by Michael )

(1) Brian Way presented a short paper to open the discussion. He discussed his experience in the field and his belief that theatre works best when actors and audience are in the same space - hence he has abandoned the proscenium arch stage. He believes in this way the actor can become involved with the same sincerity as the children and that real spontaneity comes from involvement. He feels we should no longer be teaching children to only appreciate adult theatre - we should be learning how to make it work for them. He spoke on the development of T.I.E. type work as educators became more and more aware that children learn through direct experience. Lack of theatre buildings means in many cases theatre must be taken to an audience. This has made him conscious of the need to concentrate on the mutual process of experience rather than on 'teaching'.

Dr Hoffmann then discussed her paper and questions were asked. In summing up the session the next day Brian Way expressed dismay that there had been little attempt to answer some important questions :-

- a. How many should there be in the audience for a participation play ?
- b. What should be the breakdown in audience age groups for this ?
- c. What about the problems of stimulation and control of participation?

It was generally agreed that there needed to be both large scale theatre productions and the taking of theatre to children. The problems of touring were evident.

Participation also poses problems for the playwright - who decides the solution or the ending ? Is it dishonest to manipulate the audience to a pre-determined ending ?

He stated participation could be silent and thoughtful as well as physical and vocal. Both have their value.

Mr Way spoke on the need for ASSITEJ to consider more thoroughly participation theatre and suggested a workshop/seminar. He concluded that audience participation arose from the natural behaviour of children and we should work to understand this.

(2) , Madame Ladika presented a paper on the complex relationship between actors and children, and the ways of investigating this. Creative drama can be a starting point for investigations. The ideal relation ship was where the children and actors were participating and creating a scenario together. Actors working with children need to be well prepared and the quality of presentation must not diminish even after 100 performances. Quality can be maintained as long as pleasure is maintained. Children can supply the fresh experience each time.

She discussed the problem of existing training schools for actors where creative and amateur dramatics had little or no part to play. She feels amateur theatre is fundamental to children's theatre -



amateur ( one hopes ) in the sense of community theatre. She saw the pedagogue as an important figure in children's theatre. She discussed the differences between the actor and the pedagogue. The actor makes an impact - is a guest, not a teacher. The pedagogue has a slower, longer role - that of developing the experience or actor's impact.

The group attempted to discuss various aspects of theatre in school - the actor's status, his need to 'perform', the need for co-operation and a growing together between school students and the actor.

(3) Natalia Saz opened with a paper - from Michael's report it was almost incomprehensible because of the translation. She talked of the role of theatre in the cultivation of creativity in man and the need for theatre to use the ideals and treasures of the past to open up doors for mankind.

We all experienced a feeling of dissatisfaction with the discussion groups. We had little time to prepare or consider any thoughts, and people tended to ask questions or make statements that were not followed through. There were no real conclusions or recommendations made - but we did find out a few more details of activities in different countries.

Once again the main problem was language and translation - and the felt need to be diplomatic. It was felt that smaller groups and more preparation would have been more satisfactory.

In the afternoon we saw what was possibly the most exciting performance - of THE PLAITED CIRCLE by J. Gjardo/M. Faundez. This was a guest performance by the Volkstheater Rostock, Abteilung Kinder Theater - a company from Chile now living in Berlin. It was in Spanish - once again the Caucasian Chalk Circle story but delightfully fresh and colourful. Scene changes were done in front of the audience and very effective use was made of blinds - pulled up or down to establish a particular setting. There was a particularly memorable commedia scene when the doctor was mending the doll. The audience thoroughly enjoyed it.

On Tuesday evening a few of us went to the Berliner Ensemble to see an early Brecht - TURANDOT. It was fascinating but almost incomprehensible !

Wednesday April 23 While M. Leask attended the elections of the Executive at the Volkskammer, the other Australian delegates went to the Akademie der Künste to see some children in DIE HORATIER UND DIE KURATIER by Brecht. There was also the opportunity to visit some schools. Sharon's report expressed disappointment at this. The teacher explained at the beginning that every child in the class had been involved in the creation of the production which was still unfinished. It was virtually a recitation with little action or apparent understanding by the children. It was to be wondered if the children learnt anything from it. Sharon felt the children were ill at ease and found no enjoyment in the exercise.

The elections once again made me conscious of the political games being played and the need for new blood ! A number of honorary members were created in memoriam in recognition of their contribution to children's theatre. ( I certainly learnt more of the history of children's theatre in Europe.)

In the afternoon we attended a performance of POOR CONRAD by F. Wolf - a guest performance by the Theater Junge Garde, Halle. This was

singularly dull - a simplistic didactic statement which was uneventful. We did, however, talk to some of the young audience. They go to the theatre about three times a year, many of the stories they see are similar, and the actors visit them at school for discussions.

We then saw a short film on the Teatro De Arte Infantil y Juvenil, Venezuela. The film showed the young company in workshop, rehearsal and presentation of a colourful carnival theatre piece for children. We were made aware of the need for more opportunity and facility to display material and information from other countries - this was not really available except for exhibitions in the Theater der Freundschaft of the company's work.

In the evening we saw KING JOERG by E. Eschner for children of ten years and over. It was written by an actor at the Theater der Freundschaft and was quite enjoyable. Very elaborately staged with a stunning set of animal masks used in one scene. It was apparent that because plays stay in the Company's repertoire for some years, sets and costumes are very well made and no expense is spared.

After the performance we had the opportunity to go backstage and talk with the company through a translator. The technical facilities were incredible - enormous flying and storage areas. The company at the Theater der Freundschaft consists of 40 permanent actors. Altogether the staff numbers about 200. The actors undergo a three year training course at one of the three theatre schools. They are then contracted to theatres for 3-7 years. As such they are, or have to be, totally committed to playing for children. The repertoire consists of 15 plays, all of which have a least 300 performances. Each year four new plays are introduced into the repertoire. Each play is presented at least twice a month. They play to three age groups : 5-9, 9-12, 12-18, plus some youth productions for 17 and over. These groupings are flexible. They have 4 main ways of gaining an audience and are usually booked out two years in advance.

... looked out two years in advance.

1. School bookings - teachers arrange these
2. Individual ticket sales
3. Weekend family performances,
4. Holiday productions for children from large housing areas

They have a number of pedagogues and dramaturgs on the staff who arrange discussions and rehearsals with children to help decide suitable age groups, etc. Most productions are proscenium arch contained, but there is a rehearsal space sometimes used for open space performances.

The director of the theatre is a direct employee of the State, and as such has certain limitations. However, there was a general atmosphere of well-being & creative community, and certainly the actors have security. The theatre is heavily subsidised and there is a large amount of published information and publicity on its activities.

Thursday April 24 At the Volkskammer the results of the elections were announced and the retiring president, Mr Nat Eek ( U.S.A. ) presented an excellent paper on ASSITEJ and children's theatre. He talked of children's theatre being able to enrich the visual and imaginative experience of children. Its strength is its three-dimensional quality and ability to create 'real' magic in front of our eyes. He feared we may take ourselves too seriously and were in danger of making children's theatre dull.

He stressed the need to offer roads of life to children that we may



not necessarily know the end of. He hoped ASSITEJ would have the courage to be challenged by youth and be constantly aware that the greatest power of the theatre was that of giving pleasure.

Summaries of the previous day's discussions were then presented by the group leaders and a general discussion took place. It was obvious that many people were disappointed at the conduct of these sessions and stressed the need for better preparation of the translations.

Michael Pugh, who compiles the International Bibliography of Children's Plays, requested information, and an announcement was made of an international film project on children in the arts. Other coming events were announced and general recommendations were made for discussion by the Executive.

Mr Gerald Tyler from Great Britain, a foundation member of ASSITEJ, spoke on the need to remember the international aims of ASSITEJ and the need to encourage new member countries. Money is obviously a problem in spreading information and maintaining communication.

It was announced that a sub-committee of the Executive had been set up to investigate creative dramatics in relation to ASSITEJ. As previously stated, ASSITEJ is at present based firmly on performance orientated children's theatre - it is necessary to develop the other side of the coin and I feel this is where Australian participation in ASSITEJ is most important.

During this session information on different countries was distributed - this is available on request ! ( I took multi copies of a two-page blurb on AYPAA and our activities )

In the afternoon we attended a performance of Cinderella by Y. Schwarz - a guest performance by the Theater der Jungen Generation, Dresden. It had some audience participation but could have involved the children more. They seemed to have little conception of the pantomime dame so it was pretty but not exciting.

We then saw some films from Iran - on the Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults, introduced by Don Laffoon. It was interesting, but really publicity type material.

In the evening we attended the Deutsche Staatsoper for two short children's ballets - PETER AND THE WOLF and THE EMPEROR'S NEW CLOTHES. Rather old-fashioned, both visually and choreographically, but mercifully short !

We then were invited to an official reception given by the Minister for Culture. This provided an excellent opportunity to talk and exchange addresses and impressions. It was evident that there were definitely two points of view centred around participating and spectating, and they are somewhat connected with political and social ideology.

Friday April 25 With our concentration on the wane, we attended a performance of THE HUMPBACKED PONY, a dramatic fairy tale poem by E. Erb and A. Endler suitable for children from six years old. It had a fabulous set - on three working levels with a series of curtains drawn across different sections to represent various scenes. It was very close to farce and extremely entertaining.

After this we saw a publicity film of the Albany ( Canada ) Children's Theatre visit to Moscow with their production of THE WIZARD OF OZ in 1974. We also saw some slides of a French company's work.

In the afternoon we went to the Haus der Jungen Talente to see a group of children performing folk songs. The Haus der Jungen Talente is like a clean community arts centre where children can go after school to learn dance, drama, art, craft, etc. The performance was enjoyable but rather regimented. While we visited this performance, Michael visited a school. He reported that the school was virtually part of a large housing commission block in a Redfern type area. Junior School finishes early in the afternoon although children whose parents are not at home can stay at school till 5 pm. He sat in on a discussion between two actors from the Theater der Freundschaft and the children who had seen THE HUMPBACKED PONY in the morning. The children were then given plasticine to make their favourite characters from the play. He also saw a participation piece involving the children and actors which was refreshing.

In the evening we attended a performance of THE PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD by Synge - a guest performance by the Theater fur Junge Zuschauer, Magdeburg. It was rather Brechtian ( songs, tableaux, etc ) but slow moving, and didn't capture the Irish wit. This was the final event for the week and after the performance farewells were said.

Throughout the week - over meals and drinks - there were many opportunities to talk. We had enough French between us to communicate with the French and Belgian delegates and most of the Western Europeans spoke some English. It was these informal get togethers which were the most valuable and I hope some lasting contacts were made. I will go into more detail about the people I met and the follow up in various countries later. It was, however, most exciting to meet Brian Way and Gerald Tyler from England. They were very conscious of the need to encourage more involvement from countries like Australia.

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It is impossible to record all my thoughts and impressions but attending the Congress was an extremely valuable and positive experience for me. From talking with others I gained confidence about the work being done here in Australia. We seem to be making many advances, and perhaps because we are isolated, we seem to be thinking and working more constructively than some countries. I almost felt in some ways we are trying to do too much too soon ! People were very interested in our work, particularly theatre in education and community arts. I think it is essential Australia maintain active contact with ASSITEJ. The structure of the Association leaves much to be desired - but then every organisation has similar problems. The important thing is the contact and awareness making effect of such a grouping of people.

Thank you for the opportunity to take part and to wave a somewhat timid flag for Australia.

Margaret Leask

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#### COUNTRIES REPRESENTED AT CONGRESS

Algeria, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Canada, Chile, Cuba, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, East Germany, Finland, France, Great Britain, Hungary, India, Iran, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Mongolia, Netherlands, Peru, Romania, Russia, Spain, Sri Lanka, Sweden, Switzerland, Syria, U.S.A., Venezuela, West Germany, Yugoslavia.

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STRUCTURE AND FINANCE OF ASSITEJExecutive Committee

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The Executive meets annually, the General Assembly is held every three years. The General Secretary is in Paris - the headquarters of ASSITEJ. A centre may nominate itself for a place on the Executive. The Executive ideally consists of 15 nations.

The Association is funded by annual membership fees paid by member nations. There is also some money available for publications but all work and travel on behalf of the Association ( save that of the General Secretary ) are voluntary. Many delegates were funded by their governments to attend the Congress.

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