

NOW WHERE DID THEY LEARN TO DO THAT?

Rebecca Bartlett reflects on Youth Theatre directors' needs for some "imaginative therapy" and offers ways of finding it.

Have you every tried to write down, to articulate and put on paper your personal working ethos? To put it in another way, what are the three things that you as a youth theatre director/leader would 'to the mat for'?

Words like quality, innovation, inventiveness, professionalism; phrases such as 'high production values' 'imaginative use of 'limited resources' (how many times have we heard that one!) and 'energetic programme of workshops' are familiar to us all; but how do we recognise quality? What constitutes an energetic youth theatre workshop programme in say, Sweden or South America or Scotland?

Are we all basically the same or are there cultural, experiential, conceptual, methodological and philosophical emphases which enrich our work in ways that we can only be aware of when we get an opportunity to compare and contrast our practice with that of others? We owe it to ourselves - and to our young people- to think comparatively, to work developmentally.

At the same time, we all need an opportunity to lose ourselves in an abundance of other people's theatre. To cull new ideas, not just for plays of devised pieces but for clever sets and clever theatrical devices. To sit, relax, and let someone else's inventiveness draw us in and back to a sense of wonderment, admiration, even awe and envy. One of the opportunities on offer to do this is to travel to some of the international festivals that take place each year.

Teater for Born og Unge / Theatre for Children and Young People (Denmark)

The Danish Centre of the international organisation of theatre for children and young people, ASSITEJ (Association International du Theatre pour l'Enfance et la Jeunesse) promotes knowledge about Danish children's theatres to countries abroad. Its Spring Festival has become a real meeting place for those interested in quality theatre for young people – and needless to say, the social side of things is good too! The festival takes place in a different town in Denmark every year. It presents more than 450 shows in a single week, aiming to make it possible for every child in the area to see at least one performance during the festival, and for children and adults to experience theatre together. Free buses take you from venue to venue so that you can mix and match, and in your free time you can exchange ideas and commentary with other directors. There are social events included in the programme, and of course there is Denmark itself to explore.

The 34th Danish Children's Theatre Festival took place in April in the beautiful riverside town of Silkeborg, where the artistic community of ASSITEJ/Denmark together with the municipality of Silkeborg were the hosts for the Festival. 100 observers from more than 25 different countries around the world shared the Festival's goals of:

- "improving international experience and knowledge in the field of children's theatre."
- "sharing ideas and developing a network of contacts for children's theatre around the world."

The quality and variety of the work on view was amazing, the production values

quite superb. From the one man version of 'Hamlet', performed with real audacity and flair and appreciated by the secondary school audience, through work like the story of 'Maria Bonita' who became a Mexican bandit, aimed at audiences over 12, to the beautifully constructed and intimately performed stories for children under 4.

One such performance 'Little Py' took place in a blacked-out classroom on a Saturday morning. Small children and their parents eagerly anticipated the contents of the solitary wooden trunk, bathed in blue light in the centre of the blacked-out space. Inside was a magically economical set. For each of eight locations for the story, large shoe-sized boxes containing miniature sets, beautifully painted and skillfully constructed were withdrawn from the trunk by the actor storyteller. In a panoply of colour, light and text we had, by the end of the performance, a day in the life of the story's small child. The audience were enthralled.

'Maria Bonita' by Teatergruppen Batida, on the other hand was noisy, fast paced, exciting, but equally inventive. Slides developed from photographs of the real Maria were thrown up on sheets at the beginning of the piece to the noisy accompaniment of the actors' own brass band. As the story unfolded these same images were "discovered" in the action. The actors would freeze and a child from the audience invited to come and capture the moment in a photograph. While reminiscent of techniques used in 'Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid', it was a clever framing device and the devised performance threaded history, performance, theatrical devise, music and memory together in an energetic and impressive piece of theatre.

ASSITEJ/Denmark is high quality theatre performed by adults for children. It offers so many performances that one is lost for choice. The dialogue that develops between practitioners within the audience inevitably refers back to their own experiences. The value of the story, the appropriateness of the piece for the audience, the captivating way in which some little germ of an idea is built upon, the use of music, the inventiveness of some companies who present in really small spaces. Although this is work for children performed by adults, you will think about how your own work lives up to what you are seeing.

Plotlines lead you to think about the way in which they have been treated and directed. As an audience member there is a constant process of engaging with an idea, reflecting upon it, making unconscious or conscious comparison with the work that you do. Involuntary promises are made about trying out this or that idea. Images are stored away to frame perhaps another concept or story at another time. All of it an enriching experience which the best of us will think about, working out ways of developing and incorporating it into our own work.

Inevitably at a Festival like this you will interrogate what you do, and why and how you do it.

8th AITA/IATA World Festival of Children's Theatre

AITA/IATA on the other hand offers theatre performed by children for audiences of their own age. The 8th AITA/IATA World Festival of Children's Theatre took place in Havana, Cuba in July 2004. It had at its core, artistic performances and workshops where girls and boys from different nationalities explored cultural difference under the Festival motto: "Children are the Hope of the World"(Quote from Cuban national hero José Martí.)

The Festival programme was built around the importance of Arts and more particularly of Theatre in the lives of children. A week-long programme of workshops and performances provided opportunities for participants to network and to explore

possibilities for international exchange between theatre groups.

In daily debates, the plays presented on the previous day were discussed and the directors explained the methodology and techniques used in their creative process, as well as the social and cultural background within which they carry out their theatrical work. In Open Fora the children and young people too exchanged impressions, opinions and approaches on the presented plays.

An International Symposium explored the whole question of whether and how “cultural differences make for different theatre.” Significantly the whole idea of “youth arts” was discussed (in and out of the Symposium) exploring how theatre contributes to the development of culture and society in individual societies. Speakers from South American countries and from Cuba itself emphasised how theatre allows them to explore the past, to represent struggles for freedom in dramatic and story form. They also emphasised how the artistic medium of drama is so significant in providing ways to explore national cultural traditions, tying the past to the present through poetry, music and playwriting.

Lastly these Symposia allowed discussion of directing methods and techniques for theatre work with children. As in Denmark, Festival members were exposed to and shared different patterns of children’s theatre thinking, thus encouraging the development of new ideas, methods and ways of making theatre for children. So the wonderful ensemble work and almost operatic quality of the Young Actors Musical Theatre of Moscow stood side by side with the Macnas-like group from Columbia who used mask, movement and myth as bones for their production. In most pieces, high production values were given priority. There was of course the odd very dud, dud - but Havana gave over its own Teatro Nacional for the larger scale productions, allowing companies to use sophisticated lighting plots and to indulge their designers with a wide expanse of stage to dress effectively. Being Havana, of course, the organisers battled with power cuts and inferior infra-structural facilities but the city itself and the cultural experience of being in Cuba made up for all of that.

Perhaps the absence of an Irish group was understandable given the distance and the expense involved. In comparison to Denmark, however, there are few working Irish practitioners of theatre. Denmark did not offer the opportunity to showcase Irish work but it did at least have representatives of TIE, Youth Theatre, Irish Festivals and Arts Centres as well as individual directors, practitioners and writers as visitors to the Festival.

Perhaps as far as Irish groups to with IATA events, this is always going to be an issue. However let me just acknowledge here that the Young People’s Theatre group from Newcastle-upon-Tyne in England (who performed a beautifully devised production of ‘The Tempest’) had wanted to come and individuals raised most of their own money!

More seriously there was also an absence of Irish input at the level of directorial exchange and interaction, and this is something that NAYD seeks to change. This would have been possible in Cuba, where there were workshop facilitators from other countries so why not Ireland?

NAYD recognises that practising YT directors will benefit from the ideas, the dialogue and the exposure to different productions in a short space of time. The new Eilis Mullan Award means that participation in such events is no longer outside the reach of our director members. Whether it is in Denmark or Cuba, Moscow or Seoul, engagement at this level can produce further opportunity for participation. More

importantly it serves to enrich a director's own work, not just by virtue of exposure to a multiplicity of ideas and forms of theatre, but through the dialogue and possible exchange with fellow youth theatre directors.

Eilis would have enjoyed nothing more than hearing about such a visit, and recognising the renewal of imagination, energy and excitement that it brings. Maybe we owe it to her to travel the world in search of theatrical things new! Certainly failure to engage in such joyful and culturally significant experiences seems at this distance a real pity.

We are agreed aren't we? To stand still is to stagnate.

Rebecca Bartlett travelled to Havana courtesy of an Arts Council Travel Bursary and to Denmark as part of her ongoing work with Baboró, Galway's International Children's Arts Festival.

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