

# Operating in a State of Creative Chaos



Alex Byrne working with the international group in Vilnius. Photo: Søren K. Kløft 2023

*BABEL's first major workshop activity took place in the capital of Lithuania, Vilnius, from January 16 to 20, 2023. The representative of the project's lead partner – Teatercentrum in Denmark – Søren K. Kløft was there - partly as an observer and partly on the floor taking part in some of the warm up exercises.*

## Vilnius – a week in January

I find myself in a spacious rehearsal room in the company of 12 workshop participants from as many different countries. They are doing an exercise where they have to work in pairs with a thin bamboo stick between them without using words. Use of spoken language is completely prohibited. All communication between them takes place by means of the movements they make, and with what they can communicate to each other employing facial expressions and eye contact.

The only sound in the room – apart from a soft noise when the participants move around the room – are short instructions in English from workshop leader, Alex Byrne:

“Yes. Like that. Quietly. Be careful there. Yes. Exactly.”

Alex is assisted at the workshop by the musician Greg Hall, whom Alex asks to play a bit on his guitar in the middle of the exercise. As soon as the music starts, several of the participants instinctively start dancing, but then Alex is immediately giving new instructions:

“No, you’re not allowed to dance. Try to resist the temptation to dance. Yes, like that”.

This continues until all participants gradually fall off because they lose their grip on the bamboo stick and must exit the game when it is dropped on the floor. As soon as the exercise is over, Alex starts a new one. New rules and new tools. There are no breaks here.

From the outside it looks like a game, and in the long run it might just be a game, but it is also hard work. After four hours like this – exercise after exercise – everyone is tired. And during the exercises, there are only a few free moments to enjoy the beautiful view over the town’s beautiful city centre.

## Workshop in an old Soviet Setting

We are working on the 3rd floor of *Menų spaustuvė* – Arts Printing House, located in Vilnius. There has been a printing press here since 1585, and during the era of the Soviet Union the building housed the machines that ensured the daily production of the *Pravda* newspaper. Now the building has been modernized and houses modern art forms and working artists.

The workshop runs over five days in total and this is the first of a long series of similar workshops to be held over the coming years as part of the BABEL project.

This week’s workshop leader is director Alex Byrne, who is currently the artistic director of New International Encounter (NIE) – founded in 2001 – which produces touring theater for both young people and adults. NIE’s productions have won worldwide recognition and have won awards at numerous international festivals. Over the years, Alex Byrne has held theater workshops in Great Britain, the Czech Republic, Norway, Poland, Germany, Japan, Switzerland, Poland, Ireland, Sweden, Bosnia and Denmark. Thus, it is no coincidence that he is one of the central figures of the BABEL project.

## Listening to the Audience and to Each Other

The BABEL project aims mainly at exploring the art of listening to the audience and the art of listening to one’s performing colleagues on stage. And in the rehearsal room in Vilnius I am quickly impressed by how the two main objectives of the BABEL project are brought to life on the floor.

Thus, the group is now starting an exercise where they will need all their acting skills and their ability to communicate with each other. I have taken the position of the observer, and I can now see with my own eyes how far you can go - without using any kind of spoken language.

The exercise consists of four participants leaving the room, while those remaining between them decide what they would like to see their colleagues do when they re-enter the room. The only way the audience can express their enthusiasm for what the others are doing is by clapping their hands.



When nothing is done that is expected, the action of the performers is met with a noisy silence. If they do something that comes close to what is expected, some applause can be allowed. And so on.

The performers must not communicate verbally with each other while on stage. When they reach what is expected, there must be strong applause – yes, even a standing ovation can be expected.

It sounds like an impossible task, but every time a team entered the room, it only took a few minutes for them to guess what was expected of them. The exercise was thus the whole BABEL project's main purpose expressed in one exercise: To listen to the audience and to each other. And find a solution in a very short time span.



Alex Byrne working with the international group in Vilnius. Photos: Søren K. Kløft 2023

There is a lot of laughing during these exercises, and both misunderstandings and new understandings of contexts are used to progress in the exercises. Seen from the outside, it sometimes seems a little chaotic, but that is precisely something that Alex Byrne works with consciously, as he explains in his presentation of the workshop:

“I work in a chaos of ideas, all at the same time, of music and objects, puppets and costumes and stories and words and deeds, and in this spoken language is one of the elements at play, one among many. I enjoy misunderstanding, confusion, and the struggle to be heard and understood, this is the stuff of life, of everyday life and art.”

## Festival and Research

In Vilnius it is the KITOKS festival with theater for children and young people that forms the organizational framework for the BABEL workshop. The festival is held concurrently with the workshop (and is also housed in the same building), and the participants therefore have ample opportunity to be inspired by the performances that are presented every day at the festival to a large local audience consisting of children and young people.

The performances are both local productions, international collaborative projects and international guest performances. Each morning the workshop participants could thus see at least two





productions before they had to get back on the floor themselves and continue working under Alex's leadership.

On Thursday afternoon, however, the time has come to sit completely still. On chairs. In front of a TV screen. It was time to meet the BABEL project's research team via a ZOOM link. The team consists of Dr. Wolfgang Schneider and Dr. Nicola Scherer, both professors at the University of Hildesheim, Germany.

The intention is that the two researchers will follow the project closely and - using mainly qualitative research methods - gather new knowledge along the way, which will be continuously shared with the professional community at conferences and congresses. Over time all this will be disseminated to a wider audience through video material, podcasts, reports, and scientific articles.

All this is done so that the international theatre community in in future can benefit from the relationships and ties that are forged during the process - both internationally and across age groups.

The ZOOM meeting with the workshop participants in Vilnius was also an important exception to the rule that the researchers must of course be physically present in the future when the workshop activities take place around the various festivals. A detailed itinerary for the two researchers has therefore been drawn up, so that they each cover all workshops until March 2025.

## **Cheers, salud, kippis, osasuna, skål...**

So, what started as many big words in an EU project application several years ago on the desk in front of the project's original founding fathers, Roberto Frabetti from Italy and Yannick Boudeau from Belgium, respectively – both from the international ASSITEJ network – ends up one day with a different kind of word soup – on a different level of abstraction – in the hands of the intellectual duo, Schneider and Scherer.

Back in Vilnius, Friday night, we can evaluate an intense week with many hours on the workshop floor and a great number of inspiring theater performances.

And unlike the more intellectual part of the BABEL project, where the goal is some kind of scientific knowledge, I can now find some comfort in the feeling that not all art can or should be intellectualized. That it is perfectly okay to experience something without always having to understand it. That a movement or sound on the workshop floor can sometimes contain as much information as several explanations and long conversations. That the Babylonian confusion can also be experienced as a blessing and not only as a curse. That the beautiful and creatively fruitful can emerge from the diversity and from the chaos that arises in the meeting between people and generations.

And then it's time for a toast... in the more than 14 languages, corresponding to those that the participants present use in their everyday lives. Cheers...

The next stop for this BABEL workshop with Alex Byrne as a leader is at Theaterfest 2023 at the AGORA Theater in Saint Vith in Belgium on October 24-28. The same artists who were under Alex Byrne's loving treatment in Vilnius will take part in this Autumn workshop.



## The Facts

- "BABEL – or The Art of Listening in TYA" – a four-year collaborative project financed with funds from EU's *Creative Europe* pool. The total budget is DKK 15 million.
- Teatercentrum in Denmark is the project's lead partner.
- BABEL originates from a reflection on the potentials and barriers of language in the ASSITEJ International network (Association of Theatre for Children and Young People).
- The project is structured as a development and learning platform consisting of e.g. workshops.
- The 14 partners in BABEL are: ASSITEJ International, La Baracca (Italy), Agora Theater (Belgium), Bronks Jeugdtheater (Belgium), Théâtre La Montagne Magique (Belgium), Stichting De Stilte (The Netherlands), Baboro International Children's Festival (Ireland), Lutkovno Gledališce Ljubljana (Slovenia), Menu Spaustuve (Lithuania), Rialles Espectacles Infants I Juvenils (Spain), Scènes d'enfance – ASSITEJ France, ASSITEJ Serbia, ASSITEJ Sweden and Teatercentrum in Denmark.
- Read more on the website [www.babel-tya.com](http://www.babel-tya.com) (under construction) – find e.g. information about past activities and upcoming workshops, open calls, news, etc.
- Follow the project on *Facebook* and/or *Instagram* (search by project name); here you can find image and video material with relation to the project.
- find video material from BABEL events and workshops on BABEL's own video channel: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLrkOMawFToYBKSRBggFFvJyfNs1Tkd97F>

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*Teatercentrum, January 2023*

