

2020 ASSITEJ Inspirational Playwrights Assessment Report

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	3
DESCRIPTION OF AWARD	5
CRITERIA FOR ASSESSMENT	6
ABOUT THE NOMINEES	7
NOMINATION AND ASSESSMENT PROCESS	8
ASSESSMENT PANEL RECOMMENDATIONS	9
IMPRESSIONS OF THE ASSESSMENT PROCESS	10
ABOUT INSPIRATIONAL QUALITIES IN 2020	12
THE FINALISTS – MARIA INES FALCONI	13
THE FINALISTS – OMPHILE MOLUSI	15
THE FINALISTS – SUZAN ZEDER	17

Executive Summary

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

As editors of a website and leaders of a network that seeks to globally showcase the work of writers creating the best of theatre for young audiences, we find that the *2020 ASSITEJ Inspirational Playwrights* are, in alphabetical order:

- Maria Ines Falconi, Argentina
- Omphile Molusi, South Africa
- Suzan Zeder, USA

Most of the thirteen nominees exhibited a high level of both artistic excellence and commitment to the field.

Time and again throughout the nomination and assessment process though, there were two attributes – interrelated yet individual -- that stood out: mentorship and artistic empathy.

Looking to the challenges of 2020 and beyond, the importance of providing training, guidance, and support to younger writers is paramount to these playwrights' careers, even helping open doors of creation to theater-makers who might never have thought of themselves as playwrights.

The generosity extended to fellow writers also deeply informs their own writing. They create characters and situations that deeply connect with the lives of the young people who see their plays. In a world that increasingly embraces nationalism, xenophobia, and intolerance, the role of theatre as a 'greenhouse for empathy' is more important than ever. All three finalists write plays that come from a deeply personal yet universal place, creating a theatrical world where young people can see people both like them and not like them – a rich artistic empathy that fills a theater space with simple humanity and wonder.

The four WLPG (*Write Local Play Global*) website editors and network leaders – Deirdre Kelly Lavrakas (USA), Karin Serres (France), Jenny Anne Koppera (USA) and Kim Peter Kovac (USA) have processed and synthesized the recommendations of an exceptionally committed assessment panel.

Eight assessment panel members from seven countries,, including four playwrights and four artistic directors, deliberated over the for several weeks from late December 2019

until January 2020, sharing their heartfelt and intelligent thoughts, writing from personal, artistic, and global perspectives.

We thank the panel for their hard work.

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 honored 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 administered and adjudicated by the *Write Local Play Global* network in coordination with the ASSITEJ Executive Committee.

Highlighting the importance of playwriting in all its manifestations around the world, the association will honor up to three persons as *ASSITEJ Inspirational Playwrights* every three years at its World Congress. The awards were first presented in Cape Town in May 2017, and 2020 in Tokyo will mark the second incarnation

The essence of the work we all do is telling stories on our stages, and this award exists to honor particular writers who have inspired theatre for young audiences in their city, their country, their region, and/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, culturally, or socially aware work that challenges entrenched traditions or power structures 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

Honoring up to three inspirational playwrights at each Congress allows ASSITEJ to celebrate its broad membership of practitioners of varying ages, 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, and such.

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 thirteen playwrights from the following twelve countries: Argentina, Germany, Hungary, Iran, Israel, Poland, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Togo, the UK, and the USA:

- Yadollah Aghebassi, Iran
- Robert Alan Evans, UK
- Maria Ines Falconi, Argentina
- Afi Gbegbi, Togo
- Marta Gusniowski, Poland
- Peter Horvath, Hungary
- Isabel Cruz Lilijen, Sweden
- Omphile Molusi, South Africa
- Hagit Rehavi Nikolayevski, Israel
- Itziar Pascual, Spain
- Sasha Marianna Salzmann, Germany
- Karen Zacarias, USA
- Suzan Zeder, USA

They write in eleven languages: English, Ewe, French, German, Hebrew, Hungarian, Persian, Polish, Setswana, Spanish, Swedish. (Note – Omphile Molusi writes in both English and Setswana, Karen Zacarias in both English and Spanish; Afi Gbegbi in Ewe, French, and English).

We were extremely pleased that nine of the thirteen nominees are women, as well as the greater number of languages than in 2017. Additionally, what inspired us the most were the number of mid-career playwrights and their important influences in their communities, countries, and regions.

Assessment Panel

The Inspirational Playwright Guidelines call for an assessment panel with eight members: three from WLPG leadership, one from the ASSITEJ EC, and four others; always with a diversity of continents, regions, countries, languages.

The eight panel members from seven countries include four playwrights and four artistic directors; 6 out of the 8 are women

- Deepika Arwind (India) - Playwright, director, actor, educator
- Steve Ball (UK) – Artistic Director, Educator, manager
- Cleiton Echeveste de Oliveira (Brazil) - Playwright, Artistic Manager
- Tamara Guhrs (South Africa) -Playwright, educator
- Jenny Ann Koppera (USA) – Artistic Director, Choreographer, Director
- Deirdre Kelly Lavrakas (USA) – Artistic Director *New Visions/New Voices*, director, teaching artist
- Cecilie Lundsholt (Norway) – artistic director, actor, pedagogue, member of the ASSITEJ EC
- Karin Serres (France) – Playwright, translator, director, designer

Nomination and Assessment Process

WLPG launched the nomination process in November 2019 though 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 eventual closing date of December 2. (this deadline, along with the other ASSITEJ Awards, was extended to seek more nominations)

By early December we had thirteen excellent nominations for playwrights in twelve countries.

The assessment panel began work on and delivered their recommendations on xxxxxx

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.)
- Comment on each nominee with our criteria of inspiration, excellence and impact.
- Send a listing of the five nominees that they felt deserved the award.
- Send us back their recommendations by January 20, 2020.

WLPG Co-Editor Kim Peter Kovac administered the process and provided technical support. Though assessment was an individual process, some of the panel members interacted through group emails.

Assessment Panel Recommendations

Panel members were asked to fill in recommendation sheets for each nominee, assessing their inspiration, excellence and impact at three levels, from 1-3 as well as listing their top five recommendation 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 honor and something to be celebrated.

Upon synthesizing and tabulating their recommendations, it became clear that two nominees were regarded extremely highly regarded by the panel and a third candidate was close behind those two. These candidates are, in alphabetical order, Maria Ines Falconi (Argentina), Omphile Molusi (South Africa) and Suzan Zeder (USA).

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, highlighting three exceptional artists with different aesthetics, and from different cultures, countries and language groups. It was significant to the Editors that two of the nominees are women who have had long and far-reaching careers and the other is mid-career, under the age of forty.

- Time and again throughout the nomination and assessment process though, there were two attributes – interrelated yet individual -- that stood out: mentorship and artistic empathy.
- Looking to the challenges of 2020 and beyond, the importance of providing training, guidance, and support to younger writers is paramount to these playwrights' careers, even helping open doors of creation to theater-makers who might never have thought of themselves as playwrights.
- The generosity extended to fellow writers also deeply informs their own writing. They create characters and situations that deeply connect with the lives of the young people who see their plays. In a world that increasingly embraces nationalism, xenophobia, and intolerance, the role of theatre as a 'greenhouse for empathy' is more important than ever. All three finalists write plays that come from a deeply personal yet universal place, creating a theatrical world where young people can see people both like them and not like them – a rich artistic empathy that fills a theater space with simple humanity and wonder.
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Impressions of the Assessment Process

From a panel member:

I was delighted to take part in this assessment panel. Thank you so much for the opportunity! Congratulations to WLPG board and to ASSITEJ for the outstanding quality of the 13 nominees.

From another:

First of all, I would like to start off with what a privilege it has been to read and get to know these nominees from all over the world. I am truly inspired and would like to read more of their work. Therefore, it has been hard to select five. I think there are different reasons for this. In some of the playwrights I know of their work, their context, the theatres where they have worked and companies that has performed their texts. (I do not know any of them personally, I would like to point out.) Others have impressed me despite not knowing their context, their background as we have no mutual reference points beyond the common ground we share as theatre practitioners and creator

From a WLPG Co-Founder:

I have been fortunate to observe all three of our 2020 inspirational playwrights on multiple opportunities interacting with students, former students, and/or younger colleagues. They all share some critical qualities of great mentors: modesty, intelligence, compassion, humor, and the understanding that asking piercing yet empathetic questions is the best way to help a younger writer find their own voice.

The Finalists – Maria Ines Falconi

From nomination:

- Marie Ines Falconi is a theatre director and Drama and Playwriting in TYA Professor in Universidad Popular de Belgrano and Drama School Buenos Aires City. She has also presented workshops, lectures and conferences in different countries around the world.
- She created and organized different international projects related to TYA like Taboo Workshops, Schoolyard Stories in Latin America- theatre for adolescents and International TYA Researchers and Critics Forums in Buenos Aires.
- *She has opened the field for playwrights in Argentina and beyond, to tackle painful subjects, countering a tendency towards what Laura Gentile calls “aseptic theatre”*

From assessment panel:

- *[She inspires] both . . . through her work and through who she is as a person.*
- *a strong influence on the theater of Latin America;*
- *Dealing with difficult contemporary subject matter such as war, in a poetic, healing and yet unsentimental way, the inspiration she provides to other playwrights is the courage to not look away.*
- *choosing to address topics so closely related to children’s everyday lives, in direct connection with their social surroundings, is of extreme importance for the development of the new generations.*
- *“Pedro and the War Cantata” brings out the themes of the impact of war on everyone’s lives and the absurdity of people killing people for whatever reason. Both themes are absolutely necessary and as relevant in 2020 as they were when the play was first staged.*
- *there is a softness and sensitivity to audience and material which extends storytelling into a sensory theatrical experience*
- as we all know about her work and playwriting transmission in Argentina and more, I would add to that her commitment into Assitej at the EC, representing playwrights and south Americans, and especially her creating structures to help TYA people on the long term
- María Inés Falconi’s plays deal with contemporary topics in a highly communicative and moving way.
- She is a strong voice in Latin America and her plays has been played all over the world. She is brave in choosing her topics and writes about difficult subjects for a young audience such as disability, sexual diversity, war and conflicts.

The Finalists – Omphile Molusi

From nomination:

- Omphile is an acclaimed actor/director playwright who studied at the Market Theatre Laboratory, and is Artistic Director of the TsaMmu Theatre, a platform which provides opportunities for a new generation of writers. His play *Balatladi* is part of the ground-breaking anthology: *New Visions/New Voices: 25 Years/25 Plays*
- *Being able to write about a country's trauma and managing to bridge the two different sides is a great achievement and speaks to his strengths as a playwright.*
- *Through TsaMmu, Omphile is inspiring a whole generation of young writers who will create original stories about South Africa.*

From assessment panel:

- *Omphile Molusi is one of those people who generously gives of his time and knowledge to those coming after.*
- *he is a big inspiration where he lives and works, especially through the playwriting course TsaMmu, inspiring a whole generation of younger playwrights in South Africa. [This is] no little achievement in this region.*
- *Omphile Molusi has created an incomparable body of work that has contributed to the canon of great contemporary South African work.*
- *His brave voice, being a living example of what is possible and through selflessly guiding others as well as creating opportunity for the next generation*
- *His work seems energized and infused with the inclination to tell stories stemming from extremely real and personal places, writing about history that has been painted with one brush stroke. He seems like a playwright who is able to talk about difficult things while also inspiring young people.*
- *his work has a great impact both in South Africa, and also when this work travels to festivals across the world, lifting up different sides and other voices than what is often shown and given a voice.*
- *There's a fine sense of humor, a rhythmic quality to the characters' lines which make the scenes somehow breathe and get us - audience members/readers - to engage with the characters. To me, a sense of humor is fundamental to empathizing, and Molusi has this masterly touch.*
- *I did like the language, the form, the playfulness and the evocativeness of the excerpt ; in his biography, the fact that he is writing in various languages, as playwrights for YA have to do in South Africa, seems to me a special skill he's developed, which enriches our field*
- *I'm impressed by his commitment into transmission thanks to Market Laboratory and within personal mentoring relationships*

The Finalists – Suzan Zeder

From nomination:

- *She inspired me to go on an artistic journey that led to my authentic voice and gave me the courage to write the things that previously scared me most.*
- *Perhaps the single most extraordinary thing she has given us [all] is the reminder that children and their stories deserve our deepest engagement.”*
- *She laid the foundation for a new chapter in the evolution of TYA*
- *. . . the unfolding of the rich, often disturbing complexity of her characters and worlds thereafter*
- *Her plays have been performed in all fifty states [of the USA, as well as] Canada, Great Britain, Germany, Japan, Korea, Israel, Australia, and New Zealand.*
- *She was awarded the first-ever endowed chair in Theatre for Young Audiences and Playwriting at the University of Texas at Austin, [arguably the finest graduate program in TYA in the USA]*

From assessment panel:

- *Undoubtedly an alchemist of the medium and its possibilities for mending and connecting in divisive and discordant times, Susan Zeder is the definition of an inspirational playwright.*
- *“she has inspired generations of new playwrights” and “seems to go out of her way to inspire and make opportunities for others”*
- *Zeder has a great respect for her audience, and has throughout her career dedicated her writing to not as light entertainment, but truly dive into difficult topics, not shying away from taboos and lifting on to the stage diverse characters and issues, inspiring both the audience and theatre artists to take themselves and what they create seriously*
- *There’s a cry for humanity in her writing, an intense and moving atmosphere of reconciliation. A loving and tender perception of the human being fills her characters with boldness and dignity. Zeder’s creations heighten the level of theatre creation for young audiences, offering them - and anyone willing to listen - a new, fresh and hopeful perspective of life.*
- *she paved the way for other writers to embrace the complexity of childhood,*