

Children's Festivals: Substance, Subsidies, & Sustainability

By Janet Stanford



me me me...by DynamO Theatre. EDGEfest at Imagination Stage, Bethesda, MD. Courtesy of Laurie Levy-Page.

After a quarter century, Toronto's prestigious Milk International Children's Festival of the Arts lost its title sponsor, the National Marketing Association for Canadian Dairy Farmers. "The Milk Festival was much loved locally, and respected internationally for bringing the best of what's happening in youth theatre around the world to Toronto each May," Jeremy "Boomer" Stacey, the festival's artistic director, says. At its height, the Milk Festival was presenting fifteen international companies at the Harbour Centre on Toronto's waterfront and attracting 30,000 visitors. But despite its popularity and success from the standpoint of international artists, as well as many Toronto school children and families, in recent years the Milk Festival's title sponsor believed the festival was no longer reaching a broad enough audience.

For festival directors in the U.S., the recent demise of this North American youth theatre festival (and in Canada where support for the arts is more generous than in the U.S.) is cause for pause, self-assessment, and reflection around the value of a theatre festival in any city. For presenters, a festival often celebrates trendsetting and highly acclaimed work from all over the world, giving our audiences a wider, more global perspective on the arts. Festivals also draw extra media attention for the arts and the sponsoring organization, often attracting support

from corporate or other sponsors. Furthermore, once established, festivals can become a source of civic pride and identity that binds the arts to business, politicians, and the public. For audiences, festivals provide low-cost access to the arts and an opportunity to experiment with unfamiliar show titles. The party atmosphere and free activities at a festival also provide an incentive for children, teachers, and parents to try things beyond the typical theatre fare, as festival offerings often challenge audience assumptions about what constitutes good art, and can awaken an appreciation for a new aesthetic.

Recently, there has been new interest among presenters in further capitalizing on the draw of a festival and/or showcase. Oftentimes, arts leaders from around the country come together during a festival to discuss (both with the audience and among themselves) not only the work on display, but also its implications for the field. For example, this summer, the TYA/USA (formerly ASSITEJ/USA) conference was held in St. Paul, MN, in conjunction with the Flint Hills International Children's Festival. This kind of "dual purpose" festival is common practice in Europe where children's theatre festivals are both integral to the fabric of life for audiences and a key component for arts leaders in determining each country's priorities in the field and artistic direction for the future.

U.S. Big Four Festivals Face the Future

Leaders at the four largest youth theatre festivals in the U.S.—in Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, Seattle, and St. Paul—remain acutely aware of recent challenges to keeping their festivals alive, namely changes in their local markets, uncertainty in the funding climate, and new State Department hurdles and restrictions since 9/11 on obtaining visas for guest artists to enter the country. Still, they remain cautiously confident that their festivals are here to stay. In speaking with the curators, I was struck not only by their energy and enthusiasm around the festivals but also by their sense of purpose.

Roy Wilbur, producer of the Philadelphia Festival since 2002, recently left the Annenberg Center to return to his marketing career, but believes, "The international companies brought in by the festival ultimately speak to a lot of different communities in this highly diverse city... Since the time of Brian Joyce, my dynamic and outspoken predecessor, the festival has aimed to share theatre that goes beyond simplistic themes and cartoon-like characters," Wilbur says. Over the years, these productions have come from Canada, Great Britain, Japan, Belgium, China, Uganda, and Italy, exploring themes such as the Holocaust, family, love, and gender equality.

For Maranne Welch in Pittsburgh, respecting the integrity of children remains the key to her festival. "I see theatre as a visual medium that can build understanding between nations and encourage global communication," Welch says. Her 2007 festival featured seven groups from Kenya, Israel, Denmark, Canada, and the U.S. Determined to accommodate some of her favorite works, Welch has been known to build smaller theatre spaces within a large school gymnasium used for the festival. This year, she accommodated two puppet shows in this way—one from Israel called *Itamar Walks on Walls* for ages three and up, and another from Denmark called *Goodbye, Mr. Muffin* for ages five and up. "This last piece," she says, "is one of my favorites. It tells the story of a pet hamster's last days and is important for kids in my community to see because, as we all know, in the U.S. no one ever dies and babies come by storks!"

For the festival in Seattle, Brian Faker says, "We work to upend expectations, turn around assumptions and counteract prejudice through presenting international performing arts to children." He likes to surprise his audiences with hip-hop from Holland or an African group from Chad that performs gospel, soul, and jazz. Described as "globalicious," the 2007 festival included twelve guest companies from Québec, Brazil, Mexico, Germany, and the U.S. presenting juggling, music, circus, stop-motion animation, and clowning. Faker says his festival has been known to collaborate with the Seattle Children's Theatre (which shares the Seattle Center campus) by including a play on the theatre's second stage. But, in general, he says, "I try to avoid booking children's theatre productions with too narrow of an age appeal. I believe the festival's future lies in re-branding the festival as a trans-generational event."

Heather Spicuzza has adopted a similar approach with the Flint Hills Festival at the Ordway Center for the Performing Arts in St. Paul. While she, like most other festival directors, believes that good theatre is good theatre and that its appeal should be ageless and universal, she's aware that from a marketing standpoint, the term "children" in the festival banner limits the range of audience members who will come out and purchase tickets. "Our festival," Spicuzza says, "like Seattle's, also made a strategic choice not to do children's plays." Instead, they focus on global music, dance theatre, and what Spicuzza calls "crazy outdoor installations." In the past, they included a massive Earth Harp in the festival, and last year, they hosted street painting with local artists working with kids to create chalk

designs. This year they included an exhibit called "Fabric and Flight" with fourteen huge pieces of fabric hung from buildings and accompanied by kite demonstrations. Another popular addition to the festival, now in its third year, is a parade on the final Saturday. "The parade," Spicuzza shares, "evolved from a way of showing off wearable art to a collection of decorated bikes, wagons, puppets, and whimsical costumes. Arts groups, community centers, and individual families are all welcome to join in the fun."

Big Four Festivals Offer a Place to Start

While each of these festivals may prove unique in their mission, the four major U.S. festivals share several characteristics. They each support small year-round staffs of two to five people. All take place in May and target a combination of school audiences during the week and families on the weekend. Ticket prices remain low, from free subsidized tickets for selected schools in Philadelphia to a top price of \$18 for a single festival show in Seattle. In addition, each festival has a multi-complex with three or more theatre spaces of varying sizes and all offer hands-on activities to supplement the theatregoing experience. These activities are always free, often outdoors, and encompass everything from learning origami to making a child ID card to participating in a tree climbing competition, which Maranne Welch credits for bringing an extra 10,000 people to her most recent festival.

Each of these festivals also has strong support from their cities, local corporations, and foundations, typically having two-thirds of their expenses

contributed either directly or in-kind. The Philadelphia festival is hosted by the Annenberg Center, which is connected to the University of Pennsylvania. Faker, whose festival takes place at the Seattle Center's campus, originally built for the 1962 World's Fair, says, "Without these grounds, we wouldn't exist." Spicuzza credits Flint Hills Resources, a petrochemical company that operates in Minnesota, for the start-up of her festival seven years ago. "The Vice President of this company was from Calgary [home of another long-established Canadian children's festival] so he understood the importance [of a festival]," Spicuzza says. In order to make sure that the new festival would weather its first few years, he made a one million dollar commitment to underwrite the first five years of the festival. The Flint Hills Festival also receives marketing support from the refinery and its employees volunteer at the festival each year.

Not Everyone "Gets" It

Although they are inspired and energized by the higher purpose they see for their festivals, the big four festival directors spend a lot of time and creativity repositioning, re-branding, and revising programming in order to keep attendance up. High attendance is seen as the primary measure of success and has become a natural expectation of festival sponsors. This pressure leaves some festival directors concerned. "I worry about increased competition for our audiences' time. In the 1980s, the Philadelphia festival attracted 27,000 people. Programming spread beyond the Annenberg Center into two other theatres and 37th street was blocked

U.S. International Children's Festivals at a Glance

Festival/ City/ Date Founded/ Website	Current Financials	Venue/ Annual Attendance	Primary Supporters
Philadelphia International Children's Festival Philadelphia, PA Founded 1985 www.pennpresents.org/events/childfest	Annual Budget: \$220K 61% contributed	Annenberg Center Attendance: 12,500	American Express Sunoco
Pittsburgh International Children's Festival Pittsburgh, PA Founded 1986 www.pghkids.org	Annual Budget: \$300K 65% contributed	City Park North Side North Shore Attendance: 12,000–15,000	Giant Eagle Heinz Endowments Citiparks
Seattle International Children's Festival Seattle, WA Founded 1986 www.seattleinternational.org	Annual Budget: \$1.2 Million 33% contributed + in-kind and donated venues	Seattle Center Attendance: 32,000	City of Seattle Paul G. Allen Family Foundation IKEA NEA
Flint Hills International Children's Festival St. Paul, MN Founded 2000 www.ordway.org/festival	Annual Budget: \$500K 66% contributed	Ordway Center for the Performing Arts Attendance: 40,000	Flint Hills Resources Target



Cuchulain: the Hound of Ulster by Cahoots NI Children's Theatre Company. EDGEfest at Imagination Stage, Bethesda, MD. Courtesy of Laurie Levy-Page.

tends to focus on programming "art for art's sake."

Toward a European Model

Festival directors, often world travelers themselves as they search for great new programming, are familiar with other countries where theatre, music, and dance festivals are integral to the country's culture. Among Faker's goals in Seattle is to make his festival "more European" in its orientation. And many in the TYA field, both presenters and producers, seem to be searching for ways to help American audiences appreciate what they themselves love about overseas festivals.

off to accommodate the crowds," Wilbur recalls. "This year we saw a further drop-off in attendance to 12,500 from 15,000 the year before. And there were five or six other *free* festivals going on around town for families to choose from," Wilbur says.

Faker admits that while school audiences are strong for his Seattle festival, the family weekend days are less popular. "The public doesn't understand what we're doing," he says. "It's not children performing, it's not Folk Life and a chance to graze around the grounds for a single entry fee. The festival is hard to get."

Spicuzza shares a similar concern about audiences in St. Paul. "People don't understand the festival unless they've been inside it," she says. "A few years ago there was a documentary made about the Flint Hills Festival that aired on local TV and raised awareness. But I still believe that the whole festival movement is among America's best kept secrets."

A less appealing secret, harkening back to the fate of the Milk Festival, is that corporate sponsorships are increasingly precarious and difficult to come by. With the scramble to attract big crowds, it seems as though festivals following the state fair model face a slowly escalating identity crisis. What exactly do festival presenters and sponsors want their public to "get" or to take away from the festival experience? At what point does offering a wide array of activities begin to erode the mission behind presenting innovative art? It remains a question as to whether or not the expansive "state fair" format of the big four festivals in the U.S. is compatible with, or can also accommodate, a "boutique" model that

After visiting Croatia in 2005 and participating in the 47th Sibenik Children's Theatre Festival, I decided, as the artistic director of Imagination Stage, to try to replicate a similar event in downtown Bethesda, MD. Because our venue has two small theatre spaces, we moved away from the big four's "state fair" approach to festivals and instead attempted the boutique model festival with a narrowly targeted mission. We launched EDGEfest in March of this year with professional, international companies from Northern Ireland, Québec, and Russia, as well as student actors and dancers from Israel, California, West Virginia, and D.C. We also brought in seasoned TYA writers and directors including Laurie Brooks, Mary Hall Surface, and Moses Goldberg, to lead post-show discussions and conversations with small audience groups about what topics are considered acceptable and appropriate for young audiences. Our goal was to show our audiences excellent "edgy" work—stylistically or thematically innovative—that would create an appetite for similar fare on our stages during the regular season. Audiences seemed to enjoy the unusual plays they saw and, despite the added workload, our theatre staff proved enthusiastic about hosting guest companies and presenting their work.

Mary Rose Lloyd, director of programming at the New Victory Theater in New York, reported a similar experience when she recently hosted the Danish Children's Theater Festival. The New Victory is Broadway's only children's theatre with a mission to bring in great performances from around the world. "Our staff embraced it," she said. "When the plays

[from Denmark] were in tech, there was a buzz that crescendoed right out of the theatre and across the city." She was impressed that the Danish government and Arts Council, which co-produced the festival with the New Victory, insisted on a two-day symposium for American producers and presenters to meet and interact with the Danish artists. Such meetings between artists are not typical at American festivals where the focus is placed on attracting large audiences, rather than examining the artistry of the performances.

Time for U.S. TYA Professionals to Take Stock

Colleen Porter, director of education at Playhouse Square in Cleveland and a Vice President of IPAY (International Performing Arts for Youth), observed that our country's TYA field is at the same formative stage that Denmark reached in the 1980s. "We need to come to a consensus in the United States about our goals," she says. "We need to define what is good art." Porter has been responsible for helping to rewrite the strategic plan at IPAY to put the children and artists at the center of the organization's goals rather than simply the business of presenting. She has added professional development sessions to her annual conferences and concentrates on bringing companies to the showcase from countries with the most impressive theatre for children.

In this same vein, Lloyd believes that the experiences of the Danish Festival should be built upon. "We need ways to formally convene artists in the field," she says. Kim Peter Kovac, director of theater for young audiences at The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts and the president of TYA/USA agrees that we need a way to determine what work is excellent, but he adds, "American artists first need a way to talk better with each other about our work without being judgmental." Kovac is in the early planning stages for a proposed 2009 international children's festival at the Kennedy Center which would be held in years alternating with New Visions/New Voices, the center's well-established TYA script development conference.

Even amidst the growing consensus among practitioners that the time is overdue for TYA professionals in the U.S. to examine their values and purpose as a group, there are practical difficulties that are not easily overcome. Kovac points out that TYA/USA, which would be the natural entity to take the lead with such an initiative, has only one part-time staff member as compared with nine in its German counterpart. Lloyd admits that the contribution that the Danish government made to her recent festival was essential and without a similar arrangement, and support provided by another guest country, the New Victory would not be able to afford a second conference. As for EDGEfest in Bethesda, MD, its future also remains uncertain. Despite positive feedback from audiences and staff regarding the festival, Imagination Stage's Executive Director Bonnie Fogel points out, "With all

Finding Festival Programming

Below are some of the showcases and international festivals that U.S. presenters attend in order to find the works they will book for their festivals. They also report that networking with other festival directors is important in order to "share" visiting companies and save on the high costs of visas, airfare, and shipping set pieces and costumes.

Name of Festival	2007–2008 Location	Timing
IPAY	Tampa, FL	January
Horsens Danish Theatre Festival	Horsens, Denmark	May
Festival of Theatre for Young People (biennial)	Lyon, France	June
WOMEX	Seville, Spain	October
CINARS (biennial)	Montréal, Québec, Canada	November

our programs needing underwriting, and a finite amount of contributed income potential in the region, organizations must prioritize."

While Boomer Stacey may not "Got Milk" in Toronto, he does have other local supporters and partnerships in the works. He says that losing the dairy money forced him to ask himself, "Why are we doing this?" He has had time to step back, reexamine, and reevaluate his program. He is taking a page out of Denmark's book of aesthetics and choosing to regard children as citizens in the here and now, not citizens of the future in need of shaping and molding by adults. This view is contrary to the generally established notion in the U.S. where parents and

educators always expect theatre for children to focus on useful lessons. Stacey says he wants to leave what he calls the "state fair" festival model behind and instead create more narrowly focused, boutique events that have strong themes and a multidisciplinary approach to the arts. He acknowledges that this is an experiment born partly of necessity (the partnerships and funding opportunities left open to him) and of his own vision for a new kind of twenty-first century festival for Toronto. In October of this year, Stacey will premiere *The Living City*, a festival about how people relate to their environment. It will include architecture, multimedia, sculpture, and theatre. He anticipates that it will speak to the idea

of community and will pose questions about the responsibilities of children and adults to community. Finally, Stacey hopes that his new venture will have a professional component and that many delegates from overseas, the U.S., and Canada will attend—sharing practices and opportunities for exchange and professional development.

There is no telling what festivals in the U.S. will look like in five years time. Will there be fewer or more? Will the public's taste for foreign fare extend beyond espresso and sushi to embrace a new kind of children's theatre festival? Will our audiences ever care as much about the art as the entertainment or education value of the work we present? And can we ever bridge the gap between the dreams of our festival presenters and the realities of survival? With hope, creativity, and determination, maybe. . . ■

* For a listing of festivals, visit the Festivals Guide on ASSITEJ website: <http://www.assitej.org/guide32/def5.asp>

Janet Stanford is the artistic director of Imagination Stage, Bethesda, MD. With grants from TCG, TYA/USA, and the Canadian Embassy, she has traveled to many international youth theatre festivals and, as a result, has been able to initiate collaborations with artists from Montréal, Toronto, and England.

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