

:DANISH+

2nd May - 5th May 2010

:Danish+

The :Danish+ Theatre Festival in Aarhus, Denmark is a showcase of professional Danish performing arts for children and young people. The first :Danish+ was held in 2008 and is now set up as a biennial. This year it ran from Sunday 2nd May - Wednesday 5th May 2010. :Danish+ was initiated and organised by Gruppe 38 and supported by the Danish Arts Council. Gruppe 38 are one of the most prolific theatres in the present landscape of Danish performing arts for children and have been established since 1972.

A curatorial group handpicked the fourteen Danish productions for the festival with the one sole parameter of quality. With a few exceptions, all the performances were performed in English. Performances were combined with a one-day conference about artistic quality in the performing arts. The result of a Danish research project was presented - the IAN-model, along with presentations and discussions with a panel of Danish and international delegates. About sixty theatre representatives and presenters from seventeen different countries took part in :Danish+ 2010, with fifty Danish theatre presenters taking part in the one-day conference about artistic quality.

As Outreach Officer for Cahoots NI Theatre Company in Belfast I was keen to attend this event for numerous reasons. Firstly, Cahoots NI believe that it is important to meet, discuss and share ideas with our international peers and :Danish+ was an ideal opportunity to achieve this. It was also a chance to promote the company as positively as possible.

On a personal note, I have never attended a theatre festival for children outside of the UK and Ireland and had heard that the work of the Danish is among the best in the world. I wanted to experience this first-hand. I also hoped that being exposed to a large quantity of high quality theatre would inform my work within Cahoots NI in a positive manner and also give me the opportunity to bring back inspiration and ideas to everyone within my company and to the members of TYA NI.

The Performances

The performances took place in five different locations throughout the city of Aarhus. These were Archauz, Gruppe 38's theatre, Musikhuset Aarhus, Svalegangen and Teater Refleksion and offered a great opportunity get to know the city of Aarhus and also to enjoy the cultural spaces that Aarhus had to offer. I was astounded that there were so many beautiful theatre venues and it seems that most theatre companies have their own performing space.

The following shows were presented over the course of four days;

Oskar	Teatret Mollen	age 12+
The Beach	ZeBU	age 6+
Anima	Meridiano	age 4-10

Cahoots NI

I've Got Everything	Gruppe 38	age 8+
Lecture	Baggard Teatret/ Mungo Park	age 14+
The Walk Around	Teater Blik	age 1.5- 4
Boxy George	Teater Refleksion	age 5-10
Me You Us	Aben Dans	age 0.5 - 4
Slovenly Peter	Thalias Tjenere	age 5+
In Short	Teater Morgana	age 5+
The Trouser Button	Gruppe 38	age 9+
Shadow of Time	Carte Blanche	age 8+
Norbert Fatnoggin	Teater 2 Tusind	age 7-12
Do You Believe in Magic?	Teater Hund	age 5-12

For a full description of each show go to the Danish+ website at www.danishplus.dk and click on performances.

I enjoyed the experience of being able to watch such a high quantity of performances in such a short space of time. Moreover, i loved being able to discuss each performance with other theatre delegates as the event progressed. Highlights for me included Boxy George and Anima. Boxy George is a mimic puppet performance for 5-10 year olds and adults. George is alone and it is nice to be alone. Everything is neat and tidy. Perfect. But...one day a box shows up. And George isn't alone anymore. This performance was non-verbal and one of the most endearing, funny and sad shows i have seen. The puppetry was masterful and i have never felt so much love for a box! A real treat.

Anima was a puppet show that tackled the theme of death in the most beautiful way. Anna wants to know what happens to people when they die. Her grandad thinks your soul flies up to heaven but he is not sure. So Anna decides to set out on a journey that leads her far and wide in space, time and different dimensions. The set was beautiful, the language was simple yet effective and the heart and humour in this show was rich.

A distinctive feature of the Danish performing arts for children is that it appeals to both children and adults. It is widely acclaimed for being uncompromising in reaching its artistic goals. I reveled in the serious subject matters that the companies explored in a very adult manner. Danish productions aim for an intense and intimate dialogue on several levels between stage and audience and this was very apparent in the productions i witnessed. This level of intensity was heightened by my next observation that generally the performers within the realms of children's theatre in Denmark were older than in Northern Ireland, Ireland and the UK. This was most apparent in the production of Oskar where an 11 year old boy was

played by a 50 year old man. Noel Jordan from the Sydney Opera House also pointed this out in his presentation on artistic quality. He stated that one of the reasons that Danish children's theatre is among the best in the world is because it is sophisticated theatre that portrays difficult subjects, because the performances have weight and power and because the performers have a very high level of skill and are of a mature age.

It was also apparent to me that Danish theatre companies receive a much higher level of funding. I witnessed this in the beautiful theatre spaces I visited along with the fact that Danish companies receive a much longer intensive rehearsal period than here in Northern Ireland.

The Conference

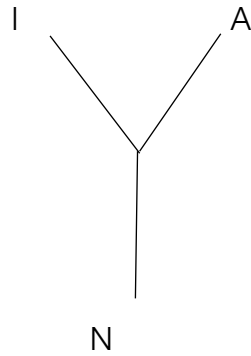
The one-day conference on artistic quality was a blend of discussions, presentations and performances. Anne Middelboe Christensen was the moderator at the conference. Panel discussions were led by Muireann Ahern from The Ark in Dublin, Noel Jordan - an independent theatre consultant for the Sydney Opera House in Australia, director Bernt Hoglund and Gitte Kath from The Mill. Professor Jorn Langsted from the University of Aarhus also presented a paper on his Danish research project - the IAN-model which strives to go some way to opening up the debate about what artistic quality is.

It is difficult to pin-point exactly what artistic quality is and this led to some interesting discussions. Muireann Ahern from The Ark stated that she had stopped using the word 'quality' and that quality is as elusive as a rainbow - that it is dependent on the spectators point of view and no two people will have the same experience. While Noel Jordan talked of his travels around the world seeking children's theatre to book for the Sydney Opera house, as being like sifting for gold. The discussions outlined how difficult it is to pin-point exactly what artistic quality is. The IAN-model was presented as a handy tool for rapid quality assessment.

The IAN-model

Artistic quality is defined in the IAN-model as a combination of Intention, Ability and Necessity. Artistic intention consists of a will to express and communicate and feels to the audience as if it has genuine commitment. Ability is about the skill of the performers gained through training and experience and their ability to communicate the ideas of the director, playwright, choreographer, etc. to the audience. Necessity is the relation of the performance to the here and now. It is about the relevance of the performance to the audience, to the surroundings and to the society in which it is performed.

The IAN-model is expressed as a three vector system and artistic quality is then determined by an interplay between Intention, Ability and Necessity. High artistic quality would be expressed as three vectors of equal length like this;



Professor Jorn Langsted used the IAN-model to discuss Oskar by Teatret Mollen - one of the shows all the delegates had watched. Here is a brief summary of his thoughts;

Oskar is searching for the truth about his father who died during the attacks on the World Trade Centre. In his father's dressing room he finds a key in an envelope with the name 'Black' written on it. Oskar decides to visit everyone in New York called 'Black', in a quest to find the lock that fits the key. It is a funny and moving journey of survival, through a little boy's sorrow and out onto the street of New York.

What is the intention of the story? It tells the story of ten year old Oskar who is left behind after 9/11. It is about deep loss and upheaval. It inspires the audience with courage. The experience is intense but the ability to deal with pain grows stronger too.

Ability? The performance delivered outstanding performances by individual performers who were also part of an ensemble. Their mission was to tell an important story but with slap stick humour, deep sensitivity, music and many tempo shifts. Their ability as performers was considered very high.

Why is the play performed at the present time? What is the artistic necessity? It is a play for teenagers and young adults about how to deal with grief and loneliness in a constructive and sensitive way. It is about what people do when exposed to situations of catastrophe around the world. The play is exciting as it doesn't say that everything is going to be fine but rather offer images and experiences which one can empathise with.

Jorn Langsted concluded that Oskar was a great performance and high in artistic quality. The vectors of his model would be of near equal length.

Conclusion

I was thrilled at the opportunity be an international delegate at :Danish+ 2010. I would thoroughly recommend a trip to an international children's theatre festival for those working in the sector. It was a fantastic opportunity to meet other theatre makers from around the world and witness an intensive amount of theatre in a short space of time with the ability to discuss ideas and opinions about the work with other delegates. The hospitality of the organisers was also excellent. The conference added an excellent dimension to the event as we were engaged in interesting debate about artistic quality and were offered a tool in the IAN-model as a means to assess artistic quality. All in all, a fantastic experience.