

WITH SOPHOCLES IN THE CARIBBEAN

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Jamaican Sashawna Thompson, 29, is both an actor, writer and actually also an attorney. Here she reads the result of one of the day's writing exercises for the rest of the participants while workshop leader Nieves Rodríguez Rodríguez attentively takes notes in the background. Photo: Søren K. Kløft

Funding from the EU's Creative Europe pool help to finance and thus breathe life into many different cultural projects in all corners of the member states. One of these projects is *BABEL – or the art of listening in TYA* (Theatre for Young Audiences), which has been running since spring 2022. Teatercentrum in Denmark (an institution under the Danish Ministry of Culture) is the so-called *lead partner* on this project, whose main activity is the holding of a number of workshops for theatre professionals all over Europe – but also at selected locations around the rest of the world. One such 'extra-European' workshop took place in Cuba in May. The project's press and documentation manager, Søren K. Kløft, was present.

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"This building is a bit confusing for me. Can you help me?", I finally get phrased in Spanish, as I have given up on figuring out which floor I have to take the elevator up to in order to end up in the right place. Fortunately, the reception – which is dominated by tall cartoon characters punched out of cardboard – is staffed by a very serviceable lady who kindly directs me up to the right conference room on the 3rd floor.

Cuba's oldest animation studio – *Estudios de Animación ICAIC* – is located in a seven-story building in the Havana district of Vedado. Cartoons, puppet movies and animated films have been produced here since 1960. And in the studio's conference rooms, workshops are regularly organized for children and young people who want to create animated films. But for three days at the end of May 2024, a crowd of 30 theatre people occupy two of the building's fluorescent-lit and air-conditioned conference rooms. Just over half of them come from Cuba, while the rest come from other places in the Caribbean and South and Central America.

They are gathered here in connection with *ASSITEJ International's World Congress for Theatre for Children and Young People* that takes place in the city, and – in addition to a lot of theatre performances and networking activities – a large number of workshops are held around the city. The workshop at *ICAIC* is part of the large four-year BABEL project, which is financed with funds from the EU's Creative Europe pool.

The project's main activity is to organize of a number of masterclass workshops in different countries in Europe, but the project also extends beyond Europe's borders – both to Asia, to Africa, to South America and to the Middle East – and it also reaches the Cuban capital, where one of the so-called regional workshops is being carried out on three hot days at the end of May.

The overall purpose of the BABEL project is to give performing artists and theatre professionals the opportunity to unfold and explore the potentials of artistic languages and thus become better at creating high-quality performances for children and young people. The project is structured as a development and learning platform where performing artists, artistic directors, festival organisers, researchers and other industry professionals meet and develop, exchange and build new knowledge together.

Travelling with Sophocles and Lorca

Specifically, the BABEL project in Havana results in two small workshops, where the course participants over 12 hours divided over three days have the opportunity to be taught the art of writing drama aimed at children, and how to work systematically with telling stories for children with a number of tools from the stage design toolkit. The teaching is carried out by university-trained teachers from Spain and Chile.

A quick look inside the room where the writing workshop takes place assures me that the teacher – Spanish Nieves Rodríguez Rodríguez, who has a PhD in Journalism and a BA in Creative Writing on her impressive CV – has set the bar high and demands something from her students. And Nieves does not hesitate to be





inspired by the great old masters – including the ancient Greek Sophocles and the Spanish Federico García Lorca (1898-1936).

One practical writing exercise replaces the other, only interrupted by some explanatory and conceptual mini-lectures by Nieves. There is no pause. They work for three full hours without interruption. It would never have worked at a Danish educational institution, but here no one complains. People are inquisitive and ready to absorb knowledge.

At lunchtime the bus leaves the animation studio back to the hotel at the other end of the city, and I meet Spanish Inmaculada López Manzilla, who lives in Honduras and follows the writing workshop. She is, among other things, a trained theatre director and actress with over 20 years of experience in this field under her belt. She is very positive when I ask for her opinion of the workshop:

"I love all kinds of drama, and I like to read things in all genres and styles – be it both classical and modern texts. Writing myself is actually a bit difficult for me, but it is so gripping to do it, and it is important for me to get to know new methods, constantly keep up to date in the field, and be presented with new ways of approaching things," says Inma, whose CV also includes several film roles as an actress and an ongoing university education in cultural management.

"The only thing I might miss in this workshop is more time to go in-depth with what we do. But the exercises are very rewarding. For example, we write from photographs, and we rewrite ordinary prose text and news stories into drama," Inma explains, as the bus snails its way through Havana's midday traffic.

Poetry in a matchbox

The next day I visit the workshop for stage design and scenography. Here Chilean Eduardo Jiménez Cavieres controls the course of the battle. He is a university professor, visual artist and stage designer with a CV that stretches back over 40 years, and he generously and enthusiastically shares his many experiences in the field.

Eduardo has many examples of his own work and projects over the years, and the workshop alternates between small lectures by Eduardo combined with group work and discussions in plenum. Along the way inspiration is also drawn from literature to put things in an artistic perspective. A story by the Colombian Nobel Prize winner Gabriel García Márquez (1927-2014) - you can never get around him if you move in more academic circles in Latin America – was among other things a proposal for further work and discussion in the group.

Also a poem by the Argentinian author Maria Elena Walsh (1903-93), who has a considerable production of children's books behind her, is allowed to play a central role on the last day of the workshop. The poem comes to light when the participants open the matchboxes that they had been given on the first day of the





workshop with serious admonitions not to open them until the last day of the course. The poem is called 'In a matchbox', and as a nice end to the workshop, the Argentinian actor and puppeteer Guadalupe Lombardozi from Buenos Aires read the poem aloud. It starts like this: 'In a matchbox you can store many things. A ray of sunshine, for example'.

After the workshop I talk to Lupe and get her immediate opinion on the BABEL workshop: "I have gained a lot from participating. The teaching has been good, and I think we have been a 'beautiful' group," she says as the first thing as she drinks her Mate tea from the small calabash mug she has brought with her. You can immediately recognize especially Argentines and Uruguayans by this special trait when you see them in the streets. They never go far without their Mate and a little thermo container to dilute the mug's content of greenish tea.

"But actually what stands out to me in particular is a feeling of great gratitude," Lupe continues. »Gratitude to fact that something like this can actually be done. Gratitude to the fact that the teachers are so generous and that the project makes all this possible.«

BABEL as a project and a source of inspiration

The management and administrative legs of the BABEL project are also represented in Havana by Teatercentrum's director Dorthe Skøtt Bébe and consultant at the same place, Naja Birke. Dorthe is formally the BABEL project's top management, as Teatercentrum in Denmark is the project's so-called *lead partner*, while Naja has a very central administrative role as the so-called primary coordinator of the entire project.

Naja and Dorthe are happy to see a concrete example of how the project unfolds in Havana because everyday life with BABEL in Copenhagen, where Teatercentrum is located, consists mostly of endless email threads, gigantic excel sheets and extensive reporting procedures to the EU. Dorthe says:

"The BABEL project is financed by a very large grant from the EU, and we are responsible for ensuring that it is used correctly and in a responsible manner for the benefit of all parties involved in the project. The project is just over halfway through now, and we can begin to sense the contours of the experiences we have gained along the way. As an institution Teatercentrum has not previously administered projects of this magnitude, and it provides unique opportunities to create development and change across disciplines and cultures on a huge scale. However, we have already made a number of observations about how we can make things easier and less bureaucratic in a future project of the same size, so that there can be even more focus on the actual purpose of the project."

Naja adds: "Our participation in *Creative Europe* projects, and in this case as a *lead partner*, places us in a central position in the international collaboration. We have the opportunity to follow what is going on in the world and influence the dialogue and the development of children's theatre worldwide. And it's

4





incredibly exciting to see how we can get these activities to fertilize our own work at the national level and strengthen the Danish children's theatre in terms of quality, development of new formats and more international collaborations for the benefit and joy of the entire performing arts industry."

Dorthe and Naja agree that it is very rewarding and educational to be part of such a large project as BABEL – even if they are sitting at the top of an administrative pyramid far from the specific workshop with physical exercises on the floor:

"BABEL is a very ambitious project that people in ASSITEJ International and thus also representatives from Denmark have spent years formulating, and it is of course a privilege to be involved in it. At the same time it is also important to be able to help shape the project, so that it both makes sense for the artists in the project and at the same time feeds knowledge and inspiration back to the performing arts industry for children and young people as such. Currently, for example, we are awaiting feedback from the two German researchers affiliated with BABEL; they have followed the project continuously, and we look forward to seeing what they have come up with and learning something from the research that will soon be presented to the public," concludes Dorthe Skøtt Bébe.

Group photography and language challenges

Back at the animation studio it's time for the final group photo of all the workshop participants. We stand together in the reception of the building in front of all the cardboard cartoon characters. And there are smiles. And there is laughter.

Among the participants is also Cuban Jennifer Veliz who has been an interpreter for some of the participants at the writing workshop. The teaching was in Spanish and it was Jennifer's task – in a discreet and efficient way – to make sure that the few, exclusively English-speaking, participants also got something out of the workshops.

"I'm actually very tired," she confides to me. "I have a degree in languages, and I have also taught English, but this is actually the first time I have solved an interpreting assignment where I had to continuously translate back and forth between Spanish and English. I've taken it as a challenge, and I've learned a lot during these three days."

And then it's time to leave *Estudios de Animación ICAIC* for the last time. The bus is waiting for us in 32 degree celcius heat out on the street...

FACTS

– BABEL – or *The Art of Listening in TYA* – a four-year collaborative project funded by the EU's Creative Europe pool. The total budget is EUR 2 million / DKK 14 million. The project started in 2022 and runs until the autumn of 2025; it has been created at the request of ASSITEJ International. Teatercentrum in Denmark is the project's *lead partner*, and

5





the workshop activities in Havana were organized by one of the project's partners, the theater La Baracca (from Bologna, Italy).

– The 14 partners of BABEL are: ASSITEJ International, La Baracca (Italy), Agora Theater (Belgium), Bronks Jeugdtheater (Belgium), Théâtre La Montagne Magique (Belgium), Stichting De Stilte (Netherlands), Baboro International Children's Festival (Ireland), Lutkovno Gledalisce Ljubljana (Slovenia), Menu Spaustuve (Lithuania), LaSala Teatre (Spain), Scènes d'enfance – Assitej France, Assitej Serbia, Assitej Sweden and Teatercentrum in Denmark.

– BABEL originates from a reflection on the potentials and barriers of language in the network ASSITEJ International (Association of Theatre for Children and Young People), and the project is structured as a development and learning platform consisting of a wide range of workshops that are held both in Europe and in selected locations outside Europe – including Jordan, South Africa, Indonesia, Brazil and Cuba.

– Read more on the website www.babel-tya.com – here you can find information about already concluded and upcoming workshops, open calls, news, research activities, calendar function etc. Follow the project on Facebook and/or Instagram (search for the project name); here you can find photo and video material from the workshops that have been organized all over the world.

– read more about *Creative Europe* here: <https://culture.ec.europa.eu/creative-europe/about-the-creative-europe-programme>

– read more about ASSITEJ International here: www.assitej-international.org

– read Søren K. Kløft's other stories from Cuba here (only in Danish): <https://teateravisen.dk/er-det-her-magi/> and <https://teateravisen.dk/scenekunst-og-netvaerkspleje-i-cuba/> or listen to the podcast 'Behind the Scenes' hosted by Søren K. Kløft, recorded in Havana in May: <https://teatercentrum.dk/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Jesper-Cuba-podcast.mp4>

