

Drought And Abundance In Cape Town



South African dance theatre: Christelle Dreyer is outstanding in her special wheelchair in the Chaeli Campaign's 'No Fun ction ALL anguage', which along with more than 60 other performances from all over the world could be experienced at the international theatre festival in Cape Town in May. PR photo.

A disastrously drought-affected Cape Town provided the setting on 16th-27th May for the 19th ASSITEJ World Congress and an international festival for youth and children's theatre in South Africa. A Danish delegation of over 40 people were among those who had made the journey to the southernmost tip of the African continent. There they found both inspiration, big and small theatre experiences, and a smoothly running congress machinery that brought together people, art, theatre ideas, and professional engagement in a most fruitful manner under the heading 'Cradle of Creativity'.

By Søren K. Kløft – sk@teatercentrum.dk // Denmark

'Eh, I think I'm a wrecked jet engine! What can YOU do for me?' exclaims Faith Busika, lying on the floor in an odd posture while I stand over her with my arms outstretched in the attempt to look like an off-course charter aeroplane.

An awkward but quite amusing situation. We are playing. We are at a workshop in Cape Town. It is three o'clock in the afternoon and outside the bright autumn sun is shining over Township

Guga S'Thebe, some 7 km from the city centre. I am attending the 19th ASSITEJ World Congress and this is only one of many activities on offer during the 16 days of congress.

Our workshop organiser interrupts the play:

'Change positions! What are you going to say to each other now? What's happening in the relation?'

All around us people are huffing and puffing and scrambling around on the floor. There are five other pairs. All of us are rolling about laughing. What are you supposed to talk about with a jet engine? But it is also really interesting to play your way through the day like this and all the workshop participants seem to feel likewise.

Meet a new friend – at eye-level and with no filter

We spend two full hours together in the township's old post office where we have gotten to know each other only through play. Nobody has introduced themselves by name, age, nationality, job title, or other background. We have encountered each other on the floor, as human beings and completely blank pages in a book.

I have known Faith for an hour but we already feel entirely comfortable in each other's company. But I still don't know what else she does or where she is from. And thus the goal of the workshop is almost fulfilled already. This entire day in a suburb to the Cape is dedicated to the theme 'Theatre for Healing' and our workshop organiser, psychologist Hector Aristizábal from Colombia, has almost 30 years of experience in using theatre as a means of (re-)building human relations and (new) friendships in a very short time.

He has previously worked on bringing together mortal enemies from the Colombian civil war, and more recently, he has been working with hard-boiled criminals from Los Angeles prisons. His mission is simple enough: reconciliation. And his toolbox contains drama pedagogy. And then it's out on the floor. Meet your fellow humans as the persons they really are. Without social or national labels. Without anything except an open mind and the desire to get to know each other. If we are ready in this way the means of theatre will do the rest. Almost.

Art – and some of Africa

Later in the day, when the workshop has finished and we are all in the local assembly rooms eating hot pancakes with cane sugar, I discover that my workshop colleagues come from USA, Nigeria, Israel, Northern Ireland, South Africa, as well as other countries. But they are really only useless national labels – first and foremost we are human beings. Now I've got a whole bunch of new friends that I can share a freshly-pressed guava juice with while the sun rapidly sinks under the horizon and the ink black night falls over Cape Town.

And so, Faith turns out to be a teacher and drama pedagogue at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg and also a member of the 'Drama for Life' project who are joint organisers of the theme day I've been attending. Oh well.

After being 'on the floor' all afternoon, we now are going to watch theatre in a theatre hall constructed from old cargo containers and with a tin roof that crackles slightly as the heat of the afternoon gradually loosens its grip on the building.

Later that night our bus heads back to the city centre. We are completely full of impressions, a little wiser on the capabilities of theatre, and many good friends richer. We have encountered art and we have encountered some of Africa – it has been a great day.

Closer to the real person

The following weekend – after a long, busy week of theatre as well as long days of meetings at the congress itself – I take my seat for one of the last performances in the festival's official programme. My expectations aren't high, but as soon as the lights go out and the music begins I know that something really special is about to take place.

Because this is not just any old theatre. On stage are performers with different kinds of physical disabilities. A woman in a special wheelchair appears. At first sight she looks like a cripple. But performer Christelle Dreyer can dance – and she can express herself using her body in ways that us with normal physical ability can only dream of. And Christelle does it with humour! The audience are on the edge of their seats. More dancers appear on stage, accompanied by a truly gifted one-man band, and Christelle dances with them and merges seamlessly with the four-person dance troupe.

I feel like I need to pinch myself seeing this on stage as I suddenly realise that it is in the contrast between the so-called 'normal' and 'abnormal' that I clearly perceive the truly human. This is perfectly successful art. The performance is produced by the Chaeli Campaign, which among other things specialises in production of professional theatre with artists with disabilities. This performance, called 'No Fun ction aLL language', explores in many ways how we create meaning in what we can't express using words.

Dance can do that – it can fill the void between the said and the unsaid, between the expressed and the silent. It is so beautiful – we nearly can't stop the applause at the end. Here we saw so much more of the whole human being, ourselves reflected in the disabled individual. Very thought-provoking and a huge artistic achievement.

Cradle of Humanity and Creativity

More than 60 performances from 34 countries (including Denmark) were presented at the international festival of Cape Town. In addition, there were dozens of workshops and other theatre-related professional events throughout the city that were open to anyone interested – even in the most remote townships. It was impossible to participate in everything but it was a great joy to experience the enormous effort that ASSITEJ South Africa had invested in the events, which had taken shape over the course of four intense years of planning.

As attendees, we felt part of a genuine melting pot – on a huge continent where it is generally believed that the cradle of modern humanity stood millions of years ago. It was therefore an obvious step for the event organisers to have the programme unfold under the common and very appropriate heading 'Cradle of Creativity' – with a respectful nod to the anthropological 'cradle of humanity'. It includes everything in our past and from there we face the future together.

This message ran through all activities at the congress and festival. It was a grand notion and an amazing experience to be a part of for these 16 days of events.

Dane elected secretary general

As part of the festivities, the formal congress took up three days, during which 168 delegates of ASSITEJ International agreed on much and discussed a lot more.

In a Danish perspective, the most interesting news was undoubtedly the election of ASSITEJ Denmark's Executive Director, Louis Valente, as Secretary General of ASSITEJ International for the next three years. His election means that the organisation's headquarters will move to Copenhagen for the coming three years, and also undertake a number of new tasks.

The 20th ASSITEJ World Congress and international festival will take place in Tokyo in 2020.

Facts: ASSITEJ is a french abbreviation for 'Association Internationale du Théâtre pour l'Enfance e la Jeunesse' – in English: International Association of Theatre for Children and Young People // 19th ASSITEJ World Congress / Cradle of Creativity - www.assitej2017.org.za // In total 1.390 delegates from around 70 countries participated in the congress and in the festival // Drama for Life - www.dramaforlife.co.za // The Chaeli Campaign / "No Fun Ction aLL Language" - www.chaelicampaign.co.za // ASSITEJ South Africa - www.assitej.org.za // ASSITEJ Denmark - www.assitej.dk