

President's Report

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General Assembly May 15, 2021

According to our statutes, presidents of the IATC have normally stayed in office for three terms, which has meant six or sometimes seven years, depending on the congress plans. In my case, a seventh year as president was added, depending on the pandemic and the twice postponed congress. And the last year turned out to be very special.

A Normal Year: 2019

Seven years is quite a long time, and no one would have dreamed about the many challenges caused by the pandemic in the beginning of 2020. When we met for our 30th congress in St. Petersburg in 2018, the world looked complicated enough, but we could be satisfied with an intense program of workshops, conferences and greater global outreach. The following year, 2019, was consequently packed with an international conference in Bratislava, Slovakia, two meetings for the executive committee, one in Montpellier and one in Chicago—both arranged through great work by Jean-Pierre Han in France and Jeffrey Eric Jenkins in USA. The same year I went to China twice, once to present prizes for a competition in criticism organized by our Chinese colleagues, in conjunction with the Laoshe Festival, for which I thank Peng Tao in particular. My next trip to China was in December 2019 to attend the Partner Organization Meeting of the International Theatre Institute (ITI), our link to UNESCO. The result of this meeting was a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) regarding the partnership between ITI and the AICT-IATC, which gives us the right to “whenever needed and appropriate” to use the tag of ITI-UNESCO. Little did we know then, how useful some of the contacts with other partner organisations would prove to be in the year to come, the year of the pandemic.

Postponing the Congress: 2020

All seemed normal and we had begun to plan for a Bratislava congress in May 2020, when the world was struck by the pandemic. Already in February, it was clear that a physical congress would not be possible and we first postponed to autumn 2020. Relatively soon, and in coordination with our hosts at the New Drama Festival and the IATC in Bratislava, we realized that the congress must be postponed for the entire year. By autumn, it became increasingly obvious that travel would not be likely in 2021, and alternatives were discussed. Shall we postpone again, or attempt a congress online? We had valuable global contacts and exchanged ideas with organisations such as ASSITEJ and UNIMA, which were managing a similar situation. Gradually, our executive committee was ready to decide in favor of a congress online. By that time, we already had experience organizing online events, and most of our colleagues had become accustomed to working online. The decision to separate the elements of the congress, the general assembly, an international conference, and the Thalia Prize ceremony was made later.

A New Chapter in the Life of IATC

Theatres, opera houses, and venues were in lockdown all over the world. What could critics do? On the national level, many of us were inventive and creative as we worked through a sudden, very difficult situation. It was obvious that everything we normally might have done as an

international organization needed to change. Our priority was to involve “grass-roots members” of the IATC as soon as possible, to learn what the national sections were doing, and to mirror their activities in our new situation. Among our constituent groups, as among artists, new methods were tried and the idea of a Corona Section for our website was born. Our modes of communication with our membership are the website of IATC, letters to our membership, and *Critical Stages*. For information on lockdowns and cancelled theatre performances and festivals, the website was the best platform for us to use. The introduction of the Corona Section might have been quicker, but in April 2020 it was in place and with the new section fed material to our social media accounts on Facebook and Twitter. Natalia Tvaltchrelidze of Georgia was appointed as social-media adjunct to assist Ragıp Ertuğrul, our executive committee member from Turkey. With the addition of her special skills, our “face” toward the world has been much improved, in French as in English.

Even before the summer of 2020 Ivan Medenica led an IATC online conference, with a second one following in September. Both conferences focused on the challenges of the pandemic and its impact on the performing arts. In autumn 2020, two smaller-scale workshops were arranged. These events were monitored by Deepa Punjani and Mariko Anazawa, executive committee members from India and Japan.

Something that did *not* change with the pandemic, was *Critical Stages*, which, under the wise leadership of Savas Patsalidis, worked like a clock and published right on schedule. The increase in unique visitors to the site is proof of the demand for our high-quality journal, which is now indexed by SCOPUS, the largest abstract and citation database.

Visibility and presence have been key words in this time of pandemic. Not an easy task as the whole planet—universities, theatres, and networks of all kinds—went online. As president of IATC, I have tried always to accept invitations for online events when possible. At the ITI general assembly in December 2020, I was able to represent IATC with a video about our activities. In March 2021, I chaired an event for UNIMA and attended the ASSITEJ congress. I also participated in a Georgian conference online, thanks to Irina Gogoberidze, and gave a brief speech at the national Romanian theatre festival, invited by Ludmila Patlanjoglu.

Democracy in Difficult Times

The IATC has a classical structure of representative democracy. The national and regional sections elect ten representatives who form the executive committee, which is the governing body of the organisation. A cabinet comprised of the president, the secretary general, the treasurer, and any appointed adjuncts to these officers execute the decisions of the executive committee. There are usually two meetings each year of the executive committee and cabinet where we can discuss the direction of the association and undertake new initiatives. The pandemic made live meetings and travel impossible, so other modes of communication and decision making became necessary. As president, I have tried my best to involve the executive committee in all matters of the association during this extraordinary time. We have, for instance, employed e-mail communications to the entire executive committee, inviting members to comment through correspondence. We often needed quick decisions for activities and events, and I have at times taken presidential responsibility for certain decisions, which are later ratified by the executive committee members. I thank the executive committee members for their

generosity and open minds as we all have adapted to new circumstances. The decision to undertake a general assembly online was a difficult one to make, and it created some challenges.

I have had close contact with both the cabinet and executive committee members. At times, there were almost daily telephone conversations with our secretary general, Michel Vaïs. Together with the cabinet there were many hectic moments of work. In some situations, I turned directly to our three vice presidents for their advice and support, which I always had and for which I am very thankful. This centralization of democratic power is not ideal, but it was necessary for the international association to continue to function well. We could easily see—from the inspiring work shown in the Corona Section of the website—that the national associations were inventive and creative.

From October until now the executive committee has been meeting monthly online, with these past few months devoted to the rigorous preparation of the general assembly, which will be held online May 15, 2021. All of the executive committee meetings were hosted on Zoom by Jeffrey and the University of Illinois. The meetings were always prepared with an agenda and are documented in minutes located on the IATC website. The many cabinet meetings were often executive and I thank the cabinet for its efficiency. Planning the general assembly has included Tasos Paschalis, the webmaster of *Critical Stages*, which also served as a platform for the international conferences of the IATC. Tasos' patience and generosity have been of great assistance to our work.

It is clear to us now that the extraordinary situation of the pandemic made it necessary to act online and to do so quickly. More than once, it became obvious that current statutes do not give us sufficient guidelines for these increasingly digital times. Updating and modernizing the statutes will be an important task for the incoming leadership of IATC to manage.

Finally, I would like to thank our secretary general, Michel Vaïs, with whom I have worked closely since 2014. I imagine us as pair of old horses, struggling in all kinds of weather, on all types of roads to deliver an important cargo.

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