

Beyond our own Bubbles: Global work for children by embracing diversity

Interview by Julia Dina Heße with ASSITEJ International Chair Sue Giles (Australia) and Vivian Boateng (Ghana), co-founder and Chair of ASSITEJ Ghana.

ASSITEJ Germany is one of the founding members of the International Association for the Performing Arts for, with and by Children and Young People. Connections to the international scene have therefore always been a central characteristic of ASSITEJ Germany. On the occasion of its 60th anniversary, two colleagues share their views on the global organisation, its National Centres and its work for and with young audiences—and they offer their birthday wishes to ASSITEJ Germany.

Julia Dina Heße (JDH): First of all, thank you both for agreeing to take time and do this interview with me. Sue, you are a long-standing member of the ASSITEJ International Executive Committee (EC). You joined the EC in Warsaw in 2014 and have been president of the association since 2021. What does ASSITEJ mean to you personally and as an organisation that connects theatre makers for children and young people worldwide?

Sue Giles (SG): For me, the personal connection with and the understanding of ASSITEJ has taken many years. And I think that ASSITEJ is not something that you can completely understand immediately. When I was asked to stand as the Australian representative I had gone to a World Congress, so I had seen ASSITEJ in action, but I didn't really know much about the organisation. It was only when I was elected to the Executive Committee that I started to truly understand it. I guess the growth of that understanding—the understanding of the incredible complexity and the community within ASSITEJ—leads to a real and personal commitment to what the organisation does. It's one of the things that I am especially interested in because connection, and therefore commitment, makes all the difference in our sector and how my sector understands their work in an international context. So to have personal experience, to have friends, to see their work and to have been to places where they produce in their different contexts is extraordinarily powerful in terms of emotions and in terms of commitment to this sector, this audience and to your own work as a practitioner. To understand what ASSITEJ is, is also multi-layered: it can start slowly, it can be a big

hit or a revelation, but it takes an immersion in it to really understand it. It's a "slow cooking method" and it's something that is worthwhile taking time over.

On a global perspective ASSITEJ is so vital to help us out of our bubbles in which we work. What ASSITEJ does as an international association is that it creates a perspective that offers a bigger picture when we feel desperate about our personal work challenges because it shows us the breadth of the global commitment that happens across our community, and so you understand what's worth continuing to fight for. And, for me, ASSITEJ means having an organisation that connects theatre and young people, connects children to adults, to artists, and all to each other, that connects the idea of culture to people everywhere. For me, I think, the idea of ASSITEJ takes you over because there is so much heart in what is happening in our sector around the world, and it makes you realise how incredibly important it is to have an organisation that focuses on this marginalised community and on theatre and performance, which is such a hard thing to explain and a hard thing to do—also to explain what difference our art can make.

JDH: Vivian, you founded ASSITEJ Ghana just a year ago and you played a major role in shaping this process. How did you learn about ASSITEJ in the first place and why did you want to introduce it in Ghana?

Vivian Boateng (VB): A few years ago, while I was lecturing in the theatre department at the University of Ghana, I kept asking myself: who else is working in theatre for young audiences? What are they doing, and how can we support each other? I realised it's so important to look beyond your own bubble and connect with others in the field.

A mentor introduced me to ASSITEJ, and I was amazed by its global reach. I joined as an individual affiliate but soon wanted to create a bigger impact by uniting practitioners in Ghana. I reached out to colleagues and through social media, bringing together a core team of eight. Together, we applied to establish ASSITEJ Ghana. On January 31, 2025, we received confirmation, and we officially launched on World Theatre Day for Children and Young People, March 20th, with the Minister of Tourism and Creative Arts in attendance.

Attending the ASSITEJ Artistic Gathering in France last year showed us the magnitude of global work for children and young people and inspired new ideas for Ghana. Being part of ASSITEJ International allows us to share Ghanaian arts with the world while learning from others, proving that art truly unites us across borders. I think that's the beauty of all art: it shows that beyond all our differences and boundaries, we are one. ASSITEJ International makes that possible; it makes the world see through our art that we are one people.

JDH: Vivian already mentioned the ASSITEJ Artistic Gathering 2025 in Marseille. During this event in France ASSITEJ International also celebrated its 60th anniversary in the country where it was founded. In your opinion, Sue, what moments or achievements in its history can ASSITEJ be particularly proud of?

SG: The original intention of the partners involved in founding ASSITEJ is incredibly impressive: that is of creating an international association of children's theatre as a response to a world of conflict and division, like back then in the time of the Cold War. That was such a big thing to do—something we can be proud of, and we need to keep this legacy. Also we need to ask ourselves: how do we continue this legacy, what are

the current challenges? I think we can be proud that we face those moments and that feeling of responsibility; the challenges are getting scarier, but still we do face them, because we are getting more global and we just have to.

Also we can be proud of the fact that the leadership of ASSITEJ International over the years and especially in last 20 years has been really open to opening up our structure and constitution and making changes to embrace diversity. And also the work of the association to be more sustainable across more people and more countries. That is also something to be proud of—but it also needs continuous work, as every opening brings new challenges. But we have already proven it to be possible. This also implies that we need to make sure that our recently achieved funding through the European Union continues to flow to everybody through projects like those that we have been able to do lately—the EU funding is also something I am extremely proud of, by the way. I would like to see that funding continue and increase over the next years—not just through the European Union but also in all the other funding areas that we can go to globally.

JDH: Talking about challenges: what would you describe as the biggest challenges for our art form and scene right now?

SG: One thing is the marginalisation of children and young people in all their societies to varying degrees, obviously. But it is also the marginalisation or—well, we call it the “culture wars”—like a war on culture and arts generally. I think that is one of the big challenges for art and culture: that many people regard it as not important, not economically successful, that it does not deliver an economic idea of success and that its impact is not measurable. So globally speaking: the place of culture and art as well as the place of children—and here especially theatre for children is very marginalised. When I say marginalisation I am saying that children are often still invisible, not recognised within their societies. They often do not have their cultural and artistic rights. They don't have a voice, they are often neglected and ignored. And they don't have power or money. That means that our art form is also marginalised and the work we do is often not recognised. In its advocacy work what ASSITEJ does is focusing its activities on that demographic of 29% worldwide: we are specialists in this area and our craft and art cannot be separated from our audience. And this means we are deeply involved in the well-being, existence and recognition of children and young people for themselves. ASSITEJ can provide that perspective in lots of different contexts, which is what we are doing: we are doing it through the studies and publications of the recently founded Performing Arts Coalition (PAC) that ASSITEJ is part of, we are doing it as a global body talking to governments, to social welfare or when we talk to health and education. And we can do it because we know the facts and the evidence around the effects of theatre for children and young people. And we are collecting data and providing our members with research and informed advocacy that's backed up with numbers and measurements, and those sorts of tools can make the difference.

JDH: How is the situation of the performing arts for young audiences in Ghana, Vivian? What are your plans as ASSITEJ Ghana for the coming year and what are the challenges you are facing?

VB: In Ghana, professional performing arts created specifically for children and young audiences are still quite limited. In many ways, children are an overlooked audience in our arts landscape. Yet they make up such an important part of our society, and they

deserve high-quality artistic experiences created with them in mind. That is one of the reasons ASSITEJ Ghana was established—to advocate for and grow the field of performing arts for young audiences in the country.

As a young National Centre, one of our biggest challenges right now is growing our membership. We're asking questions like: how do we set fees that are reasonable while still encouraging people to join? How do we make membership exciting and valuable? These are conversations we have in our weekly meetings, and we also learn from fellow ASSITEJ Centres such as South Africa, Rwanda, Nigeria, and Cyprus. For our first anniversary in March 2026, we have something symbolic planned. Some of our students will plant a tree with us to represent growth, and we will host a Zoom conversation, bringing together older and younger generations to discuss the future of performing arts for young audiences.

Beyond that, our strategy is to increase visibility for this community. When our members produce shows or host events, we encourage them to include the ASSITEJ Ghana logo alongside their own so we can amplify the work collectively. A major highlight ahead will be our first national festival of performing arts for young audiences in December 2026, showcasing the creativity and talent of children and young people across Ghana.

JDH: Both of you have already been to Germany several times. You both took part in the International Directors' Exchange, which is co-organised by ASSITEJ Germany. Can you share some of the experiences that you had and that maybe influenced your artistic work or perspective?

SG: Yes, I have been there for EC meetings in Nürnberg and Frankfurt, and before that I was part of the Directors' Exchange 2003 in Hamburg. In Frankfurt the EC visited the ASSITEJ Archives and we were offered a guided tour; I went to the Australian section as I was interested to see who sent material from Australia. It was moving to see that there is a whole room for this archive, but also to learn who has been contributing over the years, how far back the history goes and also to see the digitalised plan and how the archive is being turned into something that is more interactive. In Australia we don't archive very well, so the archive is deeply impressive for me.

Another thing that I strongly associate with Germany is the impressive research that is done; the effect of German research and German writing on ASSITEJ International is incredibly valuable. And also the leadership that ASSITEJ Germany has provided—not only within the Executive Committee but also in terms of project leadership, examples of ways to engage globally—is incredibly important as well. And it's an important example of the strength and support for sector awareness of international influence through institutions like Goethe Institut; the amount of cultural funding that gets dispersed is extraordinary.

I also have strong memories of the Directors' Exchange I was part of in 2003. It really was my first encounter with ASSITEJ Germany and the German TYA landscape. I was new in my theatre Polyglot and the Directors' Exchange with artists from all over the world was absolutely a turning point for me in my relationship with culture in Australia and my relationship with the children's sector in Australia. I became much more personally interested and engaged with professional development and very much aware of its lack in my country. I remember the strength of the conversations and also the willingness of German artists to take on feedback to their show in a way that I had

never seen before. And I remember how impressed I was by the sheer number of theatre houses with companies in them in one city, that was unbelievable.

VB: Meeting other directors and seeing how they work in their own spaces was incredibly inspiring. The Directors' Exchange 2025 marked Ghana's first participation, creating visibility for Ghanaian performing arts on the global stage and opening pathways for future collaborations. It was humbling to represent my country, and I carried that responsibility with me—I wanted to show the world the best of Ghana. You know, there is often such a narrative when we are talking about Africa and how it's projected in the western world: it's usually about war or starvation or poor children. But one part of my work as an artist and an advocate for children is to make the rest of the world see what children and young people in Ghana are capable of. For the Hamburg Exchange, all the directors worked with children and young people from their regions. I worked with students from my Creative Education Through Drama programme. Their voices and insights became central to the discussions. The recordings were shared in the working session with fellow directors—their honesty, creativity and expressiveness sparked strong reactions from my colleagues. For me, when I listened to all the things children said in the interviews, three things stood out: first, children everywhere long for peace and reject war. Talking to one of the participants in Hamburg, Sharbel from Lebanon, who still experiences conflict, reminded me that art can—and must—happen even in difficult circumstances. It taught me that we don't need perfect conditions to create: we do not have to wait for the right situations or the right environment to make theatre and art happen. If people going through a war are still making theatre for children and trying to let them have a normal life, then I really don't have an excuse. The second thing about the children's voices that resonated with me was: young people are deeply aware of the climate crisis and demand urgent action. I was amazed to see how children and young people from different countries all spoke the same language: "Adults, you are not doing anything!" Third, children want to be recognised as capable individuals whose ideas and opinions matter. And we should be listening to them. This is why I advocate for performing arts for young audiences in Ghana. Art gives children a platform to express themselves, own their voices, and share their stories. In our culture children have to be silent when adults talk, but performing arts say: "No! Children have a place in our society, they have a right to talk." So while in Ghana children often don't really have a voice, we are trying to change that and we are trying to help them amplify their voices, ideas and what they hope for through art. And thanks to the Directors' Exchange I got another insight: most of the time we think we know what children want and we talk for children, and in Hamburg I learned that we should not do that but give them the space to talk for themselves and represent themselves and make their own choices and decisions—including in creational processes. The Exchange in Hamburg reinforced that we must give children space to speak for themselves, make creative choices, and shape their own work—a principle I carry into every project at my academy.

JDH: ASSITEJ Germany is celebrating its 60th anniversary this year. What do you think would be a particularly welcome gift or wish from Ghana?

VB: 60 years—wow! I mean, here we are just taking our first steps, and you are 60 years ahead of us. Thank you, ASSITEJ Germany, for creating such a positive platform for children and young people through the performing arts and for being such a true pacesetter.

From Ghana, we really admire how dedicated your artists are to the next generation—it's inspiring and intentional. My wish is that you continue to hold that light and carry the torch of hope that uplifts children, young people, and artists everywhere. I hope the next 60 years bring even more transformation, creating a vibrant, global community where children grow into world changers who are guided by humanity, creativity, and care—who are humans before politicians.

JDH: What are your birthday wishes for ASSITEJ Germany, Sue?

SG: I wish for ASSITEJ Germany that your commitment to the sector is recognised and visibly supported. That recognition is gained for all the work that you do from artists in the broader arts industry and from your national founding bodies. I certainly feel that within the international community of ASSITEJ that ASSITEJ Germany is highly respected and is looked to and has built so many relationships throughout the globe. And this could inspire other National Centres to grow and demand and hold that space and get stronger just as you do with ASSITEJ Germany. So I think the whole of Germany should throw you a party and put you on a panel in a TV programme so everybody can know what you do.

JDH: What do you wish for the ASSITEJ community for the next 60 (or 6) years?

VB: What I wish for ASSITEJ Ghana and also for the rest of the world is that for the next 60 years may we say that because of ASSITEJ we have better human beings who are championing progress, love, community and oneness. I hope that the world shall see that because of ASSITEJ International and our art there is peace in the world.

SG: I wish for ASSITEJ in the next 60 years to be recognised for its really important role in a broader societal resilience and community cohesion. I think this is already being worked on in lots of different ways in terms of our influence outside of our own sector and into the other sectors of government and social influence. I would love to see ASSITEJ achieve the means to financially support National Centres to enable them to take over leadership in particular parts of programming and projects of the association. And I wish that our work around ecological sustainability is pushed and continues to be something that we are proud of, and maybe that is something that ASSITEJ Germany can support. Finally, I am proud that we punch above our weight: that we are very ambitious in our thinking, which is really exciting and slightly scary. I wish for ASSITEJ to stay this brave and ambitious in the future.

Sue Giles AM is the President of ASSITEJ International and works in advocacy globally and nationally in Australia. She was Artistic Director of Polyglot Theatre for 22 years specialising in child participation. She still creates and produces new works for children and is a mentor and consultant for the TYA sector.

Vivian Boateng is a Ghanaian arts educator, choreographer, and theatre director whose work champions performing arts for children and young people and bridges artistic practice and scholarship to inspire the next generation of performers. She is Founder and CEO of Vivie's Dance and Theatre Academy in Accra and Director of ASSITEJ Ghana.

Julia Dina Heße is a German dramaturg, cultural mediator, researcher and presenter. She has been working with theatres and companies in Germany and internationally. Julia is a member of the board of ASSITEJ Germany and ASSITEJ International.

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