

'Play Space, Safe Space' towards the development of a paradigm of education for the 21st Century

On behalf of IDEA, the International Drama/Theatre and Education Association, I would like to congratulate BVTS, the German national association, and their partners the Rostock Academy of Music and Theater and the Department of Special Education at the University of Rostock on their choice of such a relevant theme *Play Space, Safe Space*, at this moment of global insecurity, uncertainty and crisis within education. I would also like to thank our partners for their decisions to attach IDEA's 2009 General Council meeting to their international conference and to fund the participation of many IDEA practitioners and scholars from the 'developing world'. Without this reflex of solidarity, our discussions, workshop demonstrations and IDEA decisions in the coming days would be impoverished and incomplete.

How serious is the global crisis that we are living in at this time? When I visited Hong Kong and Taiwan recently, I was shocked to learn of school teachers committing suicide in public. In Latin America, all the schools I visit and work in reveal teachers and pupils 'learning' behind bars. Across Africa, teachers told me stories of digging graves for entire communities decimated by the effects of war and the lack of access to treatments for Aids. In Europe, North America and Oceania, teachers and pupils 'teach and learn' under digital surveillance against bullying, armed assault and massacre; and throughout the world, teachers speak of psychological and emotional illness and profound demoralization, unable to cope with the relentless pressure of 'performance' goals they are expected to meet.

These critical levels of tension and violence within schools and communities – in global cities as well as in small towns – make a conference concerned with 'play and safety' profoundly relevant. If we consider how teachers also have to deal – alone and unprepared – with the daily effects of the patriarchal family in crisis, the sexualization of childhood and the replacement of *socialization processes* of play by the *consuming of products*, and place these intimate dramas in the larger global theatre of fear of unemployment, disappearing savings and unsustainable futures, this conference – both in its organized program and informal spaces – will be contributing to no less than the worldwide quest for a new paradigm of education, capable of nurturing and sustaining our humanity.



Of course, teachers are not alone. Young people throughout the world are also advocating the need for change. In China, primary school pupils use theatre to dramatise their fear of global warming. In Africa, adolescents dramatize their concern about the lack of drinking water and how its scarcity will destroy solidarity and community. In Latin America, they dramatize the rising statistics of youth suicide, a self-destructive response to a lack of vision or social project. And in Europe, young people dramatize their numbed impotence and passivity, unable to respond to a constant tsunami of global violence and despair.



This youth response to the globalization of fear and despair motivated the formation of a World Alliance for Arts Education (WAAE) between IDEA and the International Societies for Music Education (ISME) and Education through Art (InSEA), in the days before the first UNESCO world conference on arts education, held in Lisbon in 2006. I opened our WAAE contribution to the conference by reading our first *Joint Declaration* which generated hope throughout the world precisely because it responded to a global need and announced that practitioners and scholars around the world are ready to deliver a new arts-based paradigm of education. We have the expertise, the curricula and the models of evaluation capable of responding to the challenges of our times.

Many of IDEA's members, colleagues and their networks are participating in this quest for a new paradigm both through the WAAE and diverse global spaces like the World Social Forum. As President of IDEA, I have had the privilege to work with other arts educators within these sister organizations and to witness mature creative pedagogies capable of responding to the new challenges of our age. In every corner of the world, I have visited schools, colleges and cultural centres which are already generating new performances of solidarity and cooperation, drawing on decades of experiment, research and collaboration.



Industrial waste is being creatively recycled into musical instruments and epic sculptures of vision. Rows of desks are being placed against walls to transform classrooms of complicity,

competition and alienation into performances of community and innovation; and drama pedagogues, theatre artists and university departments of performing arts are working with teachers, police officers, prisoners and communities of special needs to nurture confidence, human rights, historical memory, networks of cooperation and the intercultural sensitivities needed in our digital and plurinational societies.

Drama and theatre educators in the 90 or so countries that make up the present IDEA community understand that a *safe place to play* can nurture, heal and transform the imagination and enable children, young people and adults to practice new identities and worlds. A paradigm of education based on artistic languages is coinciding with an emerging global consensus that we need to change the world's performance before it is too late.

The simultaneously motivating and overwhelming question that we all carry within us, however, is 'will there be enough time?' Though there is a consensus among *us* that the artistic languages need to be fully integrated into education to nurture the multiple intelligences and capacity to live in a permanently-changing, technologically-driven, information-rich world, we are all too aware that in many 'developed societies' the arts in education are being replaced by laptops and 'basic skills', and that in every region of the world, most parents and teachers still think of the arts and creative industries as elitist luxuries or just irrelevant to their lives.



In response to that question, we need to be courageous in our diagnosis of *where we are now*. We need to honestly recognise that it is one step to sign and proclaim a Joint Declaration, but it is quite another process to learn how to collaborate and to build the culture of a sustainable institution. The WAAE has needed the past two years to learn how each of our artistic languages and the institutions that make up our Alliance might meet and work together in such a way that both respects the specific culture and history of each discipline and builds an integrated strategy and programme. Our 2007 Summit was a first landmark in this process of listening and learning to collaborate. But it also revealed our fragile self-esteem and how unprepared we are to network and map our existing resources, to demonstrate and prove our pedagogical claims, and to advocate in the language of the fears and needs of pupils and their parents and teachers. We need to recognise too the distance between us and the entrepreneurs, industrialists and policy-makers who we know we must sensitize and partner to sustain our world project.

Our 2008 Summit tried to turn outwards to build the strategic arguments and key projects to enable us to turn every teacher and parent into an advocate for the arts-based paradigm we can envisage. But we still needed time to develop the interdisciplinary sensitivities and,

above all, the self-confidence to experiment as advocates and protagonists in our meetings with parents, politicians, entrepreneurs and journalists. Teacher education today needs to nurture the confidence to innovate and perform so that we can all transform resistance to the arts into the recognition that we have a ripe proposal to respond to the remarkable needs of our times. I am confident we can move towards this in our 2009 Summit, in preparation for the 2010 UNESCO world conference on arts education in Seoul.



These needs are truly challenging! To demonstrate them, I want to sing a lyric written by young people at risk.

*On the dole in arcade city
Mind turned numb
By bleak self-pity
Finds refuge in the paradise
Of high-tech dreams and neon lies
Uninspired
Uninspired
Uninspired*

I sing this youth lyric partly to demonstrate the self-confidence that theatre nurtured in me as a student director that I think we need to nurture in all human beings. The song itself was composed by teenagers from the periphery of post-industrial Manchester in 1988; its lyrics are relevant for a few reasons. First, they voice an important 'structure of feeling' which lies on the threshold between industrial and knowledge-based societies, at the moment when consumerism was 'emerging' as a powerful socio-cultural force of seduction or 'interpellation'. Second, they powerfully evoke the void in the consumer (created by work and unemployment in both industrial and post-industrial contexts), that drives the compulsive need to participate in the 'performance' of shopping centres. And third, the lyrics hint at the critical insight which can follow the discovery that the promises performed and consumed in the shopping centre are illusory and unfulfilling. In the past twenty years, these three dimensions have fused into what might be called a 'compulsive theatre' of alienated desire and co-dependent need, where the consumer is both fascinated audience and deluded protagonist in an unsustainable global performance. I believe that only drama and theatre education can respond to that need, if our teachers have the skills and the self-confidence to apply them.

But this also means that we need to avoid unintentionally cultivating deeply authoritarian subjectivities through the aesthetics of our pedagogies. We know today's knowledge-based society requires the development of creative, multiple and empathetic intelligences. In addition to becoming visually and musically literate to be able to read critically the popular cultures that profoundly shape their identities and to be able to participate in the making of cultures, young people need to learn the skills of building and fulfilling shared aims. This requires the abilities to integrate different perspectives and adapt one's objectives in a

space of agreed values. This is particularly important in a time of when the very foundations of identity are being questioned by constant and accelerating change, the ceaseless production of images and flow of cultures across national borders, and the disintegration of community. The skills required to build a community of aims, methods and outcomes need creative, experimental and flexible intelligences which are cultivated not just through theatre production but by what I call 'performance literacy'. This is essential to meet not just the needs of knowledge-based societies but to acquiring the confidence of living and performing in a multicultural *participatory and deliberative* democracy.

I believe today, most educational philosophy recognises the theatrical dimension of our humanity: our simultaneous presence as actor and audience on all the stages where we live our lives (even before we are born and after we die). Less understood are the theatrical properties of all public space, be it the classroom, workplace or home. As in all dialogue, the gaze of the active listener focuses the 'performance' of the active speaker (even when 'silent'), and the more people who actively gaze with empathetic curiosity at the same space, the more focussed and enlarged anyone or anything that enters it becomes. Professional actors are trained to stimulate and craft this power to create their theatrical 'presence' and its aesthetic effects, particularly when the gaze is critical or sceptical. But rarely are teachers trained to read and deal pedagogically with the sense of vulnerability and even nakedness they may experience when meeting the combined critical and amplifying focus of their pupils, or to understand the critical and amplified power of their own gaze when they direct it at a pupil.

Rarely are teachers aware of how easily they can (and often do) redirect the gaze of the entire class onto an unprepared pupil, suddenly transforming parts of the auditorium of the classroom into a spot-lit stage where isolated pupils are expected to 'perform' the correct answer in front of their immediate and extended community. If this power of the teacher as actor and director of a 'community theatre' and the aesthetic potential of all spaces of performance were part of all teacher-training, teachers would rarely abuse this power 'accidentally'. More rarely still would they turn their classrooms into a confusing authoritarian 'theatre of complicity', where pupils silently witness and empathise with their fellow pupils as they are interrogated, judged and often chastised and humiliated, forbidden by the conventions of that theatre to speak or unable to safely intervene.

Performance-literate teachers are aware not just of how to create motivating community stages of confident performance, but also of how to build and protect confident stages of experimentation – transforming the fear of public failure into the magnified energy of creative risk. Rather than internalizing years of humiliation and complicity which result in the development of fearful, authoritarian subjectivities, pupils educated in a performance literate space of learning, acquire the capacity to perform and support the performance of others, creativity and confidently. Quite apart from experientially acquiring the skills of collective and flexible production and understanding the relation between the rigorous discipline and creative unpredictability of the rehearsal process, pupils acquire essential capacities for reinterpretation, innovation, cooperation and aesthetic rigour demanded by the professions to meet the needs of a permanently-changing world.

I am often asked if I really believe that governments and parents are open to rethink education and particularly our artistic languages so profoundly. Today, I answer that by sharing a remarkable story.

In April 2000, in the course of building a monumental theatre with indigenous people to mark 500 years since the colonization of Brazil, in Bahia, where the Portuguese landed, 200 armed military police bulldozed its foundations to protect the stage for official celebrations of the 500th anniversary of the 'discovery' of Brazil. Despite anguished pleas by indigenous leaders and international letters of protest, the anniversary itself was marked by the most

violent repression. The performance literacy collective process through dance narrative and storytelling to build the theatre of healing to the Other 500 Years was renewed and completed in 2001.

Seven years later in a *Performing the World* conference in New York, I was asked to introduce 25 Brazilians whose interpreter had been delayed. They danced with joy when I greeted them in Portuguese. When I spoke to them later to find who they were, they told me that they were the Military Police of Bahia, working through arts education to transform their relationships with young people in the peripheries of Salvador. The next day, I attended their afro-dance workshops and later, they attended my Transformance workshop; the following evening, all the conference participants wept with amazement as the police concluded their performance of the popular history of Brazil with a dance, in uniform, which showed the historic and emerging images of the police, in one and the same body.

You cannot imagine how you have transformed my understanding of police, I told them at breakfast, the next morning, as we were preparing to depart, and I shared my story of the Other 500 Years monument. Beside me one of the officers was crying. I asked him why. *I was there, in that destruction, he wept, hunting you down. To kill you.*



I am now giving pilot workshops with the same military police inside a safe collective stage where they can undo centuries of exclusion and violation to create a new 'solidarity-based' citizen police community.

The fact that one of the most violent and conservative institutions in Brazil is *choosing* to integrate the languages of the arts into its training and culture is a significant shift. I believe it reflects a growing awareness that the intimate and daily violence caused by global economic competition, increasing social polarization and the predatory nature of consumerism require new skills and capacities. Like the police, and the young writers of the new lyrics of the 21 century, we all need to be able to read our collusion within the performance of consumerism, as audiences and actors, to create an alternative performance. I believe that performance literacy is an essential key to developing the ethics, aesthetics and performance – at work and in their homes and communities – of a sustainable future.

So it may be that the most important dimension of the conference and General Council meeting this week will be the creation and protection of safe and playful space *for us* to experiment with our performances as affirmative, questioning and dialogic actors and

audiences. If we can learn from each other how to transform different unsafe spaces and moments into stages of playful risk, we will be able to widen the stage through our own performance of another possible world.

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