'The Whisperers' are here

Conference Interpreters bridge the Globish Gap in their world congress. And a new documentary about these expert linguists debuted.

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If the international stage in Brussels is what you call home, you come across them all the time: “The Whisperers”. That is how David Bernet and Christian Beetz, directors of the remarkable ARTE documentary by the same name, refer to conference interpreters. The directors were present at a screening of the film for conference participants and the local press at the opening ceremony of the Assembly of the International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC) on 11 January at the Bedford Hotel in Brussels.

As the film-makers look behind the scenes, the communication pros are stepping out of their interpreting booths this week (12 – 15 January 2006) to discuss their own affairs.

In times when everything has to be “quicker and cheaper no matter what,” questions of professional ethics are high on the agenda for AIIC interpreters. Another main topic at this year’s assembly will be the challenges arising from multilingualism, something which falls on fertile ground especially here in Brussels and is subject to intense and controversial debate.

Rudimentary knowledge of English

While some are in favour of “Globish” (global English) for everyone, others insist on cultural diversity and the importance of using one’s native tongue. Whereas some believe that even a rudimentary grasp of English is sufficient to communicate, others are concerned about nuances and subtleties which can make all the difference between understanding and misunderstanding or between a well-founded discussion and superficial chat.

There will be plenty to discuss and a wide diversity of challenges. For a year now, a group of Brussels-based AIIC members has been tackling the job of planning the assembly, not in the background in the role of “the whisperers”, but as active players. And it is all very multicultural indeed, the 15 members of the organising committee representing nine countries from Russia to Latin America and nine mother tongues from Italian to Finnish, not to mention a handful of German interpreters who have been living in Brussels for years, some for decades.

Co-production

Diversity is evident, not only in terms of language. The work within the organising committee itself is a surprising example of cooperation beyond your typical stereotypes. Our Italian colleague is certainly not the incarnation of “far niente”. Instead, she could be described as the “queen of sponsor
hunters”, brilliantly efficient, but cool, calm and collected at all times. The colleague in charge of interior design for the party on the final evening came up with the most extravagant ideas and speaks…German with a Berlin accent. And Latin America came up trumps not only for the cultural program, but also with immediate solutions to a myriad of technical questions. A Belgian-Russian-Irish consortium was responsible for press relations.

Living and working together in a multicultural environment, hands-on multilingualism not only behind the scenes but on stage, is an enriching experience - and a lot of fun.

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