The 5th WPI Conference took place in Athens and Delphi during the first week of October 2000. This Conference represented the culmination of a long period of hard work for many women both in Greece and abroad. The organisation of the Conference required a lot of co-ordination and careful planning and quite a number of obstacles had to be surmounted before the aspirations of the WPI management committee and the Conference organising committee were realised. It is a conscious decision on my part not to go into all the difficulties that were presented during the three years between Galway and Athens. This report will concentrate on the actual Conference but it is necessary to say that the lessons that we were taught during the pre-Conference stages will, I believe, help in ensuring that mistakes will not be repeated in these coming years leading up to the Mexican Conference. The main lesson is that the organisation of the Conference needs many people working together in harmony and respect for each other, good communication skills, and careful long term planning of events and presentations. I will endeavour to present the Conference in its true colours, point out the positive aspects while taking into account the negative ones and try and draw some conclusions that will hopefully help the next organising committee in identifying certain issues and problem areas.

Sponsorship and fund raising is a major area that has to be dealt with before any Conference can be organised successfully. Lack of funds and the effort to manage everything within the possibilities offered on an extremely tight budget wore us out from an administrative point of view. Partners SA, a professional publicity company, seemed like a wonderful idea in theory. In practice, however, their lack of understanding of what this particular type of organisation and Conference required, caused more problems than anticipated and in fact did little to help with the logistics aspect of the Conference. It did nothing in the area of sponsorship and financial assistance and that was a major
set back indeed.

One of the main difficulties we faced even before the Conference was properly under way had to do with logistics. Registration of participants, acknowledgement of payments, hotel bookings, receipts, transportation, publicity and coverage of events requested by participants, training volunteers, catering for meals and organising extra-curricular events proved to be an extremely copious task in which the company we had hired was unwilling or incapable of assisting properly. Delegation was, therefore, not an option as it should have been and an impossible load of work was piled on to a handful of enthusiastic (but not sufficient) number of people. Most logistical aspects were dealt with in the end. Given the serious difficulties we were faced with at the pre-Conference stage, the number of demands that were unthinkingly thrown at us by some (thankfully few) participants and the fact that every sort of logistical nightmare had to take place in that one week of the Conference (including the taxi strike and the general strike in Athens) I would dare say that things were not as bad as they could have been. A general important lesson was taught nevertheless: logistics are as important as the artistic side of the Conference. If an outside company undertakes to organise these matters this should be a company that is sensitive to the needs of the particular Conference and to its “specialness”. If they are done “in house” then they should be dealt with as early on as possible and with a fair number of people working on them. An action plan and a time schedule are of utmost importance. Participants should also be sensitive to the special nature of the Conference as well as to the particularities of the country hosting it. Personal demands can be a huge burden on the organisers and they may affect their good will in a negative way especially if these demands are not within the spirit of the organisation and the aims of the Conference.

Lack of sufficient communication and the taxi strike both resulted in a fairly disorganised arrival of participants to Athens and settling in hotels and other accommodation. Billeting, not being customary in Greece, left a number of women disappointed and many had to organise their own accommodation. This was unavoidable but caused a lot of friction at the onset of the Conference.

The opening ceremony at the Ceremony Hall of the University of Athens was quite a formal occasion and since the Hall is not easily accessible to the general public this presented a good opportunity for women from all over the world to sit and enjoy the beautiful surroundings. Ellen Stewart was a wonderful “Mother” figure and her blessings eased the resentments and sent the Conference forth in a more positive spirit.

The afternoon session marked the real opening of the Conference at the site that was going to be used for the duration in Athens. A rather unfriendly and cement surrounded site which, however, had the great advantage of being offered to the Conference by the University of Athens, under the auspices of which the Conference was organised. The central auditorium in which the main keynote speeches and panels were held was quite suitable for the occasion with technical support and interpretation possibilities whenever required. The rest of the building on the other hand was vast and labyrinthine thus causing a number of problems especially with the afternoon session rehearsed readings. A more friendly and intimate environment may have been a more suitable site than the School of Philosophy in Zographou but financial considerations made this quite an impossibility. Efforts were made by the organisers to accommodate the needs of individual readers and workshop leaders within the constraints of the building and the possibilities it offered. Most participants appreciated the difficulties and saw the realities with which we were faced in their true dimensions. Some few, however, remained critical and displeased to the end. Although I can appreciate the way that some women must have felt when the environment they may have been expecting was not as perfect as it could have been I still believe that a lot of work had gone into managing the site and that with a little bit of good will the aims of the Conference were fulfilled despite it.

The artistic part of the Conference included keynote speakers, a variety of panel discussions,
workshops, presentations, readings and performances. It was a full and extremely varied programme. If anything maybe a bit too full and too varied for a conference of this scale of participation. I think this is a fair criticism of an otherwise extremely lively week full of events and exchange of ideas and definitely full of creative talent. It may have been better to have fewer options available to participants. In the end the amount of choice available and the wish to be in as much as possible of what was going on probably led to confusion and weariness. This type of heavy programming had been a conscious decision. The organisers had opted for variety rather that order. I believe now that we made a mistake. In our effort to have as many voices heard as possible, as much creative work presented as possible and as much choice available as possible we overlooked the strain this may cause and we did not leave margin for flexibility. This is something the organisers in Mexico should really take into consideration and possibly try to avoid.

The keynote speakers (Louise Page, Marie Louise O’Donnell, Timberlake Wertenbaker and Deepa Mehta) all offered an interesting and varied insight into their particular area of expertise and craft. My view is that they were well chosen and a definite plus to the Conference. The speeches were well attended, although at a comparatively early hour in the day and the Q&A was always lively and challenging.

Most panel discussions were also well attended and generated a lot of discussion and exchange of views. “Do We Still Need A Women Only Conference” will be remembered I think for a long time to come by everybody attending, not least by the panelists themselves...

The afternoon sessions were a daily point of chaos. The readings went on for longer that anticipated, readings had to be re-arranged and, sometimes, cancelled, rooms were not available as planned and (unfortunately) some egos had to be slightly bruised. To add to this workshops and seminars planned at the same time were not as well attended as they deserved and many women were disappointed. The definite lesson from this is that the programme of readings should be well thought out in advance. It is better to have a few less readings and give them the time and respect they deserve. This, however, applies to playwrights themselves as well as organisers. I was very surprised to see how many women were not there to support and share the work of their peers but only made an appearance when their readings were scheduled. I was also surprised to see how these readings departed from their original aim and turned into almost full-scale performances when this was not what was expected. If women playwrights themselves do not do credit to their work and that of others how can we expect the outside world to hear our voice and treat us with the respect we deserve?

Having said that, however, I must add that a lot of really exciting work was presented and many positive outcomes were achieved by this. So, despite the quite incredible amount of last minute changes and the ensuing protests which formed our daily staple, the end result was not that negative and it is my view that nearly everyone felt that their work had been heard and duly appreciated.

Matinee and evening performances were quite well attended too and a lot of new and creative work was presented. This was a difficult task from an organising point of view due basically to the fact that this was a conference-albeit an artistic one- and not a theatre Festival. The technical support we were able to offer was minimal compared to the demands of the groups that had come to perform but to their credit they all managed to give their heart and souls to it and the result was good. The performers were great and their positive attitude saved the day. It was, therefore, a great disappointment to the organising committee that the N. Zealand group which so movingly performed Purapurawhetu in Delphi left the Conference with the most negative of feelings-feelings they shared with all the audience at the performance as well as with the Greek Consulate in Oakland. Theatre, real and good theatre, can be performed anywhere, with no props or technical support of any sort. This is a lesson that many performers still have to learn and I believe that with
hindsight even our friends from New Zealand may be accepting this now. For the future I would like to urge Conference organisers not to try and accommodate for anything they cannot cope with or anything that may not in the end work out as we did in our effort to please as many participants as possible. These will definitely backfire one way or the other and unnecessary resentments will ensue.

Delphi was definitely the jewel in the crown of this 5th WPI Conference. Maybe because of the imposing and inspiring beauty of the place, maybe because everything was drawing to an end, maybe because we all needed to feel it the two days there were an extraordinary success and no amount of chaos or bad planning or resentment could change it. The hair-raising performance of Greek actress Lydia Coniodou and the crazy party that followed it were proof of the final success of this unruly and wayward Conference. The feelings and the spirit cannot be described, but everyone who was there knows what I mean (I am sure) and words are not the right vehicle for expressing them.

In addition the European Centre in Delphi was the perfect location for the Conference and it managed to eradicate the somewhat negative feelings caused by the site in Athens.

As a general finishing statement I would like to say that in my view the Conference was a resounding success. It was given strength and courage by the incorporation of WPI announced at the Conference, by the election of a new management committee and by the superb presentation by the Mexican delegation of their plans for the 6th Conference in Mexico City. It has left most women there with a feeling of completion and excitement for the future. It accomplished most of the goals it had set out to accomplish—despite everything—and it offered optimism and a new vision for the future. The Conference was packed with excitement, free spirit, creative talent, fierce and passionate beliefs and most of all remarkable women from all over the world. This, if nothing else, is what should remain. And this is what should keep us going, creating and working in our separate fields, until we meet again.

I will close this report with the short farewell speech I gave in Delphi and with my thanks to each and every one of you. Keep the spirit up! See you all in Mexico!

"When Aliki asked me to help her organise the 5th Women Playwrights International Conference in Athens and Delphi I thought: "Wow, this sounds interesting!. Interesting? You bet! I only realised the full proportions of this undertaking much later.... and by then I was hooked. To an addictive nature like mine this Conference became the ultimate addiction. I remember sitting in front of the computer screen, alone in my house, and yet feeling as if I was amidst hundreds of creative, talented and enthusiastic women. It was a fine weaving of a beautiful and complex tapestry. For months this weaving went on. The texture was smooth at places and rough at others, the colours changed the shadows and light gave depth and warmth to it. Into this tapestry went the work of many women, their fights, their struggles -personal and political- their pain and their power.

And then.... one day we all got together to unravel the tapestry we had been weaving, to spread it on the floor and to allow it to come alive. And boy did it come alive! The careful weaving of months (for me) and years (for others) went haywire. A frenzy of panels, readings, workshops, seminars, cancellation and re-arrangement of the above, locked rooms, undisciplined buses, politically aware taxis, rehearsals, performances, discussions erupted from our tidy tapestry. And to me it was beautiful, very beautiful... Because the spirit which hovered over this "controlled chaos" was benign... Because it allowed me - and I am sure most of us here- to experience the most wonderful and intense feelings. When sitting amongst women from all over the world I was balled over by their creative talent and their passion. Women sharing their work, their experiences, their fears and their pain, their humour and their raunchiness with each other.
That was what the spirit of the tapestry was and spirits cannot be contained, cannot be structured. The total freedom I have felt, the lack of shame, the shared laughter (and there was a LOT of that) and crying, the loving hugs and compassionate and gentle criticism and suggestions were the highlights of this Conference so filled with passion. To me the Conference was Shelley from S. Africa dancing more beautifully than any other person I have seen. It is Ratna's anger for Marsinah and Rosemary's outrage with the academic establishment, it is the moving song of Bilgesu and Sheila's ode to life, it is Lynn's hand on my shoulder when I am tired and Sandra's laughter. It is Katherine's humour and Caren's songs, the Mexican women's incredible energy. It is the passion of the written word in the readings, Sue's striking coloured scarves, Patrizia's courage, Deepa's fierce independence and so many other things that can only be counted with the heart.

Thank you Aliki for giving me the opportunity to experience such great feelings and for trusting me with this. To all of you, courageous and beautiful women, good bye, never succumb to pressure and...see you in Mexico!!

Maria Triantopoulou-Capsakis

Assistant Conference Director