

CENTRAL ASIAN CARAVAN MEETING

ACTIVITY REPORT

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HIVOS

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I. Aims and Background of the Project

The Central Asian Caravan Forum is an international meeting, which gathers performing arts professionals from Central Asia and their Western counterparts. Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, has hosted the third international meeting of that kind after Tashkent, Uzbekistan in May 2004 and Dushanbe, Tajikistan in September 2005.

Central Asia is an enormous and diverse region. The quality of art is very high; there is a strong theatrical tradition and it is a culturally rich area with solid professional practice and operators.

But according to Central Asian cultural operators and their European counterparts, there is a need to connect more actively with the international context.

The two first “stops” of the Central Asian Caravan (in 2004 and 2005) clearly identified a strong need to know each other better and to learn more from both sides, in Central Asia as in Europe. As a result of these first meetings, concrete connections with European producers have been established, networking on the Central Asian level has been strengthened, and co-productions between Central Asia and Europe are ongoing.

In the frame of this already existing dynamic, IETM in collaboration with its two new partners (CANAC and Central Asian Initiatives) proposed to organise the third Central Asian Caravan Forum, in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan in June 2006.

The aim of the project is to strengthen regional and international cooperation in culture. The meeting’s objectives were:

- To provide a platform for performing arts professionals from Central Asia, Europe and Afghanistan;
- To promote dialogue and exchange of experience between performing arts professionals from the different participating countries;
- To provide the participants with a picture of the performing arts situation (especially the contemporary theatrical arts) in Central Asia, Afghanistan and Western countries;
- To initiate the development of a performing arts network between Central Asia and its neighbours (Afghanistan, Iran) and Europe: assistance in the development of contacts and systematic collaboration between performing arts professionals from European and Central Asian countries.

This is a long-term process that the organisers want to support, and hope to continue in the future with their partners.

II. Organisation

1. Organisers

This meeting comes as the result of a collaboration between CANAC (Central Asian Network for Arts and Culture - Bishkek), Central Asian Initiatives (France) and IETM (Brussels).

a) Implementing Structures

Different structures have been involved in its implementation:

- IETM
- CANAC
- Central Asian Initiatives
- OSI Network in Central Asia

b) Supporting Structures

This Meeting was hosted in Bishkek under the patronage of the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Kyrgyzstan.

This meeting has been organised thanks to the kind support of several international organisations:

- Arts and Culture Network Program (OSI Budapest)*
- HIVOS
- UNESCO
- Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation in Kyrgyzstan

* It is worth mentioning that Arts and Culture Network Program has been actively contributing to the implementation of the project.

2. Participants

The Third Central Asian Theatre Meeting gathered 69 participants from 12 countries: Afghanistan, Belgium, Egypt, France, Hungary, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Slovenia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. The detailed list of participants is available in annex 2.

III. Program

1. Discussions

The discussions were held every morning. A simultaneous translation English-Russian was provided. The organisers aimed at favouring interaction and live exchanges by designating speakers for each different theme.

The topics had been discussed and agreed beforehand with Central Asian partners and advisers.

a) Content of Discussion

Date	Theme	Speakers
Wednesday 7th June	Cultural Diversity and Theatre in Europe and Central Asia	<i>Aigul Umuralieva (Bishkek City Theatre)</i> <i>Kamaridin Artykov and Ildar Muhtarov (theatre critics Uzbekistan)</i> <i>Raj Isar (EFAH)</i> <i>Nevenka Koprivsek (Bunker – Ljubljana)</i> <i>Mary-Ann de Vlieg (IETM)</i>
Thursday 8th June	Arts Management and Cultural Policy	<i>Almash Naizabekova (OSI Kyrgyzstan)</i> <i>Pavel Rudnev (Meyerhold - Moscow)</i> <i>Artur Ghukasyan (Highfest – Yerevan)</i> <i>Sultan Usmanov (Maiakovski-Dushanbe)</i> <i>Anna Mele (Awara -Ashgabat)</i> <i>Ahmed El Attar (See Fondation – Cairo)</i> <i>Nevenka Koprivsek (Bunker – Ljubljana)</i>
Friday 9th June	Experience and Perspectives of Cultural Networking in Central Asia	<i>Dinara Chochunbaeva (Central Asian crafts support association),</i> <i>Veronika Nassalskaya (Art&Shock-Almaty)</i> <i>Bolot Sadybakasov (CANAC-Bishkek)</i> <i>Mary-Ann de Vlieg (IETM)</i>

b) Discussion Summaries

See annex 3

2. Artistic Program

This third Meeting took place at the same time as the Art Ordo Festival organised by the Kyrgyz Ministry of Culture. It gave the opportunity to the participants to attend several performances from Kyrgyzstan and from other Central Asian countries.

Program to be added soon to this report, in annex 4

IV. Evaluation & Concrete Results: Impact Analysis

Besides a factual activity report, an analytical approach is proposed, in order to underline the project impacts:

- Network / Capacity Building

Among Central Asian theatre professionals the concept of networking was not as “natural” as it was able to be in Europe. After three meetings aimed at spreading the notion of networking in the performing arts sector, it seems that the benefits, but also requirements of networking are now well perceived by our target group.

- Appropriation – Project Ownership

For the first time in the series of meetings already organised in Central Asia, it seems that a feeling of appropriation of the Central Asian Theater network has been shared among the Central Asian participants. In comparison with the previous editions, the participants have been much more committed to the creation and development of such a network, as illustrated by the type of questions raised during the working sessions, as well as by the richness of exchanges during the informal moments.

This feeling of network ownership was spread among the Central Asian participants, especially among the younger generation.

As an illustration of this ownership development, two meetings already planned in the short term, both of them gathering Central Asian performing arts specialists:

- Issyk-Kul, Kyrgyzstan, August 2006
- Almaty, Kazakhstan, 20 – 26 November 2006

(these two meetings were already planned before the IETM meeting, but the Central Asian participants decided to allocate some time to work on the Central Asian Theater Network).

- Sustainability

As a direct result of this feeling of ownership, the project of network creation is entering a new phase: a process of reflection and discussion is now concretely engaged among Central Asian practitioners. At this stage, and with the constant

advice of external experts (IETM members), it is considered that the network is also entering a new phase, oriented towards sustainability.

Considering how fragile a new network can be, experts already provided advice, based on their “best practices” experience with networking (Nevenka Koprivsek, Mary Ann DeVlieg, Ahmed El Attar):

- no hierarchy among network members – no need for a director or president at this stage, but rather an informal group with a common vision of objectives and means;
- to develop the network experience through basic and small actions, requiring very limited funding;
- the importance of transparency and communication between members.

- Cultural Diversity

The notion of cultural diversity has been one of the pillars of this meeting:

A specific working session of the Bishkek meeting has been devoted to a presentation of the UNESCO Convention on Cultural Diversity, providing the participants with its basis and historical background (it was the first time that such a presentation was organised for Central Asian theatre professionals, many of them were not aware of the existence of such a text).

This meeting gathered participants from 12 countries, including the 5 Central Asian Republics (this regional approach has been considered as essential from the beginning of this project, cultural diversity being an important asset for Central Asian performing arts). This *de facto* diversity gave birth to interesting exchanges and better understanding of different regional realities (i.e. presentations of Egyptian and Slovenian performing arts sectors, sharing common characteristics in their backgrounds with Central Asia: centralisation, state-owned cultural infrastructures, self censorship).

V. Conclusion

This meeting brought a new stone to the bridges under construction between Central Asia and its neighbours (Afghanistan), but also contributed to a better regional dialogue and understanding among Central Asian performing arts specialists.

The meeting is also an important step toward strengthening cultural relationships between Central Asia and Europe.

It is clear that the third regional theatre meeting contributed to strengthening regional and international links in the field of performing arts, with promising contacts and exchanges established among individuals and organisations¹.

A new phenomenon raised in this third meeting was a feeling of ownership of the new network by its main beneficiaries, the Central Asian practitioners.

However, it seems necessary to maintain all efforts for this unique regional project, with already two dates on the agenda:

- August 2006: meeting of Central Asian theatre professionals in Issyk-Kul, Kyrgyzstan
- November 2006, meeting of Central Asian theatre professionals in Almaty, Kazakhstan, in the frame of the Theater Festival.

The first Handbook on Central Asian Theatre is still available on line² (a direct result of the previous meeting in Dushanbe). It provides meeting participants, culture specialists and field operators with an interesting (net)working tool.

¹ * Feedback forms have been distributed among the meeting participants; answers are expected by the end of the Summer season, and should provide concrete inputs and examples of specific collaborations.

² <http://www.on-the-move.org/documents/Introduction%20to%20Theatre%20.pdf>

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CAI is an NGO promoting cultural exchanges between Europe and Central Asia. CAI is working on cultural projects as tools for sustainable development

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Annex 2: Discussion Summaries

draft report by Rita Bakradze

June 7, 2006 “Cultural diversity and theatres in Europe and Central Asia”

According to the suggestion of moderator, Alexander Djumajev, musicologist from Uzbekistan, an overview of the theatric situation in Central Asian countries was presented.

The theatrical situation in Kyrgyzstan was outlined by Aigul Umuralieva. As a major positive change the revival of theatre festivals in Central Asia was mentioned. The Theater Workers Unions remain very formal organization, and no professional theatre managers are working in the field. Theater workers could be perceived as kind of “creative missionaries”. There are 22 theatres operating in Kyrgyzstan currently.

According to Kamaridin Artykov, independent theatre expert from Uzbekistan, there are 1,5 – 3 active theatres in Uzbekistan. These theatres are operating rather informally. The independent theatres represent active theater while state theaters represent “dead theater”. The term management is still very exotic in Uzbekistan and it applies to organizing the public rather than anything else. The major problems of Uzbek theatres are: poverty and censure. Innovation is not possible, theaters are expected to support to state politics. The public is not sufficiently educated for the kind of theatre independent groups are staging. There is a tendency to fall back into the past through folklore, historical themes etc. Escaping from conflicts, as if they did not exist, kills dramaturgy: “No conflict-no dramaturgy.” Altogether Uzbekistan has 43 state theatres.

Ildar Muhtarov, theater critic from Uzbekistan, expressed that there is a need for an informational/analytical journal about theatre in Central Asia. There is no information about regional theatres in Uzbekistan. There is also a problem in the education of new generations. The Theatre Institute does not raise proper new generations. Each theater though, has its own school or studio, which compensates for the lacks.

It would be very important to pay more attention to the social aspect of theater.

Kazakhstan has 52 theatres. Although the public is visiting theatre there are no bright events, no plays are available. Some improvement was achieved by master classes held by western teachers. There is a need for such kind of seminars designed for theater workers as well as for an informational journal.

During the second part of the first working day the idea of networking, introduced by Mary Ann De Vlieg, was discussed. Participants debated whether or not such a Western European tendency could work in Central Asia. Networking is a learning experience in itself. Newsletters are means of the networking, too. While reflecting on the morning session it was clear that Forum participants were looking for concrete results achieved at the previous two meetings.

In the following presentation made by Raj Isar, President of the European Forum for Arts and Heritage (EFAH, www.efah.orh), the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions was introduced. The concept of Cultural Diversity was adopted by UNESCO in 2005 as a reflection on the characteristics of the world today. Issues, such as the phenomena of culturalism, differences between national communities, homogenization, bridge building and cultural space were discussed during the introduction. Raj Isar emphasized that all these tendencies have been formulated by artists, and in particular by theater.

As for the Convention, the most important part, Article 8 was highlighted. The Convention can be found at www.unesco.org/culture/diversity .

The next speaker, Nevenka Koprivsek, the Director of Bunker Productions, Slovenia, admitted, that the issues raised in the morning session by Central Asian colleagues are very familiar to the Eastern European experience. There are discussions about the mission, about how to bring an art work in touch with audience. The question about the role of contemporary art was also raised. On the one hand, it is an attempt to move borders, limits and to ask substantial questions. In the Western world the place of contemporary art is in the middle, while elsewhere it is on the edge or at the extreme. But what are the expectations? Artists are expected to express, while audience is expected to absorb. Contemporary art is heritage in the future. In Europe, there is a tendency to take care of each other. Copying the US or the British system would cause damage to the arts. However finding balance between old and new, good and bad is difficult. Contemporary theater has become multidisciplinary. There is no longer a straight line between visual and performing arts. New forms, like contemporary dance, can easily be a tool of democratization in some places. The social role of arts and culture became very important in many countries. Mobility and networking are the main trends in European theater culture today. It helps to break isolation, refreshes and inspires. Infrastructure, management, funding and other aspects, however, should be improved. Many theatre companies use basements, old buildings, corridors to start up. The space for theater is therefore changing. And so does the way of doing theater. Instead of learning texts, the organic creation of pieces is more frequent.

June 8, 2006 “Arts management and cultural policy”

Almash Naizabekova, the Arts and Culture Program Coordinator of the Soros Foundation Kyrgyzstan, introduced the topic. She explained that in Kyrgyzstan small, experimental theatres were more successful than state theatres. Almash highlighted that a new tendency appeared in Kyrgyz theater lately: the director of the theatre is separated from the artistic director. The Soros Foundation – Kyrgyzstan is planning discussions on Cultural Policy throughout the year with the intention presenting recommendations to the government. Both in Arts management and cultural policy, Russian and European tendencies are interesting and relevant for Central Asia.

Following Almash, Pavel Rudnev, theatre critic and manager of the Centre of Meyerhold from Russia, introduced the changes that took place in Russian theater management in the past few years. In Russian theater management a new generation and a new repertoire has appeared. Theater life is getting younger. In Moscow, the process of changes begun in the 90s, when municipalities started changing theater management. Theaters in Moscow went through open space or half-open space experience.

Traveling theaters and one-time-performances have led to the youthening of theatre life. Another tendency, worth mentioning, is raising students to become professionals. There is a need for new names, texts and forms, and as soon as they appear, a new audience will appear. Another tendency is dependency from the theater director. In this regard managerial education is very important. By training managers, actors themselves do not have to become “theater administrators”.

The Russian Government does not have a cultural policy; the existing one is rather an economic policy for culture. The repertory theater is the one for sale while avant-garde is the one not for sale. The tendencies among theater critics are not only analytical, but also practical developing cultural links. However there are no mecenats; sponsorship as such does exist. In the case of the theatre business funds are mainly provided by state.

The next presentation was held by Artur Ghukasyan, President of HIGHFEST Festival www.highfest.net from Armenia. The HIGHFEST Festival became successful within 3 years after its launch. Currently, about 35 countries participate in the annual event. Apart from performances, the event also includes seminars on cultural policy and art management. Theater directors hold workshops for the students during the conference. Ghukasyan emphasized, that for festival organizers it is essential to be a member of all available

networks. As for the Caucasus, there is the Caucasus Art Managers Network (www.camn.net). The state system is still bureaucratic, but the festival already brought many new theater directors to the fore.

The theatrical situation in Tajikistan was introduced by Sultan Usmanov, theatre producer from Dushanbe. There are 17 theaters in Tajikistan, 16 out of them are state theaters, and only 1, the Dance Theatre "Pagida" is independent. In the past year, the reconstruction process of theaters began. In terms of repertoire there is freedom in Tajik theater life. The funds are equally disseminated among theaters. At the end of 90ies theatrical studios appeared thanks to the available funding, but in about two years almost all of them died. The fate of theater directors is often decided by state bureaucrats. State bureaucrats are limiting factors in organizing events. A well organized event can easily be exploited by the state with no credits to the initiator. The local public is not going to theater. Audience could be attracted by "living theater".

Anna Mele as Turkmen actor from an independent theater group "AWARA" outlined the Turkmen theater context. In Turkmenistan are many state theaters and only one independent group, namely "AWARA". The president has renovated all the theater buildings as well as built new, modern theaters. The repertoire of Turkmen theaters has to be approved by the state authorities before put on stage, and a final approval is needed after a piece is staged. The chosen theme is usually historical or patriotic.

Following these presentations, Ahmed El Attar, the Director of Studio Emad Eddin <http://www.seefoundation.org>, a play writer and producer from Egypt, gave an overview about the situation of theatrical life in Egypt. In the Muslim region, where Ahmed El Attar comes from, networking was very successful.

Similarities in the region are based on language and religion, but at the same time there are many differences as well. Egypt has a kind of "French-Soviet" system in the cultural sphere. All the theater workers were government people, who retain in their positions for life.

Egypt is a country of cultural industry. The private industry is very much income-based. There is nothing in between the controlled public sector and the money driven private sector. In late the 80ties an independent movement appeared. Independent, in this context meant, that one could deal with the state and the donors on his own terms.

Networking is not a European concept, it is global knowledge. Western societies were able to put global knowledge in action due to their socioeconomic situation. It is very important to include the young generation in every network, otherwise the network will not grow and will not survive. It is also important that artists have a choice to stay individuals. The network should also have institutions in it. National networks are very important. One can find points that all members share: staff training, resources, communal fundraising. Training is important, but productions are at least as important as well. None of the above should dominate over the other. Mobility should be mentioned as another very important aspect.

Going into statistics – Cairo has about 12 state theatres. There are year round productions including many light comedies making comments on government actions (in a light and funny way) and also classical pieces. There is no problem with the audience in Egypt, people watch theater performances even on TV.

Continuing her presentation on the 1st day Nevenka Koprivsek shared some background information about the relations between the state and the public sector in Slovenia. In Slovenia, there are 12 repertory theaters. A misunderstanding often arises, that real art develops under the pressure of difficult conditions. This cannot be perceived as eternal truth, since good productions do need funds. In Slovenia an association of independent artists and art companies was created. There was a need for new knowledge, like understanding law, lobbying etc. A dialog between independent professionals and city leaders began. The next step was a research on industrial spaces that were converted into cultural spaces. An important issue is also the transmission between generations. Developing networking with others, who have similar attempts, is essential.

During the second day a lot of practical information was shared by the speakers. In terms of policy, one can see that there are ways to change the system and one can be

independent within the system. Issues like audience or innovative venues are indeed relevant topics for Central Asia. The same applies to the involvement of new generation and to capacity building in the theater field.

June 9, 2006“Experiences and perspectives of networking in the sphere of culture and arts in Central Asia”

The 3rd day of the Forum begun with the success story of Dinara Chochunbaeva, President of the Central Asian Crafts Support Association (www.catgen.com/cacsa), about the creation of their crafts network. In 1993 the Aid for Artisans (US) came to Central Asia exploring the field and offering assistance. They started up a project in 1994 in order to build up the capacity of young artisan leaders. A coordinator for the project was chosen in every country. At the beginning artisans did not want to participate in the seminars, they did not understand that they needed it. After 4 years, regular meetings started to take place. As of today there is a marketing structure as well as a market built up for artisans. The mentality of people has changed. In 1998 Aid for Artisans left Central Asia behind. Local artisans were faced with the dilemma of how to proceed. The group continued meeting regularly and in 2 years 11 artisan organizations started up an association. At the moment, the Artisan Network covers 7 countries (Mongolia and Iran as well recently joined) and 60 members – both organizations and individuals. In 4 years many members have opened their workshops and boutiques. The activities include: seminars, exhibitions, sales, festivals, travel information centers and ensure equal involvement and benefit for all member countries. In the field of capacity building, the development of leaders took place by learning how to work in teams, cooperate in office work, keep up contacts with member organizations, monitor training requests, consider country specifics etc. Annually a big meeting is organized as well as permanent e-mail communication is secured by a person assigned for this task. Information is widely shared within the network. The particular interests of artisans are possibilities of realizing their products and cultural activities.

The meeting continued with the presentation of Bolot Sadybakasov, Director of Central Asian Network for Arts and Culture. His PP presentation is available upon request.

At the end of the event the following suggestions for future activities were made:

- conducting theater management training based on the reality of the region;
- dissemination of the report of the Dushanbe meeting;
- exchange of professionals, internship possibilities in other countries;
- exchange of play-writes;
- exchange of theatrical texts and translations;
- joint work on translations with writers and actors;
- securing permanent possibility to see each others' performances (exchange of VHS,DVD);
- creating a database of plays (the directory already exists, but it needs to be developed further and to be updated);
- conducting workshops and master classes;
- providing mobility funds for individuals;
- creating a mailing list and website for the network;
- finding national leaders/coordinators;
- creating a working group, that would find ways for sharing information;
- usage of existing festivals as possibilities to meet and foster communication (like New Dramaturgy Festival organized by Art & Shock in November in Almaty);
- consider membership fees based on country realities, in order to keep up motivation of members and attract founders.

Annex 3: List of Participants