

REGISTERED BY AUSTRALIA POST PUBLICATION No. SBH2453

ISSN 0158-099X

LOWDOWN

YOUTH PERFORMING ARTS IN AUSTRALIA

Vol. 9 No. 3

May, 1987

\$4.00



THAT FESTIVAL

Come Out 87, The ASSITEJ Congress

THE YIN AND THE YANG OF GUNBOAT DIPLOMACY

The politics of the ASSITEJ vote in Adelaide

by JOHN EMERY

WHAT is ASSITEJ? What does it represent? Whom does it serve? These questions came to me the first time I saw the now familiar acronym. When I found out it was an organisation founded in the rubble of World War 2 Europe, I was interested, but warning bells were ringing. Europe's war was not my war.

When I met the ASSITEJ delegates the same bells kept ringing. They were old. They bore the memories of long and bitter skirmishes on their faces, in their carriage. I knew that the fierce need to keep some cherished dream of a pure, clean, proper children's theatre had driven them through the bad days. I knew, too, that many of them, from countries which have perfected the self-serving bureaucracy as a way of life, would be finely skilled in the business of stacking a meeting, juggling the vote. So skilled that the very business of winning the vote would obscure from them that what they were voting for was something which, like their youth, had died in the winter of 1945.

And perhaps, too, because I have seen European culture's dark underbelly, out in the central South Pacific. The crew-cut violence on the face of French marines guarding Hao airstrip — the jumping off point for all flights into Mururoa. The warships in their dirty grey, masking the surf on the reef at Tahiti. The mothers on Mangerava, downwind from Mururoa, who miscarried during the atmospheric tests of the 1960s.

A culture which can turn the beauty of coral islands, and the beauty of the Polynesian people, into part of the killing machine, is one which has reached the end of its evolutionary span. As with the dinosaurs, the end of evolution is in over-armament, over-ornamentation, over-specialisation, and diminishing brain.

It has become customary to tag the French as the villains in the Pacific.

But that ignores the other facts. The French are in Polynesia because the British, during the reign of Queen Victoria, weren't interested. Despite Queen Pomare's plea — as one sovereign ruler to another — the British Foreign Office elected to let the French fleet take Matavai Bay, the site of what is now Papeete, without a quarrel. Even though Cook had claimed the island in the name of Britain.

The Americans have used the Pacific as a larder. First their whaling fleet. Then, when the whales were finished, the tuna fleet moved in. Coming out of Portland, Oregon, or San Francisco, the American assault on Pacific tuna has been systematic in its depletion of fishing stock, paying no thought to what happens when the tuna, too, are fished out. The American Tuna Boat Association for too long was their nation's de facto representative amongst the island nations. Only since several islands struck deals with the Russian tuna fleet, and the Russian presence in the Western Pacific could no longer be ignored, was there any move for an accord. A fishing treaty is currently being negotiated.

But American fishing of the Pacific is far smaller than that practised by the Japanese. The Japanese, in turn, have made moves to legitimise their activities — again, following the increased Russian presence.

The Russians, in turn, deny that they have a military interest in the Pacific. But American satellite photographs of the installations, and kinds of aircraft and ships, now in Vietnam's Cam Ranh Bay base give a different story. According to Admiral James A. Lyons, C.I.C. The U.S. Pacific Fleet, "... on any given day, you will find 20 to 25 surface combatants, three to five submarines,

a squadron of fighter-interceptor aircraft, strike bombers, anti-submarine warfare aircraft, reconnaissance, naval, infantry, and surface to air missiles." The strike range of the aircraft, incidentally, covers Adelaide. The photographs bear this out.

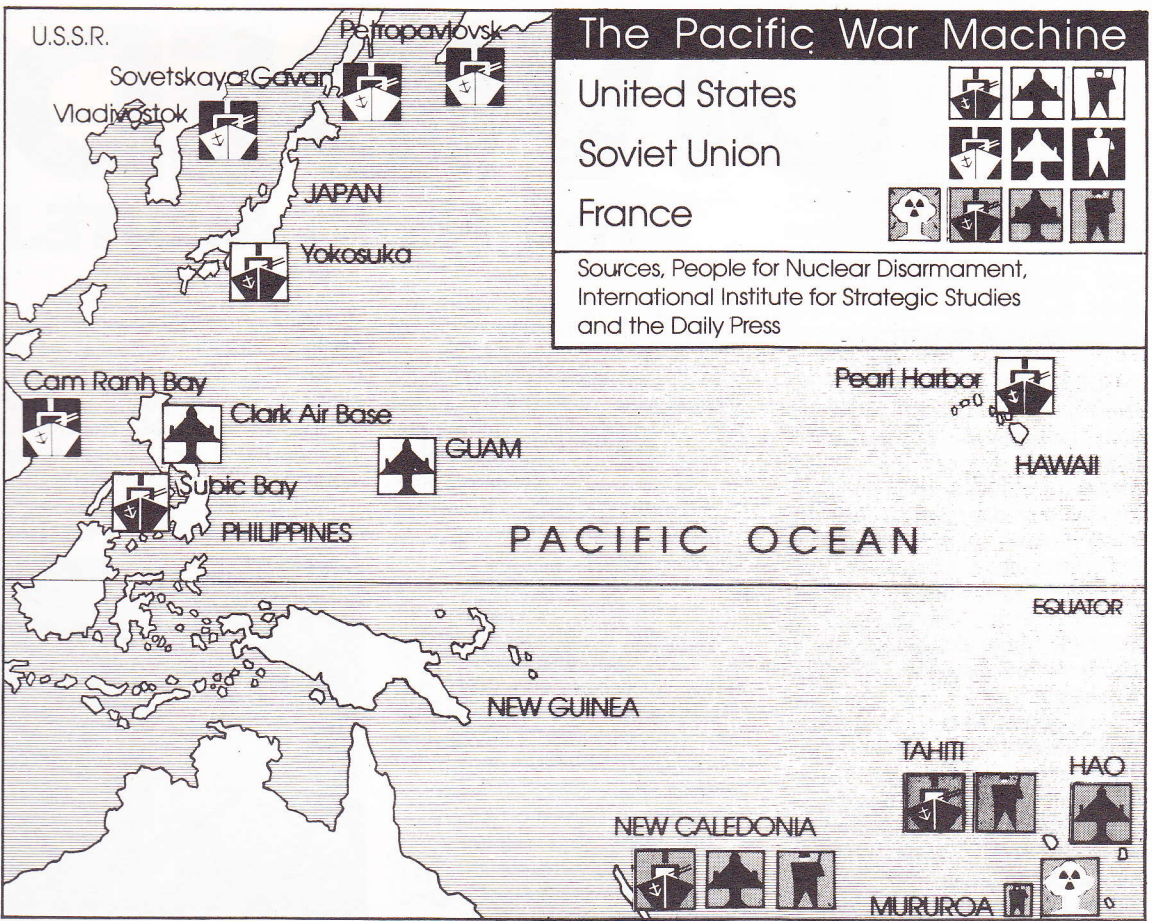
In other words, there are three fleets in the Pacific: American, Russian, and French.

At the ASSITEJ Congress, it was interesting to note the ideological differences that were expressed over theatre for young people. The idea that youth theatre is theatre by youth and for youth, with the accent on participation, exploration, and statement, was constantly put forward — and demonstrated — by the Pacific nations. The idea that youth theatre (through ASSITEJ) is by adults, for youth, with the accent on professionalism (a word which, increasingly, means blinkered vision), and a supposedly apolitical view of aesthetics, 'Art-for-arts-sake', came from the Eastern bloc, France, and America. The people with the warships and the bombers.

The British appear to have renounced their traditional role of cultural coloniser and are now actively seeking inspiration from their former colonies. Aided, of course, by the fact that those whom they colonised have re-colonised Britain.

And so to the voting for control of the ASSITEJ executive. To a disinterested bystander several things stuck out. First, the age of European delegates. Second, the ferocious increase in tension in the room when voting began. Third, the absolute wiping from the board of any Pacific/Asian influence, and the consolidation of the European position.

How was this accomplished? Basically, through proxy voting. East Germany, for example, held the proxies of Cuba, Hungary, and Rumania. France held Belgium and



Map for LOWDOWN by Joe Benke

Switzerland. Each of these proxies was worth three votes.

The final results were: Sweden, 81 votes; Portugal, 77; USSR, 74; Cuba, 74; Federal Republic of Germany, 71; German Democratic Republic, 64; Italy, 64; Spain, 63; USA, 60; Bulgaria, 54; Finland, 49; Poland, 48; Australia, 46; Czechoslovakia, 43; Yugoslavia, 42; Denmark, 42; Rumania, 42.

Japan and Vietnam scored less than the necessary 42 votes.

A quick count demonstrates the power of the Eastern bloc. Cuba, for example, didn't attend the Congress but came in fourth. Such countries as Poland and Italy, virtually unknown as active ASSITEJ members, got in. And the Japanese, the main drive for youth theatre in the Pacific were dropped.

Michael FitzGerald, of ASSITEJ Australia, who organised the Congress summed the vote up as, "In the short-term, despite the intermingling that was achieved, the elections were thoughtless. I haven't

come to a conclusion whether it's malicious or just thoughtless.

"I believe there are fine people and fine work coming out of Europe. The judgement is on certain people who hold dominant positions. I believe the whole system of proxies is disgraceful. The dumping of Japan shows no thought about countries with energy and progressive attitudes for the organisation. They had been six years on the Executive, and have devoted themselves to the promotion and development of youth theatre throughout the Asian region. They did all the spadework for Roger Chapman's and my trip to Thailand and Vietnam, for example.

"But the position is this. As Trina Parker said, 'I've worked in this area for 12 years and for the first time in my life I felt as though Australia was much more aligned with the Pacific Rim than with Europe. I feel the growth of a movement that's really got something to say.'

"And now you and I are going to Canada," Michael sums up. "There

will be an Australian youth delegation to China in the near future. We will be working with Thailand. In Vietnam we will be providing a resource for their theatre. I hope to follow through with contacts in India, which will lead to exchange. New Zealand is committed to strengthening the trans-Tasman connection.

"I think the energy from the night all the Pacific delegates met was summed up by the woman from Thailand who said, 'This is the first time I have been able to sit down with my neighbour, from Vietnam.' That is the long-term, positive thing which will come out of the ASSITEJ Congress."

Dialectical thinking was perfected in China long before the Europeans Hegel and Marx 'discovered' it. And, dialectically, the defeat of Asia and the Pacific at the ASSITEJ Congress vote is the best thing that could have happened to us. Because that defeat has defined for us who we are and what we are doing. ●

DIVIDED

The Ninth ASSITEJ

by IAN CHANCE

YOUNG PEOPLE'S theatre in Australia's artistic development has been underpinned by notions of liberal humanism and the need for change in attitudes and conditions. Theatre for young people is often seen as a means of education and empowerment. A creative situation quite alien to traditional European concepts of the visionary artist, a seemingly fragile idea defended quite vigorously by European ASSITEJ delegates.

Such generalisations always need qualification. One of the most important provisos to differentiate the Australian movement from a 'theatre of the pedagogue' was expressed for many by Arena Theatre Director, Angela Chaplin. In her keynote address on the topic of the role of theatre in youth culture she said; "I do not believe in artists acting as missionaries to youth culture. We may present options, but never solutions."

Ms. Chaplin nominated three major roles that she saw for theatre in youth culture that would be echoed by many young people's theatre workers in Australia. These were to affirm and celebrate young people, their thoughts and feelings; to bring new ideas, images and experience to young people; and to provide them with the opportunity to explore their own creativity.

The public launching of *Come Out 87's Allwrite!* literary program left little to be desired as a celebration of youth arts as it swept over Bert Flugelman's gleaming staccato star sculpture and into the upper levels of the Adelaide Festival Centre. The sounds of storytelling, literary theatre sports and youthful high spirits spilled from the galleries.

And so it was that in the lower depth of the Festival Centre, serious huddles of experts engrossed in the theory of youth culture were all but

swamped in the vital reality of youthful practice.

Many international delegates to the Ninth World Congress and General Assembly of the International Association of Theatre for Children and Young People (ASSITEJ) were at first surprised by such lack of reverence for the consideration of high art.

There was evidence of this early in the small group discussions, too, when drama teachers on conference day-passes showed themselves quite willing to debate the theory and practice of young people's theatre on equal terms with anyone — oblivious or unconcerned by their companions' status as major directors, producers and writers in Europe or America.

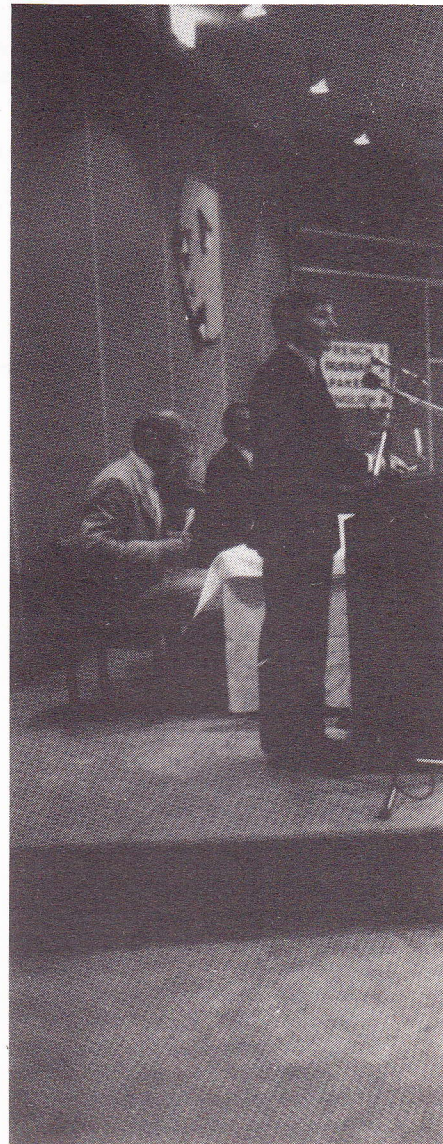
Fortunately, this self-confident style was notably free of arrogance and seemed to win over the Congress. There were many favourable comments about the relaxed but well-organised nature of the conference. One result was that discussions on specific topics over the first three days of the gathering were especially stimulating. The daily precis of these exchanges make interesting reading and represent some of the most substantial work possible at such international talkfests.

The selection of *Come Out* programs presented to ASSITEJ eventually found less favour with this international jury than did Australian manners — it also left many Australians somewhat abashed. Congress Director Michael FitzGerald attempted to make it clear from the start that the selection of shows from the youth festival's program was intended as a 'warts and all' cross-section to show delegates what is happening in young people's theatre of here and now.

It was definitely not intended as a

showcase of the best work available, Michael stressed. To some minds perhaps, this could seem a barely plausible excuse for poor work. But it is also an impossible exercise in discrimination for people seeing works completely out of context.

Similar mental calisthenics were required of jet-lagged and lubricated



The Premier of South Australia, John Bannon, opens the Ninth ASSITEJ World Congress, April 8, at the Adelaide Festival Centre. Inset: ASSITEJ Australia's Michael FitzGerald.

WE STAND

World Congress, Adelaide, 1987

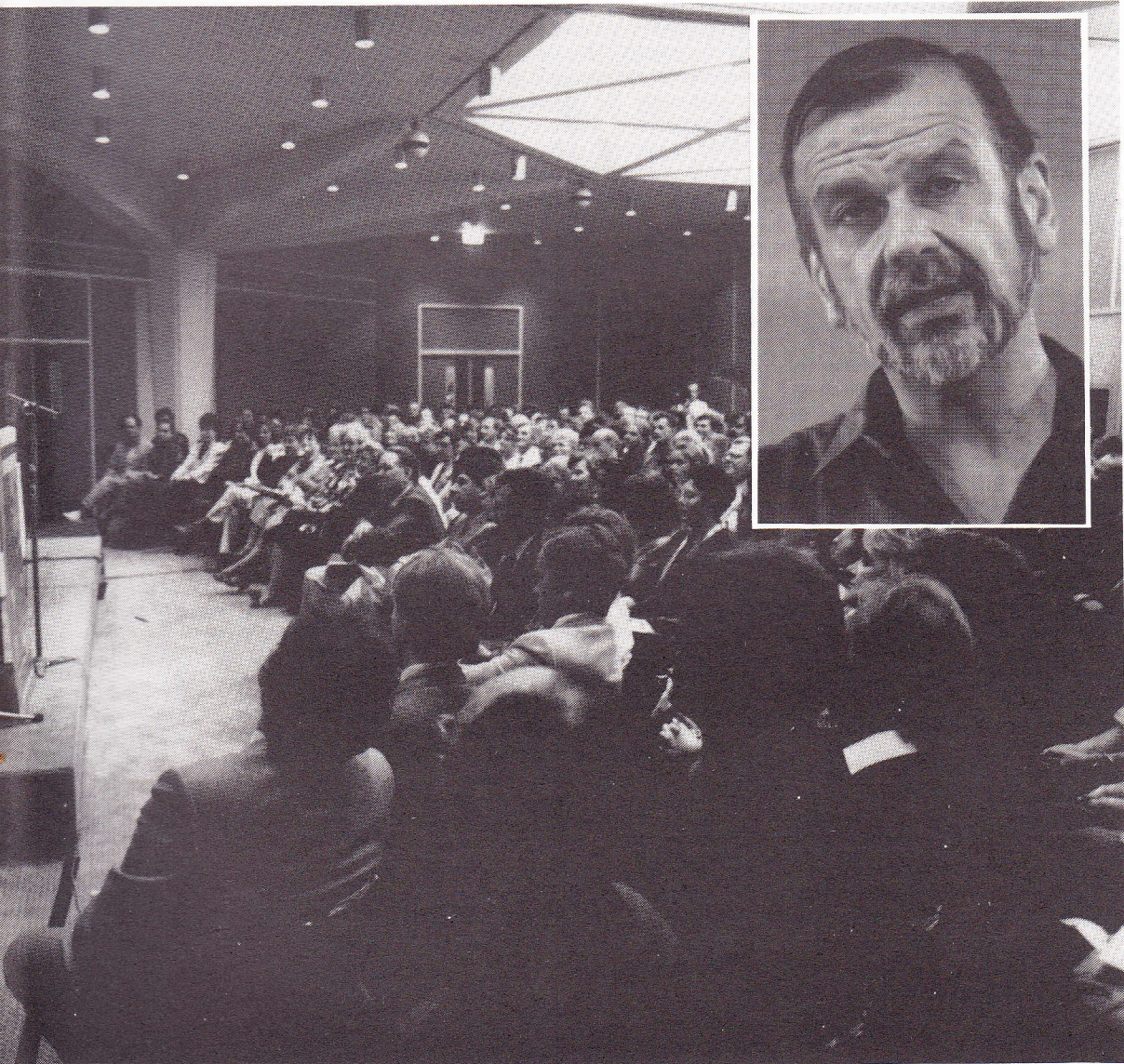
delegates during a cabaret presentation of Aboriginal dance at the Congress Club. In presenting this display it was begging embarrassment to expect people to disregard the superficial, tokenistic context and see it as it should have been — a rare opportunity, even for most Australians, to enjoy skilled

performers of genuinely Aboriginal art expression.

The chauvinistic presentation of the relationship between white Australians and the people whom our culture dispossessed was only remedied by the opportunity to hear Aboriginal writer Jack Davis reading his poetry and to thus glimpse the real

grace in this man's culture.

A STAUNCH LINE within ASSITEJ is the pursuit of the highest artistic excellence in children's theatre. This convention is very important to some American members and to the large theatre companies of continental Europe, East and West. They claim the sole



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ambit of ASSITEJ to be in the fully professional presentation of children's theatre.

Here then lay an inevitable conflict with the views of many Australian professionals. In this country there is a strong argument for the empowerment of young people in the process of making their theatre. Since the Come Out program fairly reflects the current style and concerns of the profession this schism was highlighted by the shows presented to Congress.

One reaction to the major steam of TIE in Australian theatre for young people, and the acceptance of theatre professionals working directly with young people (youth theatre) on an equal footing, was neatly encapsulated in the epithet of an American delegate. "Australia!" he declared, "The place where the actors are in the classrooms and the kids are on stage."

Many statements from major international practitioners surprised Australians at the Congress. They had expected a generally advanced critique of the sociology of children's theatre in Europe and America and often found instead an outspoken conservatism and an apparent retreat into pure aestheticism.

In retrospect, the ideological battlefield of the Ninth Congress of the International Association of Theatre for Children and Young People was mapped by Dr. Ilse Rodenberg in her final opening address to delegates after nine years as the organisation's President.

A political dynamo, Dr. Rodenberg began her career with popular theatre in politically-charged depression Germany. Banned from acting for her work in anti-facist theatre she was later gaoled by the Nazis for political activities. She was an actress in children's theatre for 15 years and became a representative to the parliament of the German Democratic Republic in 1956.

As founding member of ASSITEJ, Dr. Rodenberg admitted to the Ninth Congress that the initial members of the organisation were by no means unanimous about the best kind of theatre for young people. She may well have added that things haven't changed much in 22 years.

There was only one area in which there were no contradictions, she said: "We all agreed that theatre art was a

universal expression of mankind, with the influence and power to unite large parts of the world's population in the service of peace, and that theatre art could play an important part in the education of the young generation."

Delegates to the first Australian assembly of ASSITEJ would concede the first point to Mme. President without debate. As to young people's theatre having political and educational priorities; superficially at least there is little consensus in ASSITEJ. Instead there are disunited objectives whereby major functions of theatre for children and young people have transmogrified into factions within the organisation.

The rift was revealed when Dr. Rodenberg added a paradoxical rider to the previously stated agreements of the founders; "That was why we founded an international association to promote the development of (young people's) theatre of the highest artistic standards," she said.

At the crux of the argument then lie the familiar hydra-headed twins of an art and information dialectic. Unfortunately either 'form' or 'content' become such mutually exclusive tenets that, for some in ASSITEJ, any expression of accord is extremely difficult and emotionally-charged.

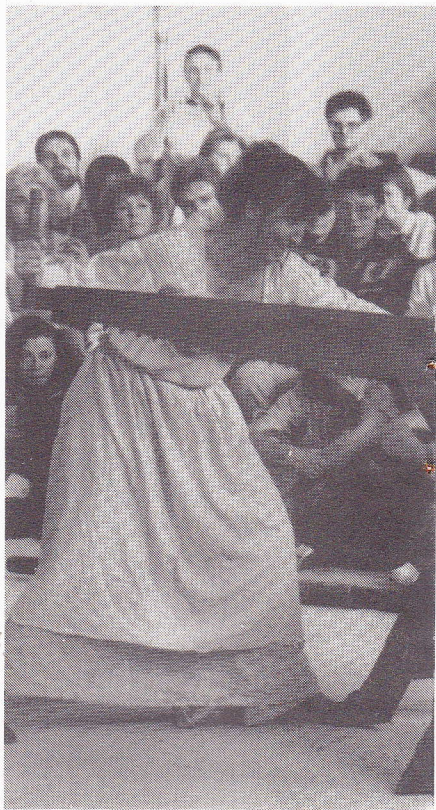
"Don't give me socio-drama and expect me to treat it as art!" declaimed one Floridean authority.

British delegate Paul Harman of the Merseyside Young Peoples Theatre best described the middle ground. "We must be artists and educators," he said. "Educators to draw out the best ideas and the best reactions in our audiences, artists to create an effective, rich and celebratory theatre."

Australian theatre workers are no strangers to the opposing viewpoints, for they are at the nub of much debate about our own arts practice — particularly in an environment of competition for State support. Community theatres and theatres for young people have long been embroiled in just such an argument with the opera, ballet and mainstage drama theatres, and although the trenches are quieter of late it is still an uneasy truce.

THE FIRST SALVO of another battle for the hearts and minds of the Congress was fired by Maurice Yendt

The Youth Opera, 'Frankie'.





Photographs DAVID WILSON

of France, director of Theatre de Lyon, the highly respected producers of 'some of the world's most spectacular and imaginative theatre for children ... neither heavy handed nor didactic.'

M. Yendt's introduction to the first topics for discussion had many Australian delegates from the youth theatre movement wondering just what they were doing here. This is despite the fact that his own theatre has also attempted to introduce children to theatre through programs like *Jeu Dramatique* (Dramatic Play).

"The considerations and actions that can be undertaken by ASSITEJ absolutely do not cover the whole range of dramatic and theatre-derived activities which involve children and young people themselves," M. Yendt stated forcefully.

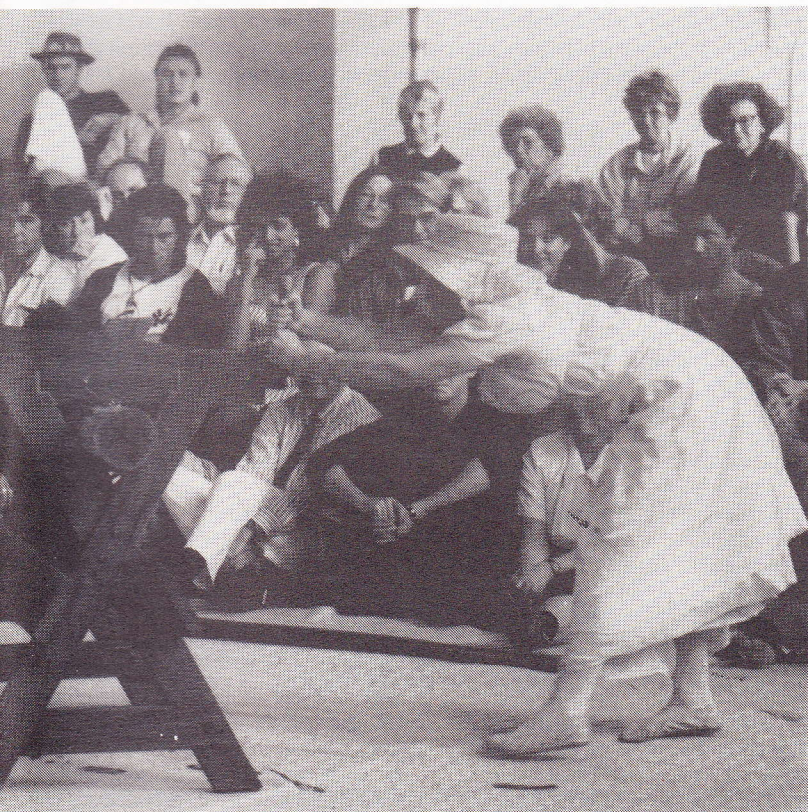
He went on to say that the statutes of l'ASSITEJ clearly state that it is only interested in theatre produced by professional adult performers and that all discussion should be within this constraint.

This statement also left the entire Congress theatre program in a bit of a lurch really. Intentionally selected as a 'warts and all' cross-section of the 1987 Come Out Youth Arts Festival, it reflected the festival's concern for fostering the participation of young people in the development of a theatre for young people.

Opening night of Come Out 87, however, was the piece de resistance — the premiere of an opera for young people, *Frankie*. Even by ASSITEJ standards the professionalism of this production was impeccable. The music was written by Alan John, libretto by David Holman. *Frankie's* director, Neil Armfield, is one of Australia's most highly regarded mainstage directors, and the set was designed by the star team of Ken Wilby and Mark Thompson.

As for the ASSITEJ definition of theatre for young spectators; eventually five thousand young people were to see this show over its short season: an opera! For kids, in Australia! One could only surmise that arts education must be making considerable headway here in preparing the audience of the future.

At *Frankie's* premiere then, ASSITEJ delegates were settling back for a night of 'high artistic achievement. The curtain went up and — *quelle horreur*, children! On the wrong side of the footlights!



Arena Theatre's 'The Women There'

Homesafe, was the circumstance that, although contracted for *Come Out*, this Victorian State Education Department TIE team was disbanded by its masters on January 1st, 1987.

Handspan Theatre's show lent interest to the debate about the ways that such themes should be handled. *A Change of Face* is about multicultural friction amongst young Australians. During discussions on the topic of writing for multi-cultural audiences, a frequently expressed feeling was that there always should be positive portrayals of relationships between ethnic groups. It was felt that to do otherwise was often to provide ammunition for already entrenched attitudes of xenophobia in children.

A Change of Face certainly displayed the other side of this coin and Congress delegates heard of teachers complaining that they had to work hard to re-establish a working tolerance amongst mixed cultural groups who saw the show. The creator of the show, Carmelina de Guigliommo, was quite unabashed by this reaction, saying that it only shows that the extra work needed to be done anyway.

Multicultural themes could seem to dominate young people's theatre in Australia at present — and it is not an unreasonable preoccupation in our current society. However, by midway in the ASSITEJ Congress the plaint was heard; "All we've seen is shows about multiculturalism, isn't there another topic for children's theatre?"

IN A NEAT IRONY, it appears that multiculturalism was perhaps the perfect subject for such a world gathering — given that the political fun and games of the last two days of the Congress tended to create divisions in the organisation along racial/cultural lines.

In discussing these aspects of the Ninth ASSITEJ Congress it should be remembered that such loosely affiliated international organisations are notoriously poor at governing themselves. In ASSITEJ, laissez-faire methods have generally pursued the interests of major European national theatres for young audiences, the perceived threat to such interests highlighted by a senior member of the organisation in saying; "We do not want to change European traditions to suit others."

The changes that such traditionalists seem to fear were

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almost certainly represented by Australian delegates and the theatre program of the Congress in the major concerns of issue-based and youth participation theatre. Such changes could well be represented by the ideological and artistic competitors of ASSITEJ conservatives at home also.

What seems certain is that the voting of the powerful continental European lobby in the elections of ASSITEJ was a definite rebuff to these aspects of our work, and to further initiatives that the Australian organisation had taken in encouraging the growth of ASSITEJ in non-European parts of the world, particularly in Asia and the Pacific.

However, the disorganised voting procedures allowed for an overreaction and ASSITEJ shot itself in the foot. The election of the ASSITEJ executive saw the popular, hard working and successful Japanese organisation dropped, as the European contingent frantically covered each others backs. The comparatively poor showing for Australia, which came close to losing its own seat on the executive, and the dismal lack of support for other Asian and Pacific delegates was indication of the same.

It was recognised by all as a shameful moment, although when Britisher Paul Harman told the plenary of ASSITEJ that the organisation was being treated as a private European club, there was uproar. It so happened that almost no Australians were present in this final plenary and there is no doubt that it must have been seen in some eyes as a walkout.

Although not intended as a demonstration of disapproval, the interests of Australian delegates were elsewhere by the final morning of the conference. They had organised a last minute meeting with the objective to capitalise on ASSITEJ and their rare gathering together.

The reflections provided by the ASSITEJ experience, both positive and negative, had helped to crystallise some very clear perceptions of the needs and aspirations of Australian young people's theatres. It was a positive statement of confidence and independence that saw this final withdrawal from Congress procedures. ●