

The End of the Agenda Part 1 – Munsbach Summer School 2000 by Brian Parker

Saturday the 5th of August, 15:00 and Rachel and I are trudging up the gravel path toward the Chateau de Munsbach dragging a couple of suitcases behind us. Yes, it is again time for New World's Theatrical Summer School and this year I am being sponsored by Pirates so I'd better pay attention and take copious notes. This being my fifth consecutive year as a residential student on this course you'd think by now I'd learned all there is to know, but no; The Theatre is indeed a very big thing and this would prove to be a very valuable year indeed.

Old friends from previous years are ritually hugged and we catch up on whatever our co-students have been up to since last year. In many cases the Summer School is the only point of contact for a group of thespians that come from all over Europe, and indeed even from as far as the USA this year. In the Salle de Parc Mike McCormack, the course Director, explains how the week works as the old lags loll around outside in the sunshine saving their energy for later.

Munsbach week is based around the idea of three projects. Two of the projects, Skills and Themes are of approximately equal duration. There is also the much shorter Project 3 (More later). Each of the four tutors offer us one Skill and one Theme from which the students choose one of each. A marvellously fair voting system is used to sort out the requirements of trying to fit nearly 50 students into some sort of sensible balance. For example if you only got your second choice for the Skill project you are almost certain to get your first for Theme. In practice almost all students get either both their first choices or their first and second – remarkable!

So what was on offer this year:-

Skills

Graeme Du Fresne - ACTING/SINGING SKILLS: What Kind of Play Am I In?

Noel Greig – ACTING/DIRECTING SKILLS: The Actor as Writer.

Peta Lily – ACTING SKILLS: Delivering Comedy

Mike McCormack – DIRECTING SKILLS: Thought in Action

Theme – The Turning Point

Graeme Du Fresne – Getting the Gist of it.

Noel Greig (and Mike McCormack) – Fin de Siecle.

Peta Lily – Transforming the Moment.

Mike McCormack (and Noel Greig) – Next?

Project 3 Directors workshop

Two sessions totalling 3 ½ hours make up Project 3. This excellent experience allows any aspiring Director to either bring a scene of a favourite play or be assigned a piece by the tutors. (Attendees of the NWTC's Café Villon evenings will know how useful this is for

potential Directors to try things out). The remaining students are assigned a student Director and the groups scatter to various locations in the grounds in order to work on rehearsing the pieces. The tutors wander around the groups providing helpful advice and ideas when needed or requested. Five years ago when Project 3 debuted I tried my hand as a Director and gained enough confidence to go on to direct a production. It is a wonderful opportunity for budding Director to get a taste of what's in for them should they decide to take on a full production.

Swaps and Shares

The Summer school also features a cunning component to the timetable, that of Swaps and Shares. In a Share your group gets a chance to show whatever you have been working on to the other groups. This is not a performance but a window onto an ongoing process. Swaps are where you get to have a go on the other courses for a short session.

What to do?

As a Director with a show in pre-production I already knew that I wanted to take the Directing Skills option since it is the last part of Mike's epic 3-part Direction Course – hence my title "The end of the Agenda." Due to the Swap system I knew I would be able to sample the delights of Peta's Delivering Comedy, which was my second choice and also to do a bit of writing with Noel and look at women's bottoms with Graeme! (More later).

Enter John Brigg holding a stack of voting results which he enjoys reading far too much – And it seems I am on the Directors Skills group, visible relief since that is what I'm really here to do. Time now to vote for the Theme and although again tempted by Peta and the promise of physical theatre (that's enough of that you lot!) I plump for Graeme who, in his introduction, says all the right words, Brecht, Singing and Acting, Kurt Weill. Having attended Mike McCormack's Brechtian acting course last year I find myself eager to get the songs into the act as well. Again John Brigg intones the list and again I get what I've asked for. After dinner we get started with the first Theme session. Graeme presents his militarily precise plan for the week's work (this session was the last we saw of it) and proceeds to warm up our voices ready to start work on the promised five Brechtian style songs we will visit in the week. Afterwards we repair to the bar and eventually our beds at an almost decent hour.

The Next Day

Dawn breaks. To the sound of the Munsbach bloody beach party, which has been pounding away all night. Yours truly wakes to the sound of a distant bass drum at least an hour earlier than he should have. On the way to breakfast several so-called friends remark upon the early manifestation to be greeted with an incoherently mumbled curse. 09:15 sharp and we start warm-ups. Thinks, they all look pretty tough now but wait until Wednesday or Saturday, we'll see how sharp 09:15 is then. Afterwards we all disperse to our skills groups. Again several so-called friends make silly jokes about Directors sitting in class all day, and will there be a test at the end of class? However we (all) know that our course is the best one (except maybe for all the other best ones) and hurry along to the room laden with sharp pencils and pads of paper.

The Directors Skills Course

Mike McCormack runs a three-year cycle of Direction training at the Summer School, which is remarkably suited to both beginning and experienced Directors. It isn't necessary to do the courses in any particular order, in fact any particular order will do. To present an idea of the depth and breadth covered on the course is a bit beyond this author however a brief sample of the type of material covered over the three years would be:- Ideas in Theatre (Stanislavski, Brecht, Artaud, Boal & others), How to cast, A very thorough analysis of rehearsal, Design of sets, Use of exotic techniques such as screens and masks, Types of Theatre (The physical building), Types of stage, History of Theatre, Analysis of text, Rehearsal and production schedules. Any single year in isolation is also well worth attending as the components stand alone.

I would particularly recommend the forthcoming year, which features detailed analysis of the rehearsal process and a highly practical way of casting a play. If all of this sounds rather dry it most certainly is not. Classroom work is mixed with creative practical sessions where it is possible to try out and challenge the ideas learned in the classroom. With 10-12 other Directors to argue with there really isn't a dull moment.

Getting the Gist (Gestus) of it

Graeme Du Fresne had explained that he planned to cover five Brechtian style songs over the week. So we started by singing, "Make our Garden grow" from "Candide", by Bernstein. Aha, caught him out! But it turned out it was only a warm up. Onward to the first featured number, "The Alabama Song" from "The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny" the story of a city where anything goes, providing you can pay for it. Splitting into two groups, The Lumberjacks and the Prostitutes (Astonishingly I was a Lumberjack) we proceeded to get into character. Brechtian "chorus" scenes usually feature clearly defined roles for each of the members of the "chorus". For example it is very important in the two groups to be able to indicate differing status within the groups in order to bring the characters out as individuals. Graeme had us randomly draw playing cards for this exercise and we were soon able to provide fairly convincing backstories based on our status for our assumed characters.

The bulk of the work, necessarily, for the first half of the week is concentrated on learning the songs since Brechtian style music demands a high degree of precision in the delivery. For example it is essential to contrast the harsher staccato sections with the cooler more melodic parts, all of course while playing a scene. As the course progressed to the second half of the week the acting component was emphasised and we developed scenes from The Threepenny Opera and The Good Person of Seczhuan. In particular Dominic Muldowny's "Song of the Waterseller" made a great impression on me with its wonderful Tango rhythm and peculiar Chinese Harmony.

All in all a fascinating look at how to approach playing Brecht and featuring the skills that it is necessary to master in order to produce this exciting and demanding form of Theatre.

Three Days Pass (Danke Herr Brecht!)

It's lunchtime on Tuesday and in addition to our selected courses we have swapped for 1 ½ hours with another skills group. Peta Lily's Acting Skills, Delivering Comedy, would certainly have been my first choice if I hadn't had to complete the Direction course. In the brief time

available to her she ran us through the basics of clowning and we began to realise why some of the students on her course were going to bed so early. Imagine trying to make someone laugh just by looking at them. (Easier for some than others.) If I'd had a spare hand I would have been taking notes but what with the two full plates of virtual spaghetti I couldn't really manage. However I was able to memorise the Boss and two henchmen routine and no I'm not telling. You'll have to wait until the next Panto.

About this time, the infamous bottom-watching share made its appearance. Under the cover of teaching cross-gender Panto technique Graeme De Fresne had his students observe each other's walk (bottoms) in an effort to teach boys how to walk like girls and vice-versa. Graeme informed us that it is absolutely necessary to observe the walk (bottom) in detail otherwise an imperfect parody of a cross-gender walk will be the sad result. I am reliably informed that many hours were spent on this demanding topic before they finally got to the bottom of it.

After Lunch comes Graeme's special session with everyone, including Tutors involved. We all assemble in the chapel and the warier straight-acting types nervously eye the piano in the corner. Yes, it's the traditional Munsbach "Let's get this shower through a piece of harmony vocals" assault course. This year's victim is "You'll never walk alone" from Carousel. Graeme, feeling rather outnumbered (He & Helen Ireland normally gang-up on us for this) springs his ace in the deck announcing that we will have to sing in perfect time since he's got an orchestral Karaoke style backing track. One hour later despite those out of time Karaoke musicians we stagger through the piece, almost observing the dynamics, eh sopranos? Deciding not to tempt fate again we are given another song from Carousel, "Blow High" This highly politically incorrect song (All about whaling) was just the sort of rousing blast to finish the session and we all reeled from the Chapel in good shape for the start of Project 3.

Project 3 Special Mention (Again)

Project 3 deserves a special mention. If you have ever even slightly considered Directing a show attend Munsbach and do Project 3. You are given co-operative actors, who have been your friends and co-students during the week, tutors who will assist you (but only if you want) and a warm comfortable atmosphere in which to try out your ideas. Neophyte, or old hand, this is the Directing lab – Experiment!

"There is no such thing as writer's block"

is Noel Greig's firm assertion as we begin the writer's skills swap. This can't be right? Doesn't he know how long it's taken me to write this bloody article! (For the paradoxically inclined - of course he didn't, because I hadn't yet written it. But you know what I mean). As a veteran of some of Noel's courses I well recall the remarkable toolbox of techniques that he brings to the Summer School. So, writer's block eh?

Splitting us into groups of three we are to go somewhere within the Chateau grounds and find a view that appeals to us. It doesn't have to be pretty, just interesting in some way. Two members of each group are designated as talkers while the third is the writer or observer. Settling down in front of the chosen view my two talkers, I was an observer, as instructed began to chat about things in the view and let the conversation meander around the topics raised. After ten minutes of this we re-convened and each of us took a copy of the conversation. We were then given twenty minutes to construct a short piece of text using the

natural conversation forms of the view example but with an underlying reason or motive for the conversation, that we were free to choose. The results of this small exercise varied in success but some of the pieces were remarkably lively, with an unforced conversational tone. During the limited time available for the swap we skimmed over one of Noel's many techniques for stimulating creative writing. From conversations with other students on the course there was a genuine sense of excitement as people who had thought themselves either blocked or uninspired poured out pages of text, producing several proto-scripts by the end of the week.

The End of The Agenda

As usual at the Summer School it seems to take an age to get to the end of the second day and then suddenly it is next Sunday! Time has a funny way about it within the walls of the Chateau. My particular Agenda is completed and next year I will be free to choose whatever takes my fancy. It is always sad to leave the thrilling atmosphere of The Summer School but the prospect of a tasty al-fresco lunch at the Villa d'Este softens the blow. Anyway since I've been mad enough to agree to run the Website we'll at least be able to keep in touch.

"You'll never walk alone..."