

The Artistic Work is what ASSITEJ is all about A Look into the ASSITEJ International Archives

By Tamara Huggan

Why explore the ASSITEJ International archives? That is the question I was faced with when I took on the task of organizing boxes full of documents and correspondence that the Children and Young People's Theatre Centre in Frankfurt received in 1996 from the Secretary General of ASSITEJ. It was a tough question to answer when faced with a mountain of paper and relatively little knowledge about the early organisation. But it didn't take long before I was caught up in the materials, and caught up in ASSITEJ's history – the people involved in its foundation in 1965 all the way up to the present executive committee; the National centres and their members whose work help to keep professional theatre for children and young people alive and growing; and the diversity of people, ideas, cultures, and languages that have been, and still are ASSITEJ's greatest qualities, as well as its greatest challenges. Initially, my job was to organise the materials from the 1996 mailing into smaller boxes labelled by country, noting when correspondence between the secretary general and the various countries began and when it ended, and observing any gaps. I did not change the order of any of the materials, but made notes throughout of points that I found interesting. This report is not meant to be an inclusive examination of everything contained in the archives, rather it should give an introduction to the ASSITEJ International archives and offer examples of the variety that can be found within them.

Scope of the Archives

The Children and Young People's Theatre Centre took over responsibility of the ASSITEJ International archives in 1992. It was agreed at this time that all materials relating to ASSITEJ International would be sent to Frankfurt. The 1996 mailing contained materials from both Rose Marie Moudoues, secretary general from 1965 – 1990, and from Michael Ramløse, secretary general from 1990-1996. It consisted primarily of correspondence between the general secretary and the National Centres, as well as information and minutes from the World Congresses and Executive Committee meetings, Executive Committee Commissions reports, National Centre reports, and a binder and video of ASSITEJ's 30th birthday celebration held in Seattle in 1995. There was also the occasional brochure, flyer, program, etc. of work being done within the National Centres, but they made up only a small part of the mailing. Something to note is that most of the materials received dealt mostly with the administrative, organisational side of the work of ASSITEJ and contained a fairly limited amount of documentation of the actual artistic work being done in the member countries.

There were materials written in several different languages, although most of the minutes and correspondence were in English and French (Rose Marie Moudoues wrote mainly in French) and covered the years from 1963 (when ASSITEJ was still in the planning phases) to 1996. All of the early correspondence was typed or hand-written. There were separate folders within country correspondence for certain individuals and organisations that were in frequent contact with Moudoues, especially in the early years. Gerald Tyler, Caryl Jenner, and Nat Eek, for example, all have their own folders that made for interesting reading.

Information Sources

The information came from 72 countries worldwide, most of whom are or were at one time member countries, but also from several others who had never been members, but had shown an interest in the organisation at one time. Some countries have been very active in ASSITEJ throughout the years and others not at all. This is not to say that good work is not being done there, but unfortunately this work is sometimes happening within the countries and not being shared internationally. Reading through the correspondence offered several reasons why this could happen, such as financial difficulties, lack of time/overextended, change within the National Centre and political unrest. Some of the countries who were not at all present in the general secretary's mailing are: China, Croatia, Estonia, Georgia, Kirgistan, Nicaragua, Slovenia, Tanzania, Uganda, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, and Zimbabwe. Large gaps where no written contact was received were found in Cyprus, Ireland, Mexico, Mongolia, and New Zealand.

Obviously, those countries that hosted a World Congress had more contact with the secretary general during the planning phases. Reading through the congress planning often offered much insight into the structure of the various National Centres and the politics and culture that they were working in.

Accomplishments

There is no question that ASSITEJ has accomplished an incredible amount over its 35-year life span. Its 30th birthday celebration in Seattle in 1995 focused on the history of the organisation and called on several of the founding members to speak about their experiences. A video of this celebration, unfortunately not of good quality, can be found in the archives. One of the most interesting documents from this event is a 23 page interview that was done with Ilse Rodenberg, by Jürgen Flügge and Christel Hoffmann (translated into English). The interview shares Ilse Rodenberg's stories and experiences on many different topics relating her years of involvement with ASSITEJ. She talks about: the foundation of ASSITEJ; the people, such as Natalia Satz, Gerald Taylor, Vladimir Adamek, Nat Eek, who were involved in the early years; the political challenges and cultural differences faced by the organisation; the difficulties that encountered in the beginning trying to attend meetings outside of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), and how things have changed over the years. One of her opening comments caught my attention. She was describing her feelings about the accomplishments of the organisation looking at the political situation that existed at the time of ASSITEJ's foundation:

"I feel a huge respect towards ASSITEJ as well as towards ourselves. Because we set an example of community at the peak of the Cold War period. Although all the people were contradictory and all their ideas were inconsistent, we succeeded in building up a sense of community, which gave everybody the chance to save his or her face without making false compromises. It wasn't easy then with the relation between countries like the USA, the USSR and their representative states. You only have to think of the Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic, still existing at that time. Both belonged to different blocs. It was an impressive act of ASSITEJ to keep this away, not to let itself be ruled by these conditions. This was only possible because everybody involved in the work of ASSITEJ kept his

or her mind on the aim of this organisation: to accomplish good and professional theatre for children all over the world. We are no political organisation. This organisation which assembles various artistic organisations in itself, reconciled persons who were humanists. That was the basis on which ASSITEJ could grow in an age which actually had a tendency of breaking up.”

International Membership & Inclusion

In the beginning, ASSITEJ was primarily a European organisation, but it was felt that in order for it to become a truly international organisation, it needed to be representing a wider membership and expanding to include other continents as well. In 1989, two years after the 1987 World Congress in Australia, Michael Fitzgerald wrote a paper, on “The Future Directions of ASSITEJ and the Role of the Executive Committee”, voicing his concern regarding the Eurocentricity of the organisation. He says,

“Since its establishment in 1965, and up to April 1987 ASSITEJ will have held nine Congresses. The Adelaide Congress will be the first time the event has taken place in the Southern Hemisphere and the second only outside Europe, the first being jointly in Montreal (Canada) and Albany (U.S.A.). I don’t have all of the details of Executive and Bureau meetings but from what I have, deduce that practically all of these have been held in Europe. Of the 5 presidents since 1966, 4 have been European and 1 an American. The continuing and only Secretary General to date is European. There have been 2 Treasurers, both European. Of the current 17 Member Executive 12 are from Europe, 5 from all other continents. This is not to deny the value or worth of these events and individuals nor the fact that the people, the place and the time were right i.e. the founders in Europe in the 60’s. But it is now the late 80’s the 21st century is upon us and the organisation has grown considerably since its beginning. If the tendency to marginalize other-than European countries continues, this could fragment the organisation to the point of risk as to its future.”

ASSITEJ’s goal to keep expanding into new countries has required constant reassessment of its constitution and the requirements for membership. Bringing in new countries as members required that the organisation be flexible and adaptable. Ilse Rodenberg commented on this subject in an interview in 1995:

“Theatre with children didn’t exist as part of ASSITEJ at my time. I wouldn’t approve relaxing the statutes and working with children, but I can’t do anything about it if it’s done now. But this relaxation I only apply to the professionalism. If you think of Africa where no professional children’s theatre exists – you either can exclude a whole continent or accept that there are highly qualified amateur groups with music or dance. You simply have to accept such groups as theatres.”

In 1986, Penina Mlama of Tanzania, a member of the UAPA, an organisation whose goal is to foster the development of the performing arts in Africa, including theatre for children and young people, presented a short address to the Executive Committee in Stockholm, Sweden. Here she stated that at that point there was very little professional theatre being done in Africa for young people, but that there was an interest in developing it and the support of international organisations, such as ASSITEJ would help them grow. She stated, “Theatre for children has got to be made very active

before the African countries can meet the qualifications demanded of them by such international organisations as ASSITEJ". She then questioned, "If international bodies are really interested in working for the development of Children's theatre in Africa, at what stage do they come in (i.e. at the grassroot point, or later when this work has been done and established children's theatre centres exist)?"

Corresponding membership was granted to several African countries in 1989 and compromises were made to accommodate cultural differences, but concerns still existed. In a letter received from Oby Obyerodhyambo of the ASSITEJ Kenya in 1992, ASSITEJ was urged to reconsider several items in their constitution in order to be more inclusive to African countries. He explained that in Africa, because of traditional customs, the terms „children“ and „young people“ are confusing. In Africa, as soon as a child starts school he/she is no longer considered a child, rather a young person. They asked that the description be left at „young people“. As well, the ASSITEJ constitution stated that it caters to professional theatre makers that produce theatre for young people and not by young people. If this remained the case, then it would exclude much of the young people's theatre being done in Africa.

This is an example where ASSITEJ was flexible enough to accommodate to the needs of its members while still maintaining its structure and goals. The Africa, Asia & Latin America Commission of the Executive Committee which existed between 1981 and 1993 is proof of the importance that was placed on fostering international membership and inclusion at this time.

Michael Fitzgerald's president's report in 1999 states

"The 1999 Tromsø Congress is a watershed for ASSITEJ International. The hard work of the Executive Committee over the last three years is now beginning to bear fruit. The internationalism of the organisation is seen in the composition of the committee membership, maintained through meetings in countries as far removed as Peru, Switzerland, Israel, and Great Britain and demonstrated through dealing with wide ranging matters including collaboration of the middle heart of Europe, membership and activities in Africa and Latin America and the place and presence of Asia in dealings and deliberations. Australia too has received a fair bit of attention!"

Membership since 1989 has grown from 43 countries to 60, with 33 of them being from outside of Europe. The working languages of the international meetings and congresses have been changed to make them more inclusive to an international membership (i.e. meetings use the language of the host country, English, and at least one other language determined by the EC according to the needs of the meeting). The present Executive Committee shows that 9 members are from Europe and 8 make up the rest from other continents, including people from Asia, North America, South America, Africa, and Australia. The constitution was altered in 1996 to remove the obstacles in the Statutes to full participation from some of the countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America. The materials demonstrated a continuing awareness within the Executive Committee of the importance of international membership and participation. It is an area that remains in discussion.

Support to members in crisis

ASSITEJ, as a non-political organisation is required to stay out of the internal affairs of member countries. This does not mean that members in need are ignored, rather support must be offered in other ways. The materials in the archives documented some of the ways that support was offered to these countries. After the war in Vietnam, for example, support was offered artistically, through the provision of theatrical equipment. In other circumstances, such as in Ethiopia and Sri Lanka, experienced theatre professionals were sent by ASSITEJ to help build up the theatres there. As well, sponsors were sometimes found, with the support of government, to offer financial support to countries in need, as ASSITEJ has no funds of its own. Writing letters was another means of support. In 1991, a letter was sent out by Adolf Shapiro on behalf of the executive committee of ASSITEJ urging “all international organisations, all governments throughout the world and the responsible decision-makers in Yugoslavia to use all their influence to put an end to the unfortunate situation in Croatia.” It went on to say, “When force of arms becomes the answer to conflict, the biggest tragedy is the pain and suffering which is inflicted on the civilian population – and especially the children.”

Exchange of Knowledge & Ideas

Workshops and seminars on various topics relevant to children and young people’s theatre are a large part of the work done in ASSITEJ, and have been frequently documented in the archives. Many topics have been covered and participants have been offered many opportunities to learn, create, discuss, and exchange ideas. A report contained in the mailing was of interest to me. It was inspired by a seminar called “International Theatre for Young Audiences – what we programme and why”. It was held in May 1997 at the Theatre Workshop in Edinburgh, Scotland and was organised by the Association of Professional Theatre for Children and Young People with involvement by ASSITEJ Great Britain. Another example is the International Director’s Seminar that originated in ASSITEJ GDR and has now become a project of ASSITEJ Germany. It began in 1976 and brings directors from all over the world together to work on a specific theme – such as, “The Responsibility of the Director at a Children’s Theatre for the Development of Actors”, “Bertolt Brecht at Children’s Theatres – Experiences and Possibilities”, and “The Rights of the Child”.

Conflict and its Resolution

With an organisation the size of ASSITEJ it is only natural that conflicts arise. The challenges have always been on properly resolving the conflicts and learning from them. These conflicts have included those of a personal nature, cultural dilemmas, political issues, etc. The archives are full of these types of incidents – more numerous than mentionable – but some of the following stood out as I was skimming through the materials.

Cultural Conflict

An incident in a letter I read caught my interest. Arun Agnihotri, the artistic director of The Playhouse in India wrote it in 1990, to a Dr. Mrunalinidevi Puar, the director of a university there. Mr. Agnihotri was attempting to mount a production using students from the university and wrote the letter out of frustration of the fact that his female actresses had an 8:00pm curfew to be back in residence, making rehearsals and performances impossible. That the male students had no such curfew made it even more infuriating. If it had have been an event that belonged to Indian culture permission would have been granted, but because it was theatre it was not.

Personal Conflict

There are several personal conflicts that were documented in the correspondence received. Most were due to misunderstanding, but all led to hurt feelings and an attempt on behalf of the secretary general, who sometimes was right in the middle of the whole conflict, to mediate and restore the peace. It became obvious to me how important communication is especially when people are working at such a distance. As well, I realized how essential it is to have a National Centre that is focused on meeting the needs of its members. If a National Centre is not working effectively, then there will be false representation at the international level. Additionally ASSITEJ depends on its National Centres to encourage new membership within their own countries in order for the organisation to grow, if the National Centres are not doing this, ASSITEJ has no chance to gain more visibility worldwide.

An example of personal conflict was in Denmark in 1980, between the Danish ASSITEJ National Centre and a man over who should be running the centre. The man, feeling that the present president of the National Centre was doing a good job at representing Danish children's theatre abroad, took the initiative to form a new National committee of ASSITEJ in Denmark. This of course, could not be accepted by ASSITEJ because only one centre per country can exist, but he had gathered the support of 25 children's theatres and was running the centre as if it was official. He had also made contact with the members of the executive committee of ASSITEJ and a messy situation entailed where everyone ended up involved.

In 1992, a situation arose between the Peruvian President of ASSITEJ and the Cuban president of ASSITEJ due to comments that the Cuban had made during an Executive Committee meeting at which the Peruvian was not present. The minutes of the meeting were then sent out to all the National Centres. The Peruvian was unaware that a conflict existed until reading the minutes. That the Cuban, who she had thought was a friend, had gone to the committee and not dealt with the situation personally with her, was the main issue.

In 1986 the National Centre president of ASSITEJ Israel lodged a formal complaint against the US President of ASSITEJ saying, "The Vice-president of ASSITEJ, has become involved in organising a meeting in Israel with various representatives of the Israeli theatrical scene with regards to the activities the Israeli Centre of ASSITEJ without having had the courtesy of informing me about her intentions." The American denied the allegations and wrote a lengthy letter to the Executive Committee to tell her side of the story.

Political Change

ASSITEJ's relationship with UNESCO has stirred up issues over the years. Taiwan, a centre that had joined in 1989 was forced to leave when it was given back to China in 1994. This was due to ASSITEJ's connection to UNESCO through its affiliation to the International Theatre Institute (ITI) which is a non-governmental organisation with A-Status in UNESCO. It therefore had to follow the official rules of the organization calling for a "one China policy". The situation was somewhat uncomfortable, as the executive committee had made the mistake originally in 1989 by accepting Taiwan as a member, overlooking the fact that it was not a member of the UN. As you can imagine Taiwan was distressed upon hearing this news and attempted to find a way to hold on to their membership, but to no avail. The UNESCO policy also came into play in Yugoslavia in January 1993, but was reversed. With the division of the country into Czechia and Slovakia, Czechoslovakia no longer existed and therefore its centre could no longer exist. Two new centres needed to be developed. Marian Lucky had been running the National Centre for quite some time and found himself faced with dealing with the situation. Similar situations have arisen in both Germany, with its reunification, as well as in the splitting of the USSR, where new centres have needed to be formed to fit with UNESCO rules.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I found the ASSITEJ International archives to be full of interesting reading. They offer an incredible recount of the history of the organisation – the key players, the structure, and the work being done. There is information that offers insight into the challenges of working within diversity of languages, cultures, financial situations, access to technology, theatrical forms, etc. As well, they offer stories – a look into lives that one wouldn't get from the outside.

This said, it needs to be acknowledged that the archives could not be considered to be in a "user friendly" format. In order to find materials, one must have the time and energy to go hunting. I would like to see some of the basic information from the archives, especially factual information concerning the history of the organisation placed on the Internet where it could be more easily accessed. This, however, brings up a major challenge to ASSITEJ concerning the use of new technology for communication. How do countries that do not have access to email, the Internet and fax machines stay in tune with what is going on? It is my opinion that a serious commitment to assuring that everyone has the same access to communication is crucial for ASSITEJ to move forward into the 21st century. Major strides have been made in the area of international membership and inclusion and this issue could threaten the work that has been done if not examined carefully.

Another concern that I have for the archives is the shortage of materials present that focus on the actual artistic work being done in member countries. I feel that it is extremely important that theatre companies themselves, not just the members of the executive and National centre presidents begin to be seen in the international work, and that this work is documented. The artistic work is what ASSITEJ is all about. Without it, there would be no sense in having such an organisation. Artists need to realize how important their work is and take responsibility for submitting it, in order for the archives to be a true representation of what is being done in ASSITEJ. This sort of documentation would mean that the archives would become an area of re-

source for artists as well, not just for those interested in the administrative, cultural or historical sides of the organisation.

Additionally, I believe that there is still work to be done within member countries on improving the visibility of ASSITEJ. For the incredible amount of work that is being done within the organisation, there are still many theatres and organisations that are not aware that ASSITEJ exists. The National Centres need to keep spreading the word and letting people know about ASSITEJ. This means really knowing what is happening in their National theatre scene, and encouraging new membership. It is only then when ASSITEJ will be truly representing the diversity of countries of its membership.

In conclusion, although I had never heard of ASSITEJ before beginning this internship, I am leaving feeling a connection to the organisation and its goals. It was a privilege to have the chance to catch this glimpse into ASSITEJ. I have gained a much better understanding of the complexity of running an international organisation and have a lot of respect for those who are involved. My interest in the organisation has grown and I am coming away from the experience with a lot more than I imagined.