

# Twenty Years – in the Blink of an Eye ...

Paul Harman was at the Tenth Augenblickmal Festival in Berlin in May 2009



ASSITEJ Germany Awards 2009 - Guests included Suzanne Osten (2nd from Left) and Ad de Bont (4th from Left)

## Cakes all round!

They are celebrating the Fall of the Wall this year in Berlin. When it fell there was a serious threat that the excellent work of East German theatres for children - big traditional houses each with a repertoire of twenty shows and a hundred staff – would be lost. The West German models are small teams of a dozen or so attached to a big city theatre or post '68 'Free' companies run on more or less collective principles. The GDR developed the Soviet model and also supported countries such as Cuba to establish professional theatre for young audiences. Ilse Rodenberg, wife of the first GDR Minister of Culture and President of ASSITEJ from 1987 to 1993, fought for the sector and won. Today her legacy, now named *Theater an der Parkaue* (the original *Theatre of Friendship* and the post-89 *Carousel* being deemed too value laden or insufficiently serious) is the largest in Germany and still based in a huge old former school building in a leafy suburb of East Berlin. A collaboration with West Yorkshire Playhouse starts soon.

Current ASSITEJ President Wolfgang Schneider used all his influence and the full energy of the former West German ASSITEJ Centre and its development agency in Frankfurt ([www.kitz.de](http://www.kitz.de)) to preserve the positive gains of the GDR. The biennial [Augenblickmal Festival](#) held in Berlin was one of the first symbols of re-unification with respect. Some of the patronising attitudes of Wessies over Ossies after the Change did lasting damage in other parts of social and economic life. In the cultural field, artists have stuck together and won significant support from government at all levels.

I have attended four of the ten editions of Augenblickmal and can reflect on how much the German scene has changed over that time. My conclusion is – not a lot! And that is all to the good, because the core values are high quality professionalism, continuity, maturity of actors and a prolific new writing scene. Germany needs 800 new plays a year for the repertoires in more than 120 children's and young people's theatres. The annual 500 page directory *Grimm & Grips* is in its 22<sup>nd</sup> edition and there are ten pages of writers, 90 to a page, among them Kenny, Mike with five productions, Way, Charles and Wood, Nick with three and Retallack, John with one. The Brothers Grimm naturally top the list with 40 but several contemporary playwrights like Gertrud Pigor, Lutz Hübner and Dutch writer Ad de Bont – an ASSITEJ award winner this year for his contribution to German TYA - make double figures.

## Selection

How did ten curators select ten productions for the tenth festival? In a word, thoroughly. By travelling over eight months to see 260 shows all over the country of which 20 shows were nominated for the final selection. By determining to present as varied a picture as possible and flag up key current trends. Early years shows are new in Germany so *Rawums!* was an excellent choice to represent the relatively small number of specialists here, led by Small Size members Helios Theater. Helios won another ASSITEJ award for its achievement this year. *Rawums!* is what you say when you fall over – a bit like *Whoopsadaisy!* A simply elegant, gentle and humorous show about falling feathers and falling people uses some fine language and music to enrich a highly enjoyable experience for two year olds. At a festival near you soon, for sure.

*Schwarz Wie Tinte (Black as Ink)* is a well performed Dutch text fashionably deconstructing the Snow White tale. A pair of experienced women actors explore the complex mix of jealousy, envy, love and hate in all relationships between mothers and daughters. They act out these emotional states using the text of the story as the frame and material. The producers Theaterhaus Frankfurt also got an ASSITEJ award for their annual region wide festival, [Starke Stücke](#) – (*Power Plays*).

## Talent?

Not entirely satisfying, but very much a Europe-wide trend, is the fashion for children and young people on stage with adult professionals. Somehow this seems to be the 'Achilles Hell' (sic) of today's German Children's Theatre. We watched a dozen kids off the block telling us how they feel while doing break-dance numbers in a dance show called *Hell on Earth*, which for some of us oldies it pretty much was. Shapeless and repetitive but highly popular at home and abroad, apparently. An amateur show about street children from Iran was frankly embarrassing and the Berlin Fringe Ten included an *Alice* done by a posh adult company's Youth Theatre, which had pretty frocks but little understanding of core performance discipline.

*Duck, Death and Tulip (Ente, Tod und Tulpe)* would close any UK arts venue for dealing light-heartedly with death but was a delightful, and finely crafted interaction of puppet (Duck), actor (Death) and object (Tulip). The sophistication of the live music, delicate lighting, colour and forms, staging and text was probably more than most UK companies could master. Much longer creation and rehearsal time is a feature of the work of smaller companies like this, who don't even make it into the pages of Grimm & Grips. A strong tradition of puppetry was also represented here.

*Hikikomori* is a Japanese word for self imposed isolation. An astounding physical performance by actor Oliver Lagerpusch and powerful direction by Dominik Günther deliver a torrent of text by Holger Schober. Thalia Theater, Hamburg has a reputation for radical, edgy work and this scream of pain was relentless but not unrelieved. In a daring move, the actor we have been watching throw himself against the walls of his cell between bouts of frenzied internet chat with – possibly – a girl, suddenly stops and crosses the fourth wall to engage with the audience. Unsettling at least. The justification he offers for his self-exclusion, pressure to succeed at school, overbearing mother, etc, is ploddingly realistic and sociological. The real strength of the show lies in watching an extremely talented actor transform himself into an intense monster before our eyes, taking all kinds of risks, never letting the balls drop.

## Trying too hard

One cul de sac so often chosen by designers, visual theatre and performance artists is the ingenious device which looks great for the first five minutes but then fails to advance a story or support a vibrant theatre event. As in the majority of shows at this festival, *Der Räuber Hotzenplotz* by performance quartet Showcase Beat le Mot, is based on a hugely popular book. The group assumed that, since every child in the audience knows the book, they could deconstruct the story, show the irony within, poke fun at the conventions and explore a kind of anti-acting, mostly consisting of speaking woodenly, fiddling with their eccentric costumes, corpsing and making up bits of text as they go along – or appearing to do so.

I returned to watch the sequel, *Peterchens Mondfahrt* on the Monday following the end of the Festival and the formula was the same. Children were tolerant if somewhat bemused. When the performers did one of their longish witty musical numbers the kids talked happily among themselves. In *Hotzenplotz*, costumes are made from 4 by 2 sheets of chipboard, decorated according to the dictates of the text. The best bit was the pancakes the cast cooked for us on stage during the interval!

## Challenge Invited

A much more accomplished, and therefore less easily deflected challenge to conventional theatre wisdom, was offered by the invited production *Kiwi* by Quebec writer Daniel Danis. This mix of video and theatre at a high technical level has been pioneered in French Canada. The bleak text is about kids who live in the shadows of a violent city, but somehow find the strength to be tender and loving. The two excellent actors were from France and the show was made in Belgium. Film of live action is projected on two translucent screens. In the dim light we can just make out a cameraman and two actors creating the close-up images. Because of the clear delivery of the text and the high quality of the filming, the story gained an extra dimension. We are constantly reminded of our voyeurism when we watch media reports and portrayals of 'youth on the margins' and we feel implicated in the harsh experience of the young subjects.

An opera based on the story of the Seal Wife and *Seventeen*, an unconvincing more theatre piece about, well, disturbed eleven-year olds with more teenage problems than you can shake an I-pod at, were examples of other genres being explored. In a country famous for its dramaturgs, it was surprising there were not more shows as tight and well shaped as my top three, *Rawums*, *Hikikomori* and *Black as Ink*. The stagecraft is strong, the layers of invention, text and technical investment are rich and produce solid results. Perhaps they work too hard, perhaps they are driven by the need to deliver too many shows to too many children, perhaps their commitment to the plight of an increasingly pressured youth demands extreme plays which tell how badly the young are suffering.

The paradox is that outside, on the leafy, quiet streets of Berlin, where every corner has a pleasant cafe, where countless expensively modernised Museums and modern buildings can be reached so easily by effective public transport, the grey atmosphere I remember from before the fall of the Wall has almost vanished. The malaise is within an economic structure which results in high youth unemployment – something theatre cannot change.

For most of the key figures in German TYA, the catastrophic and life changing events in 1945, 1961, 1968 and 1989 are inescapable reminders of the continuing duty to empower young people through art. History hangs heavy around their necks.

The wonder is not that so much has changed on the outside, but that so little has changed within. By and large, such steadfastness of purpose and solid achievement is to be admired. And they like to celebrate together too.

PH

Other reports will soon be coming from designer Zoe Squire and Amelia Bird, Artistic Director of Gomito Productions, who were selected by ASSITEJ UK to join the Next Generation, New Faces programme for 20 years younger artists alongside *Augenblickmal 10*.

TYA-UK members Karen Draisey, Sarah Richards and Tony Reekie were also present.

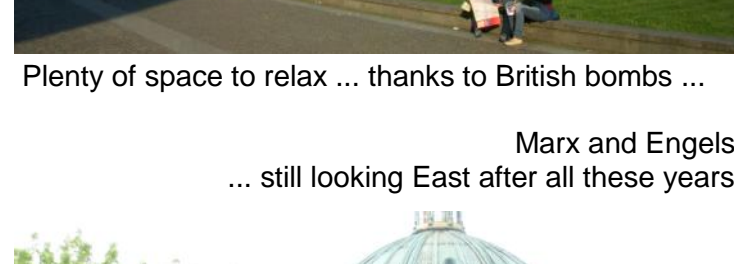


President Wolfgang Schneider and ASSITEJ Germany Board members served guests regional cakes ...

... and regional tipples



Plenty of space to relax ... thanks to British bombs ...



Marx and Engels ... still looking East after all these years



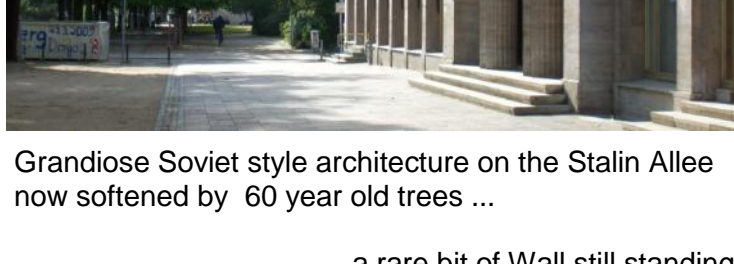
Grandiose Soviet style architecture on the Stalin Allee now softened by 60 year old trees ...



... a rare bit of Wall still standing



Companies face the critics ...



... selectors explain their choices



Overseas guests from Brazil, Turkey, Holland, Austria and Croatia ...



... Sekt on the roof with Parkaue Head of Education Karola Marsch

