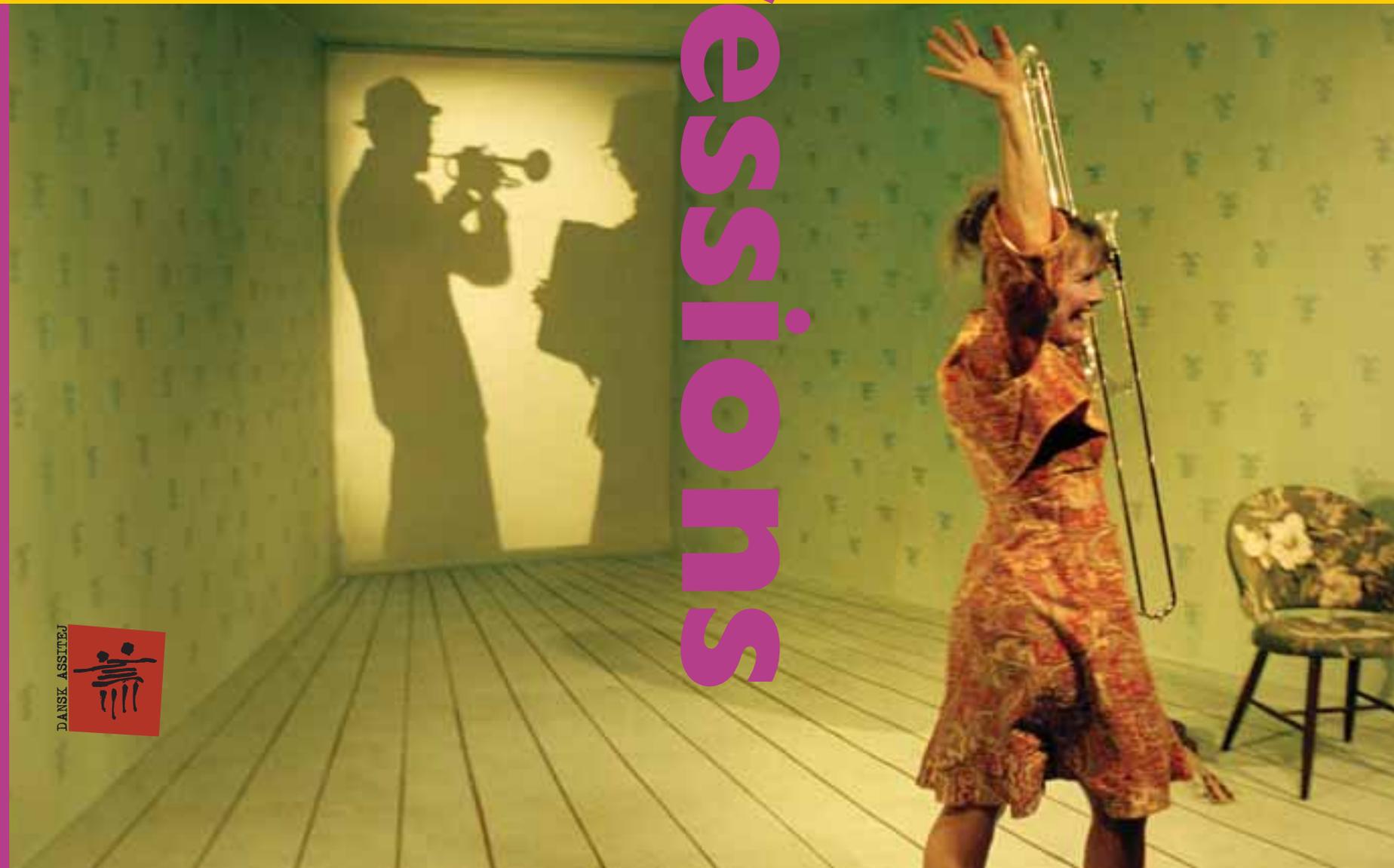


# Impressions

**Theatre for Children  
and Young People in  
Denmark**

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## New Impressions...

Since re-forming in 1983, ASSITEJ Denmark has developed into an organisation comprising at present 55 professional theatres that produce shows for children and young people. Our prime task is to create international contacts and work for understanding, regardless of political and cultural differences. As a result, we often venture into collaboration with countries and regions that are otherwise excluded for political or historical reasons. The power and energy of Danish children's theatre plays a major part in our efforts, and we think we have managed to transfer this energy to our international work.

The present publication provides six new "impressions" of the current artistic and political landscape for children's theatre in Denmark, for your information and inspiration. May the work of ASSITEJ continue for many years to come, and may we look forward to ongoing co-operation with our friends and colleagues all over the world.

Yours sincerely,  
Flemming Holk  
Chairman of ASSITEJ Denmark

# The Motivation

by **Lotte Faarup**, Actor, Stage Director, and Member of the Artistic Management of Corona La Balance - the Danish National Ensemble for Children's Theatre

Why play theatre for children? And why bother to answer this question at all? Have we not already answered it time and time again? When we ask the politicians to support us, when the people from the press want their stories, when the buyers need to promote us - we have all the answers ready and prepared. So why must we look for still more reasons...? Simply because the answer we found last year rings false when we repeat it mindlessly. This question calls for a new answer every time it is posed. Why play theatre for children?

If we ask the question, and do not have the answer already laid out, we become creative. We think. We work. We seek. We sense what moves us, and what moves others. We sense what is most important to us. Right now. Why play theatre for children? Which story? Is it important to the children? Is it important to their adults? What do I want from these children? What is my business?

The answer will change according to our experiences and the reality that surrounds us.



Apart from member theatre contributions, ASSITEJ Denmark also benefits from the support of the Danish Arts Council, with additional project funding from the Nordic Council of Ministers, the Danish Centre for Cultural Development and the Danish Actors' Association.



Theatre for children in Denmark has gone through periods in which its development mainly took place on the political front, while later periods have highlighted its artistic expression. The world changes, we change; there are always new stories to tell - new goals for the meeting between children and the theatre.

In my view, the most important reason to play theatre for children - right now - is to search for a feeling of community based on a dialogue between the theatre and the children. Dialogue can mean many things, and if we continue to build on our artistic experiences, there is no limit to the shape and form of this dialogue. However, a dialogue will always be an exchange between two parties in which we observe and are observed; we listen and we are listened to. We act together.

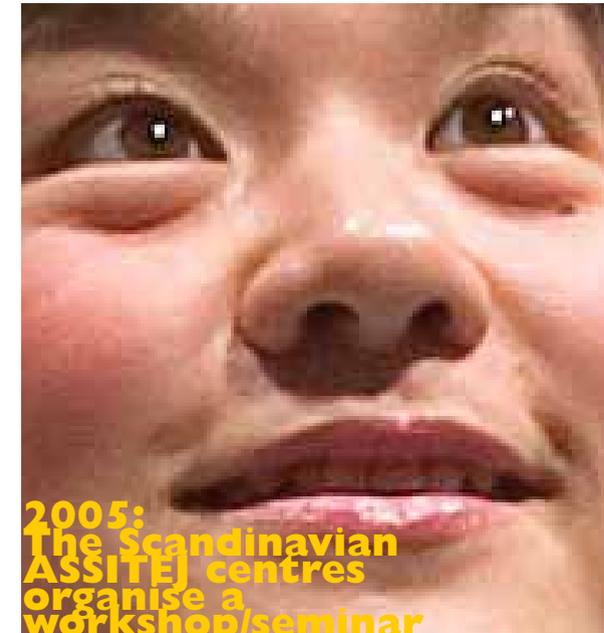
It seems to me that in our lives today, as adults, we demand more and more freedom to fulfil our individual needs. Needs that also become our children's. We refuse to set limits to our activity. How far can we get as individuals? Would we bother to help other people, if we were required to pay a price? Do we, in fact, just want to be left alone? Is this what we should teach our children?

I feel a strong urge to combine artistic ambition in the theatre with a social commitment. I am convinced that theatre is meant to make us need each other, and become involved with each other.

I would like to address children and young people who do not normally go to the theatre.

I would like theatre to participate in the reality that surrounds us. Not to confine the dialogue to concrete answers, or to give less priority to artistic work, but to use our art to build bridges between people, attitudes, prejudices, cultures and experiences.

It is time that we find an alternative to the individually unrestrained consumption of unconcerned entertainment that neither satisfies nor fulfils. Children's theatre should be a place where, together, we experience something of value. And where we are given the feeling that we can accomplish things together. We may, of course, choose to be annoyed by having to defend, over and over again, matters we consider to be self-evident. But we can also choose to be proud of the fact that we are persistent in trying to answer those same questions.



**2005:  
The Scandinavian  
ASSITEJ centres  
organise a  
workshop/seminar  
and a festival in  
Jordan in  
collaboration with  
ASSITEJ Jordan and  
children's theatre  
representatives from  
Lebanon, Iraq, and  
Syria. The purpose  
is to develop and  
strengthen existing  
networks in the  
field of theatre  
for children and  
young people in  
the region, and  
also between  
the region and  
Scandinavia.**

# The Variation

by **Carsten Jensen**, Author, Journalist, and Editor of the Children's Theatre Magazine



**2005/06: The Red Catalogue presents 121 children's theatres offering shows of every kind for all age ranges. The catalogue is distributed free of charge to schools, libraries, theatres, and cultural institutions nationwide.**

Although Denmark is a fairly small country, we are fortunate enough to be the birthplace of Hans Christian Andersen - and the cradle of so rich a children's theatre culture that it is quite a fairy tale in itself. The country is the home of more than 120 children's theatres. These are mostly small companies, all of which are professional in the sense that their shows are included in the state "reimbursement" system, meaning that the state provides municipal or regional institutions with a



50% refund of the price for a show. In addition to this, there are a number of theatres with productions that are not eligible for reimbursement, but which nevertheless perform and sell shows on a professional or semi-professional level. We should also take into account the big theatres in the major cities - like the Royal Theatre in Copenhagen - all of which offer shows for children and families throughout the season. By all means an impressive supply of theatre for children and

young people in a country with a population of only 5.5 million. This, however, also implies that not all theatres function on a full-time basis, and therefore many theatre people have to take other jobs, or work as freelancers with periods of unemployment. So there is great diversity and a substantial amount of difference in quality, which can make it difficult for outsiders - and even for Danish theatre organisers - to navigate through the varied landscape.

Over the odd 40 years in which modern Danish theatre for children and young people has existed and developed, a number of characteristics have crystallised:

Theatres have tried to sustain the vision of creating art on the children's own grounds through extensive touring activity, and by performing theatre in children's everyday environment. As a rule, shows are performed for a limited number of spectators (down to as few as 30, and rarely more than 120), and there are fixed - and strict - rules for the age range of the individual shows.

On the other hand free rein is given when it comes to the contents and expression of the shows. There are many (imaginative, crazy, strange - and trivial) dramatisations of fairy tales and good children's books, but the children's theatres are also responsible for the lion's share of new, original Danish drama written specifically for children and young people. And no subjects are taboo. From bullying, paedophilia, death, and destruction through everyday existentialism, absurdities, and fun. Some theatres specialise in storytelling, dramatic theatre, or opera, others in puppetry, dance, or performance, while yet others are devoted to musical or physical theatre. Theatres may produce shows exclusively for tiny children (2-5 years) or, for instance, only for youths (14-18 years), but the majority try to cover different genres and age ranges.

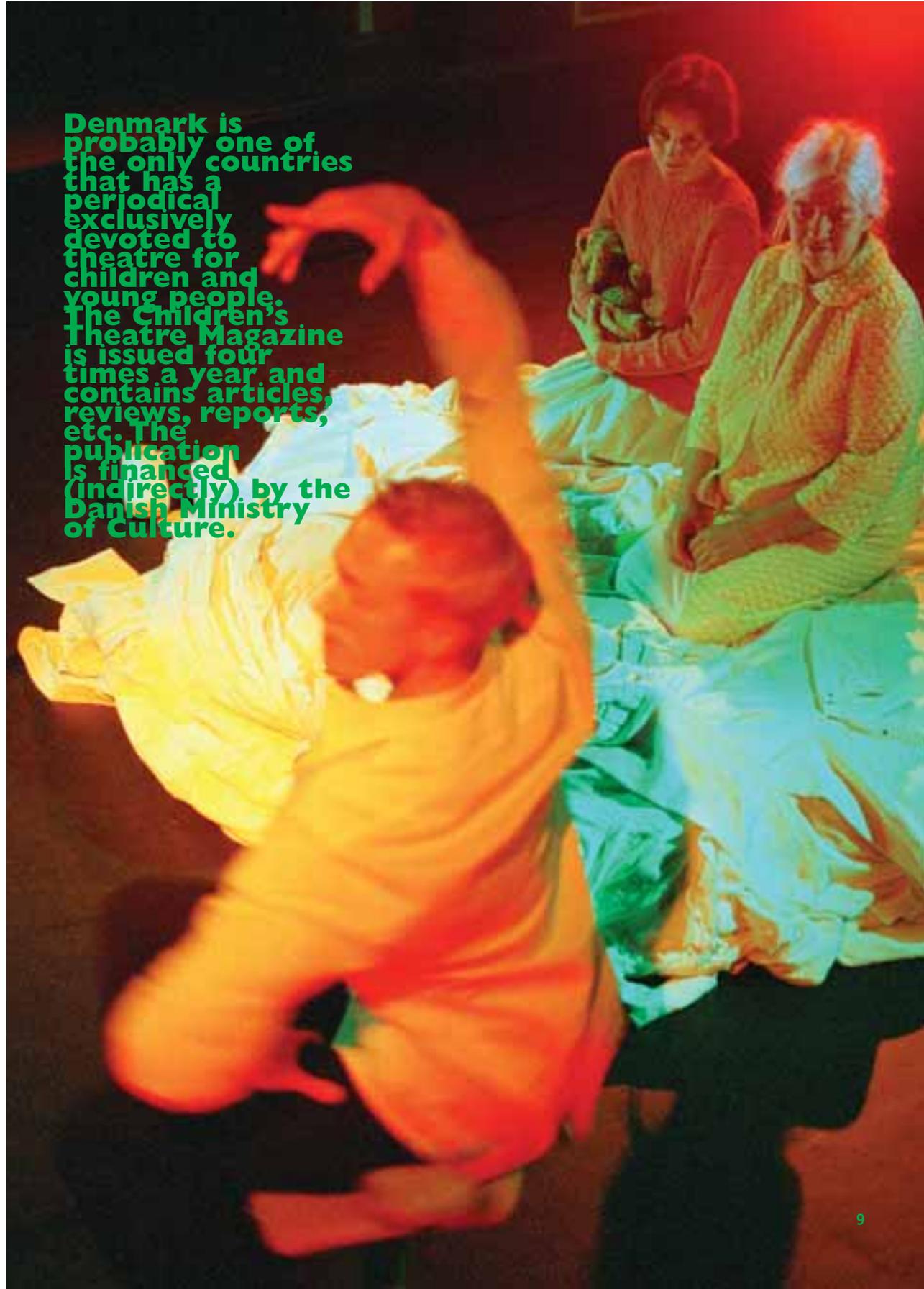
This provides us with many exciting experiences and performances. But, in fairness, also quite a few dubious and sometimes even

absolutely awful ones. Fortunately, there is an ongoing discussion among professionals in Danish children's theatre about quality. Both among the children's theatres themselves (models for quality have been agreed on, and a so-called "quality commission" has been established), and among theatres and presenters (through seminars, conferences, etc.). Under the umbrella of the Ministry of Culture and the Arts Council there is also a "reimbursement committee" consisting of theatre professionals that are appointed to evaluate, by way of showcases, whether or not up and coming children's theatres have the professional capability to be eligible for state reimbursement.

The subsidised children's theatres consist mainly of state supported touring theatres, regional theatres, and small city theatres, but we are also seeing an increasing number of unsubsidised theatres. This creates a certain polarisation in the field, as many theatres are forced to produce shows in spite of ailing economy, and consequently also have poor sales figures.

The interest, however, for experiencing Danish theatre for children and young people abroad is ever on the rise. The increasing number of international guests and organisers present at the April festival has resulted in a substantial number of tours abroad. During the period 1999-2004 more than 30 Danish children's theatres presented more than 50 different shows in more than 40 different countries. A total of over 1,150 Danish presentations abroad!

Denmark is probably one of the only countries that has a periodical exclusively devoted to theatre for children and young people. The Children's Theatre Magazine is issued four times a year and contains articles, reviews, reports, etc. The publication is financed (indirectly) by the Danish Ministry of Culture.



# The Organisation

by **Michael Ramløse**, Chairman of BTS, the Danish Association of Children's Theatres

**2005: ASSITEJ Denmark and Serbia-Montenegro organise a theatre co-production for youths with seminars for participants from the West-Balkan countries. One of the main purposes is to further an exchange and development of the participants' culturally based professional skills in the field of theatre for youths.**



The history of modern theatre for children in Denmark is the story of a movement - the theatre form emerged from the anti-authoritarian communities and tendencies of the late 60's and the 70's. Therefore it also tells a story of solidarity, and of shared victories and defeats. It is the story of a theatre form that has attained a natural position in the Danish theatre landscape - not as something given to us, but as something we have fought for over the years. We are here, not because of, but in spite of!

The Association of Children's Theatres (BTS) has been - and still is - the vehicle, the organisation that has conveyed the dreams, visions and demands of children's theatre to the level of politics. BTS is also the internal discussion and education forum responsible for helping to set the standards for good children's theatre in our country.

As any visitor to the Danish April festival can see for themselves, theatre for children in Denmark is both full of vitality and extremely all-embracing. You will see shows at the festival that range from sublime through good and mediocre to completely unacceptable.

As an organisation, BTS embraces most of this. It is not for this article to decide, whether organising as widely as possible is our strong point (as some believe), or our main weakness (as others believe) - but just to confirm that the discussion has been going on for the past twenty years, and that it is still equally relevant - and unresolved.



The secretariat of ASSITEJ International was situated in Denmark from 1990-96, during which period a significant modernisation of the organisation took place.

However this - and other - disagreements among the members notwithstanding, it is evident that the results we have reached together for children's theatre have come about primarily through the work that the theatres and their staffs have put into the organisation.

During the 90's, the structure of Danish children's theatre changed - the old, collectively run groups had, in time, worn each other out. We discovered that, in a group, the person who showed the least interest would often have the biggest say! A transition was made from being collective ensembles with permanent members to becoming small institutions with one or two managers, who would hire freelancers. Many of us, including the author of this article - deemed this development the beginning of the end of Danish theatre for children, the end of a movement.

It was - not surprisingly - a long and quite painful process for the individual theatres; however a new dynamism entered the field. A much better flow of old and new people playing first in one theatre and then in another. The children's theatre field attracted young, trained actors, who began to consider it a work place comparable with the big theatres - and not simply something they might turn to when nothing else was available. This new dynamism combined with the best features of the old movement (solidarity between the theatres, for example) rejuvenated Danish theatre for children.

Listing victories and defeats, giving marks to the results of years of ups and downs in our work, and putting it all into perspective is outside the scope of this article (and would probably also demand a greater distance to the subjects than this writer is able to summon). Nevertheless, I will mention some of the achievements that the organised theatres have made through years of struggle.

The Danish Theatre Centre organises one of the world's biggest theatre festivals for children and young people - in a new area of the country each year. Anyone who has visited it will know that it represents an organisational and logistic triumph that is only possible because all the participants also help with the practical chores. Every actor, technician, dancer, administrator, manager, etc. is required to "donate" four hours of practical festival work. In my opinion, this is one of the most impressive examples of the movement having "survived" - of course, we are competitors in the market, but we are also a part of something bigger. We compete for sales, but stand together in showing the prowess of Danish theatre for children.

- Every year the organised theatres agree on a common price policy that prevents anyone from dumping the market. In adherence to cleverly calculated models (overhead costs, number of players, spectators, etc.) the minimum price of a show is determined. No member theatre is permitted to charge less than this price (anyone can, of course, charge

more). We compete in terms of quality, but not in terms of pricing.

- In the mid-80's BTS initiated a large-scale inside campaign - the so-called "quality lift". We "invented" methods for discussing shows, we set up quality commissions, money was allotted to members' education, etc. This initiative (about which much can be said, and which was quite extensive - not least in its rubbing-off effect) undoubtedly contributed to the characteristic high level of today's children's theatre. Once again, the idea was that although we are competitors, everyone benefits from the overall level being as high as possible.

- In 1996 we were able to open the Odsherred Theatre School - the first and only training and further education centre specifically designed for children's and youth theatre. The school was the result of years of work - both locally in Odsherred and on the part of the children's theatres. For a number of years Odsherred Theatre School was an important meeting place, and a site for education and inspiration in the field of theatre for children. However, the structural changes in the theatres and the greater inflow of new, trained people have necessitated a redefinition of the school's role. At present we are engaged in turning it into a national and international centre of information and skills pertaining to theatre for children and young people - yet another exciting and innovative effort generated by the new dynamism of the field.

- In the late 90's we realised that there was a disastrous lack of new playwrights writing for children and young people. And, in 1997, thanks to funding from the Theatre Council, BTS launched the first "Dramatist's Greenhouse" - a three year programme designed to "educate" new playwrights for the field. This project was so successful that the second Greenhouse took off in 2001 - and currently six new up-and-coming playwrights are busy in the third Greenhouse module. The dramatists from the first two Greenhouses are now diligent suppliers to the theatres in the field.

The above is just a small selection of some of the victories that children's theatre has won by continuing, at least in part, to see itself - despite the prevailing spirit of the times - as the movement we originally set out as. Whether or not this will hold true for the future is difficult to say - the competition is tougher, less money is being spent on theatre performances (especially for schools), political changes in Denmark include a structural reform involving the abolition of the counties and the establishment of fewer and larger municipalities, politicians are preoccupied with "hard" values in education - giving high priority to memorising - and neglecting "soft" values (like theatre), individualisation is replacing a feeling of community, etc. - all these elements are possible threats to the way in which we and our theatre, and the whole professional field function today.

However, it may well be that these threats make it all the more necessary for us to stick together and consider children's theatre in Denmark to be - still - a movement.



**Danish national statistics for state subsidised theatres in 2002/03 show that:**

**- out of a national total of 437 theatre productions, 138 were for children and young people.**

**- out of a national total of 11,593 performances, 4,907 were for children and young people.**

**- out of a national total of 2,220,000 spectators, 510,000 were children and young people.**



# The Dissemination

by Rikke Lund Heinsen, M.A. in Theatre Studies, Secretariat of ASSITEJ Denmark

One of the main mantras of the political culture of Danish children's theatre is to let children meet the art form through extensive visiting and touring activity on the part of the theatres. Denmark is a small country, so any theatre van can get from one end of the country to the other in about 4-6 hours. And since towns are not far apart, theatres can play up to ten performances a week in schools and institutions (during school hours) all over the country. Most shows (and theatres) are small-scale, 1-4 actors play in flexible sets for a limited number of spectators. This model ensures mobility, intimacy - and makes up for diversified playing spaces and limited financial resources. A unique theatre tradition of decentralisation based on an art and culture

**The Theatre Centre publishes an annual catalogue of the Danish children's theatres' repertoire for the following season - better known as the Red Catalogue - in which theatres and organisations pay a fee to advertise.**

policy with roots in the 60's. Every child, including the children in the most remote areas, must be given the opportunity to experience theatre, regardless of background and other cultural traditions.

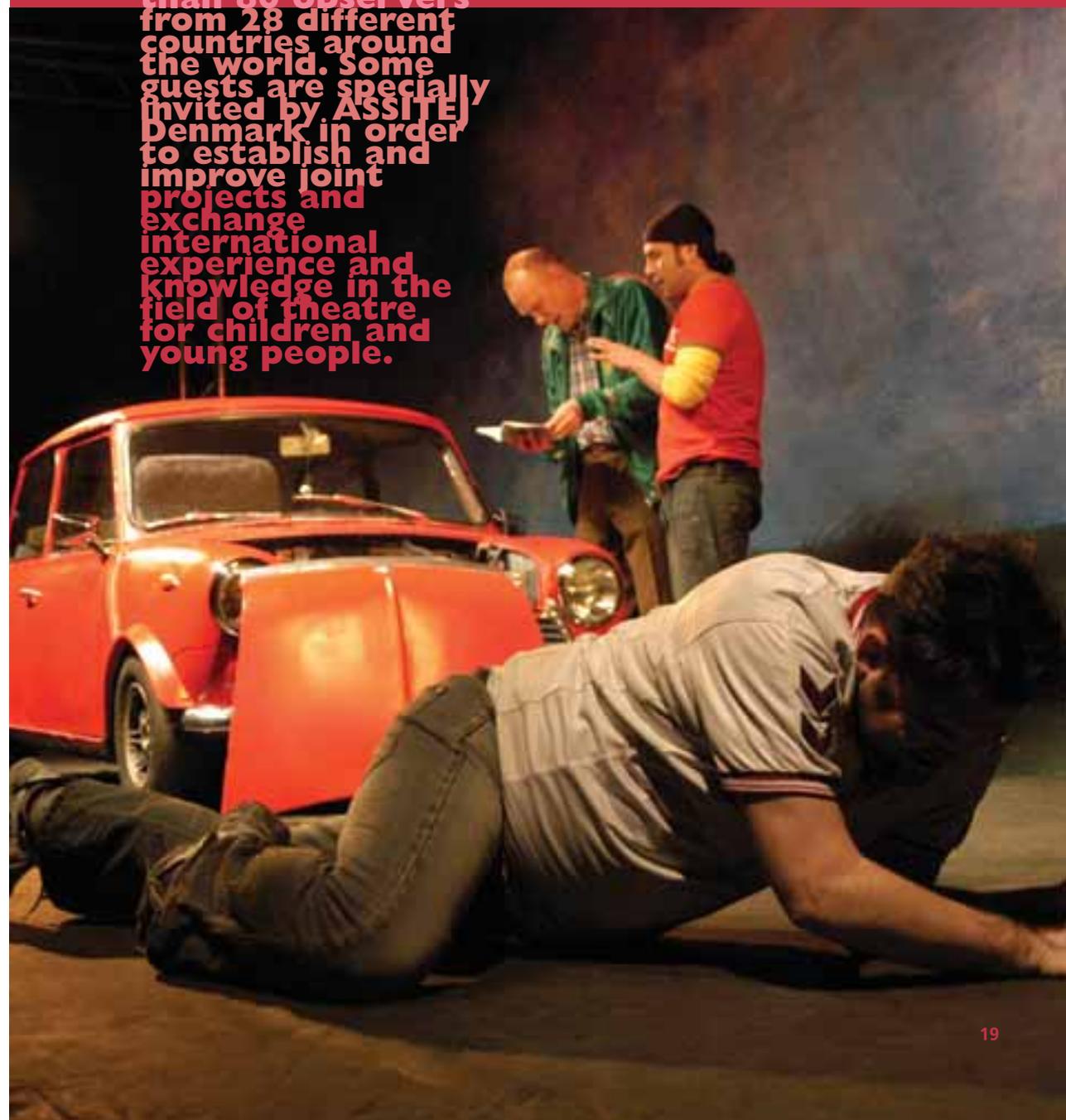
The concept of decentralisation still puts great demands on the theatre organisers and presenters as well as the artists and theatres. Over the years the theatres and their related institutions and organisations (UBOT, The Danish Theatre Centre, The Association of Children's Theatres) have attempted to provide teachers, child care workers, and librarians with tools for buying shows. Tools that make them familiar with questions of genre, artistic evaluation, and with the requirements of visiting theatres (space, room darkening, technical facilities, specified age ranges, etc.). This "upbringing" is mostly implemented as a result of the dialogue between the theatres and their customers, in that the individual theatres traditionally manage their own sales, and are therefore in close contact with the buyers and organisers (for instance, children's librarians, or contact teachers responsible for booking and arranging theatre in their schools). There is also a regular seminar for organisers and presenters at the annual children's theatre festival, in an attempt to qualify the buyers and thereby ensure that the selection of theatre for schools, public libraries and cultural institutions is made according to the best possible evaluation.

The challenge that always faces presenters and practitioners is the potential conflict between theatres producing shows from an

aesthetic perspective - theatre as an artistic experience and a field of new realisation - and various presenters focusing on the show's pedagogical approach - in other words according to whether or not the children will learn something and as such contribute to their general education or have a direct pedagogical function - if they are not simply looking for entertainment or "fun" for the children. In Denmark the paradox is quite evident, because although professional children's theatre is not part of the educational programme in schools, it is still most often physically present in an educational or pedagogical context (the school, institution).

In other words, children's theatre as an art form is part of the day to day political reality in our schools and institutions, and the continuation of a cultural policy that sends theatre to the children, rather than children to the theatre will always demand surplus energy, extra time, and ever-scarce money from presenters and practitioners alike. The annual festival provides a unique stimulus as an indispensable national and international meeting place, and the Theatre Centre's Red Catalogue is another key factor in keeping up-to-date with the current supply of shows. This constant and qualified dialogue with its exchange of information, thoughts, and experiences is probably the most important prerequisite for the successful dissemination of theatre for children and young people in Denmark and abroad, and helps us ensure the ever endangered existence of this unique art form as part of our children's frame of reference and mirror of life.

Each year an increasing number of international guests attend the Big April festival. In 2005 we had the pleasure of welcoming more than 80 observers from 28 different countries around the world. Some guests are specially invited by ASSITEJ Denmark in order to establish and improve joint projects and exchange international experience and knowledge in the field of theatre for children and young people.



# The Political Future

by **Jørn Langsted**, Professor of Dramaturgy at the University of Aarhus

The structure for children's theatre that has been established in Denmark over the past thirty years or more is founded on the existence of many small theatres with different aims and diverse artistic expressions. Only very few shows for children are staged in the big adult theatres. The production of theatre for children - and therefore also the pluralistic structure of children's theatre - is supported by the state, the municipalities, and the counties (until these are abolished in 2007). As a whole, the production of theatre for children is supported with approximately 80 mill. DKK or 11 mill. EUR yearly (2004). This amounts to about 10% of the total public spending on theatre production.

Public funding for children's theatre comes in different shapes and forms. The arrangement for regional theatres and small city theatres is based on joint financing on the part of the state and the local authorities, while the RBOT-scheme for visiting and touring children's theatre depends on state and county support for a number of theatres (the existing RBOT-scheme will be terminated with the scheduled abolition of the counties). The Arts Council's Committee for Performing Arts also distributes direct subsidies both for projects and for the general maintenance of an additional number of independent children's theatres.



**2003-05:**  
On the occasion of St. Petersburg's 300th anniversary, ASSITEJ Denmark and Sweden organised a Nordic-Baltic-Russian festival in St. Petersburg. The festival featured Danish performances, workshops, and a conference. In continuation of the project, a number of Russian Theatre Academy students came to Denmark to study and work with Danish theatres.

The present Liberal-Conservative government shows little interest in the existing structure for children's theatre. Instead, efforts are made to pressure all the major adult theatres to stage productions for children. This is written into the contracts and political agreements for institutions such as the Royal Theatre and the three provincial theatres in Århus, Odense, and Ålborg. Concurrently, it appears that the state is gradually diminishing its financial support for the independent theatre world, including the independent children's theatres.

So, for the time being, there seems to be a movement towards more traditionalism in Danish children's theatre policy. Apparently the goal is to make greater use of children's theatre as an area of recruitment for future adult audiences, in other words to familiarise children with theatre-going. Less priority is given to children's theatre as an offer of experiences to children here and now, with no ulterior motives.

The state, however, still supports the sale of touring children's theatre shows through its 50% reimbursement to municipalities and counties of their institutions' expenses for purchase of children's theatre. This indirect support is of fundamental importance to the distribution of children's theatre shows to schools, libraries, childcare institutions, etc. Nevertheless, with the economy of the institutions currently under serious pressure, the distribution system is being undermined. As far as we can ascertain, it is becoming increas-

ingly difficult to sell children's theatre shows, and with less shows sold, the state spends correspondingly less on reimbursement.

The municipal reform that is now underway will reduce 275 municipalities to a little over 100 municipalities by 2007. No one is able to predict the consequences of this for Danish theatre for children. All we can do is hope that larger municipalities will provide a better foundation for independent cultural policies, including the improvement of the conditions for local theatres.

Judging by the present state of affairs, state interest in the established children's theatre structure is limited. The Minister of Culture underlines the importance of art and culture for children, however this means that he wants to increase the participation of children as an audience in the existing traditional theatre institutions, and is much less interested in theatre taking place in the children's everyday environment. These government tendencies may reflect a dream of returning to the situation in the 1950's, before the emergence of the modern theatre for children.

Consequently, we may be able to envision a dichotomy in the coming years between, on the one hand, municipalities that implement independent cultural policies, and the state on the other; or perhaps between an activist and anarchistic conception of the role of theatre for children, and a more traditionally orientated one, based on the promulgation of theatre art.



**“It is clear that the European theatres regard children as people, and, furthermore, as people with whom we would like to talk about the most important matters.”**  
Russian Theatre Critic Elena Gruyeva, after viewing Danish performance in Moscow.

# The Dialogue

An afterthought by **Bente Buchhave**, Library Advisory Officer at the Danish National Library Authority and Member of the Danish Network for Children and Culture

These two quotations hold the answer to why, for years, Danish children's theatre has been such a meaningful part of children's lives. In the theatre, themes of life are enacted in a universe where reality and imagination become one. This communication respects the child's particular capabilities for interpretation, and, rather than a monologue, it becomes a dialogue between people of different ages who, through this experience, exist in the same world. Essentially, Danish children's theatre recognises that the child is a fellow citizen, and the importance of children's theatre in Danish cultural politics is reflected in the courage and ability to pursue and express in an artistic form the child's view of the world.

I hope that, in the future, theatre for children in Denmark will continue to provide artistic interplay in children's everyday lives, and that this essential dialogue will eliminate the borders between the cultures of children and adults in our common search for meaning.

"In his theatre we are all equal. He as the actor, and those who watch. He is not an adult teaching or seducing the children, but a human being who wants to test the images of truth that exist in reality and in our imagination, using the same frame of reference as the children."

Bjørn Lense Møller, former Theatre Council Chairman, in 1993, about Actor Ray Nusselein.

"We offer the children our own wonderment, our questions, joys, and sorrows. We do not simplify complicated matters. With every new show we try to approach the essence of the themes and subjects we have chosen to deal with, and to experience those brief moments that are "out of time", and in which we may find an opening to our innermost selves."

French-born Stage Director and Danish Award Winner Catherine Poher in 2004.

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# Impressions

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