

On The Edge of Europe: An Autumn Journey

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ASSITEJ festivals of TYA this Autumn have led me from East to West across the Northern edge of the European Union. I started in Bucharest in summer heat, had autumnal rain in Croatia, falling leaves in Estonia and bitter early winter winds in Riga. This week I am off to Moscow for a conference on festivals at another festival, Big Break, and I fully expect snow.

My full account goes into more detail about the 20 shows I saw, who was there and what concerns the different communities of theatre makers I met. (See TYA website) The setting up of the new Secretariat of ASSITEJ International in Croatia and the proceedings of the Executive Committee are also reported on elsewhere. (www.assitej.org)

On the final plane ride back to the UK, I tried to separate out the seasonal changes in TYA worldwide, or at least Europe wide, from the climatic changes or trends. Every country has its ups and downs, governments change and funding schemes come and go. But if there is one crucial difference between continental Europe and the UK, or more specifically England, it is this: Culture with a big C is of central importance to Europeans.

NUMBERS

You see this in the infrastructure and in particular the number of people employed to deliver cultural services, like professional theatre for children. In the poorest country I visited, Romania, performances of our production of *Leonardo*, which two people take into schools here, was supported by a team of eight technicians who rushed to carry out our slightest whim. Teatrul Ion Creanga, our host in Bucharest, has a staff of about one hundred, including 36 actors and a huge repertoire of plays for children and young people.

In Parnu, where ASSITEJ Estonia was hosting the annual Nordic Baltic Festival with shows from every country around the Baltic apart from Poland, the huge and beautifully renovated Endla Theatre offered large and small auditoria, two cafes, free wifi and vast rooms for children's workshops. The ASSITEJ festival team was 30 strong, including interpreters, company buddies and workshop leaders.

Croatia is delighted to provide ASSITEJ Secretariat with a modest but spacious flat in Zagreb Old Town and a staff of two Executive Assistants. A Minister not only welcomed guests from 25 countries formally – in perfectly idiomatic English - at the Ministry of Culture but joined us to open the new office with champagne and informal chat. When I presented myself as the candidate who lost out to Croatia's Ivica Simic, her reply was: "I'm sorry – No, I'm glad. I'm sorry I'm glad but I'm glad!" No heavy stuff about shifting the centre of gravity away from the big or richer countries, where ASSITEJ has been based before, or Croatia's bid for leadership of cultural development initiatives in South East Europe.

Culture is seen as the way to mend broken relationships between the countries of former Yugoslavia, and restore the wider contacts lost after the collapse of communism, with Hungary and Romania, for example. The EU will spend generously. Greece and Turkey were also represented at the regional Epicentre festival and conference in the charming country town of Cacovec. The regional conference and the ASSITEJ EC meeting were held in the pretty former casino of the town's predominantly Jewish population. All but five families were murdered in Auschwitz in 1942.

OLD HABITS

Governmental support for culture may be strong, but the problems of institutional paralysis are evident everywhere. Younger artists with new approaches, and older artists driven by the revolutionary ideas of the 1960's, find it impossible to change the conservative attitudes of the state funded theatres and the managers who want bums on seats for *Cinderella* or shows with furry animals. In progressive Estonia, Endla Theatre's own company, despite hosting a pretty wide range of contemporary TYA at the NB festival in 2005, shocked visitors with a skin show that was old-fashioned in the 1950's.

In Riga, the State Puppet Theatre presented me with a vacuous and fussy show about a brave rabbit and scary night time creatures - I think. In a gesture to modernity, the three actors were directed to waft gauzes about with little motivation or commitment while synthesized musak burred on continuously.

INDEPENDENT FUTURE?

But at the other end of the city, in a vast and hideous neoclassical theatre, a gift from Stalin, a financially strapped independent company presented a cracking pop musical for young teenagers. *Class* is a simple love story written by a talented 18 year old and performed by 15 young actors with a stiffening of five powerful opera singers as the teachers and other adults. Girl falls for victim of bullying - a result of mistaken identity. The young audience went wild as the adults reminisced about how they were just as unruly as the present generation, except their music was rock and roll. As the adults danced crazily four hundred kids roared their enjoyment.

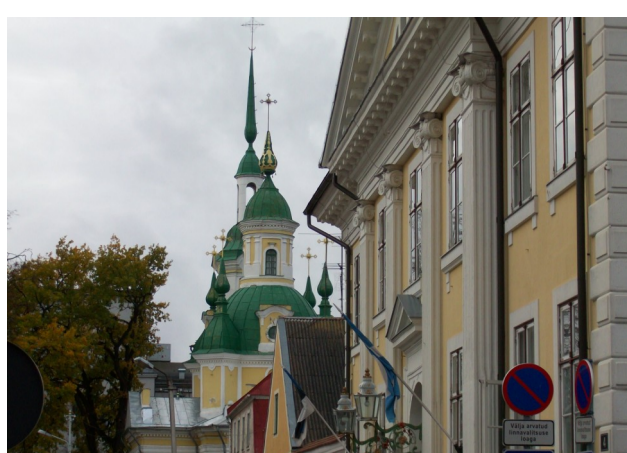
In every way this show gave a young audience a positive experience of live theatre. The standard of performance from the mix of young and old professionals and students still in training in the band and the cast was very high. The relaxed and appropriate choreography was a model of what youth theatre so often fails to get right – moves any kid can do combined in pleasing patterns that allow for individual difference of ability and body shape. You couldn't tour *Class* abroad to a posh festival as nobody understands Latvian. It was made for kids in Riga, in a country with a smaller population than South Yorkshire, where artistic standards are high and culture matters.

CHANGE AT HOME

In the UK too, we are coming to the end of a season, perhaps of an era. Wales and Scotland have new, culturally appropriate, support structures for TYA. England will also need something new if the present rather stagnant scene is to be stirred up by a 'New Generation' of producers. To succeed, however, artistic standards will have to be raised all round. This will require a subtle combination of more cash for core institutional support, a longer and more ruthless training of artists and a non-commercial approach to building audiences. We like to think we are at the cutting edge of culture in Europe. I think we are on the edge of acceptable standards in theatre for young audiences.

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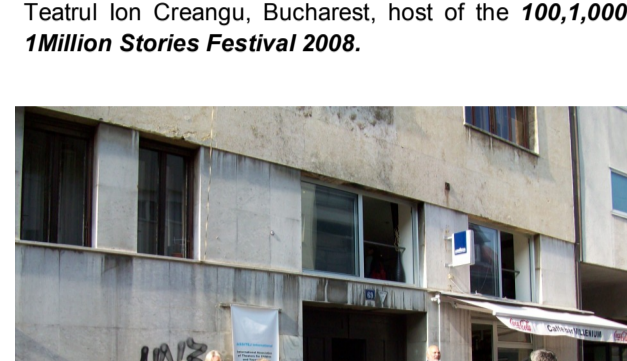
18th Century buildings in Parnu, Estonia - royal seaside resort and cultural capital.



Romanian Central Bank in Bucharest. Old and new. With global capitalism in freefall, which building will still be standing in 2108? And everyone has borrowed money to buy a car ...



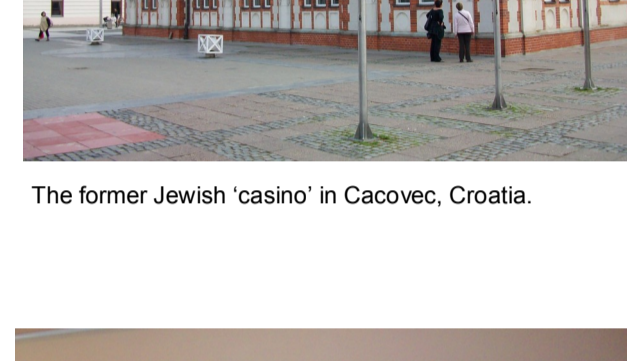
Teatrul Ion Creanga, Bucharest, host of the **100,1,000, 1Million Stories Festival 2008**.



ASSITEJ Executive members outside the new Secretariat in Zagreb. No frills.



The former Jewish 'casino' in Cacovec, Croatia.



In the new ASSITEJ office. From left: Noel (Australia), the Minister, guests from Croatia, Soren (Denmark), Dora (Executive Assistant)



Jugendstil extravagance in Riga, wealthy and cultured since the 16th Century. A mix of German and Russian traditions with the arts crucial to expressions of national identity.



The Regent's Canal, London. Outmoded infrastructure and a peaceful backwater?

