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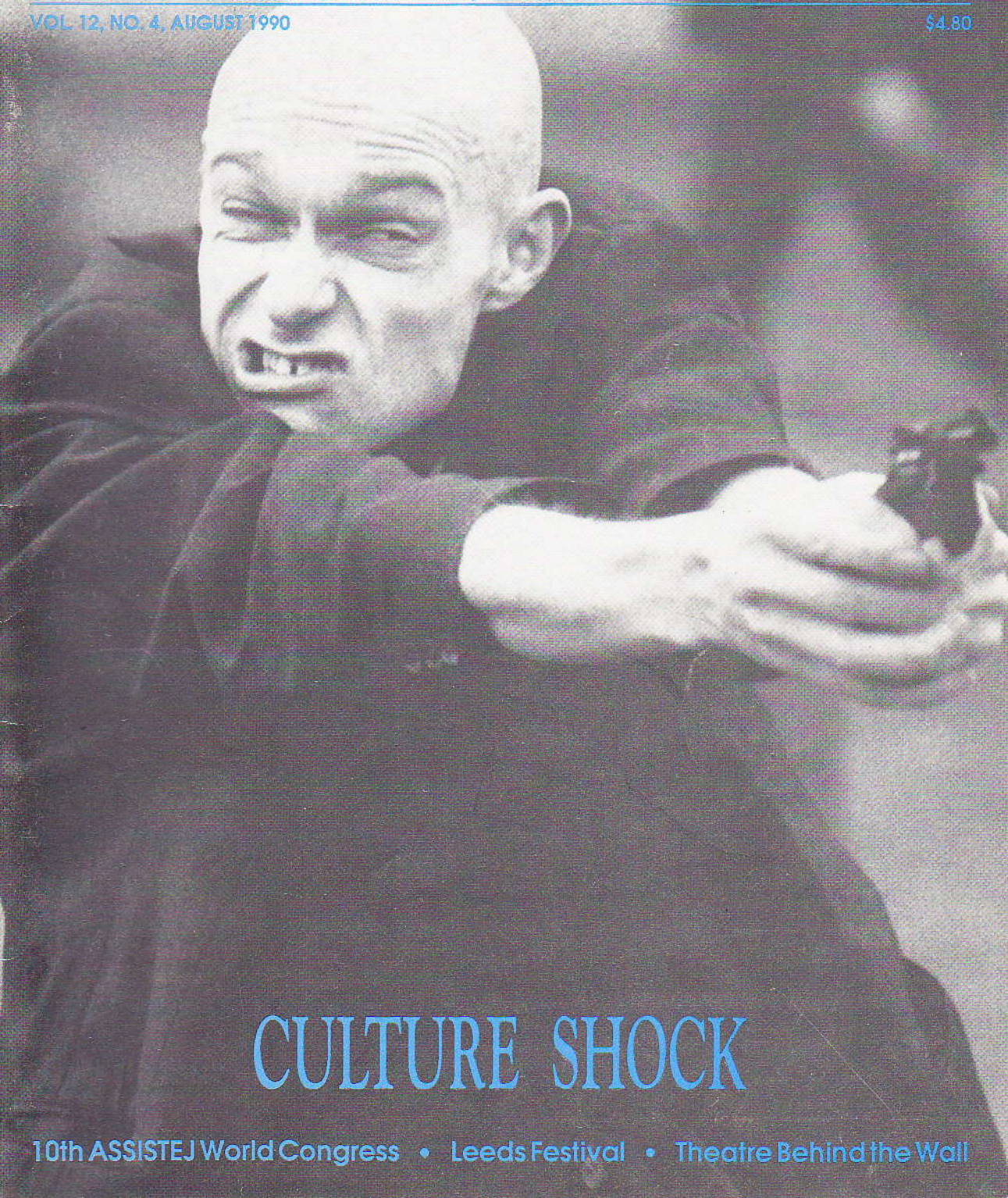
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# LOWDOWN

YOUTH PERFORMING ARTS IN AUSTRALIA

VOL 12, NO. 4, AUGUST 1990

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## CULTURE SHOCK

10th ASSISTEJ World Congress • Leeds Festival • Theatre Behind the Wall



# THE VOTE



eurocentrics maintain a  
stronghold, australia  
comes in a close second  
and stockholm wins  
everyone over. pamela  
payne reports.



YOU EMERGE FROM customs - so this is Sweden. "Welcome to Sweden". Who said that? A clown said that. That's right, a genuine clown; an amazing clown in bright red tail coat, funny hat, polka dottedie, and roller skates. "I'll take your luggage." "Thanks." "Follow me." Why not? When in Sweden ... The clown skates fast through the terminal. He disappears into the crowd. But high above his head he waves a rigid flag. It's on that flag that you pin your faith. The flag says ASSITEJ.

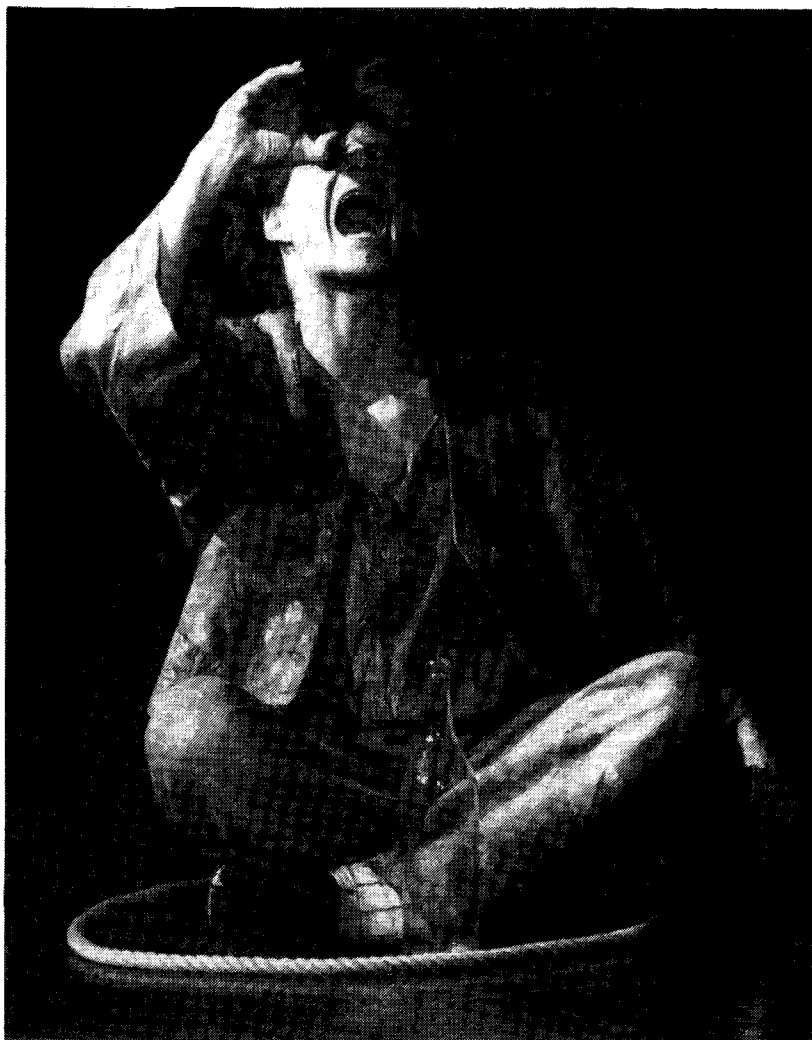
An enigmatic, efficient clown. He stows your luggage on the airport bus, pays your fare, and glides away. You emerge in the city. So this is Stockholm. "Welcome to Stockholm". No clown, no roller skates, but a friendly Swede. And a car. "Next stop the ASSITEJ office. And please accept this recording of the music I have composed for *Kameliadamens Karlek och Dod* (*The Lady of the Camellias*)".

A quirky, warm, smoothly orchestrated introduction. It promised well for the week that was to follow. The tenth World Congress and General Assembly of ASSITEJ fulfilled that promise: nine crowded, sometimes frustrating but endlessly fascinating days.

Nine hundred delegates from fifty-eight countries; on the one hand, enormous cultural, political and philosophical diversity; on the other, a shared and fervent commitment to theatre for young people. Long days, late nights and a good deal of revelry, conversation, provocation, challenge and agreement - the excitement of ASSITEJ.

What happens at an ASSITEJ World Congress and General Assembly? Proceedings fall into four definable components: there's the formal business of the assembly, like elections and constitutional debate; there are papers, forums, discussions and seminars mostly related to the congress theme; there's a theatre festival; and then there's social activity - scheduled and unscheduled.

The main congress meeting room, in Stockholm's Kulturhuset, was



Stockholm's Niklas Ek as Caliban in  
'The Tempest'

impressive. On the raised stage, a long draped table, microphones ranked; behind it a vivid curtain; on the floor of the auditorium, row upon row of earphoned delegates - Argentina, Australia, Austria, Bangladesh, Belgium, Botswana, Brazil ... And from a large glass fronted interpreters' booth the business of ASSITEJ was relayed in each of its three official languages: English, French and Russian.

Compared with Australian representation at the last ASSITEJ congress three years ago, our 1990 delegation was very small indeed. But then the last ASSITEJ was here in Adelaide. Sweden is considerably

further to travel. That as many as thirteen Australians (twelve adults and one child, Ella Doneman) made it to Stockholm, reflects the vitality of young people's theatre in this country.

On the floor of the congress, Australia made its presence felt - flexible, articulate, progressive and united. Michael FitzGerald, having lost the presidency by just one vote to Adolf Shapiro of the Soviet Union, was promptly elected (along with Eddy Socorro of Cuba, and Jurgen Flugge of West Germany) as one of the three vice-presidents of ASSITEJ. Angela Chaplin was appointed to what was, and it seems

still is, the Themes Commission; but hopefully will soon become the Artistic Commission, with a practical rather than predominantly theoretical perspective. A particularly cheering moment for Australia was as Michael FitzGerald held up *Lowdown* and began to talk about it, there was resounding applause. How many local *Lowdown* subscribers realise that it reaches readers in at least forty-four countries? That, amongst our international colleagues, it's an esteemed, indeed envied, publication: "a national magazine devoted to young people's theatre. If only we..."



**Photo:** 'Aventyret Peer Gynt'  
Photo by Bertil Hertzberg

The fact that FitzGerald lost the presidency provides an intriguing example of the subtle and complex politics of ASSITEJ. In the first round of voting for

president the votes were distributed: Australia, 42; Soviet Union, 33; West Germany (Jorgen Flugge), 18. Because no one had the majority needed for election, another vote had to be conducted: between the two most favoured candidates. The result: Australia, 46; Soviet Union, 47. Since each member country of ASSITEJ has three votes, this meant that one country had, in fact, split its vote - two to the Soviet Union and one to Australia. Further the figures suggest that only one of the countries that had previously voted for West Germany transferred its preference to Australia.

What was perhaps most curious was that while FitzGerald has a high and respected profile in ASSITEJ, Shapiro was the quintessential dark horse. Skilled and astute he may well be, but a force at either this or previous congresses he was not. Nor did any of the presidential candidates have the opportunity to present a manifesto. So most votes were cast according to an assumed knowledge of the candidate's politics, perspective and vision.

Why, then, was Shapiro elected? Perhaps fear that because the progressive Michael Ramlosa from

Denmark had been elected Secretary General (breaking the twenty-five year reign of Rose Marie Moudoues from France), ASSITEJ might bolt away from the Eurocentric traditionalists. Perhaps it was a more pragmatic and covert response to the current political climate in Eastern Europe. Perhaps. Is it at all enlightening to consider the significance of the sources of the presidential nominations? Australia, by USA; Soviet Union by Italy; and West Germany by Cuba. Perhaps.

To what extent can the floor of the ASSITEJ Congress be seen as a microcosm of the world, or even the European political arena? It can't; at least not in any specific way. Albeit there are predictable alliances between countries, but not always - like the USA, for example, following Canada's lead and withdrawing its submission for the 1993 congress in favour of Cuba (Havana, February 1993: a splendid prospect). If there was any sense in which ASSITEJ politics at this last Congress reflected broad scale world politics, it was in the more nebulous area of mood. "The fact that Michael Ramlosa won so convincingly reflected, I believe, the

mood, a need for change in Europe," said FitzGerald. "What was pleasing was that from the floor of this assembly there was assertion, challenge,

statement."

That Ramlosa won only after a challenge from the floor of the assembly gives convincing support to FitzGerald's statement. Traditionally, the Secretary General of ASSITEJ is appointed on the recommendation of the outgoing executive. This happened in Stockholm; but the executive's recommendation, Rose Marie Moudoues, was challenged by the membership. Ramlosa was nominated from the floor. All member countries voted: a simple yes/no vote for Ramlosa. The result: 65, yes; 26, no; and two blank voting slips.

For the future development of ASSITEJ, the election of Ramlosa was of enormous significance: it empowered the membership, gave it progressive, dynamic and astute leadership and moved it onto a sound professional base. Ramlosa will run ASSITEJ from the modern, well equipped office in the Theatre Centre in Copenhagen; and the Nordic centres of ASSITEJ have guaranteed \$40,000 (US) a year for the next three years of its operation.

But, in applauding progress, past achievement should not be

# W O R L D C O N G R E S S



**Photo:** 'Det 4 Bud' ('The Fourth Commandment')  
Teatret Artibus  
(From left) Basse Dam, Annette Holk, Simon Jensen.

dismissed. The congress paid due tribute to Moudoue's fine and committed contribution throughout her 25 years as Secretary General. She continues as an elected member of the ASSITEJ executive.

Another pleasing manifestation of the mood for change at this congress was Japan's election to the executive - with 87 votes, the highest of any country. Just three years ago in Adelaide, Japan had been nominated but not elected. "The voting result at this congress was a recognition of Asia; and of Japan's sterling work on behalf of ASSITEJ," said FitzGerald.

Perhaps the most urgent debate of the congress was the one that had begun in Adelaide: the need to broaden the parameters of ASSITEJ to recognize youth theatre, by definition either pro-am or entirely amateur. Under the constitution, full membership of ASSITEJ demands that a centre is recognized by its entire country (there can only be one centre in any country). There must be, within the country, theatre for young people in each of two categories: (A) adult professional actors playing for children and young people; and (B) adult non-professional theatre companies (for example, community, university and college companies) playing for children and young people.


There are further restrictions. For full membership, a country must have, within its local ASSITEJ, at least three member companies in category A; or five member companies, at least two of which are in category A, and three in

category B. Thus, for many of the African, Asian and Latin American countries where there is a vibrant tradition of amateur theatre for and by youth but little or no professional work, the implications of the constitution are depressingly clear: they're excluded from full membership of ASSITEJ. They must, so the traditionalist thinking goes,

be content to remain non-member members.

They're not. Subsequently, if ASSITEJ is to move into the next century as an organisation that embraces theatre practice for young people, with all its cultural and artistic divergence, in every corner of the globe, then it must consider amending its constitution - or drop

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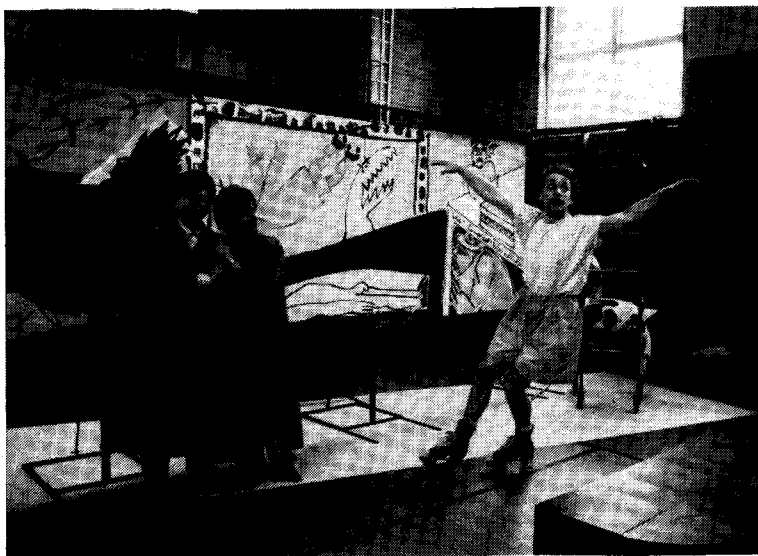
Theatregroep.

'Swans Always

Look so New';

(below) Leikbrudu-

land, 'Trettaleikir'



"international" from its banner.

The debate has been thrust into focus in Adelaide, in the first instance, by our inclusion in the accompanying festival, work by youth theatre companies and by an unprecedented representation of non-member countries from Asia. The Nordic countries' response to the fabric of the debate was positive and practical. In the week before the congress three separate meetings, for non-member Asian, African, and Latin American countries, were organised, each with an observer from the ASSITEJ executive. These meetings provided an opportunity for the sharing and exchange of practice and philosophy among non-member countries from geographically defined regions. These non-member delegates then attended ASSITEJ where their contribution - vigorous, provocative and thoughtful - infinitely enriched the congress.

Nevertheless, while there was certainly progress, the debate continues. While non-member countries have reason for optimism, the amendment to the constitution which would have given them a formal voice was not accepted. This was the British proposal for Regional Assemblies, formed on the basis of "geography, language or cultural affinity", with an elected representative on the ASSITEJ

executive. The British proposal was regrettably but perhaps unavoidably rushed. In a more concise and refined form it might have been accepted. At least it's on the table and the new executive cannot ignore its urgency. But, nevertheless, it must wait another three years before it's again put to a general assembly.

However, there is much more to ASSITEJ than the political business of the assembly. On the one hand there's a daily discussion program and on the other there's the concurrent theatre festival. Together these two strands of the congress offer a vital opportunity for the

exchange and investigation of both the theory and practice of theatre for young people.

Papers, discussions and forums swept wide - from Penin M'lama of Tanzania's passionate and highly articulate paper on new theatrical forms in relation to various cultural, aesthetic, and ethnic traditions; through Roger Deldime of Belgium's semiotic analysis of the specific effect of contemporary theatre on young audiences to a lively and informative presentation by a panel of Swedish theatre practitioners on Shakespeare for young audiences. In the evenings, sandwiched between dinner and "Night Life" on the program, were a series of "Open University" seminars that ranged from an erudite paper by Professor Matti Bergstrom of the University of Helsinki on the vision of brain research focusing on children's ego as it develops in play and reality to an enthusiastic discussion about putting your life on the stage by young people from two Swedish youth theatre companies, Roj and Studiotatern.

Although theatre productions were scheduled right through the week, with morning, afternoon and evening performances in venues scattered across the city, Thursday was set aside as Nordic Day: a showcase of productions from the Nordic countries in the vast Riksteatern (Swedish National Theatre) complex



at Hallunda, south of Stockholm. There were ten different productions on this day; and all of them, as well as another fifteen, were part of the on-going ASSITEJ theatre festival. (There was also, right through the week, a packed fringe program) Inevitably, choices had to be made. But that's one of the particular joys of ASSITEJ: a wonderful theatrical feast.

And it was a feast - the deft, zany lawyer-clown Lars Vik from Norway's Grenland Friteater in a very funny solo performance; the colourful and exuberant *Swans Always Look So New*, a performance by an actor and two visual artists from Holland's Wederzijds; the wonderful puppet characters, from gargantuan to minute, in *Trollaleikir* from Iceland; Denmark's Teatre Artibus with the *Fourth Commandment*, a punchy, compelling exploration of child rearing; the vast, superbly staged, and arresting *Stormen (The Tempest)* by Stockholm's Unga Klara...

There was more, much more; and almost all of it impressive - polished performances, tight direction, and dynamic, well considered design. Yet what was perhaps the most impressive element of the theatre for young people at the ASSITEJ festival was its innovation and experimentation with form and style - from *Peer Gynt* staged with actors and grotesque, haunting puppets (Byteatern, Kalmar) to the simple comic invention with minimal sets and props of *Childish Stories* (Orienteatern, Stockholm).

So that was Stockholm. It was, indeed, a hectic, stimulating, fascinating time: the nine days of that World Congress and General Assembly of ASSITEJ. Its nine hundred delegates filed their papers and programs, packed their suitcases, and left for their 58 different countries. They undoubtedly left with vastly different responses to the proceedings and outcomes of the congress. And they undoubtedly left with the determination to continue to promote and develop young people's theatre - in all its divergent, vital forms.



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