



B A C K G R O U N D

Writing in a World Without Peace

72nd International PEN Congress, May 22-28, 2006

The 72nd International PEN Congress marks a milestone for the city of Berlin: it is the first PEN Congress since 1926 to be held in a unified Berlin, one that is once more a capital city, and with its six public sessions, the congress will also be a major literary event in this city. That the emphasis on literary matters is so pronounced does not go without saying, for the yearly meetings of the international association of "Poets, Playwrights, Essayists and Novelists" founded in 1921 by the English writer Catherine A. Dawson Scott are not held in the proverbial ivory tower. Rather, the congress is the working meeting of an internationally active writers' organization that numbers around 18,000 members. And while the organization maintains a "hands-off" policy with regard to partisan politics and the issues of the day, every member of PEN is committed to opposing hatred between social classes and ethnic groups, protecting writers against persecution, and advocating for freedom of speech. These are noble political aspirations, and working toward their accomplishment is the primary concern of all of PEN's international congresses and panels. By defending free speech and the independence of writers and journalists, PEN is standing up for a right that can buttress and guarantee all other human rights in civil society.

It is the quality of a writer's work alone that justifies his being heard as part of this endeavor. For this reason, the three public "literary sessions" to be held in the afternoons and the three major evening events are crucial components of the congress; they are the calling cards by which International PEN is presenting itself to its host city and contributing to the city's

cultural life. Over fifty writers and two musicians have been invited to participate. They come from China, from North American and Latin America, from Israel and Russia, as well as from Great Britain, France, Hungary and Sweden, or from the Netherlands and Poland.

The literary program of the congress taking place in Berlin from May 22 to 28 is decidedly international. The PEN Center Germany wishes to be a good host and thus has chosen to show restraint in presenting German and German-language literature, which after all receives a great deal of exposure in Berlin on a regular basis. The German writers who will participate in the final event of the congress on May 26 have names that bear the mark of their foreign origins or heritage. Among their many contributions to German literature is this: that they have helped to preserve it from the stigma of provincialism.

The writers we have invited to participate in the Congress are, for the most part, neither young nor old. They are of the generation that is setting the standards for literary production worldwide. Other great names might have come to mind as well, but we have selected these particular authors, and they will be our guests—regardless, by the way, of whether or not they are members of PEN. Translations of works by most of them are available in German bookstores. Many of the texts that will be presented here, however, were translated especially for the congress, a task that has been performed over the past weeks and months by a number of outstanding translators, some of them PEN members. The fruits of their labors will be made accessible during the congress in the form of multilingual booklets. Experienced simultaneous interpreters will lend their voices to the discussions at several events, notably in the case of the presentation of African writing at the Berliner Ensemble that will be held at 7 p.m. on May 25, with an opening speech by Nadine Gordimer. And German poets will read the work of their

foreign colleagues during the "Afternoon of Poets," also on May 25, which includes a stunning lineup of writers.

The "Afternoon of Essays" to be held at the Hilton Hotel on Mohrenstrasse on May 24 will present recent essayistic work that reflects the general topic of the congress, "Writing in a World without Peace." These texts, all of which were written expressly for this event, will be united in a paperback anthology to be published by Berlin Verlag.

The literary events of the congress in Berlin will be preceded by an event taking place on May 20 at the Literaturhaus Basel. Guests of the PEN Centre Germany will also participate in events being held by the Berliner Bücherfest (Berlin Book Festival) and the Literaturhaus Berlin, as well as the poesiefestival berlin being put on by literaturWERKstatt (literatureWORKshop).

(Translated from the German by Susan Bernofsky)

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The media partner of the International PEN Congress is DeutschlandRadio Kultur.

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