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orld Festival of

Children's Theatre:

Antalya 1992

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*W*ith limited resources and manpower, the newly formed National Centre of the International Amateur Theatre Association of Turkey, must be congratulated for its enormous success in hosting the World Festival of Children's Theatre in April, 1992 in the scenic city, Antalya. Accommodating 500 energetic children and their teachers from 25 countries in an 8-day festival using four very different performing venues proved no easy job. With the

support of the Ministry of Culture and the Foundation of National Theatre and Opera, the organizing committee was able to house all the delegates in comfortable hotels and to transport them to theatres of selected places of interest as well as mobilize a great number of local families to provide the children with the special experience of outings or home stays. With no previous management experience of a large scale international event and only a small number of volunteers, the organizing committee was not without difficulties in solving the many unexpected problems posed by nature and man. The thunder storm, for example, forced the opening ceremony venue to be changed from an elegant ancient theatre to a humble school hall. The shortage of funds also imposed considerable constraints in logistics. The small size of the municipal hall also at times frustrated both the performers and the audience.

What then, has this feast of children's theatre achieved? The children, who were apparently tired in the later part of the week, had learnt much about organizing themselves, rushing from performance to performance and from dining hall to dining hall. They must have, by the end of their stay learnt to appreciate the many different kinds of music, costumes, songs and dances, as well as national flags of a few more countries. They probably exchanged addresses with some new friends who might not even speak their language. A casual encounter in the theatre or at the picnic at this age might lead to some meaningful collaboration across the

oceans years later. At any rate, the children might have learnt that there are numerous peoples who have different ways of life in the world and yet they share the same love of the stage. The little experience they have had with the workshop leaders also opened new windows to their theatre.

For those like me, who had the privilege of conducting workshops for the children, the Antalya experience was indeed valuable. As it was challenging for me to work with children who speak none of the languages I know, I had to devise body language to communicate with

the children who were very different in age and experience. The youngest in my group was nine while the oldest as 16 years old! The other great thing was that the workshop leaders who stayed in the same hotel, were able to exchange views in the short time they had, regarding the formats and focus of their workshops. These useful idea exchange sessions were very helpful.

Every children's theatre practitioner probably has his or her own preference in terms of training methodology, styles, creative process, and teaching priority. But the festival's offer of children's theatre from varied cultural backgrounds presumably broadened everyone's perspective and

they would be more open minded in their approaches in the future. Some obviously felt that it is important to train the children with techniques and skills without which they will not be able to express themselves in the style of a particular tradition, be it realistic or stylistic. Some believed that children at a young age should be let free in their expression of emotions, thus encouraging them to improvise with minimum interference. I did hear some group leaders criticize the former, asserting that such a method would kill the creativity of the children. Such a view ignored the fact that if we want to pass on our artistic heritage to the

next generation, whether ballet, Chinese opera or Korean pansori, the children must be disciplined in the necessary technique. The creativity comes later after they have mastered the technique, in their interpretation of classical works. Improvization is a good exercise to stretch the imagination of children, and it is undeniably a valuable means of training children. Improvization pieces are valuable as long as they remain classroom exercises. It is unfair to present them in the theatre, as the unedited version often lacks dramatic

sophistication. In my view, leaders of children's theatre groups who intend to present performances at festivals that showcase the alertness of child performers are responsible for guiding and coaching the children and ensuring that the pieces have artistic merit worth attention.

Preparing a big feast with so many dishes for the children is well intended but the organizer seemed to forget about the limit of the stomach. Being unable to digest the food is a waste of good food. Sometimes one forgets that one

can achieve more by digesting less. The next Festival organizer might like to consider the following:

1. Present no more than three one-hour plays a day, thus giving time for the leaders to discuss the shows with the children.
2. Give time slots for the children to interact among themselves.
3. Provide time for the leaders to exchange experiences in the format of symposium with panel discussions or paper presentations.