

21 September 2001

Ian Herbert  
President  
International Association of Theatre Critics

Dear Ian Herbert and members of the executive committee,

We are very pleased to submit the report of the organizing committee of the 20<sup>th</sup> World Congress of the International Association of Theatre Critics (IATC). The congress, which was held in Montreal from 29 May to 3 June during the Festival de théâtre des Amériques (FTA) and was the first IATC congress to be held in North America north of Mexico, was a great success. We have received many enthusiastic and gratifying letters of thanks by regular and electronic mail.

### **The Facts**

We welcomed some eighty congress participants and six invited artists to Montreal from thirty-five different countries, including, of course, Canada itself: Argentina, Belgium, Bulgaria, Chile, China (Shanghai and Hong Kong), Croatia, Cuba, Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Haiti, Ireland, Jamaica, Mexico, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, region of the Arab countries, Romania, Russia, Slovakia, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Tunisia, Turkey, United Kingdom, and the United States. This turnout made the 2001 congress the largest in the history of the IATC. Although the delegates from Congo, Iran, Ivory Coast, and Ukraine registered for the congress, they were unfortunately not able to attend due to difficulties in obtaining entry visas to Canada. Our interventions on their behalf with immigration and consular officials were unsuccessful.

The conference theme, “Breaking the Language Barrier,” generated very interesting papers and the publication of the proceedings is underway. The half-day dedicated to the theatres of the Americas seemed of particular interest to the congress participants. The special session on Canadian and Quebecois drama and theatrical practice, which consisted of presentations by Alvina Ruprecht, president of the Canadian Association of Theatre Critics (CATC), and Hervé Guay, president of the Association québécoise des critiques de théâtre (AQCT), followed by a round table of playwrights and directors (Daniel Meilleur, Wajdi Mouawad, Brigitte Haentjens, Judith Thompson, Jacob Wren, and Daniel David Moses) allowed us to ensure that congress participants had direct contact with theatre artists during the congress. This session also helped us achieve our goal of making Canadian and Quebecois theatre better-known.

Several participants published articles on the congress in their respective countries. In Quebec we obtained very prominent media exposure for an event of this kind: the Montreal daily newspaper *Le Devoir* published an extract of Georges Banu’s paper a few days prior to the conference, thus publicizing the congress theme; Radio-Canada, the French-language public network, broadcast footage of the opening reception, hosted by Mayor Pierre Bourque at Montreal city hall; numerous articles in the printed press discussed the congress; CBC radio, the English-language public network, dedicated part of a prominent program to the event; and several foreign critics were invited to take part in local radio programs. In sum, we feel the coverage was excellent.

## **Congress Organization**

The congress organizing committee consisted of four members of the AQCT and the president of the CTCA. In carrying out the many related tasks involved in organizing the congress, we were fortunate to have the support of a team of six graduate students for whom the congress constituted a practical project in their Master's degree program in Management at the Université de Québec à Montréal. The organizing committee was responsible for fundraising – a huge task as it turned out – and for establishing the budget. We also contacted and corresponded with the national sections of the IATC, received and evaluated proposals resulting from the call for papers, developed the conference program, and planned the schedule of all congress events. For each sector, once decisions were made, the students were responsible for logistical planning and execution: development of an electronic database to manage registration, organizing a shuttle service from and to the airport, hotel reservations, bus charters, the congress banquet and coffee breaks, compilation of registration kits, distribution of theatre tickets, etc. Such logistical support is essential for any organizing committee, such as ours, made up of individuals who must carry on with their usual professional activities while preparing the congress.

We cannot overstate the importance of freeing up the congress organizers to concentrate on planning the conference per se, since this is the heart of any IATC congress. Without the kind of logistical support described above, the organizing committee would be hard-pressed to accomplish its central tasks. As soon as planning for the congress begins, it is crucial to clearly describe the tasks that need to be accomplished, to establish clearly defined groupings of related tasks, and to make a specific member of the team responsible for each grouping. This member will then propose precise strategies for the execution of the task to his or her committee members.

## **The Successes**

We obtained the financial and moral support of the American Theatre Critics Association (ATCA), establishing an appropriate partnership for this first congress in North America north of Mexico.

We succeeded in making the congress a public event in the local community. This was accomplished, first, by having Georges Banu's text published in a significant daily newspaper; hiring a publicist who obtained substantial media coverage; and, finally, mounting a direct mail campaign aimed at university professors, scholars, and students of theatre as well as interested members of the public to invite them to attend the free conference being held at the easily accessible downtown location of the Université du Québec à Montréal.

We are particularly pleased with the results of two of our initiatives:

First, in planning the congress we earmarked funds to defray the travel expenses of delegates from less affluent countries in the Americas. This carefully guarded budgetary priority allowed us to arrange for the participation of delegates from Haiti, Jamaica, and Cuba – countries that otherwise would not have been represented at the congress. Furthermore, each of these delegates presented a paper at the conference on the theatre of their respective countries. The contributions of these 'guests' was valuable indeed.

Second, we established an ad hoc committee, consisting mainly of younger members of the AQCT, to organize a series of cultural exchanges that allowed some congress participants to interact more

directly with the local community. This committee and the activities they organized provided an opportunity for a greater number of the members of the hosting section to participate in the congress, ensured that the congress would have a much greater impact on the general public, and provided useful information for the congress participants.

The ad hoc committee organized three sessions of “On the Spot Theatre Reviews” – two in French and one in English – directly following certain performances in the FTA. The events were moderated by a Montreal critic, took place on stage, and lasted about forty-five minutes. At the beginning of the selected shows, audiences were invited to remain in the theatre for a post-performance discussion with two or three foreign theatre critics. These encounters, which were a great success with both the participating critics and the audiences, contributed to demystifying the role of theatre critics and enhancing the public’s appreciation of the craft of criticism.

During the congress, the ad hoc committee also produced and distributed three editions of a newsletter. The publication, which contained a wealth of information on theatre, the festival, and on criticism in general, was coordinated by a young member of the AQCT who involved several other AQCT members as well as students.

These initiatives contributed to democratizing and popularizing the congress, maximizing its impact on both the local association members and the general public, and enriching the congress participants’ experience of the host country. They thus go hand in hand with the additions to the program of the well-received special session on Canadian and Quebecois theatre and, from a broader regional perspective, the half-day devoted to the theatres of the Americas. We hope that both of these sessions enhanced the participants’ understanding of the national theatres throughout the hemisphere.

The participants greatly enjoyed the trip to Quebec City, which included a play, a reception hosted by the Carrefour international de théâtre de Québec and the city of Quebec, a visit to the Museum of Civilization of Quebec, and a visit to Robert Lepage’s Caserne Dalhousie. All were charmed by the town.

The organizing committee contacted companies that produce theatre technologies with a view to mounting a trade show in the foyer of the conference venue. Our goal was to allow local companies to promote their theatre technologies to potential foreign clients as well as to generate revenue as part of our financing. Unfortunately, we did not allow ourselves enough time to research and contact potential exhibitors and consequently only one company, Paco, took up our invitation. Although this initiative was only partly successful, it nonetheless resulted in significant revenue. This was important in our case since the Canadian government requires that part of the total funding of such events must come from the private sector. With more lead-time and greater participation, displays such as this could generate substantial funding for the organizers of future congresses.

We also arranged to have a book table set up in the foyer. This was another way to make information on Canadian and Quebecois theatre and playwrights available and many congress participants were pleased to have such ready access to otherwise hard-to-find books and magazines. Some participants had brought publications from their own countries and these were also displayed and sold. This is another feature that, if planned further in advance, could be expanded to provide a broader selection of relevant works.

## **Criticisms**

Several participants were disappointed that we had not scheduled any time to discuss the shows in the festival.

Participants were also disappointed not to have an opportunity to meet FTA Artistic Director Marie-Hélène Falcon. We were remiss in not scheduling a specific occasion for Mme Falcon to address the congress. We had invited Mme Falcon to both the opening reception and the closing banquet, assuming that an opportunity for such an address would arise – but she neglected to make an appearance at either of these events. In her defence, she was in the midst of an extremely demanding organizational whirlwind, especially given the campaign she had to wage to reverse the decision to refuse entry to the Rwandan actors and the last-minute cancellation of one of the festival's main productions (L'Hiver de force).

Most significantly, many participants felt that five or six papers per session were too many and were frustrated by the rigid format of the conference. Many participants would prefer discussions and debates to the formal presentation of papers. The IATC must rethink the format of the conference portion of the congress and should, perhaps, opt to have fewer presenters than in the past in order to allow more time for discussion.

## **Suggestions**

- For the Conferences:

The IATC executive committee traditionally determines the congress theme well in advance, allowing the congress organizers time to send out an initial invitation letter to the national sections who, in turn, distribute this information to their membership many months before the congress. Despite this lead-time many delegates and other participants did not confirm their registration early enough to avoid major logistical problems in securing adequate hotel space, theatre tickets, etc. It would seem that congress organizers must resign themselves to accepting participants right up to the last moment. However, organizers must bear in mind that even more lead-time is necessary for participants who must apply for travel funding or who are coming from countries for which entry visas will be required. With respect to the latter, congress organizers must be prepared to provide support to participants who have to obtain visas. For future events of this kind, Canadian officials suggested that we submit to them a list of invited foreigners. This list would be distributed to Canadian embassies in order to facilitate the processing of visa applications. The organizers of future congresses should thus liaise with their governments well ahead of time to determine how best to speed the processing of visas for congress participants.

More lead-time is also needed with respect to selecting the papers for the conference program. This requires making it very clear that paper proposals submitted after the official deadline will not be considered – people who cannot confirm their registration by the official deadline must understand that they will not be able to present papers. It is crucial that the organizers finalize the selection of papers early enough for session presiders to communicate with the presenters and thus ensure that the papers are sufficiently polished and properly focused on the session topic, and also allow the presiders sufficient opportunity to prepare commentaries on the relations between the papers and questions to stimulate fruitful discussion. We suggest that no more than three or four papers be presented per session. This approach should help produce the kind of dynamic sessions that participants seem to

want. Presenters should also avoid overly theoretical topics. Congress participants who are *listening*, as well as those who are presenting, are often dealing with papers in an individual's second or even third language!

In order to facilitate communication and ensure easy understanding, copyediting should be provided to presenters whose first language is neither English nor French. In some cases, it should also be proposed to authors that they have a native English or French speaker read the text on their behalf.

Although it may not be possible for everyone who would like to give a paper to do so, the conference proceedings could include all the papers submitted.

- For the Congress in General:

We were surprised by the number of participants who arrived before the official registration day. Organizers must be prepared to accommodate those who arrive early – often due to the constraints of international flight schedules – and to adjust airport shuttles and hotel bookings as necessary.

The registration forms must be exceedingly clear and must include such basic information as the sex of the participant – a question we neglected and which resulted in a few awkward room-sharing arrangements! – and media affiliation as well as very definite options for tourist activities (too many people change their plans or neglect to indicate if they are participating in optional side trips, which greatly complicates matters for those who are making the arrangements!).

Funds must be earmarked for the travel of delegates from economically disadvantaged countries.

Registration kits should include a list of local bookstores and their locations – this was the most frequently asked question upon arrival at the hotel in Montreal. We also strongly recommend organizing a larger book display than the one we set up in Montreal.

The IATC president felt that the printed conference program did not contain enough information about the IATC. The program could include a description of the IATC and its mandate, a list of its executive officers, and the postal and email addresses of the member associations.

As only the conference portion of the congress was open to the public, we did not include the complete list of congress activities (receptions, visits, banquet, etc.) in the conference program. Although the non-public activities were all listed on a separate events calendar, this omission generated a certain amount of confusion. In retrospect, we concede that it would be preferable to include all events in the program, indicating whether or not particular events are open to the public.

- For the General Assembly:

All reports should be submitted in written form in both English and French at the beginning of the congress so that they can be distributed and read by the participants before the general assembly.

The organizers must ensure that voting slips are available and that a system for publicly tabulating the results is in place.

We hope that these suggestions will be helpful to the organizers of the next IATC congress. The congresses provide very stimulating opportunities to meet and exchange ideas and it is important to make the most of them. We extend our best wishes to the organizers of the next congress!

Enclosed, please find copies of the conference program, the events calendar, the list of participants, and the provisional financial report for the IATC archives.

Sincerely yours,

Louise Vigeant, Chair of the 20<sup>th</sup> World Congress of the IATC Organizing Committee

Alvina Ruprecht, President of the CTCA

Michel Vaïs, Secretary General of the IATC

Hervé Guay, President of the AQCT

Aurèle Parisien, Secretary-Treasurer of the AQCT and Congress Treasurer