

CONGRESS REFLECTIONS AND ACTIONS: GILL BRIGG



For the eleven days of the ASSITEJ World Congress 2021, I was inspired, challenged, supported and exhausted. It was just what I needed so....thanks egg, you saved my bacon!

My reflections and actions are in three parts. They are a set of personal reflections and I have resisted the temptation to write a critical overview of the Congress through the disability lens. Points that I would have included in such a report are, I hope, within the less formal responses that I've recorded here.

- **Extracts from my daily reports to the Upfront Performance Network Research Group (UPN: Research).** This is an international FB group of practitioners and researchers who work in the field of Sensory Theatre and its related forms for audiences labelled as having complex additional needs. It generated many micro-conversations within the comments and feedback has been great. I hope it is an interesting insight into the glorious complexity of this sort of work and its advocates.
- **Questions raised by the egg team throughout Congress.**
The questions were shared via the team WhatsApp group across the 11 days of the Congress. There may be more that I didn't capture.
We encouraged each other, sometimes at our daily Zoom lunch meetings and often within 'mentoring' chats with other delegates, to phrase statements as questions in order to move thinking forward.
- **Reflections on the *What's Next?* Section of 'Inclusive Theatre for Young Audiences', written by Danny Braverman following ASSITEJ World Congress 2011 in Malmo/Copenhagen.** This report, commissioned by TYA UK, and funded by ACE, considered the strategic importance of 'Whose Theatre is it Anyway'; a one-day event hosted by the UK delegation. It is probably useful to reflect on progress.

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ASSITEJ World Congress Japan 2021
Extracts from my daily FB posts to UPN: Research.

Hi everyone. I'm off to Japan virtually of course....as part of the UK delegation to ASSITEJ World Congress. My brief on the UK team is to have my research hat on and, of course, I'll be thinking about inclusivity and access. Is anyone else from our research group attending? If so, we could chat and compare notes. Does anyone have any questions you'd like me to raise? Hope you're all ok. I'll report back when I've recovered from the jet lag.

Day One

It's been a good first day in Tokyo. Audiences labelled as having PMLD highlighted in all three of the events I attended. I talked about Oily and Frozen Light briefly in Responses to Covid and colleagues at Sensorium referenced their own work and Bamboozle. The ITYARN keynote was given by Kaori Nakayama who spoke about her work on our UPN talks last summer. Her internet connection was poor so I suggested to ASSITEJ UK delegates that they could join UPN and listen to her account of her hospital project there. The ITYARN research group on Activism featured Molly Mattaini who had her paper on emergent audiences reviewed by two colleagues. Fantastic!! Fingers crossed this visibility continues. Anyone from this group who went to other events and can let us know where our sector gets mentioned..... I'll buy you a drink in the virtual bar. I'm off for a lie down in a darkened room. Xx

Day Two

Day Two in Tokyo and welcome to our new members! I listened to an ITYARN panel on Inclusivity this afternoon and there were FIFTY people there. Claire Mason, Jennifer Essex and Margot Wood presented inspiring papers, all three of which should be shared via this network in some form! Great thinking and useful practical application. I had a 'moment' when reflecting on research in our sector a mere 10 years ago. Its growth has been exponential. How wonderful that is. Across the day there were some shout-outs in other events to people and practice: Replay, Dalija (in relation to supporting work in Poland for Early Years) and Tim Webb. If anyone heard mention of folk in this group that I've missed, please post to let us know. Tomorrow will be a big day... IIAN is the International Inclusive Arts Network and part of the ASSITEJ family. It's led from the UK BY Jon Dafydd- Kidd. So far we have heard about great work for diverse audiences across the Congress. However, neurodiverse delegates might be something IIAN can encourage for the future. More tomorrow

From Molly Mattaini in response to my Day Two post

Adding to the day two report (or maybe early day 3 for some) - I saw a great presentation from Young People's Theatre in Toronto on their access initiatives and caught the last half of the Meet the IIAN Champions meeting, both of which included some great resources and brainstorming

Day Three

Day Three and it was IIAN event day. Highlights were.....a tremendous talk from the brilliant Jenny Sealey who was in conversation with Mike Kenny....news of a congress hosted by IIAN next spring called Catch the Wave....and an excellent presentation by Jayne Batzoflin who works with D/deaf artists and audiences in S Africa. I'm including a couple of her slides as a goodie bag. I would urge you to sign-up to IIAN. It's a global movement which is under the ASSITEJ umbrella and Catch the Wave will be showcasing pieces! www.iianonline.wordpress.com.

It was also great to hear from Daryl Beeton from Kazzum and to be reminded of Interplay's part in the history of our sector. If you were there today...please feel free to add your highlights.



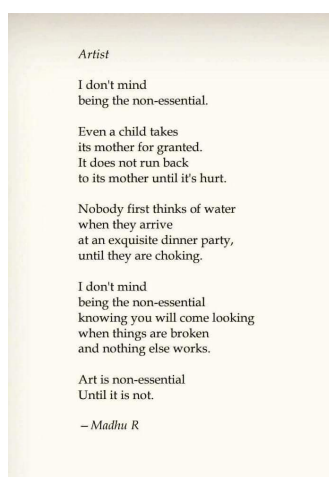
Day Four

ASSITEJ World Congress Day Four. Some highlights for those of you who are sticking with me! Beware...the Congress lasts ten days. So..it was refreshing to hear from two young visually impaired artists from Glad Theater in Denmark who spoke honestly about finding their unique routes through spatial awareness, learning lines and choosing their own costumes. Jon and Daryl from IIAN led some playful breakout activities exploring audio description and personal sign-names. What's your sign-name I wonder?...btw you're not really meant to choose your own so ask a friend! I really enjoyed hearing from Sharon Gavrielov based in Israel (and a member of this group!) Her account of the Safe Place Festival was full of enthusiasm and experience. Shout out to the role the Oily Cart team played as trainers. I have had tech issues accessing a Playwright Slam featuring Plays By, For and About Persons with Disability....but I won't give up. I've heard loads about great companies and dramaturgy in our sector but much less from artists and haven't yet found a programmed show. Today's photos are my own cherry blossom festival.



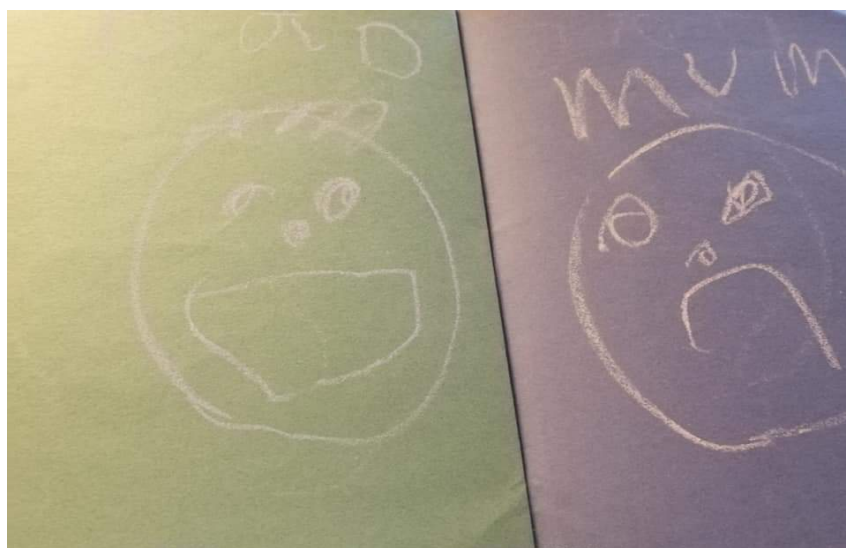
Day Five

Day Five and the main focus of the day was child participation. The research highlight was Melissa Ferreira sharing her postdoctoral research. She made a film as part of her data collection using edited-in montage, children reflecting without adult intervention, music, plus loads more. Dalija was there in the zoom along with Flossie from Oily so I asked a question about consent for research from audiences labelled as having PMLD. Melissa hasn't worked with these audiences but it's really relevant to our work and I'm going to suggest to both ITYARN and IIAN (both under the ASSITEJ umbrella) that we have a round table discussion about this at the next World Congress. I'll send a link to her film at some point. Today's goodie-bag is a poem which has been well received within our delegation. Have a good weekend.



Day Six.

I heard a talk today by Aideen Howard who runs The Ark in Dublin. It offered an interesting model of participation based on a forensic look at Article 31 of The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Aideen studied with Prof Laura Lundy at Queen's Uni Belfast who is co-director of The Centre for Children's Rights and created the Lundy Model of Child Participation. Aideen didn't mention disability at all but the Lundy Model might be worth a look if you're researching participation in venues and programming through a political lens. Do we cite Article 31 enough? Today's goodie-bag...a few doodles by my son from way back in time... I just found them ...



From Claire Mason in response to my Day Six post

The discussion about child-participation in programme curation was also really interesting with potential implications for sensory friendly performances as well. While it may be more difficult to directly ask and collaborate with young people with complex needs to find and create shows they are interested in, I wonder if there are innovations and discoveries we can use to foster more directly equitable, perhaps even equal, performance selection and creation for all young people? How might we approach young people with complex needs, neurodivergent spectators, etc. on an equal playing-field, giving them more power, when making the decisions for what to perform?

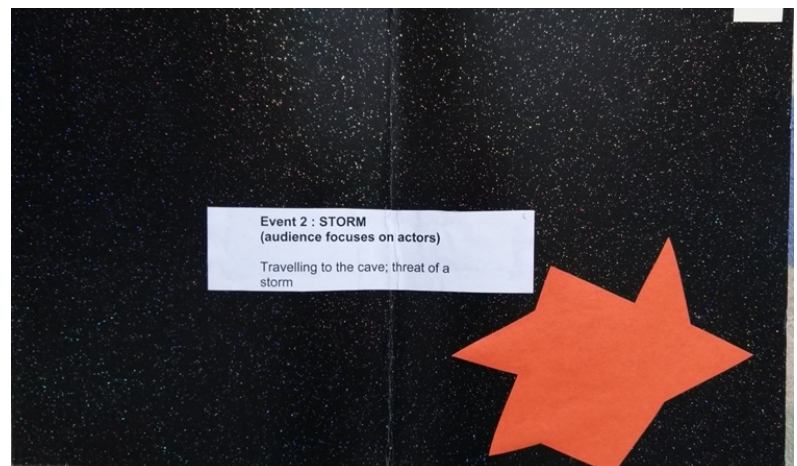
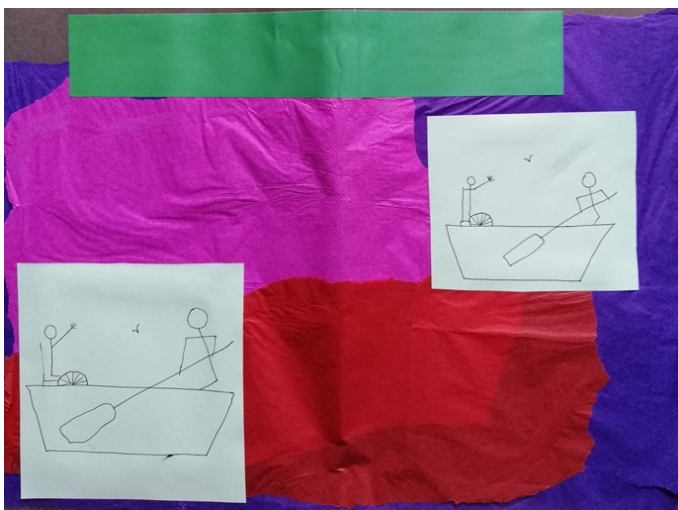
Day Seven.

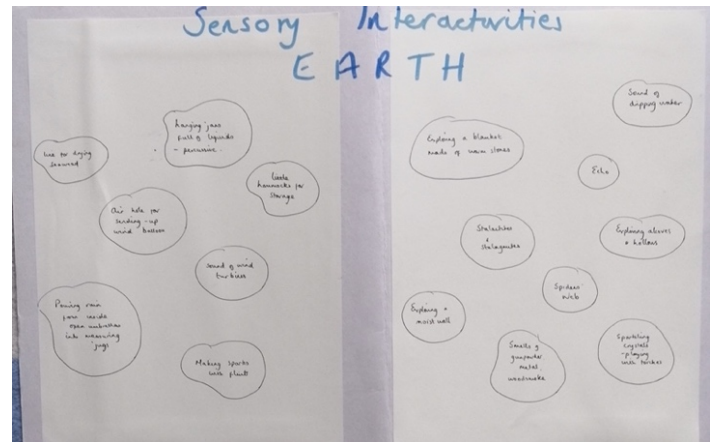
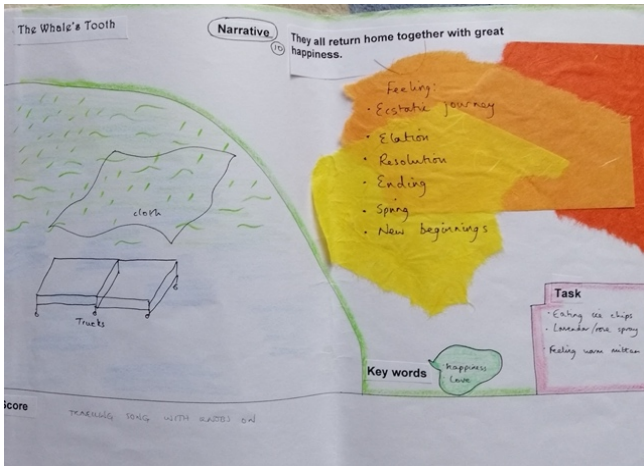
I listened to an early years project today which unexpectedly led me to think about how we record dramaturgy for theatre which may not use traditional scripts. Plink Ploink Plonk was created by Taylor Jane Cooper (Arizona State) Jane Schiermeyer Hanson (Lied Centre, Lincoln, Nebraska) supported by Dr Karen Jean Martinson (Arizona State University). They used kazoos as a method of non-verbal storytelling and referenced approaches such as teacher in role. As a method of communicating a basic narrative to people who wished to customise the show for individual settings, Taylor Jane created tactile storyboards highlighting narrative moments. How do you record your dramaturgy? Let's create an archive perhaps.... inside today's goodie-bag are some bits and bobs from my archive. Some parts are textured which haven't photographed well. I'm posting the pictures separately.

From Rosie Heafford in response to my Day Seven post

Mmm, thanks for sharing these pictures Gill Brigg - when making Touch we did a lot of drawing and Mark making to record the score which I think was our dramaturgy. But this has inspired me to do more of this with different textures

A few photos from the archive...capturing the moments. Any material you want to share? This sort of material may be useful for research.





Day Eight.

Caught up on seeing shows today to give my research brain a break. Goodie bag...a metaphor. These seeds have sprouted since the start of the World Congress!



Day Nine.

I got thinking about performance spaces today following a panel chaired by Clodhna Noonan. Jose Aguerro and Adrian Hernandez from Teatro Al Vacio Compania spoke about their work for early years. They spoke about removing stimuli to 'get back to what is essential' and design 'not as a way to catch attention but to access something sensitive'. So.... I wonder if we create spaces where both nothing and everything can happen? Jill Goodwin looked at aesthetic spaces of refuge in her Golden Tent work so today's goodie-bag is a photo of her beautiful space.



Margot, Clodhna, Molly, Dalija and any other colleagues who have been on ASSITEJ panels....please feel free to add your experiences. If you can throw an interesting question for us to chew on...even better! See you at the Closing Ceremony.

Day Ten.

Today I watched Buffalo Boy by Epic Arts based in Cambodia. It featured Buntheng Ou, who is a disabled dancer, telling his own life story throughout the piece. Epic Arts is supported by The Attenborough Arts Centre which in turn is partnered with Leicester University. Anyone from Attenborough out there who would like to tell us more about the partnership? The 'Meet the Creatives' talk was very interesting as it charted the struggles that Epic encounters presenting stories of differently abled people through the talents of differently labelled artists. It also had some sign interpretation during the post-show talk which I haven't seen anywhere else at Congress. Google the company to find out more. The goodie bag photo today is of Buntheng Ou in Buffalo Boy.



From Molly Mattaini in response to my Day Nine post

Hi all, at Gill Brigg's suggestion I'm re-posting my comment on her recent post as its own thread:

I really enjoyed my working group at ITYARN! It was great to have colleagues look at work in progress and ask really exciting questions. I proposed the term "emergent audiences" in my paper to talk about very young and young neurodiverse audiences together in terms of their shared resistance to both theatrical and societal norms, but my readers pushed on that terminology because it could fall into putting the focus on what those audiences are

emerging into rather than on their present selves. I would love any thoughts from the group on that terminology. I also raised a question in Margot Wood's panel that I think this group would be interested in chewing on: When we create work that is specifically for a population of young people with disabilities, does it have the potential to become just another segregated space? When we are thinking about congregation (voluntarily gathering with people with a shared identity) versus segregation (being separate from others by institutions and the mechanisms of power), how do we apply those ideas to work for young audiences when our audiences aren't usually in the position of voluntarily entering our spaces, but are instead brought there by caregivers and teachers?

Reply from Claire mason

Hi Molly! I agree that emergence can be tricky, and I have been chewing on your question for a while now, and I had a realization regarding how you want to frame the term! If you think of emergence from complexity theory, perhaps there is a really strong argument for the term! For those unfamiliar, emergence as a component of complexity theory is based around the idea that an individual component of a larger system works together with other components in order to challenge the system and create dramatic and diverse behaviour. In that sense, I think emergence could work really well for your argument! I think the difference might be if you see emergence as a designation for age or newness or whatnot, which I do think offers the possibility of seeing 'emergent' spectators as the sum of their potential, rather than the potential they offer the space. I don't know if this is helpful, but it is just a thought!!

Day Eleven.

Day Eleven

Some final bits from me after the spring holiday weekend. Until then..... here's my final goodie bag...a photo of the closing ceremony. Thanks for sticking with me!!



From Diane Thornton in response to my general shout-out

Hi all. It's Diane from Tenterhooks here. New to this research page and delighted to be here. Typing from a hospital bed since my child just had an op – but that's another story! Tenterhooks are currently doing some R&D to adapt MESS into a performance that we'll tour socially-distanced, to outdoor spaces and outside people's homes this summer. It was a very up-close show but of course it can't be tactile between cast and audience now. We're about to begin work with focus group families where we'll explore how to make this version

emotionally engaging for all the family. We made it for young audiences with complex additional support needs, and we wanted SEN school staff to enjoy it too. Now we'll have audiences of whole family groups and we love that! I'm really interested to hear about previous explorations into the relationship between young sensory-seeking audiences, their companions and the performer. We're keen to investigate making space for physical interactions between family members in the audience that don't necessarily feel like a parent/carer is expected to become a facilitator or performer during the show.

Response from Molly

The section "Connecting in autistic space: Circles of focus" in an article I wrote speaks about this audience relationship although I agree with Gill that there is a lot more detailed research to be done (there is a link to the PDF of my article at the top of this webpage: <https://www.mollymattaini.com/aist-academic-research>)

Day 12

Hi everyone. Just a final ASSITEJ thought from me. I've suggested to IIAN that we might send digital versions of shows in performance to future gatherings. We heard a great deal about our sector across the Congress but it would have been even better to experience some examples. If you have any further ideas about how we could make performance present at events let me know or contact IIAN directly. iianonline.wordpress.com. So finally a huge thank you to ACE, The Egg and The Sasakawa Foundation for putting some funding my way. It was much appreciated.

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**Questions raised by the egg delegate team over the eleven-day congress.
At the end of the list, I've highlighted questions in green that I have used as a springboard
for action.**

I have highlighted the actions achieved in purple.

- When can a theatrical experience enable a child to truly shed the expectations placed on them by adults?
- Where is state funding arms' length and where is it not?
- How do we know when a child stop being authentic?
- What's the role of the artist in co-creation if not to impose their will on children?
- What more is needed in today's world to support and create inclusive art?
- What is the inclusive community we want to build?
- How can we address the fragmentation in the world in order to stop the loops occurring within individual cultures?
- How can we continue to unite children and YP through theatre if political borders become less permeable?

- How important is it that the voices and thoughts of young disabled people are within the creative process when creating work for young audiences?
- Is there a tradition/established preference of employing composers rather than sound designers for TYA? What is the impact of this?
- How can we shift the unconscious bias about the way things need to be done? When eastern and Western theatre companies collaborate?
- What is the real goal of international networking within and beyond Asia?
- Is theatre more concerned with gaining new audiences than making great art?
- How can we continue to unite children and young people through theatre if political borders become less permeable?
- Are we quite as upfront about death and suffering in shows for PYA in the UK?
- Does all Early Years Theatre have to be allegorical?
- How can we further encourage artists to connect with researchers to interrogate idea for new inclusive practice?
- What does inclusion mean to you in a festival or showcase context?
- What makes you feel welcome?
- What stops you engaging?

How can we develop authentic international collaborations via the digital medium?

- **Action achieved:**
Following her contributions to Congress, and subsequent comments on UPN: Research, I have invited Molly Mattaini (University of Wisconsin) to host live international discussion events. The first is scheduled for Thursday 20th May 2021.
- Ellie Griffiths and Ben Fletcher-Watson have agreed to share the material they created for their cancelled event: Sensorial Practices in Performing Arts for Babies and Neurodiverse Audiences – A Critical Perspective. This will be either via UPN or The Sensory Lab Summer School 2021.

How do we take the new practices and ways of presenting theatre work, which have been implemented during the pandemic and merge them with live theatre once we return to normality?

- **Action achieved**
- I have suggested to Jon Dafydd-Kidd that shows for PMLD audiences should be digitally available at future events. This circumvents any difficulties with performing

to audiences unknown to the performers and will make it easier to make this work visible.

How can we help to develop and support IIAN, an international movement, towards inclusion?

- **Action achieved:**
- I have begun a discussion with IIAN about creating a round table event at Catching the Wave and Cuba 2024. The focus will be about the ethics/practicalities of negotiating permissions from our PMLD audiences/co-creators. This encompasses permission to use images, publishing feedback and crediting creative ideas. It touches on intellectual copyright and payment for use of original ideas.
- Following recent conversations, Jeremy Harrison at Rose Bruford College (academic partner of IIAN) has pledged to embed research for the IIAN World Map into future MA courses.
- A closer relationship with IIAN is a central feature of embryonic plans to create an International Sensory Theatre Centre. Jeremy and I are collaborating on these plans and my experience at Congress has created impetus.

How do we (IIAN) as an international movement move forward with the understanding that disabled artists should make work for disabled artists?

Action pledged:

- I will speak to Equity's Disability Committee about how best to keep raising the profile and opportunity of creative artists. TYA and Disability are often still marginalised within the ecosystem of professional hierarchy, especially with Agents.

How do we record dramaturgy when traditional scripted forms aren't useful?

Action achieved

- There has already been a 'shout-out' to The Upfront Performance Network about this and I will schedule a live discussion about how to record dramaturgy and also how to archive the material. Archives already exist for Oily Cart at Royal Holloway and for various sensory projects at Rose Bruford. The more we record about creative processes, the more primary source material there will be for future research.

Why is there a feeling that research progress is stuck?

Action achieved

- I will continue conversations with Caleb about this. His position as a contributor to the TYA course at Bruford places him well to extract data about research interests, funding and trends. Much of my current work is about encouraging a 'soft' research cycle: Does this work? How do we know it works? What could we do differently next time based on the two previous questions? Having listened to researchers during Congress, there would seem to be a lack of confidence in artists about this process as 'serious' research. This means that the research presented through ITYARN was largely about looking from the outside in. My view is that we need to balance this

with more 'in the room' research with its potential for artistic discovery. I am in discussions with Bruford about this iterative cycle being a central tenet of the future International Sensory Theatre Centre.

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- **Reflections on the *What's Next?* Section of 'Inclusive Theatre for Young Audiences', written by Danny Braverman following ASSITEJ World Congress 2011 in Malmo/Copenhagen.** This report, commissioned by TYA UK, and funded by ACE, considered the strategic importance of 'Whose Theatre is it Anyway'; a one-day event hosted by the UK delegation.

I'm waiting to hear from Danny Braverman for an update on this. So...this section will come later.

