

Clippings from the AAI

A Guided Tour to International Children's and Youth Theatre

By Jürgen Kirschner

"This guided tour through the city of Winterthur (but transferable to any other city) is a funny, joyful and sensual kind of theatre. You can walk and play, observe and sharpen your senses: a theatrical everyday life or an everyday life theatre. On this guided tour there are no winners or losers - but rather a chance to make many experiences with oneself and with schoolfellows. Therefore we wish you a lot of pleasure!"
1)

The following summary takes the above suggestions literally, putting the guided theatre tour through Switzerland in an international context. The stations of this tour could be transferred to the conditions of other continents. Besides that, the 'globetrotters' of the sections should consider their movements around the globe sometimes also under theatrical aspects. And anyone who walks on the described way in his country should tell the author about his experiences. - Parallel to the 11 theatre stations the aspects of international theatre for children and youth will be introduced, which result from a close look into the Archives of ASSITEJ International (AAI). These impressions are not directly linked to each station, but give the reader the possibility to begin a journey reflecting both history and theory of ASSITEJ.

I. We all go blind and dumb from classroom to the corridor, put on our shoes and jackets and meet at an agreed place at school. How did anybody feel his way? What have we?

Africa - the very first newsletter

"NEWS UPDATE: IT IS not slightly over a year since ZATCYP was formed and for an organization so young, the first year has been marked by a number of successes although there are some areas that still need to be strengthened (...)." 2)

II. Further on with waking eyes, ears and noses to the end of the school court. There we question each other on the colours of the walls and ceilings, the subjects of pictures and drawings, the number of the steps, the form of the lamps, the predominant smell, trees etc.

Rarities from Malaysia

"1. Please describe the present situation or activities of T.Y.A (Theatre for Young Audience) including puppetry around you or in your country recently in 1990 - 1992.

Activities related to theatre for young audiences are rare in Malaysia and mostly confined to the cities of Kuala Lumpur and Penang. Work in this area is being carried out by a few individuals in an ad hoc manner. Most of these individuals are confined to institutions like libraries, publishing houses and university although some are free-

lance artists. They are not involved full-time in theatre for young audiences because it is difficult to obtain funding for long-term projects in Malaysia. Clients, who are usually institutional bodies, pay only for the one or two performances which they request. Child audiences almost never pay for performances and view them for free. Theatre for young audience workers are therefore forced to work at other jobs to sustain a steady income. The individuals involved in theatre for young audiences generally do not belong to a troupe. They only come together when there is a request for performance. Puppetry groups however are more cohesive and train over longer periods. The standard of performances for both theatre and puppetry is not very high due to the lack of long-term commitment and training. Although these temporary troupes are made up of adult artists, it is quite common in Malaysia for theatre for young audiences to work with young people in making theatre by young performers.

2. What do you think is the most urgent problem to be solved, and what are you most concerned about in the field of T.Y.A. in your country?

Over the last 15 years, since the inception of a contemporary young people's theatre in Malaysia, no long-term attempts have been made to disseminate and propagate young people's theatre. A few workshops have been organized by institutional bodies like the Ministry of Culture, Library Associations and Universities to expose interested adults to foreign visiting puppeteers or theatre specialists. But these efforts have very short-term effects. No attempt has been made to develop a 'home-grown' theatre for young audiences and to network the method across the country. In other words we need to develop a working method and a way of training facilitators or theatre artists in the working method. It is very easy in Malaysia to obtain funding for a performance of children's theatre but very difficult to obtain funding to sustain a professional troupe, especially one dedicated more to research and training rather than to performance." 3)

III. We enjoy the journey or the walk to the main station like a little school hike.

USA milestones 1964 - 1995

"As a society we are poised in paradox. Our children represent our worst fears and best hopes for the future of civilization. Even a cursory glance at any newspaper, on any day, in any city of our nation will provide ample evidence of children in crisis. But behind the screaming headlines about juvenile violence, apathy, and despair are the quieter voices telling stories about the wit and wisdom, the compassion and courage of children. The arts in general, and theatre arts in particular, are ideally suited to tell both the positive and painful stories, to examine critical issues and choices, to offer cautionary tales, and celebrate the successes of young people.

The development of non-profit theatre for 'adult' audiences has been strong over the past four decades, and a similar growth has occurred in the field of theatre for young people. Increased professionalism, widespread support in individual communities, and recognition of the field's contribution to the educational, social, and aesthetic development of children, have resulted in a quiet revolution which merits recognition in the press and popular media. Schools regularly depend upon performances and programs initiated by theatre to supplement and enhance curricula crippled by budget cuts. Parents, increasingly mindful of the proven links between tangible ex-

periences in the arts and other areas of study, look to the arts to stimulate their children's imagination and to develop self confidence and discipline. Theatre artists exist as passionate citizens of their communities, bringing life stories of a common cultural past, exploring contemporary concerns, posing questions, and seeking answers.

ASSITEJ / USA, the United States center of the international service organization for theatre for young audiences, stands as the recognized advocacy, informational, and support forum in this country for professional theatres serving, and speaking for the unique perspective of children and young people. Since its founding in 1965, the mandate of ASSITEJ / USA encouraged the development of professional theatre for 'audiences of young people and their families'. In the revised mission statement of 1995, the organization seeks to promote and develop professional theatre concerned with the 'unique perspective of young people'. This redefinition places emphasis on the development of art, rather than the age of the audience; and calls upon the organization to widen its frame of reference to include all theatres, artists, and educators who seek to explore the domain of the child world in the multiple languages of theatre (...)." 4)

IV. At the main station we go on in pairs: One person leads the other person blind through the station area. (After a while we change roles.) This exercise is only successful if both trust each other, take responsibility and vice versa. Confidence in each other is very important! The guided person has to concentrate on her non-visual perception and 'see' with all other senses.

Cuba – A brief history of fifty years

"(...) The first period in the development of a Cuban theatre for children began in the 1930s with the foundation of a few 'children's companies' headed by adults who were interested in displaying the artistic talents of the children-actors. These companies went beyond the purely pedagogical interests; performances were held in theatres, they toured the island and they tried to attain a modicum of artistic level. The texts of their plays were generally based on fairy tales, popular among the children audiences.

The second period started in the 1940s with the foundation of a number of cultural institutions and theatre groups which occasionally performed for children. Two significant events occurred in 1943: the first performances of Nicolas Guillen's Poem for Children, an actors play, in the People's Theatre, and Modesto Centeno's The Little Red Riding Hood, a puppet play, in the Havana Drama Academy. These two performances marked the beginning of theatre and playwriting for children in Cuba with a certain professional character, since both shows were promoted by official institutions and were produced by artists with an academic background. It should be noted that from its outset, Cuban playwriting for children developed along two distinct paths: puppet theatre and actor's theatre, a feature that is still valid to this day, as will be explained later on.

The third period evolved during the 1950s, after the foundation in Havana of three puppet theatre groups for children which had to perform under the very difficult conditions imposed by the Batista regime and the dire economic situation in the country. Furthermore, these groups did all their work in the capital and practically had no influence on the rest of the population of children. Apart from the afore mentioned Nicolas Guillen and Modesto Centeno, other pioneering authors like Dora Alonso, Vicente Revuelta and Paco Alfonso also wrote plays in those hard years. Their works

were brief and elementary, in keeping with the scarce possibilities for production at the times. Theatre for young people was unknown.

The triumph of the Revolution in 1959 opened the possibilities for creating a real professional theatre movement for children and young people in the entire nation. New cultural-oriented institutions like the National Council of Culture (CNC) signed up the few existing groups to offer free performances in theatres, squares and public places, and those artists with a broader experience were called in to train the new puppeteers and actors. As a result of this process, by 1962 a group of Guignol Theatre (specialized in puppets) and a Golden Age Little Theatre - [see The Golden Age (La Edad de Oro) is a magazine for children written by the Cuban National Hero, José Martí, in the United States, during 1889] - (actors) were active in each province (...).

The fifth period in the evolution of theatre for children and young people in Cuba began in 1989, when the National Council for Theatre Arts of the Ministry of Culture launched the project system in order to facilitate a more dynamic working structure for the theatre movement. The project system allows any group of artists to join together on a voluntary basis and propose to the Council a working project along a given artistic line. The project may be limited to one or more productions, but it may also be extended for a longer period of up to five years. If the project is accepted, the Council provides funds and facilities for rehearsals and performances. As a result of this new approach, the image of the children's theatre movement has changed: some groups have split to pursue different projects, a few have remained as before, others have dissolved and many new projects have arisen apart from the already established groups.

In the field of playwriting, a new generation of authors sprung in the mid-80s. The works of young dramatists like Salvador Lemis, Joel Cano and Esther Suarez, among others, born in the fifties or the sixties, who are graduates from theatre schools or come from other fields of the Humanities, provide new ideas, new themes and renewed structures that frequently depart from the traditional concepts of theatre for children and youth.

The evolution of Cuban playwriting for Children and young people has marched in unison with the professional theatre movement of Cuba. Throughout half a century, and especially during the last twenty years, it gained in structural consistency, thematic complexity and linguistic excellence. Above all, it has reflected - with varying degrees of success - our history, our folklore, our social feats and our every-day life, without neglecting the necessary touches of fantasy, depth and meaning demanded by its audience." 5)

V. At the meeting point of the main station we stand close together in a circle, our eyes closed. Is our ear more sensitive, more refined: people, animals, motors and other noises? Do we invent our own 'ear-stories' in our mind?

80 years of japan's theatre for young audiences 1903-1983

"It is 80 years since the first performance of 'Otogi-Shibai' (A Fairy Play) produced by Mr. Otojiro Kawakami in 1903, which is said to be the start of children's play in Japan. It was just at the time of the beginning of capitalism in Japan. The modern climate then urged people to realize the importance of spiritual growth of children, and

led theatre people to start their pioneer work of children's play. We may say that the quality of children's theatre has been improved and developed according to growth of people's view on children. In other words adults have to get at first a clear idea on how to have their children grow. In course of time the Japanese governments made their fanatic war to provoke wars, and they forbade performing children's play neither by adults nor by children themselves around 1940 at last.

In 1945 when the war ended, plays for children vividly revived again. 'School-visit-performance' by theatre companies were successfully developed by theatre people and teachers who now firmly made up their minds never to send their pupils to battlefield again. And their performances at big playhouses in cities were also making good. In 1953, however, as TV broadcast began, not a few performers in popular theatre companies went on TV turning their back on a living play for children. In 1961 the government subsidized for its first time Japan Children's Theatre Association for touring performances for children. (The subsidy was one million YEN in 1961, forty million YEN in 1983.) In 1967 the government started the work of touring performances for young people, and also that for children in 1974 so as to have children and young people enjoy not only plays but traditional Kabuki, Noh, Kyogen, and the ballet, orchestra etc. (The budget was 521.930.000 YEN in 1983.)

In 1966 was the year that the movement of 'Oyako-Gekiji' or a league of children's theatre spectators began in Fukuoka City 1.300 kilometers far south (from Tokyo). At that time social conditions of children were terribly poor with hedonistic atmosphere in culture including mass media under high rate economic growth in Japan. Children also suffered from the crucial achievement race at school, and not a few of them were said to be 'deserted' as slow learners. Mothers and young people who could no longer bear such conditions organised a theatre-going system in cooperation with theatre companies. This movement has developed slowly at first, but soon so quickly to cover all Japan, with 390.000 members (0,33 percent of all population) of 370 leagues in 1983. It is now not only a mere theatre-going system, but a cultural movement of growing children in the community. This movement by children's theatre spectators has definitely helped Japan's theatre for young audiences change for better in both quality and quantity.

Now Japan's theatre for young audiences has more than 10 million spectators a year, that is 10 percent of our population. In the meantime, most of theatre people for young audiences have to struggle for creative activities in so poor conditions that they worry about how to secure their own children's healthy life. It seems that living performances are going into hard time to survive. Of course this is a common problem in all performing arts, and such difficulty is going to lead us to innovation or movement in art. Our theatre for young audiences will go on changing, finding its right place in education." 6)

VI. In small groups we watch the crowd in the market lane. What do people do there? How is their attitude, their pace, their mood? Carefully follow one person with your eyes for a while. In the municipal park we will play the role of the observed persons and maybe we will invent and tell each other new stories.

Continuity and Interruptions

A look at one's own history may be extensive or short. 'Young People's Theatre in Australia' by Michael Fitzgerald is a twelve page report on the history and structure of theatre on this continent. 7) However, the history may also be hidden behind a few lines, as, for example, in 'The theatrical activities for children in Vietnam': "A special theatre for children was founded in Vietnam in 1968, and during wartime, it had to evacuate from the city and dissolve despite of its lively spirited activities. In 1978, the Youth Theatre was founded and appointed by the Ministry of Culture with its duty as arranging plays, songs, dances and pantomimes ... for children and young people." Sometimes no current information could be found at all, and the documents merely trace circumstances of the past, as was the case e.g. in Rumania and Yugoslavia.

VII. We walk to the church and through the passage of the city hall to the municipal park. How do we sense these two very different kinds of space ? Which effects are caused by the light, the acoustics, the volume of the space? How do people behave in this space?

Concepts

"The range of work - and philosophies - contained under the umbrella heading 'Theatre for Children and Young People in Great Britain' is startling. Traditionally, theatre for young people is seen as puppetry, magic, clowning, the christmas pantomime and the occasional production of a classic text by the National Theatre or a regional repertory company.

It is a peculiarly British nation to see the skill of puppetry as being purely for children, however it can, of course, be identified as a distinct form of provision for young people. Yet this is only the tip of the iceberg as far as theatre for young people is concerned.

The twentieth century has seen a vast increase in the number of professional theatre companies working largely, and often exclusively, for young people. Many practitioners in this field are loathe to categorise their work too closely, perhaps fearing the potential divisiveness and restrictions of such labels. However, four main strands of theatre for young people can be identified: Children's Theatre, Young People's Theatre, Theatre in Education and Youth Theatre.

Children's Theatre has taken many forms over the past ninety years and was the precursor of other more recent developments. However, unlike the situation in other countries, its status and consequent funding have always been low.

Children's theatre has retained its original emphasis: the presentation of plays designed specifically for younger audiences, usually twelve and under.

Young People's Theatre, another major strand in this field of work, has similar roots but its audiences include teenagers and its work is more likely to be based on social

issues, rather than the myths and fantasies found in much children's theatre. Indeed, the work of some young people's theatre companies, influenced by the Theatre in Education movement, have a defined educative purpose. However, the remarkably rapid development of Theatre for Young People in this century can be dated from the 1944 Education Act. Although innovative moves could hardly be described as burgeoning in the twenty years following the Act, there are three landmarks worth noting. First, the establishment in 1948 of the Unicom Theatre by the late Caryl Tenner. Second, the founding of Theatre Centre by Brian War and Margaret Faulkes in 1954. Third, the publication in 1954 of 'Child Drama' by Peter Slade.

The work of Slade and War certainly influenced the creation of the next major strand in Theatre for Young People. In 1965 at the Belgrade Theatre, Coventry, the first Theatre-in-Education (TIE) company was founded.

The late 60s and early 70s saw the creation of a number of TIE companies. Some, like Coventry, were attached to "main house" theatres and, as such, developed alongside newly flourishing Youth Theatre groups which were themselves a result of moves by the theatres to reach out to their community. Youth Theatre is a vibrant and developing aspect of theatre for young people, which practitioners in a field that believes in breaking down the barriers between actors and audience could not, and still cannot, afford to ignore.

Theatre influences on the range of work for young people vary considerably. However, a common factor is the sense of not being constrained by the usual categories of theatre; a constant pushing at the boundaries of what theatre is. The demands made by the educational needs of the young people, the multi-cultural nature of many audiences, the liberation and restrictions of performing in non-theatre venues and the desire to create effective and affective theatre have been a strong incentive for companies to experiment and develop innovative forms. Acknowledged influences include 'Dan Littlewood, Bertolt Brecht, Edward Bond, Erwin Piscator, Augusto Boal, the development of feminist theatre and many elements of black and Asian cultures.

Over the years, debates in the movement have ranged from the internal structures of companies (of which there are a wide variety, from collectives to hierarchical leadership models) to the role of the artist in the 1980s and the ever-present threat of censorship experienced by companies dealing with sensitive and controversial issues. Such areas as race, colour, class, gender, sexuality and, latterly, disability, while sometimes vying destructively for priority, are central to the work of many companies working with children and young people. Many practitioners have observed that theatre for young people tends to anticipate the agenda of theatre for adults by several years. Despite an acknowledgement from funders that good theatre for children is not cheap and that companies committed to taking theatre to non-theatre going audiences in non-theatre venues cannot charge large fees or admission prices, theatre for young people is still woefully underfunded. In Europe, where children's theatre is seen as an essential part of the educational and spiritual life of the nation, an 87% subsidy is usual. In Britain, the low status of the work, its dual link with education and theatre and its sometimes 'political' content, often leave companies fighting for the scraps of money left in overstretched artistic and educational budgets.

Few writers have become known solely for their plays for young people. Exceptions to this include Brian War, founder of Theatre Centre, David Wood, Director of Whirligig Theatre - whose policy is to present musical plays to children, David Holman, who has written for a large number of theatre-in-education and young people's theatre companies, and Volker Ludwig of Grips Theatre, Berlin. There are a few more, largely unpublished writers whose plays for theatre-in-education and young people's theatre companies deserve a wider audience - for example, John Wood, Geoff Gillham, Lisa Evans, Noel Greg, Paul Swift, Charles War, Bryony Laveny, Tony Gault.

Many such scripts can be found in the Standing Conference of Young People's Theatre's script library. Also, Methuen produce a series entitled Methuen Young Drama, which include theatre-in-education and young people's theatre scripts." 8)

VIII. In the municipal park we play the 'market lane stories'. Then we take a look at the sculptures around us. Could we imitate them with our bodies? Invent new sculptures showing different characteristics. One person is the sculptor, the other is the malleable material.

Wales - Cymru: What is it? Where is it? Who are we?

"Wales is one of the countries of the United Kingdom; it is not, as is often supposed, a part of England! Wales has its own language - Welsh (Cymraeg); we have our own Welsh television channel, radio station, newspapers and magazines; education through the medium of Welsh is available to all.

Over the last 15 years Welsh theatre for children and young people has developed its own awareness, individuality, styles and methods. By now each county has its own theatre company specialising in work for children and young people. Some of the companies work only in Welsh; some work in Welsh and English.

We are a small, almost unrecognised country on the edge of Europe; although we are one of the oldest peoples in Europe, our culture and language are still growing.

Recently the British Centre of ASSITEJ, aware of the importance of our culture, has formed a Welsh subcommittee - Yr Is-Bwyllgor Cymraeg-. Now, we can say our first official 'Hello!' in ASSITEJ." 9)

IX. Now we go from the municipal park once again through the passage of the city hall to the ditch and its fountain, hut - attention: go barefoot! With our feet we feel the shape of soft and hard, sharp and unregular undergrounds, from the pleasant lawn and over different pavements we go to the cool bath.

Why just children's theatre? Answers from Sweden.

"Over the last twenty years, much of the artistically boldest, and from a quality point of view, most substantial acting in Sweden has been for child audiences, performed in all humility in gyms and libraries in anonymous suburbs far from ordinary centres of activity during the boom years of the early Seventies. Despite this, children's theatre still has relatively low status; anyone devoting his or her theatre life to child audiences expects little or no honours and praise - a paradox with very few simple explanations. On the one side, Sweden has had generous social policies over the post-war period and these have put children's needs high on the list of priorities. The great majority of working women declare the need for well-organised childcare facilities, and the level of ambition for their educational content has been relatively high. On that score, there is an old tradition in which the long ago implemented reforms of elementary education (1842) at the end of the nineteenth century were already then combined with demands for high artistic levels in texts and pictures for children. It is typical that the Swedish elementary school asked Selma Lagerlöf to write a book about Sweden for school children, a book in which the author wove geography, history and ethnology together into an exciting and stylistically sophisticated story.

During the 1960s and 1970s, that tradition was to be combined with a radical pioneer spirit hoping to bring theatre to the entire population, and with that also to children.

The ideal was a people's theatre which reached everyone, not just people who themselves chose to go to the theatre. The spirit of the day was full of slogans and a political belief in the future, among them the nation that children are the future, and that the future of children is everyone's responsibility in society. It is relevant that those people active in children's theatre today are largely the same as those who first set about the task in the 1970s. Unga Klara, Unga Riks, Byteatern and Backateatern are among the earliest, most well-established, and which have also become famous outside Sweden. These also include the puppet theatre Tittut which performs for the very youngest children and has surprised French audiences in several reviews.

The 'export' of children's theatre can be compared with another successful export: the Swedish children's book. Both genres shock non-Nordic audiences with their great openness, frank de-romanticising of family life and the authority of parents and - perhaps most of all - their way of addressing children as equals. The Swedish view of children is a product of a long tradition closer to the Anglo-Saxon than the Latin, though is marked by the profile of 'the Swedish model'. That could be summarised by saying children are nothing but less tall human beings and childhood is no preliminary to adult life. The situation and problems of children are seen from the child's point of view and that with seriousness and the importance of the matter to the child. In the steps of Pippi Longstocking, Swedish child culture has often - but not always - been able to tackle difficult and within child culture sensitive questions such as sexuality, alcoholism, divorce, bullying, politics and first and foremost the officious disregard by the adult world of the needs of children.

A list of themes of that kind may seem like a veritable catalogue of horror, but parallel with this striving, Swedish children's theatre has been marked by a search for form and bold artistic quality. Puppet and shadow theatre, as well as the mime tradition, have been sources to draw from, and the theatre has worked its way forward to a physical closeness to the audience via small and unconventional performance venues; those who have acted for the youngest children have respected their capacity and given short performances of great clarity. (...) I have many a time thought after a children's theatre performance: if only theatre for adults could be as fantastic more often." 10)

X. Here at the ditch we have a balancing disco. The class or a small group go on the disco. Together we try to keep our balance and maybe even to go in one direction.

P.S.: If you would like to go on reading, book a plane, catch the train to Frankfurt am Main - or sponsor a publication.

PS.2: The texts are from the Archives of ASSITEJ International at the Children's and Young People's Theatre Centre of the Federal Republic of Germany. After one first delivery of copies, which contains essential paperwork of the General Secretariate since 1965, this archive will not only be supplemented by new deliveries of the General Secretariate, but also by direct information from the ASSITEJ centres and individual groups or persons. A continuous reception guarantees a manifold view of the situation of theatre for children and young people and of its organizations in individual countries, respectively. If you would like to know more about it, please be so kind to send more information to the Centre in Frankfurt am Main.

XI. Now we are at the end of the guided tour or at the beginning of the theatre performance. We will take our time to reconsider our experiences.

PS.3: P.S. No. 1 and P.S. No. 2 do not contradict each other. For a closer look at the problems of logic and language, please lay your hands on the ASSITEJ brochure on Terminology where Butler is quoted: "To define is to surround a vague area of ideas with a wall of words." 11)

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