

# LOWDOWN MAGAZINE

Youth Performing Arts in Australia

December/January 2008 Vol 29 Number 6 \$9.90 (inc GST)

16th  
World  
Congress  
&  
Performing  
Arts  
Festival  
for  
Young  
People



assitej

May 9-18\_2008

[www.assitej2008.com.au](http://www.assitej2008.com.au)

Presenting partner

NATIONAL  
PHARMACIES



# ARE YOU READY TO BE HUMAN?

The 16th ASSITEJ World Congress and Festival is taking place in Adelaide in May 2008. But what is ASSITEJ and why is it so necessary? Jason Cross, Artistic Director of the 16th ASSITEJ Congress and Wolfgang Schneider, President of ASSITEJ International, spoke to Caroline Reid about the importance of ASSITEJ and theatre for young people.



By Caroline Reid

'Science and art belong to the whole world, and before them vanish the barriers of nationality.' So said Goethe 200 years ago. Flash forward to 1965, in Europe during the Cold War, where a group of professional theatre artists have come together from the west and east. What is of interest to them is not politics or nationality, but their own respective situations in theatre for children. 'Theirs was a philosophy of people who would like to make the world better,' explains Wolfgang, gesturing with open hands. 'And the first thing they organised was to communicate with each other. And so ASSITEJ was founded.'

Put simply, ASSITEJ is an international network of organisations and individuals that advocate for the rights of children, all over the world, to have access to theatre. Since 1965, a tradition of having national meetings developed, that soon expanded to international meetings every three years. The 16th World Congress will have representatives from 82 countries. 'That's the most critical aspect to the event,' insists Jason, 'that we have a gathering of those people.' A firm believer that international experience is crucial to aesthetic education, Jason embraces the differences that exist between regions and countries, and hopes the congress will lead to some fierce debate about world theatre practice.

The Cold War is now over but conflict continues - within and between countries. Will these intercultural misunderstandings be a problem for an organisation such as ASSITEJ? 'This is not a problem,' Wolfgang emphasises. 'This is a chance again for an organisation which is not really linked with the political situations.

From this point of view it's so important - it's a question of aesthetic education, the situation of children, how to change social conditions.'

'I think what's misunderstood from an Australian perspective is that it's a human organisation,' adds Jason. And he may be right because I often hear people complain of bureaucracy and little understood acronyms when they speak of ASSITEJ. So what's beyond that? Jason believes 'it requires you as an individual, whether you're with a company or a freelance artist, to find a human way of engaging with it.' While ASSITEJ has a bureaucratic structure, 'what we can learn in Australia is - how we engage with each other on a face to face and interstate level is how we should engage with ASSITEJ on an international level. E-mail is only one access to that: essentially it needs to be a human interaction.'

'Organisations are not as important as the people behind them,' contributes Wolfgang, in a statement that may not be well understood, despite its obviousness. 'And International ASSITEJ is not as important as the members of the national centres.' That means the bottom line is performing for children and young people.

But, as any theatre worker knows, performances don't just happen by a clicking of heels or wishful thinking - there's a complicated infrastructure involved that is all but invisible on opening night (or day).

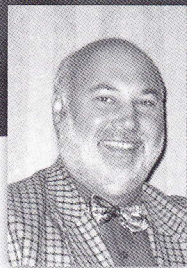
'There are theatre houses; companies touring around; artists working as directors, musicians, playwrights and so on. But to organise the infrastructure for them; to take care of children's rights to take part in the arts; to organise exchange programs on a regional, national and international level; to have all the possibilities of getting information, inspiration and experiences - I think, for that, such a network [as ASSITEJ] is very important.' Wolfgang speaks quietly but with the confidence of a man who knows this association very well. His relationship with ASSITEJ has been a long one. Chair of the Board of ASSITEJ Germany since 1997 and President of ASSITEJ International since 2002, Wolfgang's first Congress was in 1987, also held in Adelaide. As a young academic he was excited to be involved in his first international conference.

'There has been big developments in this 20 years,' he says, 'in the quality of the level of the discussions and also the question - "where are the next generations coming from, and how are they educated for what they are doing?"'

The Next Generation leadership program will form an important part of this Congress. It will bring together 25 practitioners from Australia and around the world, ranging in age from 25-35. These are not novices in the industry, but are practitioners who are 'going to be entering positions of leadership within our arts community or have already established that they're leaders,' says Jason. Both men agree the need for this kind of programme was identified years ago - questions were being asked like 'how do you study theatre for children?' Wolfgang, in *The ASSITEJ Book: Next Generation* (2006/2007 publication), (see page 10 for details) writes of

**'...the bottom line is performing for children and young people.'**





Above | Photography: Chen Wee Ling  
courtesy of The Shashin Photo Club of  
Kuala Lumpur

From Left to Right |  
Wolfgang Schneider | Jason Cross

the need, now, to 'widen the focus to change our experience about the establishment of the new generation in our field – how to educate, how to develop, how to integrate new artistic input for the children's and young people's theatre.'

His own theatre education began at an early age, in Mainz, Germany. 'I was a producer,' he says with a wry grin. 'My grandmother told me I used the puppet theatre at home for special performances for the neighbourhood children. And I asked for an entrance fee – it was three marbles for one puppet show.' Young Wolfgang's love for theatre was fostered by his grandmother, whose 'interest in theatre was my favourite connection to her. She was acting in an amateur company, which was very unusual in the times of the early twenties in Germany. Later, I could use her special subscription for the state theatre . . . if someone was sick I was able to go. And so I saw the whole repertoire of theatre and all the Christmas classics.'

Jason, too, has had a long relationship with the performing arts. His mother was a professional dancer and he was taken to the ballet and theatre from the age of five, eventually becoming a dancer himself. The performing arts were as natural to him as breathing – 'a privileged background', that this softly spoken man obviously cherishes. He has been involved in many arts festivals, both as performer and director, in Australia and overseas. It should come as no surprise, then, that the journeys of both Jason Cross and Wolfgang Schneider have led them to working for an organization whose charter is 'the right of all children to enrichment through the arts and their own cultural traditions, especially theatre culture.'

When asked about the value of children's theatre, Jason expanded further on the notion of art not being separated from life. In keeping with the ASSITEJ event's theme, 'Old Knowledge, New Word', he looked toward Aboriginal Indigenous Australia for his answer.



Top | Blak Nite 2007 | Above | Cinderella Dressed  
in Yella. Photography: Jon Green, 2007

'Our engagement with the arts was integral to the way that we lived 40,000 yrs ago. Theatre and ritual and ceremony were part of the everyday, children were not separated from it. So what happened? Over the course of 40,000 years what happened to humans where suddenly we disassociated ourselves from that type of existence? Literally what we did is create all these boundaries and these points of separation . . . As a species we haven't been around for very long and we've lost some of the best things that society treasures and I suppose that's part of the role that we [theatre practitioners] play in our society whether in Germany or Australia or India – to actually keep that flame burning. . . That's why something like ASSITEJ should exist – because it's about being human, being alive.'

'And we have the experience around the world,' added Wolfgang, 'that if children have the chance to take part they will love theatre because it is lively, human. And it could be another world on stage; it could be something that is not reality but linked with reality; it could be also I call it a mirror of

**'...children's theatre first must be theatre...'**



life but on the other side something which is the world of fantasy; and it could be also this mixture of a lot of art forms coming together in theatre.'

Wolfgang emphasised the importance of theatre practitioners recognising that 'children's theatre first must be theatre. There could be a category of simplicity, but if I, as an adult person, am not touched in a children's theatre performance, there's something wrong.' Professor of Cultural Politics, Founding Director of Children's Theatre Centres, teacher of children's literature, and editor of various publications dealing with young people's theatre - this down-to-earth man is extremely respectful of children: 'They are living in the same world. That means everything they recognise in the world is the same as you, as an adult. Sometimes its another perspective, another relationship, and sometimes they are working in another way with these experiences but it's the same.'

Attendance at the 16th ASSITEJ Performing Arts Festival and World Congress is anticipated to be over 50,000 people, including international delegates, young people and their families. That's a good injection into South Australia's economy and a feast of networking opportunities for all Australian artists. But at its heart it is simply a lot of folk sharing, learning, discussing, exploring, and celebrating theatre. Theatre - the art form Oscar Wilde regarded 'as the greatest of all art forms, the most immediate way in which a human being can share with another the sense of what it is to be a human being.' Are you ready?



Above | HalliHallå. Photography: Martin Skoog



*Caroline Reid left her home state of Western Australia in 2005 to live and work in Adelaide. Over the past ten years she's written play commissions for Black Swan Theatre, Deckchair Theatre, DADAA WA, and ABC Radio. She is currently working on 'Curfew', commissioned by Urban Myth Theatre of Youth.*

## 2006/2007 ASSITEJ Book Now On Sale!

**Next Generation**  
**In Theatre for Children**  
**and Young People**

**The ASSITEJ Book**  
**2006/2007**

Edited by Wolfgang Schneider and Tony Mack  
For ASSITEJ - the International Association  
of Theatre for Children and Young People



**The ASSITEJ Book has 300 pages of fascinating global insights into the Next Generation in Theatre for Children and Young People, and is a must-see publication leading up to the 2008 ASSITEJ World Congress**

**The ASSITEJ Book is \$18 including postage & handling and GST, and can be ordered from YPAA on 08 8267 1911 or [info@ypaa.net](mailto:info@ypaa.net).**