

DEVELOPING YOUNG TALENT IN PERFORMING ARTS IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

by Winnet Mutimbe

Development is currently underway in children and young people's performing arts owing to the resolutions made at a recent conference which focused on improving the skills of individuals and institutions in theatre for children and young people.

The Southern African Theatre for Children and Young People Conference (SATCYPC) held at the University of Zimbabwe and was a culmination of three years of planning by the Zimbabwe Association for Theatre for Children and Young People (ZATCYP) as an affiliate of ASSITEJ International, a French acronym for the International Association of Theatre for Children and Young People whose secretariat is presently in Denmark.

More than 50 theatre practitioners from Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mauritius, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe attended the conference.

Delegates were encouraged to form ASSITEJ centres in their countries to increase the number of these centres in Africa. The delegates made presentations on the state of performing arts in their countries and their plan of action for the future.

For instance, in Zimbabwe, a Children's Performing Arts Workshop (CHIPAWO) was established in 1989 and to date, there are 18 centres in the country. Annually, a CHIPAWO showcase is held at the end of the winter term and there is also the preparation of the Christmas play, which is broadcast on national television.

ZATCYP was established in 1993 and works with other non-governmental organisations such as Zimbabwe International Book Fair (ZIBF). The organisation also works closely with the government through the National Arts Council.

At present, the organisation is working towards the establishment of a children's committee whose role will be to suggest programmes they wish arts associations could organise for them.

However, even though there appears to be much progress in this field, the major problem highlighted by a Zimbabwean delegate, Linda Dube, is the predominating influence of Zimbabwean tradition, which says that "Children should be seen and not heard". He added that this notion has resulted in the lack of self-expression among the children as they wait on society to dictate to them the way they are to behave at all times.

According to Getrude Kamkwatira, a Malawi delegate, theatre in Malawi forms a very important part of Adult entertainment but children's theatre is not as developed.

"There is great need in my country to have a common understanding between parents and theatre practitioners if theatre has to succeed. They should also link themselves to the right government ministries or departments because for this whole venture to be fruitful, other players have to be involved," she added.

In Botswana, according to James Chatukuta, there is only one theatre association in Reetsanang but there are plans to have ASSITEJ Botswana after proper mechanisms have been put in place. In the mean time, the children's theatre will be given to the office of the Assistant National Coordinator who

is responsible for the coordination of, and support and training provision to, all Reetsanang member theatre groups in schools throughout the country.

Similarly, the Swaziland Association of Community Theatre has initiated the development of a theatre course in schools. It is hoped that the course will help solve problems such as lack of theatre houses and models to set standards of performances.

The Zimbabwe association, which has made notable in-roads in theatre development, has pledged to facilitate the networking process in order to consolidate the regional and international development of children and young people's performing arts during the year 2000. (SARDC)