

Stories of Migration

Report by Wendy Harris, Artistic Director of tutti frutti, Leeds, on the International Director's Seminar held in Hamburg, 15th to 21st June 2009

I was delighted to be selected for the 2009 Director's Seminar and honoured to be hosted by the Junges Schauspielhaus Hamburg and Assitej Germany. It felt a little daunting to be the only UK delegates amongst 25 directors from across the world ... but these fears soon diminished once all the delegates met. The countries represented were: Albania, Australia, Austria, Croatia, Estonia, Germany, India, Kenya, Lebanon, Mexico, Montenegro, Portugal, Romania, Russia, Spain, Sweden, USA and Vietnam.

Our Stories

In preparation for the event we were asked to send or bring a photo of our own 'story of migration'. Having being inspired by a German book *when we lived in uncles hat*, which tutti frutti have the rights to adapt next year, this became a starting point for me as it tells the story of a family who move from location to location and eventually find their home.

The stories each person brought were not intended to be the main focus of the week but were a catalyst for discussion, providing a chance for us to share them with each other when the opportunities arose. The artists' stories varied hugely; from the very personal tales of being raised by an 'alternative family' to stories of cross-border immigration from Mexico, to stories of displaced children from all parts of the world. These became a wonderful reference point throughout the week and the theme informed all the work we carried out.

Arriving in Hamburg - Meeting and Greeting

Boarding my first taxi in Hamburg the driver told me how Hamburg had been flattered by the English in the 2nd world war. She swiftly followed this with how relations between the two countries were now great and special. I had a wonderful, free, whistle stop tour of the city finally arriving at the hotel - an Etap - no surprises here as any migration that leads to an Etap is the same experience all over the world! Very quickly the delegates gathered in the lobby of the hotel and we were presented with our travel passes and whisked off to the metro. Just a few stops and we were walking through the beautiful city of Hamburg and taken to our host theatre, Deutsches Schauspielhaus. We were given lunch in a lovely marbled room and we immediately began introducing ourselves to each other. This was followed by the tour of the huge labyrinthine (like) venue with all its various making, creative and performing

spaces. This was to be our home for the week. We had no time to stop as we were taken straight to the rehearsal room ready for the reading of the scripts and for work to start.

Working Groups

At the rehearsal room we were introduced to three scripts read by actors - all themed on stories of migration and all newly commissioned set pieces. We were each asked to choose a script. This was a way to break us up into groups and we remained in those groups for the rest of the week. All the scripts were aimed at teen audiences, a slight disappointment to me as a practitioner making work largely for 3 to 7 year olds but, ultimately, this did not detract from the benefit gained through the week.

I chose the script *Phone Home* by Kristo Sagor. I ended up in a group of 12 directors. We were given no set agenda and simply told that we were to make a presentation on Saturday evening - the end of the week! To start us off my group agreed to share our stories of migration and this was a great way for us to break the ice. We shared a wonderful range of stories from cross-border migration with a beautiful metaphor about a bird (Mexico) to a sad story about immigrants working illegally in Sweden.

We were quite a focused group and spent the rest of the session getting on our feet trying things out and talking about our 'first approach' to discovering a new script. The next day we agreed that for 12 different directors to work well together we needed a structure. Soon after it was agreed that what we wanted to from the sessions was to 'share practice' and the best way to achieve this was to allocate one leader per session so that a clear focus could be given. This led to us gaining the reputation as the most organised group as some other groups took few days to decide how to work and one group never really did!

So we worked for the whole week sharing practice; debating the value of Brecht, Stanislavski, contact improvisation, visualization, working with gesture and exploring American pedagogical approaches and soon we all joined in, put our views forward, agreed and disagreed... By Saturday we had a presentation to make and we agreed that ours would consist of demonstrating each of our very different approaches to the script. On Saturday evening in the theatre space we presented our ideas alongside each of the other groups. It was great to watch each group and see how they had worked. This was followed by detailed discussion and evaluation.

Venue and Host

The Deutsches Schauspielhaus in Hamburg is the largest and most beautiful theatre in Germany used for spoken drama, designed in neo-baroque style by the Viennese partnership of Fellner and Helmer the most famous theatrical

architects of their day. It contains 1200 seats. It was spared severe bombing in World War 2, was requisitioned by British forces and didn't open again until 1948. A decade later it became Germany's most prominent theatre. In 1972 a 2nd smaller studio space was opened; the Malersaal. In 2005 there was the creation of a youth theatre and **Junges Schauspielhaus** devoted to young people. This was founded by Klaus Schumacher, who now runs the theatre with his own team and ensemble. It creates ambitious projects and is an award winning young people's venue with several performance spaces.

All the Assitej representatives and staff from the venue were perfect hosts, making us feel welcome and supported throughout the week with an abundance of German cakes and delicious food readily available. It became a running joke that we had all indulged *a little too much!!* The organisation and structure of the week was really efficient and well run. We were made to feel so welcome and very well looked after. On the final night at a celebratory party, with a brilliant Russian DJ and lots of dancing (I made it my duty to dance with as many delegates as was possible and ensured I was one of the last to leave), we were presented with a cake with all the flags of the countries present.

Despite the long days, the groups all spent much time socializing at the end of the day, still talking and sharing ideas. Many late nights were had. Our hosts arranged a beautiful trip down the river Elbe and then a riverside walk to the very nice *Subwasser* restaurant. Here I had a fantastic opportunity to chat with delegates from the other groups.

Shows

We were delighted to be able to see a great range of work each evening presented mainly at the host theatre. All were presented in German but we had a synopsis of each show. Afterwards we met the cast and had interesting discussions.

- ***Ehrensache (A Matter of Honour)*** by **Lutz Hübner**. A story about Turkish boys, living in Germany, who display macho behaviour with local German girls whom they exploit, eventually leading to a stabbing. The post show discussion was heated and focused a lot around the issues of German (non-Turkish) actors playing these roles and the situation of 2nd generation Turkish immigrants in Germany today.
- ***Mutter Afrika (Mother Africa)*** by **Ad De Bont** a piece about slavery. A high quality piece with a very high stand of production values and a large cast. The piece had many songs that were delivered to a really high standard. Similarly in post show chat the issue arose of white actors playing Black characters.
- ***Young star Fest:660@K6*** a vibrant and fabulous piece of hip hop presented a large cast of young people all who are graduated from the Hamburg hip hop academy. The skill level was extremely high. With

- packed audiences, it was a lively and charged event. Wolfgang Schneider (Assitej President) joined us for the evening and we had discussions on the work and updated him on the seminar!
- ***Ein Schaf fürs Leben* (A Sheep For Keeps)** - my favoured piece of the week and adaptation of the German book of the same name. Telling the story of a wolf who pursues a sheep but eventually befriends it. With lovely acting and lots of design invention it was a delightful and engaging piece for younger children.
 - ***Träumer* (Dreamers)** by **Gilber Afaiar** set within the context of the student revolution, 3 young people alone in an apartment explore American movies and a bizarre love triangle. This was a sophisticated and grown up piece for older teenagers.

Assitej Interview

German Assitej is very well run and has one paid member of staff. They produce a glossy magazine quarterly that gives an overview of the sector. Myself and Karim Dakroub from Lebanon were asked to take part in an interview to talk about our work. We talked for a good hour and the results of this will be in the October magazine. It was wonderful to hear Karim talk about his very different experiences of entering the world of theatre. As a teen soldier in civil war he made puppets and performed for the other soldiers. As soon as he was able to leave the army he went off to Russia to study puppetry and now runs his company from Beirut, his home town. Myself and Karim aim to talk more about how we may work together in the future.

The Explosion

The theatre's dramaturg, Anselm Lenz, organised a late night evening event (*The Explosion*) on the Friday evening. In all the spaces of the theatre there were different events going on for young people. We were allocated one of the tunnels leading from the theatre (an old metro tunnel) and we were asked to each talk about our own migration in relation to our careers as theatre directors. From 10.30pm until after midnight 12 international directors presented to the youth of Hamburg. This was a great event which included Russian songs, from the fabulous Pavel Kurochkin from Moscow, some bad jokes and some great jokes from our Romanian friend Davis Schwartz and amazing tales of how each director has carved their way into the industry. To make the event fun we had an egg timer with a bell that rang after 5 minutes—juts 5 minutes to make our pitch and that was IT! As we sat on old benches in a rather damp metro tube alongside our international friends I felt as though I was participating in a 'happening' from the 60s - it was rather wonderful and a hugely successful evening.

Conclusion

I felt hugely privileged to have participated in this week and am very thankful to German Assitej for the opportunity to do so. It is rare that one is offered the opportunity to engage with 25 peers from across the world to debate, explore ideas, watch work together and socialise. The whole week was filled to the brim with activity, discussion and finding out about how each other worked.

I was blessed to have a truly wonderful group of artists and host with whom to engage and there is no doubt that many of us will remain in touch. In addition I had the best fun, reminding me how similar we all are regardless of where in the world we come from. I shared practice with 12 people and enjoyed seeing our similarities and different approaches. Viewing such a range of work is always inspiring and offers you many ideas.

I learnt an enormous amount about how I operate within a group and negotiating the role of leader with group of strangers, which was in itself a learning experience.

Visiting Germany and Hamburg for the first time was fantastic, and seeing the well resourced children's provision in Germany led one to feel a little envious. However, one is also humbled when talking with colleagues from Kenya, India and other countries where the infrastructure and funding are not in place in the same way as they are in the UK.

I would strongly recommend any UK artist to apply for the next opportunity regardless of how much or little experience you have as I feel sure you will benefit hugely from such a unique opportunity.

I am now looking forward to hosting director Leticia Caceres from Australia in September and Dr Ashish Ghosh from Delhi next year. I'm talking to Marc Hervàs in Barcelona and trying to help him with a youth theatre project he is producing and I am communicating with Alexandra Espiridiao in Portugal..... And the possibilities of other collaboration will be explored over the coming months and years. My new Assitej friend, Ashish from Delhi, in our recent correspondence wrote to me: 'You must visit India. Chances are to be created or grabbed.'

I leave that thought with you.

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www.tutti-frutti.co.uk