

# ONE WORLD THEATRE

## U.S. Symposium in Seattle Bridges the Diversity Gap

Seattle, WA - It was planned to be to

multi-generational theatre what the

Olympics are to sports, a

convergence of cultures and talents

brought together from around the

world. ASSITEJ/USA selected Seattle

as the site for the 'One Theatre

World' festival and symposium May

8-13, 1995, for artists, scholars, and

cultural leaders from throughout the

world. This was the first such activity

in the USA since the 1994 ASSITEJ

World Theatre Festival and

Symposium at the New Orleans

World's Fair.

This cooperative spirit infused 'One Theatre World' since its inception. The event was produced in concert with the Seattle International Children's Festival and with the assistance of The Seattle Children's Theatre. The symposium was planned to build upon the annual programme of the Seattle International Children's Festival which, since 1987, has presented 88 performing arts companies from six continents in performances for over 300,000 people in the Pacific Northwest.

Seattle was a good choice as host of the event, which marked the 30th anniversary of ASSITEJ, the

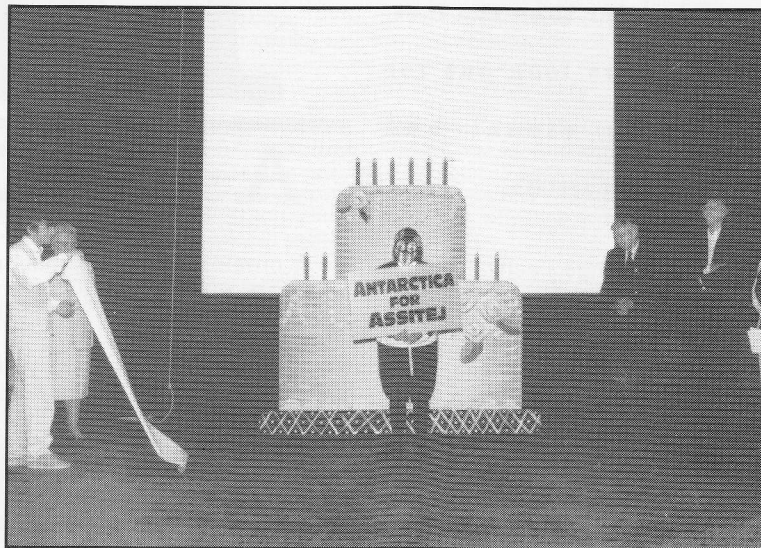


PHOTO: Chris Bennion

International Association of Theatre for Children and Young People. Seattle was also honoured to host an ASSITEJ International Executive Committee meeting to commemorate this occasion. Sixteen members of the Committee and several honoured guests joined in the celebration. ASSITEJ President, Michael FitzGerald said, "The Seattle meeting was one of the most successful I have experienced, both in quality debate and positive outcome."

Seattle as a community is accustomed to hosting international events, such as the APEC Summit and the Goodwill Games, and has millions of visitors travelling every year through the USA's "Gateway to the Pacific Rim." But often, national and international travellers bypass the Pacific Northwest in favour of better-known cities such as Los Angeles or New York City. Seattle does not share that gritty urban feel. With a more relaxed pace and hospitable venue, the Emerald City proved to be an ideal setting.

This year's festival and symposium reached well beyond what has been done in the past, not only in Seattle, but nationally in the United

States as well. For starters, the Lila Wallace Reader's Digest Fund provided major support for the symposium by awarding 'One Theatre World' a Leadership Grant of \$175,000. This funding made it possible for the Festival to include ASSITEJ/USA enhancement companies, such as Theatre Kazeno-ko (Japan), Barking Gecko Theatre (Australia), and Naa Kahidi, Gale La Joye, and Metro Theatre Company, all from the United States. Participants could attend theatre productions offered by the Seattle International Children's Festival, then workshops and discussions with the artists who created many of the productions.

Linda Hartzell, ASSITEJ/USA board member and artistic director of the Seattle Children's Theatre, noted, "There have been a variety of festivals, meetings, and symposia held in the States in the past twenty to twenty-five years, but this is the first time that I can remember all of the things being combined in one eight or nine day session."

The One Theatre World Symposium started off with a birthday celebration for ASSITEJ International, including a

retrospective of ASSITEJ's first thirty years and birthday wishes from the ASSITEJ Executive Committee. Following the reception was a performance of Barking Gecko's 'The Ivory Circle'. ASSITEJ Secretary General Michael Ramlose noted, "Today, we celebrate what we have achieved, but we also celebrate the most important person in our theatre. Not the playwright, the director, the actor, or the set designer. No, the most important person in our theatre is the boy or girl in the fifth row, who is sitting there with sparkling eyes and feeling, 'This, they did only for me.'"

It was riding this wave, this spirit of discovery, comparison and contrast, that the five day symposium continued. Registrants attended sessions such as International Pas de Deux, which featured lecture demonstrations for smaller groups pairing representatives of a company from the USA with artists from an international company to compare and contrast their philosophies, methodologies, problems and challenges. Participants chose between three possible pairings: Green Thumb, Canada; and Naa Kahidi, USA; Barking Gecko, Australia and Gale La Joye, USA; or Theatre Kaze-no-ko, Japan; and Metro Theatre Company, USA. The dynamic achieved was interesting and varied by pairing, ranging from a critical discussion of the aims and aesthetics of each company, to an active demonstration of contrasting improvisational techniques and movement.

The issues and topics covered during the Symposium were often not easy ones, particularly within the context of multi-generational theatre. Ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, environmental tragedies, cultural reprogramming of Native American children in the early 20th century, children living with Aids and forced integration in Mississippi in the early 1960s were only a few of the controversial topics that had been developed into children's theatre projects.

Keynote speakers Srdan "Gino" Jevdevic and Amir "Lazy" Baso, both from Sarajevo, showed video clips from a production of 'Hair' that was staged in Sarajevo after

the siege by Bosnian Serbs began in 1992. Children in the city first watched rehearsals, then developed a theatre of their own.

Harold Oaks, past president of the ASSITEJ/USA board of directors and treasurer of ASSITEJ International explained, "One of the major opportunities to see the world in a different perspective is to be able to see the world as someone else does, growing out of another cultural context, but being reflected in a theatrical environment that will communicate to an audience. The festival and symposium offered an opportunity to make that kind of cultural bridge, using the artistic expression that is available to these theatre companies and is too rarely available in the United States."

One immediate aim of 'One Theatre World', then, was to give American theatre professionals exposure to a wider range of theatre than is commonly within their reach. "Some people have the opportunity to travel around the world to see other theatre companies perform, but most theatres do not," states Susie Glass Burdick, managing artistic director of Bainbridge Performing Arts, Bainbridge Island, Washington. "I'd love to go to some of the Eastern bloc countries, or go to Australia to see Barking Gecko. So to be here in our arena, and have all of these theatre companies coming here, is an opportunity that we couldn't afford to pass up."

Yet it was certainly not just United States national companies and theatre professionals that benefited from the exchange. Symposium attendees included nearly 400 people from 39 of the 50 United States, and more than 20 other countries worldwide.

Symposium participants were offered the Collage of Diversity, a sampling of short segments of performance by theatres which addressed the concerns of specific populations which made up the diversity of 'One Theatre World'. Theatres included Naa Kahidi (Native American), Deaf Moose Theatre (Deaf), Alice B. Theatre (Lesbian and Gay), and The Group (Multicultural), organisations that are not always or often represented at festivals showcasing theatre for young people. But, as Linda Hartzell explains, "I think that

educators, professionals and non-professionals first hear, then see, and then should be given other options. Starter theatre should be professional and on the cutting edge, and go away with a mandate, or a challenge, to improve the work. Hopefully, it should help us to meld the two groups, of theatre for adults and theatre for young people, with a similar goal, not working separately and at odds."

To further this aim, the symposium also presented the Lila Wallace Reader's Digest New Generation Playwright's Forum, in which contemporary playwrights Y York, Steven Dietz, Mark Medoff, Sylvia Gonzales S, James Still and Eric Overmeyer introduced and discussed 5-7 minute readings from their most provocative work. The playwrights then joined in an entertaining and lively round-table discussion with each other and the audience about the challenges and potentials of writing for multi-generational audiences.

In the end, it was the exchange of ideas vital to the growth of ageless theatre that will distinguish 'One Theatre World' as an experience to be treasured. As Harold Oaks said, "This opportunity to meet with our colleagues from other countries, to share with them what we are doing in this country, and to see some of the premiere work being done in the United States as well, and inspire us by seeing what others are doing, getting ideas, and sharing ideas; this, I believe, is the way, in the long run, that you improve the quality of work in the US, and, with the good quality of our own work, improve quality elsewhere, and hopefully better learn, or develop, new ways to express our own points of view."

And, as Michael Fitzgerald stated, "I believe that, like a number of similar organisations set up at the same time, which are now seemingly moribund, we are taking up the arguments and placing the issues on the table. We have a fighting chance to succeed."

**Clare Hannan**

*Clare Hannan is a writer and journalist living in Seattle, Washington, who provides programme support for the Writer's Program at University of Washington Extension.*

**lowdown august 1995 27**