

Charter of the imagination: On all values brought by the 5th Hakawy festival

Ati Metwaly, Saturday 28 Mar 2015

Fun, education, artistic commotion, dynamic exchange of thought, clear creative vision... Those and many other values characterised the 5th Hakawy International Arts Festival for Children



“Children have the right to enjoy high-quality artistic products, specifically created by professionals for each different age-group.”

This is the fifth of 18 principles enumerated by the Charter of Children’s Rights to Arts and Culture, an initiative of the theatre company La Baracca: Testoni Ragazzi together with educators and parents from Bologna, Italy.

The same principle is followed by AFCA for Arts and Culture, the independent Egyptian organization heading the Hakawy International Arts Festival for Children, the only annual theatre festival in Egypt dedicated to children. Hakawy is one of many outstanding projects run by AFCA, an organisation working with children and young people. The festival’s fifth edition took place at the Hanager Arts Centre on the Cairo Opera House grounds (9-17 March) and the Bibliotheca Alexandrina (18-19 March).

The Charter of Children’s Rights to Arts and Culture has been widely adopted by European institutions aiming to reach out to children and, in 2011, it was awarded the Medal of the Presidency of the Italian Republic. La Baracca company translated the 18 charter points to 27 languages, and assigned Italian illustrators to add an image to each principle, turning the project into a book and an exhibition.

Last year, the fourth Hakawy festival adopted the seventh principle as its motto: “Children have the right to

attend the town's artistic and cultural institutions, both with family and school, in order to discover and experience what the area offers them."

This year, AFCA's director Mohamed El-Ghawry took things even further, staging exhibition of the 18 illustrated principles. There could be no better way to stress children's right to art and culture. With the theatre performances for children filling the Hanager halls, the exhibition stood as a declaration – or an important reminder – of the role art plays in the education and development of children and young people.

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It's all in the programming...

This year, the Hakawy Festival hosted plays from the USA, the UK, the Netherlands and France. From Egypt, a play called '500s' – cooperation between BuSSy and AFCA – was to be staged yet it was cancelled with the director Sondos Shabayek and BuSSy team pointing to "the government censorship." Addressing an audience aged 13 and above, '500s' was based on a year's research of schools and stories of Egypt's teenagers with focus placed on the sexual harassment and other topics perceived to be social and cultural taboos. The cancellation of the play however did not obstruct Hakawy, which once again offered fun and education to young viewers while stirring their creativity and imagination.

In previous years, the plays performed during the Hakawy were usually linked by a theme. The first festival held in 2011 relied on simple storytelling, the second stressed the importance of language and education, the third introduced music and rhythm and the fourth told stories through movement and dance. According to El-Ghawry, instead of having a new theme, this year's festival combined elements developed in the past four editions. However, going through the plays, it soon became evident that they still had a lot in common, in terms of both theatrical form and conceptual content.

The Tiger Tale by the UK's Barrowland Ballet, Tetris by Arch 8 group from the Netherlands, IN'Tents from the USA and Tuiles from France all use the tools of experimental theatre, where the classical approach to the space, acting, dialogue and movement is challenged, revised or even dropped completely.

The Hanager Arts Centre has the ability to adapt its spaces to experimental theatre. The gallery area can be easily transformed into a typical black box, for example, suitable for a play like IN'Tents or a physical dance performance like Tetris. In The Tiger Tale, a play based on a famous short story for children published in 1968, "The Tiger Who Came to Tea", the audience joined the performers on the stage at the end of the show.

In most cases, the set was basic, typically of travelling troupes, and performances aimed to offer economical and practical solutions to movement across different stages. The handful of props used by the two clowns from IN'Tents or the equally simple set presented by the juggler from Tuiles were sufficient to engage the young viewers in a simple story. The performers of Tetris, on the other hand, relied completely on their bodies showcasing impressive flexibility. Even if in The Tiger Tale the scenography was a more advanced, the performance operated with simple structures, making no use of advanced theatrical machinery. The audience sat around what looked like a large cage where most of the action took place.

The defining quality of a travelling troupe is that the extent of the performance is contained within the performer; and that was the case here. Great showmanship characterised all the plays. The clown duo from IN'Tents, a scout intern and his Park Ranger in command, introduced the children into the camping culture. The play was filled with tricks, stunts and an occasional dash of mime wrapped in creative theatrical procedures and elements reminiscent of silent film comedy.

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Another remarkable showman, Fred Teppe, took the stage in his solo juggling act Tuiles. Borrowing from the burlesque and circus techniques, this theatrical mini-drama used some classic circus routines – mainly juggling and balancing – with the performer diverting everyday objects such as camping stools, boxes of Lay's potato chips and clothes drying stands away from their original function. Stressing the unexpected, he demonstrated how the ordinary can generate the most fascinating and unusual ideas. In Tetris too, a group of skillful physical dancers formed shapes using nothing but their own bodies, exciting the imagination and encouraging creativity.

For the young viewers, this year's Hakawy Festival was a journey through imaginary, often undefined procedures, becoming a highly creative artistic experience where the surreal is born of nothing more than the ordinary. While giving birth to it, the performers invited the audience to participate, interacting, whether through exchange of a few juggling balls (Tuiles), pulling the tent's elastic cord all the way (IN'Tents), coming on stage at the end of the play (The Tiger Tale) or even allowing the children to participate in its unfolding (Tetris).

It was through interaction and teasing that the performers transferred valuable messages to the children. Though camping is seldom practiced by Egyptian children, IN'Tents showcased the strength of teamwork in their often hilariously clumsy efforts to build a tent. Tetris, Tuiles and The Tiger Tale – each with a different intensity – asked the viewer to step outside the box and look at the reality within parameters other than those drawn up by society.

The Tiger Tale in particular touched on the important concept of how we become victims of a routine, and how the norms taught at homes and schools can challenge creative and healthy spontaneity. All of which is not to forget the intriguing fact of how the iconic story The Tiger Who Came to Tea managed, time and again, to generate prolific material for endless artistic explorations of themes and values.

With so many axes running through Hakawy, however, I agree with El-Ghawy that this year's festival revisited previous themes in terms of performing arts formats: we had modern dance, physical theatre, circus and clowns. But this edition has also come forward with a clear distinctive to previous year's thematic bond which in broad terms could be captured as "inspiring imagination". It was the combination of experimental theatre tools and interaction with the young audience that brought this theme to the surface whether it was intended or it surfaced from within the working process.

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Emphasis on outreach

Nor does the question of theme affect the value of the festival to the fledgling minds. The only regret that might be worth voicing is that in a country of 90 million people and a large number of independent and governmental cultural players, all of which are making an effort to provide culture, the initiatives addressing children remain too few and far between. Not only is Hakawy the only stable and recurrent theatrical practice addressing children, since its creation in 2011 it has constantly developed and learned the lessons of each edition.

A brilliant example of such conscious self-improvement is this year's programming. In 2014, each play was staged only three or four times, which proved too much for the Manager to accommodate all the audiences and resulted in the occasional disappointment and even skirmishes between parents eager to secure a seat for their children. This year the troupes have performed for several days in a row, often more than once a day. In 2015 Hakawy also reduced the number of shows and selected less technically demanding performances, compared to such shows as Aga Boom in 2013 and Imago Theatre's Frogz in 2014 each of which incorporated impressive visuals but could only be performed four times. The intimate IN'Tents, by contrast, could be performed 14 times in total.

Paralleled by workshops, such continuous effort generated a breathtaking busyness at the Manager Arts

Centre, with AFCA cooperating with NGOs and charity organisations to organise morning bus trips from private and government schools and (for two days) from the Children's Cancer Hospital (57357) to the theatre, the better to give them "the opportunity to take part in the artistic and cultural initiatives of their town, regardless of their social and economic standing, because all the children have right to arts and culture," as well as to "artistic and cultural projects devised in consideration of their different abilities," as the 18th and 15th principles of the charter state.

On Sunday 15 March, the two clowns took their tent to the hospital where IN'Tents brought a smile to many a child's face. Hakawy's taking two plays to the Bibliotheca Alexandrina was also a new expansion this year.

Over five editions of the festival, AFCA has proved capable of recognising and transcending obstacle. Though Egypt does not lack performing arts festivals, it is safe to say that Hakawy is among the rare phenomena excelling in both the programming and outreach departments.

Another festival that has proved equally strong in content and execution is India by the Nile, a three-week long offering of Indian culture in the form of music, performing arts, films etc. India by the Nile, motored by the 30-year-old Teamwork Arts company, is supported by the Ministry of Culture and Embassy of India. AFCA does not have such history or resources, yet in its fifth year, Hakawy already managed to make an impact on the cultural scene, something that sets it apart from other budding or established, independent or state-run festivals taking place in the culturally busy months of March and April.

Much of the festival's achievement lies in its core values and organisation. With Hakawy, AFCA's mission is very clear, and its implementation has been consistent. On the organisational level, Hakawy creates an important commotion, a creative exchange of thoughts. It generates interest, provokes and inspires. It entertains and educates. In this context, Hakawy creates certain kind of culture and instills in the young as well as their parents and educators the habit of theatre. Away from home-based channels, it provides a healthy community where creators, children, parents and schools are actively engaged in art.

"Children have a right to have an integrated system between school and artistic and cultural institutions, because only a constant interaction between them can offer a vibrant living culture," so says the 10th principle.

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Gains beyond the festival

A large amount of literature has been written about the benefits that art brings to child development. In fact, it is not about children only, but about laying foundations for patterns of thinking and behaviour among future grownups, parents, educators, potential art supporters and representatives of various professions.

An interesting point was raised in recent research by CESifo (the Center for Economic Studies and Ifo Institute), in the Department Human Capital and Innovation especially, together with a number of universities in Germany. Conclusions issued under the working title "Music in the Air: Estimating the Social Return to Cultural Amenities," state that "the arts have positive long-term effects on the economy."

In short extracts published by Reuters, we read that the research focused on how investment in arts and culture benefits the community as a whole. "The study's findings represent a key argument in favour of subsidising cultural facilities. We find that high-skilled workers who are attracted to locations with a rich and diverse cultural scene generate productive knowledge spillovers. It is well accepted that being around smart people makes us smarter and more innovative. This implies that once a city attracts some innovative workers and companies, its economy may change in ways that make it even more attractive to other innovators."

In short, communities with access to art proved to have a higher number of high-skill workers, and those communities practicing art – whether directly or as its observers – tend to project stronger creativity in all professions practiced by their members, eventually boosting the economy.

Sadly we are light years away from acting on the conclusions presented by the German researchers. Art and culture failing to bring about immediate economic returns, they are suffering from reduced financial support by governments worldwide; the increasing suffocation of artistic development can provide a quick and easy fix for other – apparently more important – holes in the economy. If we only think about the negative effect of disconnection from cultural activities on the society a few decades into the future, we would be saddened by the results. It is therefore positive that, after a two-year hiatus, the two-decade-old state-run Cairo International Film Festival for Children has returned, despite the organisational hiccups demonstrated on the first few days.

As of today, however, Hakawy remains the only stable and ambitious theatre festival addressing children with a clear outreach agenda, an efficient organisational structure, a comprehensible and target-oriented vision and effective programming. It may be no more than a drop in the ocean of needs but also leaves us with the hope that as Hakawy develops, it will be joined -- with equal strength, enthusiasm and dedication – by other cultural players.

“Children have a right to take part in artistic and cultural events, on a regular, not random, basis during their school and pre-school life,” reads the eighth principle of the Charter of Children’s Rights to Arts and Culture states.

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