

« On the need to dream »

Annual report of the Secretary General, after the physical and digital meeting of the Executive Committee of UNIMA International, Pilsen, 7-9 June 2022

*Piece out our imperfections with your thoughts.
Into a thousand parts divide one man,
And make imaginary puissance.
Think, when we talk of horses, that you see them
Printing their proud hoofs i' th' receiving earth,
For 'tis your thoughts that now must deck our kings,
Carry them here and there, jumping o'er times,
Turning th' accomplishment of many years
Into an hourglass...*

(Shakespeare, Prologue, Henry V)



“To Have or Not to Have?”, Tamtam Objektentheater
Photograph by Dasha Knerova

This year has been marked by an increase in meetings, a willingness to communicate, to move forward on cross-sectoral projects, as well as respond to the urgent demands of our members. Communication has never been so present, as the many digital forms of communication mobilises a new energy in the new Executive Committee since the Virtual Congress of April 2021.

Six Executive Committee (EC) meetings have taken place since, and the last was a hybrid, both physical and digital, hosted at the SKUPA International Festival in Pilsen, Czech Republic, from 7 to 9 June. Seven Open Sessions with topics of the Commissions were also realised, and a Happy Apéros gathering at the festival of Charleville-Mézières, with a desire to move forward in open and closer communication. At Charleville-Mézières, members and non-members met on various topics and enjoyed a camaraderie, discussing our “Resiliart” and onwards.

Quantity aside, the EC has focused on tangible projects and outcomes. It has done so in spite of a period of transition of communication and management within the Secretariat and challenges not envisioned before the Covid crisis. UNIMA's commemoration of World Puppetry Day remained an international effort. Its poster was designed by the great artist and set designer Adrian Kohler of the world-famous Handspring Puppet Company of South Africa. Its message was by Indian educator, puppeteer, and president of Unima India Ranjana Pandey. Its theme focused on "aqua", the source of life, as participating centres and companies introduced our oceans, seabeds, and their marine life to audiences. Activities were arranged on all continents, and 50 videos submitted to UNIMA to showcase the diversity of our crafts.

What should have been a joyous occasion was unfortunately inscribed with news of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. On the day commemorations kicked off at the Museum of Ardennes, the theatre of Marioupol was bombed. An unprecedented level of solidarity among UNIMA's members surfaced, first with the emergency fund "Free of Strings" by the Cooperation Commission, then a letter of over 400 UNIMA members reiterating peace among puppeteers. On our website, unima.org, we called for support for our members forced into exile, for destroyed theatres, and for suffering companies and our efforts and funds remain open to all members victims of this conflict, Ukrainian or Russian.

In spite of the many happenings around the globe, we continue the task of introspection and expression. The need to dream is the power to believe - the power of "the voluntary suspension of disbelief", as suggested by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Sometimes we are sad, sometimes disappointed. The puppeteer looks, touches, and asks each time how it is possible, marvelling that it is, despite the powerlessness of humans, the powerlessness of things, the powerlessness of people in the wheels of History. And yet! There is space for re-look and let go, to store what is essential, to give meaning to the mirror, and make hope from each passing glimmer.

More than waiting, it is a question of calling and granting the beginning to the wave of a new attention each time. Things speak. Strings form a framework and evidence to slide from breach to breach, from disaster to disaster, from glow to glow, from horizon to horizon towards the stage.

This desire for communication among our members has fuelled a dynamic set of meetings among Councillors and representatives of thirty UNIMA centres last May. Several Councillors attended and observed the meetings of Pilsen and their enthusiasm has been invigorating. Each elected Councillor is and will always be invited to observe the EC's meetings, and the next, 7th Executive meeting of our term will be on Tuesday 11th October, 13:30 CET. Invitations will be sent shortly. We also invite all Councillors to mark their calendars for the Council meeting to be held in Indonesia, Bali, from 26th to 30th April 2023.

UNIMA remains important to artists, and many nations' puppeteers now have representations, such as Ghana, Uganda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Zambia, Gabon, Guinea, Trinidad and Tobago, and Iraq. Let us welcome Tunisia and Sudan who successfully opened their centres this year. Let us congratulate Guinea, Zambia, Dominican Republic, and Thailand whose applications for a centre have been approved at our 6th meeting in Pilsen. The crisis of Afghanistan, unfortunately, has not subsided but our Councillors and commissions remain undeterred. They have sustained our relations with UNIMA Russia and are keeping contact with many members and puppeteers of Ukraine. Together, we shall nurture our great family so they may flourish.

We face urgent demands of members in political and natural disasters as we face the steep learning curve of open communication. So we shall seek new resources to develop UNIMA International so it can respond and find solutions for puppeteers, as well as find meaning for our organisation in the world and its extraordinary future. The activities we have seen affirm this will of contemporaneity and they speak for the relevance of the vision of UNIMA: the promotion of humanism and the puppetry arts. So much is at stake, yet they affirm the necessity of our organisation, the necessity of creation, of the theatre, and of the imagination of puppetry.

Dimitri Jageneau
General Secretary