



danish delights

Lowdown Editor Jane Gronow attended the 39th Danish Festival for Children and Young People in Ballerup, Denmark. She reports back to *Lowdown* on her experience of the festival.

Imagine your office has been swept up in a whirly and dropped in the centre of a picturesque landscape complete with rolling fields, emerald green leaves, and giant red tulips. Where the locals have broad smiles, generous hearts and clever theatre that makes you want to burst into songs about rainbows. This is how I felt earlier in the year during my visit to Denmark to attend Festival 2009, the 39th Danish Festival for Children and Young People.

As one of the many international guests invited by The Danish Theatre Centre (Teatercentrum) and ASSITEJ Denmark, I was fortunate enough to witness the unfolding of this world famous festival. This year the annual festival was hosted by the Municipality of Ballerup, situated about 15km north-west of Copenhagen. Each year the festival is hosted by a different town and this year the Ballerup community opened their hearts and minds, theatres and schools

to host over 300 Danish theater makers, artists and performers as well as a host of international observers.

The first Festival was held in 1971 with the intention of promoting and supporting a new wave of Children's theatre. According to festival guide and Teatercentrum /ASSITEJ Demark representative Peter Manscher, up until 1968 children's theatre was produced by larger companies and was not particularly accessible or relevant to young people. It was not seen as professional art form and was unpopular with educated actors. In the seventies there was a rebellion against older institutionalised theatre seeing young theater professionals form the Association of Children's Theatre, now Teatercentrum. The dedication of the children's theatre community led to the showcasing of work through the festival. This provided a forum for discussing and developing the work, further legitimising the art form, which in turn supported the

strategy to lobby government for funding and support.

The festival has since become tradition and takes place every April, visiting all parts of Denmark. Children remain the primary focus and the festival provides children, young people and families across Denmark with quality theatre experiences. The Danish government currently reimburses cities and towns 50% of the costs of all children's theatre purchased. Due to the host city receiving a 50% reimbursement the hosting of the festival is an attractive opportunity. Cities across Demark bid for the role of festival host two, sometimes three years in advance.

As one of two major Danish festivals the April festival is celebrated as the largest theatre festival for children and young people in the world. The festival is uncensored and each year a community of creative and dedicated theatre practitioners come together to present nearly 600 performances. The companies perform for free, using the festival as an opportunity to showcase their work for presenters and also as a platform for creative development for newer pieces. The devotion of the children's theatre community is very impressive. Teatercentrum are the main festival organisers who

Above > Spaghetti for 3 to 8 year olds by Teatergruppen Batida.

care for the companies and artists by providing them with schedules, venues, accommodation and inexpensive catering.

This was my first international children's festival. It's challenging travelling on your own to a strange place with a different language, but you can only experience something for the first time once. But with most challenge comes reward and I'm always thrilled about having a steep learning curve attached to a cracker of a challenge! Program and map in hand I'm up for it.

It was an impressive program consisting of over 160 professional shows, performed by more than 100 professional Danish theatres. Performances cater for all age groups, 'Something for everyone – and for all ages.' Performances took place in schools, kindergartens and libraries across Ballerup. All shows are free!

In addition to Danish companies there were three international companies including Famile Flöz from Germany who presented *Teatro Delusio*, a fabulous show with the performers in masks giving us a glimpse of backstage theatre antics, a show that had me wriggling in my chair in delight.

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Belgian companies Kopergeitry and Studio Orka performed two very entertaining outdoor performances, *The Legend of Woesterdam* and *Lava – a soil investigation*.

As well as the suggested shows and performances, guests were invited to attend the official reception with the Mayor of Ballerup, the ASSITEJ International guest dinner, the Official Opening at the Ballerup Super Arena and the International Theatre Day with performances in English for the international guests and presenters.

Ballerup is not big and I am completely aware of my surroundings! Posters for the festival are everywhere and I calculate that the festival office can only be in one of three places: the Library (bibliotek), the big building with all the posters on it, or the other big building with all the posters on it. As it turns out I was wrong on all three. A rather huge marquee appears before my eyes and transforms into the Festival Café, festival central and my office away from...well... my office.

Queues to the library snake down the cobbled mall as families wait patiently and happily to receive

their free ticket allocation. There was plenty of entertainment including public performances of slapstick outdoor theater piece by musical theater group Teatergruppen Batida (one out of six shows of their in the festival program), large roving puppets and giveaways of festival chocolates and posters.

My schedule for the week was designed to allow me to get acquainted with Danish theater as well as meet with colleagues and professionals from Denmark and other countries. Loyal to my day by day program, I managed to see 29 shows in seven days. The majority of the work was in Danish, which was less challenging than I expected. Good theatre is good theatre and I was taken on some wonderful imaginative journeys, regardless of the language barrier.

I often found myself being led through classrooms and school yards on the hunt for the next venue but most performances were delivered in the Australian equivalent of school gymnasiums. As the doors opened we were led into a dark space and shimmied into position on the custom made seating. Each company provided their own seating, which packs into the company vans after the show, almost as if it's part of the



set. Seating caters for audiences from 20 to 200, with the raked seating starting with mats on the floor at the front, benches in the middle and tables at the back. Most settings are intimate ensuring an engaging experience.

The set up for most performances uses an eye level principle that brings the performance to the audience, creating a dialogue that assists in providing a connection with the best theatre critics in the world: children. There is respect for the audience that affects the type of stories that are told. It's an exchange that determines how the audience's imagination is engaged and how they respond. At one performance the 14 to 16 year old audience were obviously bored, the show wasn't doing it for them and they weren't shy about showing it. From about half way into the piece the young audience would start clapping at the end of

each scene as if to say thanks very much but I've had enough now...!

The Danish are known for producing quality work for babies and young children. Anyone who had the joy (and heartbreak) of seeing *Goodbye Mr. Muffin* during the last ASSITEJ World Congress and festival in Adelaide may understand that this is a shining example. I expected to see more and wasn't disappointed.

Pieces such as *Spaghetti*, by aforementioned Teatergruppen Batida, had me and new friend, Shir Kan from the Mini Mobile Children's Circus in Afghanistan, bopping along and singing the song.

Himmelsange (Songs From Above) by Teater Refleksion captivated the audience made up of two to four year olds, with stunning storytelling using intricately designed miniature scenarios set inside star shaped containers with star shaped lids. The performance was delivered inside a round white screen of fabric about three metres in diameter. About 20 to 30 adults and children sat cross legged inside the space for the 30 minute performance. I was transfixed by the female performer that really made me want my mum! No one made a peep (regardless of cramp)...it was magic. Another Muffin moment under my belt!

Opsang, the hard-edged teen comedy created by BaggårdTeatret and Mungo Park Allerød.



Theatre for teenagers with political themes addressing social, cultural and political issues was quite prevalent within the program. *Opsang (The Lecture)* was one of my picks of the festival. Musical theatre 'handing out theatrical wallops and musical slaps to the Danish youth'. It was delivered in the form of a teaching lecture and took the mostly older teen audience through the seven deadly sins with a brash and raw musical dialogue that worked its way through the sins in ways that remained connected to a teenager's world. Other pieces covered issues such as loneliness and cyber-relationships (Graense-Loes's, *Fucking Alone*) and *Cut* which took on self mutilation and self harming.

There isn't a single way or aesthetic that determines Danish theatre for children and young people, but there each piece is delivered with high level of sophistication and professionalism that was impressive. Errors were few if any. Most technical difficulties just didn't seem to matter, such were the skill level and professionalism of the performers.

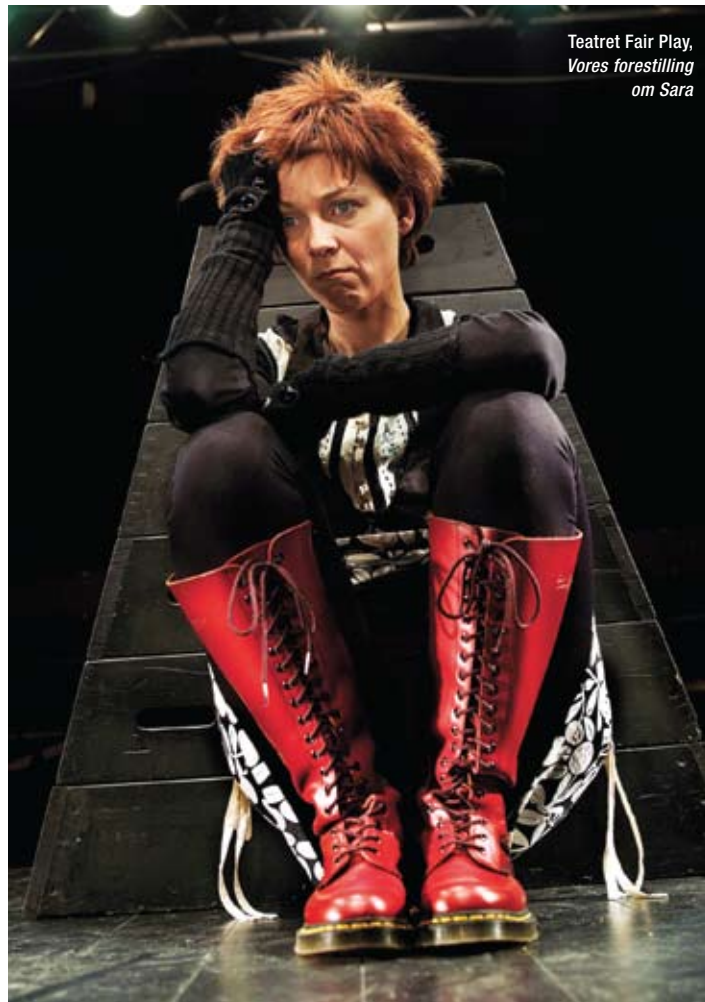
The set design and construction was also a special treat. The props were clever, sometimes mysterious, mostly enchanting and always functional. Many of the sets had hidden compartments with cleverly designed gadgets that greatly assisted in the telling of the story and had the seven year old in me saying 'wow' a lot. Famous Danish theatre troupe Gruppe 38 demonstrate this in their very clever and international hit *Sonatina*, which tells the story of Little Red Riding Hood with the aid of a custom made miniature pickup truck, live hen, newly laid egg and a very nasty looking potato masher as the big bad wolf. It's just clever!

During my visit I met with USA researcher Amy Jensen who has been in Denmark for the past year studying dramaturgy and theatricality in Danish children's theatre. Amy has spent the last year watching Danish children's theatre performances and rehearsals and speaking with theatre artists, attempting to capture the essence of what makes Danish theatre unique. Amy says:

'When asked to describe Danish children's theatre, most theatre artists begin by pointing out that with over 100 companies, you will not find one single aesthetic or one single way in which a performance will unfold. There are, of course, shared elements among companies.

By and large, performances are often played over a period of years, rather than ending after a few weeks. Instead of filling houses, most companies prefer to perform for relatively small audiences, keeping performances intimate. Many productions have only a few actors and sometimes a musician. However, even here there are exceptions. Companies may occasionally perform for larger audiences, and there are companies that perform street theatre or for large theatres. There are both productions with larger casts and companies who combine and create a larger ensemble for a particular production. However, these elements describe more of the practicalities, rather than the artistry, of these performances.'

This was a festival for children and young people that delivered polished and sophisticated theatre oozing with community ownership, celebrated with a level of joy and passion that provides not only amazing arts experiences for young people but that promotes, and shows off the uniqueness of Danish Children's theatre, providing support that promotes and develops work that



Teatret Fair Play, Vores forestilling om Sara



Participants of the International Platform workshop session planning the 17th ASSITEJ World Congress and Festival, Copenhagen/Malmoe in 2011.

is being produced for young people in Denmark.

It makes me wonder if we have lessons to learn from the Danish model that supports theatre for young audiences and the people who make it happen. I was so impressed with the smooth operations of a very large festival; the support for the creative development of the work; the lobbying of government that resulted in the provision of free arts experiences for young people; the organisation and gracious hosting of over 100 international presenters and guests, the engagement with

young audiences. There's also something pretty impressive about the chocolate but I think that may have something to do with the cows not the arts! Still both are rich and tasty and leave you wanting more. ✨

Jane Gronow is the Editor of *Lowdown Magazine*. Her invitation to attend and write about the Danish 39th Festival was supported by ASSITEJ Denmark, Arts SA and Carclew Youth Arts. Thank you to all wonderful people that made the journey such a special treat that really did make her sing about rainbows... a lot.