

Dear friends and colleagues all over the world,

the ASSITEJ World Congress 2014 is up and running and it's truly exciting to once more attend this great and unique opportunity to meet a wonderful variety of theatre makers, dancers, musicians, directors, managers, who were traveling to Poland to discuss the status quo and the future of theatre for young audiences.

I am sorry that I came late but I had to run a festival for young audience in Bregenz and please excuse my manuskript, my english is not good enough to speak completely free.

It's the fourth time I'm attending the big ASSITEJ Family – the World Congress in Malmö and Copenhagen, the international meetings in Okinawa and of course in Linz last year – and yet so much has happened over the last three years. For those of you who don't know, I became chairman of the board of ASSITEJ Austria in 2011, suddenly becoming responsible not only for the overall focus of our Austrian network, for the way to go as regards content, but also for the numbers, the budget, the facts and figures, and the politics – and we all know that our job is always about politics, whether we like it or not ; and I do like it!

So what *was* our focus over the last three years? As a network of performing artists producing for children and a young audience, ASSITEJ Austria strives to uphold critical, artistic discourse in numerous events - symposia, dialogues, festivals, networking meetings etc. - fighting for possibilities to grant children and young adults access to first-class art.

So what's that, „first class art“? Is that some kind of „luxury“, something that is reserved for only a few chosen ones? No. Not at all. What I understand under this term, is performance art which does not merely understand its audience as tomorrow's regular visitors, but which defies all educational mandates – using that unique artistic power. And, by doing so, makes all the big goals of cultural education come true virtually by themselves. In other words:, a courageous, free and liberated art - without any boarders. In my opinion, this is the only way to go – if we want to take our audience seriously and if we understand our art as relevant to public and society. And well, after all, that's also a kind of luxury in a wider sense nowadays.

So, being convinced that no artistic aesthetics can progress without thinking out of the box, we're constantly looking for international and –cultural exchange: this year, for example, we're hosting the cross-border, trans-European Festival of Young Playwrights Interplay Europe, which is a tutor-guided, professional meeting of about 30 young authors from more than 15 European countries taking place in July in Bregenz at the lake of Constance - just around the boarder of Austria, Germany, Switzerland and Liechtenstein.

And I'm sure that many of you still remember last year's International Meeting in Linz which I dare to say was a huge success in bringing together theatre people from all over the world in mind-broadening workshops, discussions and other encounters – and which was great fun too.

ASSITEJ Austria is also participating in the new Regional ASSITEJ Network, which was founded last September in Ljubljana, Slovenia, at the initiative of our dear colleague Diana Kržanić Tepavac from

Serbia and which bring together seven countries from Eastern and Southern Europe in order to lay the foundation of new European projects, cooperations and fundings.

We're also seeking for internationality in our national projects. That's why we're always inviting an international jury from abroad to our STELLA festival, the only national award for outstanding productions for children and youngsters which exists since 2007. Last year, for example, we had the pleasure to invite Vigdis Jakobsdottir from Iceland as member of the international jury. And this year, we're very happy to welcome Leo Vukelic from Croatia to our festival, which will take place in October this year in five Tyrolean cities.

So that's only to name a few of the many international ventures ASSITEJ Austria is trying its best to make come true.

Of course, we all know that it's a hard and difficult, yet necessary struggle to make possible and uphold all these big goals, especially when it comes to international matters. Fighting for acknowledgement among politicians and cultural officers, raising national and international funds and convincing sponsors and investors of the necessity of a Theatre for a young audience: That's a tough job to handle, and it requires rigid persistence and the ability to deal with ever recurring setbacks without losing confidence. Facing very small and slow, yet continuous steps forward might be discouraging, even frustrating for some, but it can also be a big and exciting challenge for others. And I'm convinced that it's always rewarding, after all.

So striving for continuous transboundary networking, I'm ready to take this challenge to the next level. To an international level. To a stage, that has its boundaries no longer restricted by country borders. And that's why I'm candidating for this year's election of the Executive Committee. To become an active part of this global project. And I'm offering not only my great passion for TYA and my deeply felt respect for all those creative people worldwide struggling day after day to make their dreams come true - but I'm also offering all the many years of my knowledge in cultural managing, in raising funds on a both national and international level and, last but not least, my years of experience as chairman of the Austrian ASSITEJ network - also in a fantastic cooperation with my board my Austrian Team, and my colleague Stephan Rabl - all our African and Asian Cooperations will go on.

It would be an outstanding pleasure to be an active and regular part of ASSITEJ International's many-faceted EC. You can count on my expertise. Please feel invited to our reception tomorrow monday!

Thank you.

Christoph Thoma