

For the ASSITEJ Executive Committee

2017 ASSITEJ Inspirational Playwrights Assessment Report

Kim Peter Kovac, Deirdre Lavrakas, Tony Mack, Karin Serres
Co-Editors, *Write Local Play Global*



2017

2017 ASSITEJ Inspirational Playwrights Assessment Report

Contents

Executive Summary	3
Description of Award	4
Criteria for Assessment	4
About the Nominees.....	5
Assessment Panel	5
Nomination and Assessment Process.....	6
Assessment Panel Recommendations	7
Impressions of the Assessment Process	8
About inspirational qualities in 2017	8
The Finalists - Suzanne Lebeau (Canada).....	9
The Finalists - René Fernández Santana (Cuba).....	10
The Finalists - Kevin Dyer (UK).....	11

Executive Summary

After an exhaustive global nomination and assessment process detailed in this report, we are delighted to present to the ASSITEJ Executive Committee our choices for this award.

As editors of a network that seeks to globally showcase the work of writers creating theatre for young audiences, we find that the ASSITEJ Inspirational Playwrights for 2017 are:

- Suzanne Lebeau (Canada)
- René Fernández Santana (Cuba)
- Kevin Dyer (UK).

Most of the fifteen nominees exhibited artistic excellence of the highest order. Time and again throughout the nomination and assessment process though, courage, fearlessness or bravery was mentioned as an inspirational attribute for the challenges of 2017 and beyond. Courage to challenge artistic form, speak to power, deliver new and challenging content for young audiences, or move from a place of artistic success to possible failure by pursuing new artistic directions – qualities associated with all of these three playwrights.

And in a world of increasing nationalism, xenophobia and intolerance, all three finalists also showed courage in their exploration of the culture of others – at times embracing or immersing themselves in a culture or world entirely foreign to their own and giving it a voice.

The four WLPG (*Write Local Play Global*) editors – Kim Peter Kovac (USA), Deirdre Lavrakas (USA), Tony Mack (Australia), and Karin Serres (France) – have processed the recommendations of an exceptionally committed assessment panel. Eight assessment panel members from seven countries on six continents, including five playwrights, deliberated over the Christmas holiday period. We thank the panel for their hard work during this time and apologize for any inconvenience.

This formal report details the process whereby we have all come to our conclusions. It is also a legacy document to assist future ASSITEJ leaders in determining the protocols and processes of this award, and is a first step in establishing the reputation of the award so that the playwrights who are honoured in this way know that their peers from around the world hold them in the highest esteem.

Description of Award

The ASSITEJ Inspirational Playwrights Awards are a new initiative created by *Write Local Play Global* in partnership with the ASSITEJ Executive Committee.

Highlighting the importance of playwriting in all its manifestations around the world, ASSITEJ will honour up to three persons as “ASSITEJ Inspirational Playwrights” every three years at its World Congress, starting in Cape Town in May 2017. This will be administered and adjudicated by the *Write Local Play Global* network in coordination with the ASSITEJ Executive Committee.

The essence of our work is telling stories on our stages, and this award is created to honour particular writers who have inspired theatre for young audiences in their city, their country, their region, or all over the world.

How they have been inspirational could be very particular and individual, including:

- Writing a play or plays innovative in content and/or form that help transform TYA in their country
- Serving as a mentor and role model to other writers
- Writing politically or socially aware work that challenges entrenched tradition or power in their country or region
- With their writing, encouraging audiences to see other people, the world and its events in a more profound and human way.

It will be the individual nominator who will ‘tell the story’ of how the playwright they nominate has been inspirational

Honouring up to three inspirational playwrights at each Congress allows ASSITEJ to celebrate its broad membership of different genders, ages, backgrounds, cultures, regions and languages. ASSITEJ members come from small and large countries, work for and with different ages of young audiences, and create theatre by a multitude of varied processes. The ASSITEJ Inspirational Playwrights will reflect not only the diversity in form and subject matter of playwriting around the world, but also its global membership of talented playwrights and theater makers.

In addition to the ceremony/reception at which the inspirational playwrights are named, the organizers of the Congress will be invited to work with the EC, WLPG and the selected playwrights to showcase their work in a creative manner, such as performances, translations, readings, etc.

Criteria for Assessment

The three criteria for nominations to address are inspiration, excellence and impact:

- how has this playwright’s work been acknowledged for its excellence?
- how has its form or content nourished or widened the field of writing for young audiences?
- how does it inspire theater artists and audiences?

About the Nominees

We had nominations for fifteen playwrights who live on all six inhabited continents, from the following twelve countries:

Australia, Cameroon, Canada, Cuba, France, Germany, Hungary, Mexico, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, UK, USA. (There were actually sixteen nominations in total, as one playwright was nominated by two separate people independent of each other. The guidelines allow a nomination from any ASSITEJ member.)

The nominees are:

Dr. Abdullah Hassan Al-Abdulmohsen, Saudi Arabia

Kevin Dyer, UK

Robert Alan Evans, UK

René Fernández Santana, Cuba

Afeif Ismail, Australia/Sudan

Jon Keevy, South Africa

Finegan Kruckemeyer, Australia

Angela Koloszi, Hungary

Suzanne Lebeau, Canada

Sylvain Levey, France

Mempuh Kwachuh Sophia, Cameroon

Kristo Šagor, Germany

István Tasnádi, Hungary

Y York, USA (2 nominations)

Antonio Zúñiga, Mexico

The playwrights write in the following six languages: Arabic, English, French, German, Hungarian, Spanish.

Assessment Panel

The eight assessment panel members (from seven countries on six continents, including five playwrights) are:

María Inés Falconi (Argentina) – Playwright, educator

Ashish Kumar Ghosh (India) – Playwright, performer, educator

Sue Giles (Australia) – Artistic Director, Polyglot Theatre, member of the ASSITEJ Executive Committee

Kim Peter Kovac (USA) – Artistic Director Kennedy Center TYA, co-director New Visions/New Voices

Deirdre Kelly Lavrakas (USA) – Director, teaching artist, co-director (artistic) NewVisions/NewVoices

Lereko Mfono (South Africa) – Playwright, actor

Karin Serres (France) – Playwright, translator, designer

Simone Spiteri (Malta) – Playwright, actor, director

Nomination and Assessment Process

WLPG launched its nomination process on 1 August 2016 through our website. We continued to send out reminders through the website, email newsletters, the ASSITEJ General Secretariat and a variety of networks until the closing date of 10 November 2016.

After reviewing the existing nominations, the WLPG Editors felt that the pool of nominees was not sufficiently representative of the diversity of ASSITEJ membership. We extended the nomination deadline and targeted regions that had not submitted nominees and urged them to consider playwrights in their countries for this honour. By early December we had sixteen excellent nominations for playwrights in twelve countries on six continents.

The assessment panel began work on 16 December and delivered their recommendations on 30 December. The extended deadline meant the panel deliberated over the Christmas holiday period – in the Southern Hemisphere this coincides with the summer holidays and vacations too – and we know for many ASSITEJ members this is precious time reserved for family and friends away from work, devices and computers. We thank the panel for their hard work during this time and apologize for any inconvenience.

The assessment panel were asking to do the following three things:

- Read the nomination material for each nominee. (They were sent an email invitation giving access to a Dropbox folder with material on each nominee.)
- Assess each nominee under our criteria of inspiration, excellence and impact.
- Send us back their recommendations by 30 December.

WLPG Co-Editor Tony Mack administered the process and provided technical support. Though assessment was an individual process, panel members interacted through a group email and provided language and cultural context on specific nominations to each other where requested. Panel member María Inés Falconi, from Argentina, was particularly helpful in this regard.

Assessment Panel Recommendations

Panel members were asked to fill in a recommendation sheet ranking nominees at three levels, the highest being their recommendations for the Awards. They were also asked to give some positive feedback, if possible, that WLPG could send back to all nominees, regardless of the decision. This recognized the fact that a nomination in itself is a distinct honour and something to be celebrated.

Upon tabulating their recommendations, it was clear that two candidates were very highly regarded by the panel and a third candidate was close behind those two. These candidates were Suzanne Lebeau (Canada), René Fernández Santana (Cuba) and Kevin Dyer (UK).

The WLPG Co-Editors read the panel's recommendations and debated the balance of these final three, especially in light of our aim to highlight "the importance of playwriting in all its manifestations around the world". On balance, the Editors felt that the panel had chosen extremely well, selecting three exceptional artists with different aesthetics, and from different cultures, countries and language groups. While all three were mature-age artists and we did wish to show inspirational playwrights across generational lines, there was a consistent theme in nominations and assessment that reinforced the choices of the assessment panel...

Courage.

Time and again courage, fearlessness or bravery was mentioned as an inspirational attribute for the challenges of 2017 and beyond. Courage to challenge artistic form, speak to power, deliver new and challenging content for young audiences, or move from a place of artistic success to possible failure by pursuing new artistic directions – qualities associated with all of these three playwrights.

And in a world of increasing nationalism, xenophobia and intolerance, all three finalists showed courage in their exploration of the culture of others – at times embracing or immersing themselves in a culture or world entirely foreign to their own and giving it a voice.

As editors of a network that seek to globally showcase the work of writers creating theatre for young audiences, we find that the ASSITEJ Inspirational Playwrights for 2017 are:

- Suzanne Lebeau (Canada)
- René Fernández Santana (Cuba)
- Kevin Dyer (UK).

Impressions of the Assessment Process

From a panel member:

“I have to start with a thank you because I truly feel that through this opportunity I have been given a great gift: that of discovering so many voices sprinkled around the globe whose work I would have never heard of had I not had the chance to read about them and their work.

“This was a tough exercise! But one that has brought about a lot of reflection. I was particularly struck by the effect the writing of these artists has had on individuals who nominated them, in some cases the effect seems to have been profound and lifelong and one that coloured and prodded their own personal growth and careers. I was also extremely interested in how many of these writers have not only written enriching beautiful stories for young people but have also (through their work) given a platform to various plights, issues and conflicts taking place in their respective environments.

“This bravery is to be applauded, especially the poetic direct frankness with which some of these playwrights express themselves in their work: something I value and hold in the highest esteem. To give an award is a difficult thing to do and choice to make in any given situation, but especially so in a situation like this where every single one of these playwrights has been instrumental in their own little part of the globe be it through the topics they have covered, the achievements they have garnered and the audiences they have reached.

“I’d like to think that each is a puzzle piece that creates a global whole and hope that the playwrights who will eventually be awarded after our recommendations will further help to keep inspiring and bringing together all these voices. As a playwright and theatre maker myself the sole experience of discovering these artists has reminded me once more that telling stories is a uniting force transcending frontiers, languages, gender, creed, race and age.

“A comforting, energizing thought and one that should propel all those with writing for the adults of tomorrow at heart to keep pushing and striving further, harder. This award and all these nominees are a testament to that.”

Simone Spiteri, Malta

About inspirational qualities in 2017

From a WLPG Co-Founder:

“I kept parsing our criteria of excellence, impact, inspiration. Almost all of the nominees score high in excellence, probably the easiest value to understand. As I tossed impact and inspiration back and forth, I found another value that lives in the valley between the two, and that is courage. The courage to write what you know is true and absolutely essential to imbue in the minds and hearts of our young people.

“I think that these three writers most inspired me because they were championing this cause long before most of us found our way into TYA. I am in awe of the narratives of each of these writers. In many instances they have walked alone or in single file (Suzanne's *The Sound of Cracking Bones*, Kevin's *The Bomb*) or lived in an oppressive environment (Rene).

“In this terrible year of a fractured world, I want to surround myself with folk who tackle dangerous stories, because we must if we want our young to grow up with strong vibrant voices.”

Deirdre Lavrakas, USA

The Finalists - Suzanne Lebeau (Canada)

From nomination:

"...words are of implacable urgency for you and that, through your thought in perpetual motion, you create a territory of freedom that children perceive, recognize, and adopt. You have the soul of an explorer, always ready to discover and then to denounce the unspeakable, the unacceptable. And you're not afraid. You do things, simply, because you feel that it's normal to do them. Armed only with your words, you use the power of fiction and the splendour of metaphor to bring to light the malfunctioning of societies, the mistreatment of the weakest and most disadvantaged. Always vigilant, always uneasy, you recount that world with the serious and mutilated face, but you also tell us that it is possible to upset the established order and that hope is not in vain.

"You have been writing for more than forty years and, through your plays, you awaken artistic and social consciences. Your stories feature men, women, and children appearing in all their majesty and who, through their complexity, nuances, and depth, restore dignity to all of today's young audiences. The contemporaneity of your words brings nobility to theatre for young audiences and pulverizes the preconceptions that some may have of the discipline. In my eyes, your engaged and activist career, the depth of your thought, and the breadth of your vision embody the epitome of struggle against ignorance and indifference, a bright light in a world in which the outlines are too often blurred."

From assessment panel:

"Suzanne Lebeau's impact has been far reaching. In the excerpt, I find brilliant exposition of a journey by two child soldiers. I particularly liked the juxtaposition of character and narrator complementing each other."

"Suzanne Lebeau has really changed playwriting in her country as well as in France but specially in all Latin America. The depth of her themes, her poetry and the need of her thoughts is amazing. Her influence has expanded to Mexico, Argentina, Uruguay, Bolivia and even South Africa. No doubts that she is inspirational."

"We need more TYA pioneers such as Suzanne, her body of work is nothing less than inspirational."

"This writer is deeply concerned with the being and position of the child in societies of all sorts, not just in her own backyard but throughout the world. Her wordsmithing and consistently interesting practice, ability to think in entirely theatrical terms, to construct worlds that are immediate and personal; as well as full of fantasy."

"Suzanne Lebeau is a no-brainer, for the depth and breadth of her work, for her influence, for her mentorship, for her strong aesthetic and beautiful writing."

The Finalists - René Fernández Santana (Cuba)

From nomination:

“He has written and published more than forty plays for children or teenagers between 1965 and 2015... His theater plays have been showed in nine countries besides Cuba (México, Chile, Perú, Bolivia, Spain, Slovenia, Guatemala, Brazil, Argentina)...

“In his dramatic work he has recreated European and African traditional tales, parodying and updating their plots. One of his most successful plays has been *Los ibeyis y el diablo* (*Twin and Devil*). Also, he has written about tricky social problems like the solitude of children and teenagers, the lack of understanding and communication, the physical and psychological violence, and the lack of interest and expressions of disrespect to them.

“His dramatic output shows a considerable technical variety, from the classical Aristotelian structure to lyrical, symbolic and dreamlike resources and styles, incorporating also an updated version of Greek Theater’s chorus, the music hall, where irony and Cuban humour are present too.

“Fernández has been the first Cuban playwrights who have included Afro-Cuban myths in the children’s and teenagers’ universe through theater.”

From assessment panel:

“Rene Fernandez Santana impressed me for dealing with hard topics involving Afro-Cuban myths to establish child as a hero in every day familial situations facing violence of different kinds, loneliness, lack of understanding and even death, using varieties of techniques and styles.”

“I have to recognize Santana’s...influence in his country and his permanent intention to change, to find the way, to reflect Cuban society in his plays. I think he deserves the recognition.”

“Rene’s body of work across the years speaks to his honest heart and ability to remain in tune with the young generations of every decade.”

“A body of work from this writer has spanned decades but has never lost the freshness and painful inquiry of a writer determined to create beauty and complexity in children’s theatre.”

“Rene Fernandez Santana because of what he has done to uplift an isolated TYA community, bringing Afro-Cuban stories, for his advocacy.”

The Finalists - Kevin Dyer (UK)

From nomination:

“...central to his work is the ability to pinpoint simultaneously in his writing the fragility and resilience of young people as they experience all of the beauty and danger the world has to offer them. His characters open their arms so wide in embracing the world that it hurts them, but in doing so they are offered the promise of hope through their sacrifices.

“This inclusivity, this desire to embrace, encapsulate and validate the importance of varied experiences, is the hallmark not just of Kevin’s writing, but of his engagement with all he meets and his mentorship to young people as well. At Action Transport Theatre he works as a writing facilitator and mentor with some of the most disadvantaged youth in Northern England – often with children who are excluded or on the edge of exclusion. His work with them is not about creating the writers of the future, though some do follow this path, but rather about giving young people who have no voice to express their world a method and a place to be heard.

“And while his local work with young people in Cheshire is of the highest importance, it is not the zenith of his horizons. From Iran to Canada to Ireland to Korea to Soweto to Mongolia, Kevin has worked with local communities on the telling of stories in a way that respects their origins and places the sensibility of the people and importance of the story’s origins at the heart of the work while also fueling his own artistic practice.”

From assessment panel:

“Kevin Dyer’s body of work is impressive... From materials made available, his use of binary opposites and contrasts help face the struggles the young people face.”

“About Kevin Dyer, I only know what I have read about him and his playwriting but I loved the text and specially I appreciate his intention of talking about small communities and refugees.”

“I admire his giving to the many countries that he has collaborated with shows in the empathetic and rich work he’s created – an admirable playwright.”

“The writer has a complete and thorough grounding in the form with many plays produced and a strong reputation for lively and interesting work.”

“Kevin Dyer for the strength of his writing, for his mentorship, for his willingness, especially in recent years, to reach outside his community to Iran, Mongolia, Korea.”