



Downtown Amman, Jordan

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*In April
Lowdown Editor
Tony Mack
represented
Australia at a
meeting of
ASSITEJ, the
international
association of
theatre for
children and
young people, in
Amman,
Jordan. Arriving
at a time of
tension for this
troubled region,
he found Jordan
a far different
country to how
it may be
perceived
outside the
Middle East.*

One thing that I like about travelling is the challenge to identity – that sense of being the ‘other’, the strange or unknown. From the time that I boarded a Kuwait Airlines flight in Bangkok, that sense was heightened. I travelled alongside a group of about 30 Indonesian Muslim women with wonderfully coloured headscarves, who were incredibly uncomfortable at my proximity. When one of them was seated next to me the rest searched for another vacant seat on the plane for her, making little noises of sympathy as they passed our seats. In Kuwait, as I waited for my connection, the only other Westerners on the flight were contractors fleeing Iraq and its hostage crisis. I listened to them while I played Peek-A-Boo with a baby from a Jordanian family, as they discussed their

motivations for working in Iraq – money, adventure, trying to make the world a better place...

On the flight into Amman, I listened to the news as our plane skirted the southern borders of Iraq. Jordanian Intelligence had located two out of three cars packed with explosives destined to bomb US/Western interests, and there was one left to find. With this tense buildup, the immediate sense of relaxation I felt upon arrival at Queen Alia International Airport was a surprise – even with the large numbers of police with submachine guns. As we drove the 35 kilometre journey into Amman I noted the landscape bears more than a passing resemblance to the area north of Adelaide. I’m sure the highway was even lined with flowering golden wattle for one stretch.

Entering the chaotic Amman traffic, I realised that it would be a hard city to navigate by myself, with the uniform limestone colour of all the buildings and the circular layout of the main areas. I checked into my hotel, put my bag on my bed and the phone rang. Lina Attel, our host and Director of the Performing Arts Centre, was downstairs and looking to see whether I wanted to go to the Centre to have coffee. Twenty minutes later I was at the Centre with Lina, Cheela Chilala from Zambia and Kim Peter Kovac from the US. It’s the kind of building a lot of youth arts organisations would die for – large rooms with high ceilings perfect for drama workshops, two beautifully appointed ballet studios, a flexible theatre space currently being used

for a children’s TV series, offices and a cafeteria. Having written an article on her work for the American magazine TYA Today as well as meeting her in Vienna, I listened carefully to Lina’s views as we sat in her office and drank coffee. Lina reminds me of some of the amazing women who have pioneered the development of youth arts in parts of Australia. There’s a combination of tenacity, intelligence, warmth and a deep commitment to young people that clearly communicates to others. Having studied in Wales and befriended Kim Peter Kovac years ago, Lina has a strong cultural understanding of the UK and US, and the conversation flicks from the situation in Zambia and Australia to her work in Amman.

As part of my resolution to have a recovery day before starting work when travelling for more than 30 hours, I had some time to kill the next day, as other Executive Committee (EC) members flew in from around the world and from a festival nearby in Haifa, Israel. The morning found me in Downtown Amman, shopping at the crowded stalls in the oldest part of the city. Having mastered the essential ‘la shukran’ (‘no thank you’), I ended up having good chats with some of the stallholders. A theory began to emerge that the entire Jordanian population either had relatives or friends in Sydney or Melbourne – maybe that’s why I felt so relaxed. In the afternoon I went with colleagues to visit Mt Nebo, where Moses is said to have died after seeing the Promised Land. I looked out over the Promised Land, toward the Dead Sea, and felt that sense of deep connection in the presence of something not just old, but ancient. Hard to explain, but for me it’s as though all the senses are heightened, priorities fall into place, and a profound feeling of both relaxation and joy seeps through my body.

I had a similar feeling later in the week when we were taken south across the deserts of Jordan (including through a sandstorm) to the ancient city of Petra. Walking about the ruins of this 2,000 year old city, known to many people as the prime location of ‘Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom’, was unforgettable and an experience that can’t even remotely be described in words. And, never missing an opportunity, the long bus ride was a great chance to talk about recent productions of Young People and the Arts Australia members to a captive audience of festival directors and presenters!

On Tuesday the first meeting of the Executive Committee of ASSITEJ International began, followed by an Opening Ceremony at the Al-Hassan Bin Talal Auditorium at the University of Jordan. Interspersed with some speeches there was a music recital by the Arabic Music Ensemble of the National Music Conservatory, a dance performance by the PAC Dance Group and a short comic performance of ‘Little Red Riding Hood’ by

the PAC National TIE Group. Her Royal Highness Princess Wijdan Ali gave an excellent speech welcoming the ASSITEJ International Executive Committee, representing 18 nations. During it all TV cameras roved the aisles taking footage of us, and the two days later we were given a swag of clippings about the event from the Arab press. Unable to read them in Arabic, I'm sure they contain many positive references to my rarely worn jacket and tie – and I reject utterly the suggestion from the Croatian representative that I looked like a British army officer!

The following days were dominated by the intensive meetings of the EC at the Performing Arts Centre. Nigeria and Albania were accepted as new centres, and ASSITEJ India has been re-constituted in a different region of that sub-continent. ASSITEJ is preparing a presence at the World Cultural Forum in Sao Paolo, Brazil later in the year, and we were updated on ongoing work with the Yearbook, web catalogue of scripts and festival database. The fundraising for children and theatre practitioners in Iraq we've been doing has got off to a good start, and it was reassuring to meet the people involved in putting it into action. Not a bad program for a group of busy people volunteering their time and energy. I also met a number of proud and committed Iraqi theatre artists and am convinced that, given half a chance, they'll be projecting a positive image of their country around the world with high quality performances in a surprisingly short time.

I was given a CD of an Iraqi performance group called Mardohk, who toured to the Gwacheon Hanmadang Festival in Korea last year, and was impressed by pictures from their performances. One excerpt from a performance, responding to the work of William Shakespeare, caught my eye:

*'We will make from the heap and the debris
a visible beauty
And we will make from the black ash
makeup for our faces
And we will make from the fire's flame the
power of youth that will never end
And we will give life to this playhouse and
speak in the world language.'*

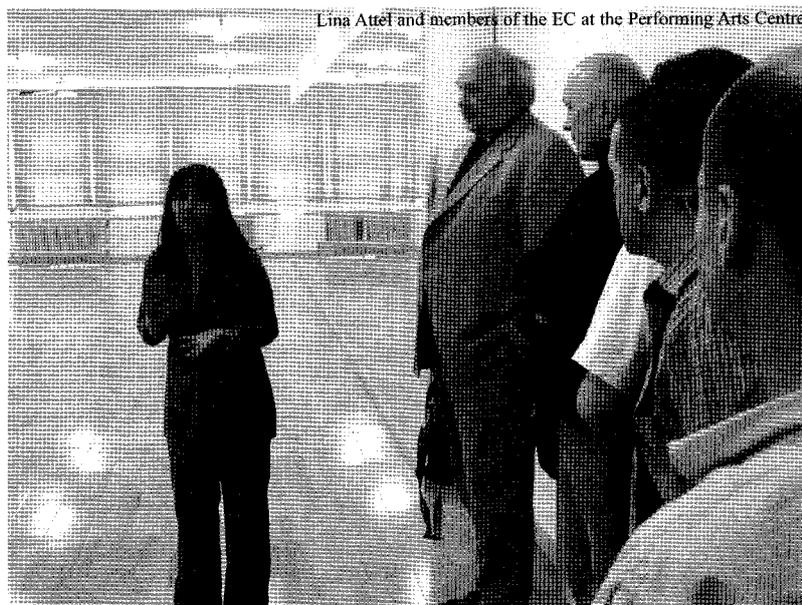
On Wednesday evening I went to the Windmill Restaurant to a dinner hosted by the Jordanian Artists Union. It was a great night, and I had a fascinating discussion with the Deputy Minister for Culture, a man with a passion for archeology and considerable knowledge about Petra. I also talked to the multi-talented Margo



HRH Princess Wijdan Ali, the Executive Committee and Opening Ceremony performers

Malatjalian who, apart from being (among other things) a successful children's author, founded children's theatre in Jordan.

The ASSITEJ seminar on 'International cooperation as a method for strengthening



Lina Attel and members of the EC at the Performing Arts Centre

children's and young people's theatre' sparked great discussion from the audience (in particular the Iraqi practitioners present), as well as interesting perspectives from Croatia, Zambia and, of course, Jordan. Margo Malatjalian gave a rundown on the current situation and history of culture for children and young people in the Middle East, while Cheela Chilala talked

about theatre for children and young people in Africa and the networking taking place in southern and eastern Africa. Ivica Simic, from Croatia, spoke about theatre for children and young people in times of transition and conflict, using his region as an example. The audience were intrigued by the networking taking place by artists in the Balkans through his organisation Epicentre.

By the end of the week, I'd made a lot of friends, assisted centres in a number of countries and confirmed opportunities in five countries for Australian practitioners and companies in four States. On the final night the Jordanian Ministry of Culture hosted a dinner at the Tal Ruman restaurant, in a resort outside Amman. The young staff of the Performing Arts Centre set the exuberant tone, and we danced, sang, talked and laughed until the weary restaurant staff started looking pointedly at their watches.

I will go back to Jordan some day. It's not just the incredible sights – Petra, Jerash, Wadi Rum, the Dead Sea, Madaba, Mt Nebo, the list goes on. But the energy and friendliness of this modern Arab country is infectious. On the day before I left Amman the Hamas leader Abdel Aziz Rantissi was assassinated by the Israeli government, so the trip to the airport and security measures to be gone through reflected the heightened tension in a country where almost half the population are Palestinian. As I went through each checkpoint I felt progressively transformed once again into the 'other'. And it made me realise how much I'd felt at home and amongst friends.

TONY MACK

Tony would like to thank the Noor Al Hussein Foundation, Jordanian Ministry of Culture, Jordanian Artists Union and the Performing Arts Centre in Amman for their hospitality and support. And many thanks to the staff of the centre, along with the Jordanian, Palestinian and Iraqi artists he met, for their assistance, friendship and laughter.