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**JOHN SOMERS**



# The 10th IDEA World Congress

## Beijing, 15–20 July 2024

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*IDEA 2024 Congress*

### **Hesitating and waiting**

Bringing the IDEA World Congress to China did not seem easy if we go back to an IDEA webinar about a year ago when the possibility of holding the event in Beijing was discussed. There were a number of voices against it, on the grounds that people would not be able to express themselves freely, that there would be security problems, and so on. I was asked for my opinion, which was of course a positive YES.

During the congress, I heard many people say that Beijing was different from what they expected. It is an international city with a distinct cultural identity and has hosted two Olympic Games, so it would

not disappoint drama educators from around the world. At the same time, this is a congress that China has long waited for. Drama education is now vibrant in the country, but it also faces many problems and difficulties. Therefore, the IDEA 2024 Congress provides an opportunity to further activate the development of drama education in China.

The IDEA 2024 Congress was held at Beijing No.2 Middle School Chaoyang School from 15 to 20 July and attracted over 500 participants, most of whom were teachers from schools across China. They were eager to meet drama educators from other countries to clear up misconceptions and learn additional



IDEA 2024 Congress

methods. Over the 5 days of the congress there were 6 keynote speeches, 5 short performances, 5 Special Interest Groups (SIGs), 3 roundtable forums, 48 paper presentations, 41 workshops and 1 Young IDEA international cooperation project with a performance. The IDEA General Council Meeting also took place during the congress, with the election of the new IDEA Elected Officers.

### Sharing and discussing

Professor Ma Wenqi of the Chinese Central Academy of Drama discussed his long-term research into what drama in education adopted and transformed from theatre. According to his findings, drama conventions are derived from the various aspects of theatre (writing, directing, acting, etc.), with the original aspects being creatively transformed into playful and participatory activities. The purpose of these activities is educational rather than performative, encouraging students' experiences, perceptions, reflections and judgements. The conventions of drama share with theatre a focus on the characters of the story. In his opinion, drama in education has developed around two methods, those of Konstantin Stanislavski and Augusto Boal, but new possibilities could emerge from the ideas and practices of Antoine Artaud, Bertolt Brecht and Jerzy Grotowski. Professor Jonothan Neelands introduced the Belgrade Theatre in Coventry, England with the theme: "Make Theatre a Source for Learning, Imagination and Creativity". Professor Katie Dawson from the University of Texas in Austin spoke about building bridges between drama and education, schools and communities, and students and teachers. She intro-

duced drama for schools and drama-based pedagogy with examples from Galena, Austin, Bosnia and Herzegovina. In addition, Professor Jo Raphael from Deakin University, Australia spoke on "Harnessing Drama and Theatre in Education for Planetary Well-being", in keeping with the global perspective of the congress. She focused on the symbiotic relationship between science and drama, arguing that there are a number of issues in science education that drama can address. For his part, Professor Kwok Kian-Boon, Vice-Chancellor of the University of the Arts Singapore, spoke on "Arts Education in the Service of a Broken Humanity on a Fragile Planet", offering further thoughts and insights from a Southeast Asian perspective. He expressed his belief in the urgency of arts education because we are now living in a time of great contradictions, where science and technology are impressively developed, but our humanity is broken and under serious threat.

Special Interest Groups (SIGs) are an important part of the IDEA congress and consist of a team of coordinators and a group of teachers, researchers and artists who work on a specific theme to develop ideas, methods and approaches. This year, there were five SIGs working on five different themes including *Drama and Peace Education* coordinated by Asa Ragnarsdottir (Iceland) and Monika Necpalova (Slovakia), *Puppetry within Drama Education: processes, skills and applications* coordinated by Cariad Astles (UK), *Drama Teaches 21st Century Employability Skills* coordinated by Jane Carter (Australia), *Exploring the Integration of Drama in Chinese Language Education: Enhancing Learning and Engagement* coordinated by Xinyi Wang (China) and *Theatre for all* coordinated



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by Joachim Reiss (Germany). The SIGs presented the results of their research in the form of short performances at the closing ceremony.

A large number of workshops and paper presentations took place during the congress, and I will not list all the details here. To experience so many workshops and exchanges of ideas in a few concentrated days is perhaps the very meaning and value of the IDEA Congress. Chinese drama educators remember the IDEA Congresses of 1995 (although perhaps only one Chinese attended) and 2007 (Hong Kong) because both events inspired the development of drama education in China. However, the IDEA 2024 Congress will be the most important because it was the first time such an international congress was held in mainland China and the Chinese drama educators had the opportunity to meet famous drama educators face to face. In addition to the boom of drama education in China, such an event is helpful in connecting local drama educators with the international community.

### Debating and voting

On three evenings during the congress, the General Council Meeting met with members in Beijing and others online. IDEA members reviewed reports, voted on motions and also elected new officers for the Executive Committee, General Meeting Committee and Accountancy Committee. The newly elected officers represent all five continents. For the first

time, Asian members have been elected to these bodies, including myself from China as Director of Projects, Fredyl Hernandez from the Philippines as Director of Young IDEA and Aishwariyah Nathan from Singapore as Secretary of the Accountancy Committee. With a stronger Asian presence, I believe there will be more intercontinental exchanges.

At the meetings, there were arguments and debates on a number of issues, and some decisions had to be postponed because they were so controversial. The General Council Meeting decided which country would host the next world congress. Sanja Krsmanović Tasić, the President of IDEA, announced at the closing ceremony that Turkey would host the next congress and also presented the list of elected officers.

### Awarding and creating

During the congress, IDEAC, the Chinese member association of IDEA and local organiser, held the "2024 Golden Mask" Drama Education Awards Ceremony to honour drama educators who had made outstanding contributions to the development of drama education in China. Tianfu No.7 High School and Eley Yuan, a member of IDEA, were awarded the Distinguished Drama Education Administrator and the Outstanding Teacher of Drama Education.

Most of the congress participants were young teachers, who were enthusiastic but inexperienced. We cannot ignore the important role and power of

young people in creating the new world through drama education. Nine young people from Young IDEA, after about two weeks of collaborating and creating together, presented a performance to show their understanding of the IDEA 2024 Congress theme “天下大同 (tiān xià dà tóng)” — Constructing a harmonious Cultural, Artistic, and Spiritual Home for Humanity through Drama and Theatre”, creating a gourmet feast with a variety of ingredients such as intuition, coexistence, diversity and responsibility.

This congress successfully connected the Chinese mainland with the international drama education community, leading to an in-depth exchange of drama education between the East and the West. Drama education in China has shown a booming trend in recent years, especially with the inclusion of the subject of drama in the new version of the Arts Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education issued by the Chinese Ministry of Education in 2022. Therefore, holding the congress in China has also enabled more local drama educators to become familiar with IDEA, and has laid the foundation for IDEA to expand its influence in China. After this congress, it is foreseeable that more Chinese drama educators will participate in international exchanges, which will give a strong impetus to the development of drama education.

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