

FIA fifty years
London, 15 June 2002
Rolf Rembe, General Secretary 1968-73; 1983-92

Dear friends and colleagues,

Forty years with FIA in twenty minutes,

My first meeting with FIA was at the 3rd congress in Brussels in 1956 as a young delegate from the Swedish actors' union. Nearly all the delegates came from Western Europe. Together we were around 30 people, including the interpreters. All interpretation was consecutive, which took time, and smoking was compulsory.

Behind the smokescreen one discovered gradually the Presidium, which also contained the founders and the pillar-stones of the Federation. There was Jean Darcante, President of FIA, an actor and a leader of the French actors' union. There was Pierre Chesnais who was a lawyer and a specialist in copyright and in practice the General Secretary not only of the French union but also of the Federation. There was Gerald Croasdell who was a lawyer, the General Secretary of the union of the British actors and a Vice President of the Federation. Croasdell was very British, in all ways. Darcante smoked cigarettes, Chesnais and Croasdell had a pipe.

The congress dealt in particular with two subjects, both in great unanimity. One was the so-called Eurovision relays for which the European television companies refused to pay any additional fees to the artists and musicians who appeared in them. The FIA, jointly with the musicians' federation FIM and the federation of variety artists IFVA, had declared an international boycott against any participation of performing artists in any Eurovision relay. And remarkably, these young and in many ways feeble federations had been successful. The organisation representing the European broadcasters, the EBU, had agreed to start negotiations on a settlement.

The other subject was the international protection of performers, an eternal item on the agenda. The matter had been going on since 1926 when musicians had approached the ILO – two steps forward, one back, at best. The report from the Executive now was that a compromise solution seemed to be on its way, at last.

The only dissension was caused by me, and my ignorance. To many of you here the Cold War may never have been a reality; to my generation it was. The Cold War had split not only governments but also the international trade union movement. The Swedish central trade union centre TCO, to which my organisation belonged, was a member of the westerly ICFTU which had its centre in Brussels. The unions in the East had their centre in Prague. But FIA, like FIM, had announced that it would intensify its efforts to make unions behind the so-called Iron Curtain join FIA, e.g., Czechoslovakia and Poland. I, as a Swedish delegate, questioned the wisdom of that. As a result there came a ton of French language down over my head from the President. He read out the Constitution of FIA which made it absolutely clear that the Federation was strictly based on professional interests and nothing else.

I could not tell him, of course, that I had never read the Constitution. There had been no time for that during the five months. I had been working, day and night, for my Swedish employer. My intention had been to read the congress documents in the plane from Stockholm, but as soon as I sat down in the chair I fell asleep, totally exhausted, and woke up in Brussels. Thus I learned the Constitution of FIA, and the realities behind it, the hard way.

From the 4th Congress in Geneva, Switzerland, my strongest memory is that it had difficulties coming to an end, like an opera by Rossini. The congress had been led, very eloquently, by Rodolfo Landa, who was not only a film actor and a leader of the Mexican actors' union but also a politician and a member of the Mexican

Senate, under the name of Rodolfo Echeverria. Fernand Gravey thanked Rodolfo Landa for the excellent way in which he had concluded the congress.

Landa thanked Gravey for his kind words and for having reunited the French actors. Gravey thanked Landa for the support he felt would be forthcoming both in his national and international function. Landa symbolically handed over the leadership of the federation into the hand of Gravey, thanking him for being available for the task.

Exhausted, delayed but indeed thankful we all stumbled into the bus to be carried up to the mountains and he vineyards and the *vin nouveau*.

The fifth congress took place in Paris in 1961, ten years after the television conference there that had first proposed to form an international organisation. You could feel that the preparatory stage was over. It was not only that we now met in style, in a UNESCO meeting room with green cloths and earphones and simultaneous translation. It was also the manner in which the whole agenda of FIA was displayed and analysed.

The position of the live theatre was presented by the Austrian theatre and trade union veteran Leopold Kopka. He was an impressive man already by his appearance. His dreams of becoming an actor had been literary crushed by a rifle butt in his face in one of the trenches of the first world war. But his devotion to the theatre art had survived. In his view the live drama should be the first priority of all governments – and of FIA itself.

The sphere of activity of FIA thus had – and had to have – two clearly defined halves: the live theatre and the media, the live performance and the recorded performance. The subject of television was introduced by Gerald Croasdell, in a working paper that came to be the ground stone of the FIA policy in that area. "Television is not an extension of radio. Cinema film is not television and should not be allowed to fill programme time instead of genuine television production. Live theatre performances in front of a paying audience should never form part of television programming. Repeat performances should be as few as possible and remunerated as nearly as possible with 100 per cent of the original performance fees (as in the UK). The fees should be related to the vast size of the audience. There should be a balance between imported and exported programmes and quotas to regulate the amount of foreign programmes in national television."

By then we knew that our great Eurovision victory had not brought the solution we had hoped; the operation had been successful but the patient had died. The European television broadcasters had found out that they did not need relays much. Programmes from abroad they could much easier and much cheaper buy as recorded films and programmes in the international market. As for the conditions for sales, FIA could not negotiate, only make recommendations.

In 1964, FIA held its first congress outside Europe, in Mexico City. It was all spectacular, all grand, and all Rodolfo Echeverria Landa: Vice President of FIA, General Secretary of ANDA, member of the Mexican Senate, brother to the would-be president of Mexico, Echeverria. When he had landed in the middle of the night he received us at the Zocolo, the fabulous baroque square in the City, with brass band. The next morning we attended the inauguration of the actors' own hospital, obviously meant to be jewel in the crown in a series of institutions already run by the union: the actors' theatre, a nursery for the members' children, a home for the retired and a cemetery for the deceased. It was an impressive effort to provide for the members what the state could not provide for its citizens.

At the congress we met a large group of Latin American who would not have been there without the invitation of Rodolfo Landa and the economic support of the Mexican state. They included a delegation from Cuba which made a spectacular arrival on the second day marching in behind a Cuban flag.

And at the end of the congress Rodolfo Landa was elected President of FIA – with acclaim. My last memory of him, and his mixture of charm and imperialism, was from his office. When he was supposed to sign a

document he did not reach for a pen in his jacket. He simply lifted his right hand over his shoulder and expected his private secretary, a young lawyer, to stand behind him and put a pen between his thumb and forefinger.

The membership of FIA had grown considerably thanks to the congress in Mexico City. But FIA was not yet international in scope. And both the Soviet Union and the United States were still missing. At the congress in Mexico City I was elected a Vice President. It was convenient to go from there on a private visit to the unions in Hollywood and New York. I came totally unannounced but when I left they had agreed to come and take part in a conference on television to be organised by the Nordic unions in Stockholm. It would thus not be a FIA conference, but it would involve FIA members, including one or two from the socialist countries. The Nordic colleagues did not know of their initiative yet, but they accepted it loyally in the event.

The conference took place in Stockholm in May 1966. It was a good conference, but as a side effect, or a primary effect, a personal contact was established between Jack Dales and Chester Migden from Screen Actors' Guild and the Czechoslovak actor Vlastimil Fisar. He represented Czechoslovakia on the FIA Executive but was also to be the host for the next FIA congress, in Prague in 1967. It would be the first congress on the other side of the iron curtain.

Fisar was of course a member of the communist party and could use his contacts in Moscow to try and convince the Soviets that they should send observers to the congress, as the American had, more or less, promised to do. The most important result of this seventh congress therefore occurred outside the congress. The alphabetic order was helpful in that it placed the American and the Soviet observers close to each other at the rear of the congress hall. The last morning of the congress I stumbled into a hotel room where the Americans were being entertained with vodka and salami and cucumber by the Soviets. The group arrived in the congress hall a couple of hours later with a shy smile and distinct sunburn on their faces.

At the close of the congress Vlastimil Fisar was elected President of FIA. We were now convinced that at the next congress both the Americans and the Soviets would join FIA – provided that the other one did as well. But in the meantime came 1968 and the Prague Spring which was supposed to create “a socialism with a human face”. Fisar was an enthusiastic supporter of that movement and used it, inter alia, to provide for an independent union for the actors. But there was immediately a tension created between the Czechoslovak union and its socialist neighbours.

In the meantime, Pierre Chesnais retired as General Secretary and I was asked to take over, from Stockholm. Vlastimil Fisar used the new possibility of going abroad with his family and proudly came driving up to Stockholm with his white Simca to discuss FIA matters. When the family drove back through East Germany they found the roads jammed with troops. The morning they arrived in Prague the invasion from the friendly neighbours had begun.

For Fisar this meant the beginning of twenty years of isolation. For FIA it was obviously embarrassing that its President should be removed from his national office and be prevented from travelling to our next congress. However, Fisar worked very loyally to the end to build a bridge between the East and the West. I remember in particular a frozen, heart-breaking occasion in a wintry Stockholm in January 1970 when a two-man delegation from the Cultural Workers' Union came to negotiate the details of membership.

The details included the number of actors they would be paying for out of their total membership of one million. Their statistics contained no specifications of that kind so we agreed over the table that they had 60,000 actors.

At the congress in Amsterdam in 1970, both the Soviet Union and the American unions joined FIA, and the French-Canadian actor Pierre Boucher was elected as the new President. Vlastimil Fisar was elected

Honorary President in the hope that it would ease the harassment he had already begun to experience from the authorities in his homeland.

How did it work to have not only a couple but a whole bloc of unions from the other side of the iron curtain? It worked remarkably well, in spite of my misgivings in 1956. From a strict trade union point of view those unions probably did not have much to pick up from FIA. Social condition, working hours, etc., were enviably well arranged in their countries. Unemployment was virtually unknown. Problems that still existed, we were told, would be solved within the next five-year plan.

The reason for the governments in those countries to accept that the unions applied for membership may well have been political and propagandistic, a way of reducing isolation. But once they had become members, the unions made it a point never to confront the “non-political” character of FIA – certainly a wise position because otherwise FIA would have fallen apart. A pleasant irony was that through the socialist unions in these relatively poor countries we could get economic support to organise all sorts of meetings and conferences on cultural policy in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, in 1975.

Throughout the years, the ICFTU in Brussels tried to establish an organisation that could be a rival to FIA and FIM a sort of Entertainment secretariat. They were artificial efforts, and from the office of the confederation, both from performers, and they constantly failed.

As General Secretary I spent much time together with Gerald Croasdell in Geneva – a beautiful but boring town, if my Swiss colleagues excuse. Our main occupation there was to fight our principal enemy in those days, the director of the European Broadcasting Union. He was an ex-Rumanian by the name of George Straschnov. He was an extremely charming man outside the conference room, but inside and in his profession he was absolutely ruthless. In particular he fought to prevent the Rome Convention of 1961 from becoming ratified by a sufficient number of states. He constantly referred to it as this “still-born child”. This position he argued not only as a spokesman for the EBU but also as an expert for several governments including Monaco, Burma and Kenya, to whom he had graciously offered his services.

In these meetings we appeared jointly with FIM, represented by its President, Hardie Ratcliffe, and its General Secretary, Rudolf Leuzinger. Hardie had been a flute player and Ruedi still was a bassoon player. I never heard them play music but I heard them argue hundreds of times with Straschnov. In later years it was John Morton who argued from his profound knowledge of performers’ rights, but I never heard him play his musical instrument, the piano. That is, by the way, another unique side of the FIA work – the fact that through the years we have been able to share the work with forceful and capable representatives of the musicians.

In spite of the resistance of Dr Straschnov the Rome Convention, the “still-born child”, came to life, as you know, and money started to come into the pockets of musicians and singers who had made records. The Rome Convention represented much, much less than FIA and FIM had demanded and expected. How else could it be when all the rights we were claiming had been handed away wholesale by the performers a hundred years ago – because they did not understand the significance of the phonograph and the cinema film and the recorded performance. From the beginning, therefore, our struggle has been, and remains, uphill.

At the congress in Stockholm in 1973 we realised that FIA was now so large an organisation that it could not be handled by a half-time General Secretary. Fortunately, Gerarld Croasdell was about to leave his function with British Equity so we could convince him to take over as a full-time secretary from London. To many, the strongest memory of that congress is probably the sad news from Santiago de Chile of the coup of General Pinochet. During the following years the Secretariat and the Presidium of FIA were much occupied by the situation of performers who were inside Chile or who had fled from Chile. In the files of General Pinochet and other dictators in Latin America there must be scores of telegrams and appeals from FIA related to these performers.

Three years later, in 1976, I left my national union for another occupation. Seven years later I came back to FIA to succeed my successor. I thus spent nearly ten further years as a full-time General Secretary of FIA in London. Obviously there are things to tell from that period as well, both positive and negative. The fall of the Wall, for example, which in a manner profoundly changed the anatomy of the federation. But that will have to be told at another time. Perhaps at the 75th anniversary of FIA, if you are prepared to wheel me on to the stage then.

Before closing I would, however, like to say a few words about what I have found to be the most important element of FIA. It is the individual people. More than anything else, FIA has been a network, knit by friendship and capacity and loyalty, occasionally even a love affair.

The contributors, therefore, are many and can't all be mentioned, but I think it is fair to mention again Gerald Croasdell. He was a very complex person, bright and full of contradictions and paradoxes. He was a lawyer who preferred trade union action to legal action – he insisted that the performers should take control over their conditions and products through the strength of their unions, not through legal protection. He was a homosexual (which was a dangerous thing to be in those early days) but attracted women as well as men through his firm and manly appeal. He was throughout his life a Marxist and for many years (although not to the end) an admirer of Josef Stalin – but at the same time a stern defender of the right of British Equity to remain, as he put it, “religiously non-political”.

Let me mention, briefly, two or three names more from the Old Guard. There was France Delahalle, who was President during most of Gerald's time as General Secretary. Gerald spoke of her – with affection – as the Queen. There was Chester Migden of Screen Actors' Guild, who showed such courage and devotion to the difficult task of bringing the American performers into FIA. There was Gennadij Pyatakov in Moscow, who was ceaseless in finding ways of assisting FIA and its members, in particular those who came from poor countries and could need and air ticket from Aeroflot. When Peter Plouviez used to address him as the colonel of the NKVD, he just smiled.

End then Peter himself. For at least two decades he was the self-evident beloved chairman or rapporteur of all the committees and meetings and conferences you could think of. He had a remarkable capacity for creating a constructive atmosphere through his wit and jokes. Some of them were rude and insulting beyond acceptance, had it not been for the warmth with which they were pronounced. Some people believed Peter was joking all the time because he was afraid of confrontation. There were wrong. I can tell you from a very personal experience that when matters got serious, Peter got serious too. And courageous.