

Activities

Congo Rep. Centre of ITI (Africa)

Activities December 2014–April 2016

Introduction

Traditionally, as is the case almost everywhere in Sub-Saharan Africa, financial dependence on other institutions and a lack of state funding are the two major obstacles that have contributed to the Centre's lack of visibility on a national level as well as its absence in the international activities programmed by the ITI network in between the two Congresses.

Nevertheless, since 2012, the Centre's Bureau has been involved, along with the cultural organization L'Arche de Ngoujel, in experimenting with a programme aimed precisely at reducing if not eradicating this financial dependence. To put this into effect, the Centre has reduced its programme of activities to a minimum during this experimental period, i.e. only the celebration of the World Days celebrated by ITI and the organisation required for the experimental activity. In this way, in addition to its involvement in the organisation of the competition of the 1st Ngoujel Critics' Prize (Prix Ngoujel 1er de la Critique d'un Spectacle), in 2015 the national Centre was able to participate only in the celebration of World Theatre Day.

The Battle to Establish a Stable Financial Resource

What we can report so far on this subject is a competition on which all our hopes rest. It is an activity that is now supported by L'Arche de Ngoujel association which has been working since 2012 within the framework of its TECEJ festival (Temps des Effusions Culturelles pour l'Éducation et la Jeunesse/ Time of Cultural Effusions for Education and Youth).

The concept of the competition is to send out to potential young audience members (aged 11 to 24) a questionnaire in advance of a scheduled show, designed to appraise their level of understanding of the show. This offers a combination of two challenges: firstly there is the proposal to the general public of a cultural product, and then young audience members taking part in the competition work on answering the set questions. This educational aspect makes upstream the Ministry of Education an inevitable partner in the implementation of the project, while downstream collaboration ipso facto generates a sense of competition which itself stimulates the enthusiasm of the competitors. The result of this logic has proved to be simply astounding where the organisers have often struggled to contain the rush of children. After all, in a city that does not have an auditorium with more than 300 seats, it would not be possible for every pupil and student in the area to attend a show, even if performances are extended over the period of a month. Moreover, the contest is not limited to pupils and students but to anyone

under the age of 25 at the close of the competition. Hence, for all the experimental editions carried out since 2011, only a few secondary schools (public and private) have been selected.

Given the aim of creating a permanent financial resource for the benefit of the project leader (in this case L'Arche de Ngoujel) and its partners (including the national ITI Centre), the key here lies in the participation fee for the competition, since, by all means possible, the activity needs to become the 'rapporteur':

1) The show, as such, has its price. There are tickets for audiences who are over the age limit and also for young people old enough to compete but who are not interested (or involved if their schools were not selected).

2) There are amounts specified in the rules of the competition for the young people who are involved and/or interested.

3) In some cases, free entertainment and/or contest participation is required of the organisers. In return, the schools or the funders and sponsors pay an amount to balance things out. So this, of course, from the point of view of the organisers, is not necessarily something free!

These proceeds logically relate to expenses inherent in the realisation of the activity. But in their distribution, a set percentage is given to the partner institutions with the aim of helping them, if ever so slightly, to deal with other problems. This especially implies, for example, operating expenses and payment of membership fees to ITI.

When the competition is not (or poorly) sponsored, a large part of the participation fees will go into the creation of the prize fund for the competitors. (Often there are actual winners – those whose written submissions have won the competition – but there is also a tombola organised to include all the competitors.) At this point, the impact of the intended result (i.e. the establishment of a sustainable financial resource) is not particularly evident. In other words, income is low.

The 'battle' then lies in increasing the interest of the authorities and professional sponsors, to make them appreciate the public benefit of the competition, and to integrate the activity within the school and academic programmes. After all, the more that governments, sponsors and mentors are involved, the less the organisers have to worry about providing prizes to give to the winners and gadgets to amass for the tombola.

Since the competition is ultimately designed to become a nationwide activity, it will be necessary to accept that even if income is insignificant in a given town, the combined sum of the low income from all areas will of necessity be a positive factor. We can but



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imagine such an activity in those countries where sponsorship is no problem. Additionally, the more populous the country is, the more considerable are the entry fees.

Activities in partnership with the Centre:

The 1st Prix Ngoujel Competition

After Pointe-Noire (2011 and 2012) and Kinkala, near Brazzaville (May 2014), this event returned to Pointe-Noire for 2015. This year featured performances of the show 'De la bouche de ma mère' ('From the Mouth of my Mother' – tales adapted for the stage from the collection of the writer Congolese Georges Sokate Mavouba), which were launched 5 March. The first part finished on 14 March due to school assessments for the second trimester period, while the second part took place from 13 to 29 April. The second round of (written) tests took place on 16 May and the prize-giving ceremony on 6 June 2015.

In total eight performances were staged in three cultural centres (Yaro and Suéco) and in five schools before an audience of more than 2,000 including 1,712 competitors. It is important to note that the competition was limited to students from five schools because of the delay in sponsor commitments.

Celebration of World Theatre Day

On 27 March, at the Espace du Trentenaire, a free show was offered to the public by the company Total E&P Congo.

For the event, the theatre company Les Pétroliers, sponsored by Total E&P, presented the play 'Je soussigné cardiaque' ('I, the Undersigned Cardiac Case') by Sony Labou Tansi. Before the performance, a journalist placed the event in its context by discussing the history of the Day; then the international Message was read out.

From 26 to 31 March there was also held the Festival du Théâtre Scolaire (School Theatre Festival – FTS) organised annually by the Cercle des Jeunes Artistes et Créateurs (Circle of Young Artists and Designers – CYAC). On this occasion, the General Secretariat of the Centre were asked to talk to the public about World Theatre Day at the opening of the festival. The Secretary General Jean Léopold Ngoulou also formed part of the three-member jury for the competition who judged the best storytelling performance. The announcement and award of the prizes then marked the festival's closing ceremony.

Activities in perspective

In terms of the short-term future, the Centre and its partners were surprised at the decision of the government to bring forward the presidential elections (initially scheduled for July) to 20 March

2016. However, the core of our cultural activities have place as normal during the period from February to July, while cultural events usually taking place in June-July were exceptionally programmed this year between March-April.

Taking into account that the electoral campaigns and the post-electoral periods generally disrupt the normal workings of society, many cultural operators chose prudence by simply avoiding any initiation or engagement. The national ITI Centre nevertheless agreed in principle to the celebration of World Theatre Day on March 27, in partnership with the Espace du Trentenaire and a number of local companies, just as for the celebration planned on April 29 of International Dance Day as part of the Festival du Théâtre Scolaire).

Conclusion

Despite the difficult financial circumstances resulting from the lack of enthusiasm from the sponsors, our cultural organisations – in particular theatre and dance companies and also the national ITI Centre – continue in their efforts to mark the local and national stages with their presence. Between November 2014 and January 2016, the Centre was limited in its collaborative work to the experimental competition programme, the 1st Prix Ngoujel for the review of a show, and to the celebration of World Theatre Day. The results of the experimentation of the competition have proved more than interesting where – aside from the satisfaction of the school administrations, the heads of the selected schools, the young people (competitors and non-competitors) and the parents of the pupils – we also note the strong engagement of sponsors during activity's progress, and also on record are the verbal excuses of certain partners who wavered.

As a result, with all these players gaining confidence, we would expect that the following edition of the competition will need to include not only the whole city of Pointe-Noire but also to win over other places in the country (i.e. there is a national formula for the competition). As anticipated, this activity has had a significant financial impact on the operating budget of the organisers. The Centre's revenue, for example, has made a major contribution to the payment of annual membership fees, and it can be confidently stated that the financial commitments may be made in anticipation of forthcoming events. On the strength of this encouraging experience, the Congo Brazza ITI Centre has proposed to the General Secretariat of ITI to hold at the World Congress in Manaus in May 2016 a training workshop with the object of sharing this experience with other Centres.