

Culture in Mexico

It's like the country itself, full of contradictions, a rich history, natural talent and wide social divisions.

In the Federal capital, Mexico City, 24 million people can naturally enough provide an audience for almost anything and the festival **A Trote** – an ingenious anagram of Teatro meaning 'at a trot' was well attended. The programme was a broad mixture from popular music theatre and contemporary dance to hard texts about war and teenage suicide.

The hope is that it will be enough of a success to merit being continued in future years, although it has been very difficult to set up given the complex relationships between state and local bureaucracies and a difficult financial and political situation.

But a huge city with legendary traffic congestion also means that it is hard to get people together to rehearse, come to meetings and workshops or make project plans. Few people have secure jobs and most work freelance from project to project. In such conditions any sense of a need for development is hard to foster. People need to fight for recognition and hang on to whatever profile they can win.

Workshops wanted

That said, workshops led by **NIE Theatre** and Korean visitors within the format of the festival, and our ASSITEJ Forum on the growth of interdisciplinary forms within TYA, notably in dance theatre innovation, attracted respectable attendances.

I presented TYA UK at the opening event as an example of the different kinds of practice you can find among the ASSITEJ family in 80 countries around the world.

To judge by the shows programmed for us as ASSITEJ EC members, there is a reservoir of technical skill in dance, acting and especially music theatre and opera. Training is strong but the teachers are ageing, I was told. The need for outside influence is vital and the three overseas contributors were chosen astutely towards that end.

There are weaknesses in direction and dramaturgy and a poor understanding of the young audience, perhaps because production is driven by the passion and commitment of an individual artist, the director or writer, within the context of a tough commercial market

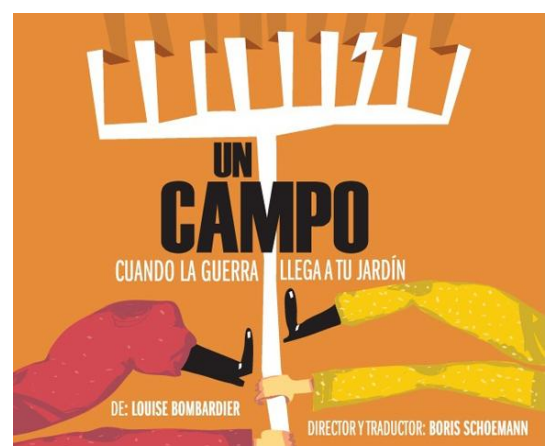
Click [A Trote Festival](#) for a jolly trailer



↓ TYA programme at the [National Institute for the Arts \(INBA\)](#) organised **A Trote** ↑



↑ School advertising for pupils
Show about war by Quebec playwright ↓



Batida from Denmark major on outdoor and musical performance and are a confident advocate for inexpensive but rich community theatre styles of show. **Gamoonjang Baby** is a product of the pioneering development work at the Korea National University of the Arts, combining heritage and modern techniques.

As in Korea, there is a similar need in Mexico to integrate popular art forms with modern, western European theatre practice and indigenous forms of theatre and performance. That is part of the role for TYA today in contributing to the creation of a modern, more open national identity, which respects both the cultural heritage and contemporary social realities.

The Centre of Mexico City is filled with huge palaces to culture, museums, opera houses in the classic late 19th Century form and a succession of modern arts and cultural complexes. There is a strong commercial theatre sector and a range of small theatre venues. Making the connections between such institutions and a wider public is the difficult trick all countries face. The Festival **A Trote** is a successful innovation which deserves long term support.

Disability on the Agenda

UGA is a very accessible, if rather didactic show by a company which has been integrating deaf actors for the last 15 years and was the first one we saw. The aim of the company is to promote the idea of difference as a positive because in Mexico disability is not yet generally accepted or even visible – except when exploited by street beggars. So this is really a social or political enterprise rather than an artistic one - likely to be still the reality in many parts of the world

Inmolación , a play about teenage suicide, was much more sophisticated, very well performed and multimedia enhanced with about 40 screens showing film, slides, screen shots of internet chatting etc. As theatre it hardly broke out of the limitation of its structure: two kids on opposite sides of the audience, mainly talking to themselves, or to us, about their feelings.

Un Grano de Sal. Two good dancers in a bath tub explored everything two good dancers could do in a bath tub, for rather longer than the context and material could justify. As an introduction to contemporary dance for small children it had quality movement and was great fun at times.

A pantomime style show about vampire women and wrestling with operatic songs and a lot of fights in a huge opera house was crammed with families on a Sunday at 11am.



↑ **Gamoonjang Baby** (Korea)

UGA has deaf and hearing actors ↓



Control + [Click here](#) to see a clip of UGA



Palacio de Bellas Artes c 1930 ↑

Saving the World in 90 Minutes

Best for me, although flawed by being overwritten for the medium, was *La Legión de los Enanos*, a huge outdoor participatory show performed by 25 young professionals with extensive technical backup. We were led in groups – at a run - to locations all over a park, to save the world from warlike nasties. It had flashes of classic TIE techniques and there was some token discussion and decision making but the show was largely a presentation of encounters with people suffering in war, delivered through operatic song, ballet and physical theatre styles, but also mixing high drama and comedy.

Cultural investment in museums and venues is vast but mainly dates to the early and mid-20th Century. There are tree-lined avenues adorned with modern sculpture and a huge central park, but new high rise offices and a flood of chaotic, unregulated building advancing steadily outwards to house ever more millions of people, affirm the triumph of individualism and the power of modern finance capitalism.

Mexico in the 1930's and 40's was a haven for artists and political refugees like Leon Trotsky, who stayed with Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera in their beautiful blue house in a quiet middle class suburb. Today the arts are fighting a hard battle for recognition.

Within the ASSITEJ family, Mexico deserves respect for a very substantial achievement and huge potential. UK artists and companies should actively look there for future partnerships, which will be both challenging and rewarding. Organisations like [The Anglo-Mexican Foundation](http://www.anglo-mexican-foundation.org) are ready to help.

Paul Harman attended the Executive Committee Meeting of ASSITEJ International. On the agenda were preparations for Congress in Copenhagen and Malmoe, 20-29 May 2011, and a major revision of the Constitution to allow appropriate international Networks, like Small Size, to become full members with more powers for individual artists and companies to get full and direct access to ASSITEJ services.

While France and Belgium were expelled for failure to meet the obligations of membership, notably to report regularly on activities and to admit all those eligible within national borders, several new member countries were admitted, including Cuba, Colombia and Togo.

Visit www.assitej-international.org for more information.
Congress in Copenhagen / Malmoe is at: www.assitej2011.info



↑↓ La Legión de los Enanos



Downtown Mexico City ↑
↓ ASSITEJ EC people at the Blue House

