

## **Internationales Treffen fur Jugendtheater**

### **A Report by Lizzie Eldridge D. Lit. (Theatre)**

#### ***Introduction***



This Report details a visit made by students and staff from the Drama Centre Malta to the Sapperlot Theatre Festival (31<sup>st</sup> May to 4<sup>th</sup> June 2009). 10 students aged 12 to 15 attended the Festival and were accompanied by Lizzie Eldridge (co-director of the performance) and Marvic Doughty who provided administrative and additional support during the trip. The Drama Centre students performed a devised piece, *Wied Hagra*, based on a script written by Mario Azzopardi.

#### ***Background Information***

At the start, it was envisaged that the students would be from an older age group (15-24) but due to other projects happening this year, this was not possible. While certain problems arose on account of the age of the group, these lessened somewhat as time went on and the actual experience of the rehearsal process, and the festival itself, had a marked and visible impact on the students.

Work began on the performance in January 09 through twice weekly rehearsals. Additional time was later provided and Albert Marshall was invited to co-direct the project. Extra time and staff were largely introduced due to problems caused by the age and immaturity of some of the students. Prior to Easter, absenteeism had been an ongoing concern although this was later remedied.

#### ***The Sapperlot Festival***

This was the first time Malta had been represented at this particular festival, a festival specifically designed for and aimed at youth theatre groups. An international forum with a pedagogical aim, the participating companies came from Northern Italy, Belgium, Austria, Lithuania, Slovakia, Germany, Israel, the USA as well as Malta. On average, 4 performances took place each day with discussion groups taking place on the final 3 days. These discussion groups were split into two: one for the actors and one for the directors. This division worked particularly well in terms of encouraging the younger actors to articulate their opinions with their peers without the possible intimidation of more experienced participants.

Overall, the festival was very well organized. Our group was met by members of the Sapperlot team on arrival at the hotel and we were given a tour of the 2 theatre spaces as well as Bressanone. The festival events began that same evening with a gathering for introductions and announcements about the week's events. The opening was fun and well suited to a younger audience and all the theatre companies were introduced individually. In addition, a 'secret friend' system was established whereby all the actors connected with someone from another group via messages on a central notice board. This was an

excellent idea, promoting immediate contact between the groups. However, there was no formal opportunity for the adults to socialize and this was one of the weaknesses throughout the week.

Each theatre group was also assigned a tutor from the members of the Sapperlot team, giving each group an immediate point of contact. Although this worked to some extent, as the festival progressed, this contact decreased considerably.

The programme of events throughout the week was very intense with an average of 4 performances a day as well as other activities. Our group was exposed to a wide range of theatrical styles and levels of performance. However – and this was surprising given the international status of the festival – the majority of plays were not in English. Sometimes, this was not a problem but where plays were more heavily verbal, it did cause difficulties in comprehension.

Social activities were organized every evening for the actors, giving our group a great opportunity to mix with others in a safe environment.

### ***Reflection on the Drama Centre's performance: Wied Hagra***

Our group performed on Wednesday 3<sup>rd</sup> June at 2pm. We were given access to the theatre at 10am that same day. We were told that technical support would be provided and this did happen but by chance rather than planning. We were expected to have our own technical personnel but we had not been informed of this until the day of the performance itself. Luckily, a technician was on hand to plot our lights and I operated the lighting and sound for our show with his assistance. However, this meant I had little opportunity to evaluate the standard of the actual performance itself.



Feedback on our show was given at the final discussion group on Thursday morning. There was some confusion concerning elements of the story and the significance of certain characters. For example, no-one understood the meaning of the framing character, *Il-Mekkuk*. The strength of the Maltese segments was noted and the suggestion made that the whole show could have been performed in Maltese.

A certain disparity in acting abilities was also noted with the girls perceived as being much stronger than the boys. The material was also seen as being extremely challenging for actors of this age-group.

### ***Conclusion***

From the students' point of view, the experience of attending this festival was unique and a major learning experience. They had the opportunity to experience diverse modes of theatre and to make connections with people from a wide range of countries and cultures. The chance to witness very high standards of performance was also significant to their own development as actors.

From my own perspective as co-director, this festival was also extremely valuable although it highlighted certain weaknesses in our own organization and process. While it was a pleasure to witness the students' delighted response to the festival events, the group

was very young and, perhaps more importantly, inexperienced as actors. Some of the actors performing at Sapperlot were in their 20s and a lot of the productions were of a semi-professional standard.

One of the things that also struck me was that the majority of plays were not performed in English. The Drama Centre had assumed from the start that communicating to an international audience was paramount and thus the use of Maltese was only used sparingly.

I would definitely recommend that the Drama Centre make future contributions to this festival. It was a unique and highly beneficial experience for all concerned. For future visits, I would make the following recommendations:

- The group is selected according to ability and age
- The chosen material is selected in relation to the nature of the group
- Immediate contact is facilitated between the director and the festival organizers so issues about the use of language and technical requirements, for example, can be discussed from the outset
- Decision processes about dramatic material and appropriate students to take to the festival are made at an earlier stage, ideally a year in advance

I am aware that the Drama Centre works under a lot of pressure in terms of funding and availability of students and given this, our participation at Sapperlot was a huge success.