



Day three of the ASSITEJ General Assembly.
Concert Hall of the Odd Fellow Palace in Copenhagen.
Photo by Niclas Malmcrona.

NOTES FROM THE PLAYING FIELD — on walls, pattern recognition, and re-imagining

By Kim Peter Kovac

ASSITEJ has found a way to be more inclusive than it has ever been – by allowing non-voting members, and by encouraging international networks organized by discipline to form.

It's pretty amazing that in 1965, at the height of the Cold War, an international organization dedicated to theatre for young audiences came to exist at all, has survived, and is thriving.

Even more terrific, exciting, and a bit revolutionary is that at the 2011 ASSITEJ Congress in Copenhagen/Malmö, sweeping changes were made to the organization, changes that, all at once, moved the organization out of its Cold War roots and into the 21st century. The real story here is not just what happened to language in a document voted in a Scandinavian meeting hall, but that a 46-year-old wall (metaphorical, but real) was peacefully but emphatically torn down.

For those not versed in the inner workings of ASSITEJ – with a complex and sort of baroque history and an equally complex and arcane mode of operation – it might be useful to think of this as a tale of two cities. Or a tale of the one city, twice. Or a tale of walls and light.

Pre-Congress, I was in Berlin at the *Augenblick Mal* festival, mingling with charming and committed practitioners from a couple dozen countries, in an organized, yet

friendly and open city. Command central was the Theater an der Parkaue, a classic old-style (non purpose-built) European theatre carved out of a 100-year old former school, lots of classrooms, studios, a café, different routes to various theatres, serendipitous logic. Getting lost trying to find one of the performance spaces brought on some off-center déjà vu, which made no sense, because I'd never been to this theatre.

To be sure, I'd been to the city in 1986, when it was called East Berlin, but at the Theater der Freundschaft ("Theater of Friendship" – a prototypical communist name). Of course, everything was way different then – crossing the Berlin Wall at the storied Checkpoint Charlie (immortalized in LeCarre and all the spy books), the not-terribly bright border guard convinced that the handful of Kermit the Frog button-gifties were going to be sold on the black market, humorless soldiers with rifles on every corner, a city where everything was grey, including the veil over many conversations. If my cardigan-clad personal translator (provided by the hosts) was not a spy outright, she certainly reported to the secret police, but that's a story for another time. Being from the US national perform-

ing arts center, they kept trotting me out for interviews, trying to bait me into saying something anti-American.

Cut back to the present – toward the end of Augenblick Mal, commenting on the déjà vu to a German colleague, who said, "Well of course it feels familiar, it's the same theatre." Pause. Since renamed, remodeled, and repainted. Pause. Wow, I got lost there as well.

The point of this story is that the stark difference in the ambiance of a flagship German theatre between 1986 (grey and guarded) and 2011 (sunny and vibrant and warm) is very much like the change that just happened to ASSITEJ.

The backstory of why the changes were needed is in part an origins story. Cut to 1965 when probably a majority of the practitioners doing professional theatre for children and young people were behind the Iron Curtain. Following a UN model, the new association was organized by countries and, let's be frank, sometimes used as a small weapon in Cold War politics. Thus power and control resting in the national centers became part of the DNA of ASSITEJ.



Theater der Freundschaft (later renamed Theater an der Parkaue). Berlin, Germany. Photo courtesy of Theater an der Parkaue.

What this all meant was that the only 'members' of the association were the national centers, and any individual or theatre could only participate through its national center. Whatever the ultimate logic of the original structure, the end result was that if you were from a country without a national center, you were out of luck. If your center restricted membership and you were not part of the in-crowd, also out of luck. If you were part of a 'ghost center' (non-functioning, a national center in name only), also, tough noogies.

To those of us used to a national center that's open to all individuals and organizations, and that doesn't stand much on ceremony (anyone can attend TYA/USA conferences at a non-member registration rate), the seriousness of the situation in some countries may not be apparent. But

it's a very real problem and has been for years. Some national centers built very real walls around their practitioners and closely controlled the flow of information and access. Along with this being antithetical to ASSITEJ's overall mission, in the current global society with easy access to instant communication (via email, Facebook, Twitter) and self-determination (you can produce a CD in your tiny home studio), it made no sense as well.

ASSITEJ's Executive Committee (or EC), the governing board, struggled with this challenge for years, wrestling with various ways of opening things up without totally throwing the baby out with the bathwater. The only real defense the EC had against a non-functioning center was expulsion. For instance, at the EC meeting in Mexico City in February 2011, two centers were ex-

Theater an der Parkaue (previously named Theater Der Freundschaft). Berlin, Germany.
Photo by Christian Brachwitz.



pelled: Belgium, because the leadership of the Center said only French-speaking Belgians were welcome, and France, because the French practitioners complained for years that it was a non-functioning center and not open to all.

After much discussion and wrangling over language, some radical changes to the constitution were proposed and circulated to the membership, in preparation for discussion and vote at the Congress in Copenhagen/Malmö.

In contrast with TYA/USA, which has a general membership meeting once a year, lasting about an hour, the 'general assembly' of ASSITEJ is the triennial business meeting, and lasts three full days. Official delegates, three from each national center, sit at tables, alphabetically by country.

Imagine the United Nations of TYA. It's the important business of the association, to be sure; however, unless you're a policy-wonk, in the middle of an exciting international festival, it can feel like watching paint dry. The 2011 General Assembly, though, promised much fun.

Some changes in voting procedures (for President, Secretary-General and the Executive Committee) to make them more logical were quickly adopted. The fireworks started, though, with the first and possibly most radical proposal. Though it's not defined in the constitution and is only the past practice, eligibility to be an ASSITEJ national center has always been defined by membership in the United Nations. This meant that the many committed and vibrant practitioners in what the EC called 'constitutionally independent entities

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Day one of the ASSITEJ General Assembly. St. Gertrud Conference Center in Malmö, Sweden.
Photo by Niclas Malmcrona.

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claiming independence’, say, Taiwan or Kosovo, could not participate in ASSITEJ. The proposal was that these entities could, if other eligibility requirements were met, be granted the same status as national centers.

This was probably a bridge too far on the part of the EC. Legitimate concerns were brought up by delegations from various parts of the world. They pointed out that cooperative artistic ventures with practitioners from these and other entities actually happen a lot, but some governments or arts councils who fund ASSITEJ Centers would not look kindly on the new proposed status. Other national delegations expressed concerns about regions in their countries that might be encouraged to spin off. End result: one proposal soundly voted down, not even close. Time to move on to the next two proposals - the most critical ones.

The first of these out of the gate involved networks: any international network with members in at least seven countries (as the two currently on ASSITEJ’s radar of *ITYARN*, the international theatre for young audiences research network, and *write local play global*, the playwrights network) can apply to be a full voting member of ASSITEJ. If the application met the criteria

and was approved by the EC, the network would have the same status as, say, Mexico or Denmark, or any other country.

The next proposal: any individual or theatre or school can apply to be a non-voting member, so that they can participate whether or not they have a functional national center. This opens things up hugely, as undoubtedly the majority of practitioners don’t really care about the politics or who’s on the EC, they only want information and the opportunity to participate.

After some lively and largely positive discussion from the floor, these latter two proposals were overwhelmingly approved by the membership present at the General Assembly, with the caveat that some of the language be tweaked and with the understanding that the EC would work out procedures and processes.

There you have it, the best kind of reinvention for an organization - necessary (with the EC listening to practitioners) while honoring the past (keeping the same essential structure of power resting in the national centers, important for those who care) and recognizing the present (a global society that communicates and collaborates without batting an eye). Simple and elegant,

Delegates from national centers voting on the constitutional changes on day two of the ASSITEJ General Assembly. St. Gertrude Conference Center in Malmoe, Sweden. *Photo by Niclas Malmcrona.*



democratically voted to boot, without too many delegates' hair catching on fire.

The old ASSITEJ with many strong national centers at the core still exists, but the walls built around practitioners in some places have been pulled down. ASSITEJ has found a way to be more inclusive than it has ever been – by allowing non-voting members and by encouraging international networks organized by discipline to form. As this article is being written, a steering committee is meeting to form a rebooted, open, and inclusive ASSITEJ chapter in France.

Of course, there will still be politics and issues of power and control, something that is true of any organization, much less a largely volunteer service organization with branches in 80+ countries like ASSITEJ. But the recent changes are shining the light where it belongs, on the playwrights, directors, actors, choreographers, educators, scholars, students – those who create the performances that change the lives of children and young people all over the world.

Sometimes the coincidences of life can be very elegant, and all sorts of disparate pieces come together in unexpected ways. The evening of the very day these con-

stitutional changes were passed, I saw a vibrant and exciting joint production from Junges Ensemble Stuttgart (Germany) and New International Encounter (Norway and England), the ticket having been arranged weeks previously. It was performed by an international cast, a highly theatrical play whose starting point is the day the East German leadership shut down the border, a play called, appropriately, *Berlin, 1961*. Walls may go up, but sledgehammers, politics, and grace tear them down. How terrific to be on the other side.

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