

FATEJ 2008 Report



Well dear reader let me take you on a journey through African heat, flirtations with fame, good beer and bad french.

The 2008 FATEJ Festival of Theatre for Children and Young People was held from the 7th - 14th November and I was fortunate enough to be there.

TYA UK's international representative, Paul Harman, decided that it was important that somebody from the UK was there to meet people, see work and generally investigate the lay of the theatrical land and, to my great fortune, I couldn't agree more.

I arrived on the evening before the festival and having left before confirmation of my pick up arrived, went through Yaounde airport to be greeted by the rush of French speaking taxi drivers and porters all happy to help and even happier to charge a bomb. Thankfully I managed to pull off the 'I'm a lost little foreign boy' look with such aplomb that I attracted the attention of Emmanuel, the head of the festival, who had come to get me and whisk me off to the hotel. Also it transpired that I'd walked straight past Sophia who'd been holding a big sign reading 'FATEJ 2008'. I was comforted by the fact that Maranne Welch from Pittsburgh International Children's Theatre had walked straight passed it as well. Once happily united we headed off for a cold beer and a hot shower.

The hot shower was something of a miracle, as anyone whose worked or traveled in West Africa will know, running water is never a guarantee and generally the only way it's hot is if the sun's been on the tank all day. But there it was, hot flowing water on a grateful plane - tired me.

So, next day the festival proper began. Armed with a schedule, myself and the two other delegates, Maranne and Yvette Hardie from South Africa awaited Elvis, our minibus driver, (whose bus caught fire and was totally gutted mid week) to go to our first show.

Two things are important here to give you a true sense of the Festival experience, one is that despite having a schedule it was reassuringly rarely followed, and two is that 9am pick up for a 9.30 show, generally turned into a 10am pick up for a midday show. As soon as I appreciated that the implications were an extra half hour in bed and a leisurely breakfast I decided that it was a very clever innovation.

The first show was 'Super Koumba' by Kharr Theatre, a local troupe directed by Ali Mvondo, and it was so fun I watched it twice. Bags of energy, very little set and lots of interaction gave this piece real flair. Most pieces were in French and my French is

reasonably tragic, but this piece was very easy to understand and had simple, sweet messages, a bit like Aesop's Fables if they'd been about smoking in libraries. It also proved to be quite representative of the Cameroonian work on show at the festival. A bit didactic for my tastes but with a real knowledge of and connection with their audiences.



Just to give a sense of the scale of the festival, two venues were used, both 2 - 300 seaters with proscenium stages and the rest of the work happened in schools. Most shows played three times a day, with up to four different shows a day, and around 1000 children per day saw a show every day for the length of the festival. C'est pas mal, n'est pas?

This year around 60% of shows were international. One Swiss, a Swedish, a French and a South African, all with varying aesthetics and linguistic ability. The French piece was a beautiful story about two boys at Christmas time but in such dense French that I had to see it twice and get the actors to spend an hour explaining it to me in detail before I really appreciated it. The Swiss was a visual treat with shadow work and crazy characters and the Swedish piece was about a Golden Eagle who was afraid of heights.

Though some pieces were more successful than others and some worked better in different circumstances. It was really the audiences that were the most startling factor. It was not strange to see 300 children from 3 - 6 standing in rows, one's hands on the back of another's shoulders, perfectly well behaved in 30 degree heat.



Through the week our party was graced by the arrival of Suzanne Lebeau from le Carrousel in Montreal who is a fascinating writer, and Ivica the new Secretary General of Assitej International who flew into the wrong airport and then spent his first morning being arrested on suspicion of spying, which it turns out isn't the best way to begin a festival.

On the Sunday we all popped down to the Cameroon TV studios for what I thought was going to be a quick look around before a show, but it turned out we were booked to appear on the Cameroon version of This Morning and three by three over the next few hours we sat in on sofas amidst TV sets, fashion shows and outside broadcasts being interviewed about the festival. It was brilliant, not least because as soon as we got back to the hotel the maid said she'd just seen me on the tele! Fame. And the following day Cendrine and I got invited to the Opera at the Hilton because they'd seen us on the tele! Again another innovation I'd be happy to see at any Children's Theatre festival.

Though there was difficulty and at times frustration, not least from the performing companies about the logistics of the festival and quality of some of the work, and it was tricky, the most incredible thing about thi great festival is that it exists at all. If you add to that that this is the twelfth time it has happened and then think that about 10,000 young people have seen a piece of theatre this week, in large part thanks to the mammoth effort of half a dozen very committed people, then it really is something quite incredible.

I'll leave you now with a Swedish proverb that made more and more sense as the week went on:

'If there's room in the heart, there's room for the butt.'

Steve Collins 08