
MUNSBACH Summer School 2002 A report from Carol Abel.

« For the sheer pleasure of it, stretch and scratch the sky » are the words with which Mike McCormack invariably opens his morning warm-up sessions at Munsbach. This too, is invariably what students do, each and every year during the course as they learn new skills, battle with demons and, last but not least, consume a glass or two in the comfort of the bar.

This year's Munsbach summer school broke new ground in a number of ways. Firstly, with a record 48 students, recruited from amongst the usual groups and one to whom the week had been gifted by his girlfriend after she found our site on the internet. Secondly, we had, for the first time in Luxembourg summer school history, 3 female tutors – Peta Lily (who was here 2 years ago) and two new ones, Julia McLeish and Jen Hayes. Thirdly, the weather, which was cold and wet, although we had glorious weather for the picnic and the evening in town. Lastly, but definitely not least, Luxembourg students had to live at home due to the shortage of residential accommodation in the chateau.

Regular readers of summer school reviews will already know the form : on the Saturday afternoon the esoterics of the voting system are explained to the assembly and the tutors lay out their wares. The overall theme this year was 'Life Stories' with the options divided as follows:

- Jen Heyes – acting skills – (Un)masking the actor
- Julia McLeish – acting skills - My space, your space
- Peta Lily – acting skills - The speaking body,
- Mike McCormack – directing skills - Early rehearsal

Theme Project (Life stories)

- Jen – the cultural connection
- Julia - Oh what a beautiful morning (or is it ?)
- Peta - Your life on stage (*)
- Mike - Real lives

The first session on the Saturday is always dedicated to breaking the ice and is an opportunity for everyone to learn everyone else's name. Peta opened this session by introducing us to some initial physical work which involved breathing from the 'Hara' (about 2 inches below the navel, a term taken from the martial art Aikido) while pretending to be sumo wrestlers who were also quartered chickens (it got worse!), squashing bananas underfoot and reaching through chocolate Haagen Daz ice-

cream. Those of us unfamiliar with Peta were soon to discover her very visual use of imagery in all her exercises as well as her Australian sense of humour.

In her skills class, which was my chosen skills option, we learned how to use animals and the elements of earth, air, fire and water to give physical form to a character. This treatment could also be extended to speech and gesture.

During the week my musical group ("Oh what a beautiful morning"(or is it?)) learned how Rogers & Hammerstein had sought to use darker subjects in their work than would have been normal in their day, e.g. domestic violence, racism, etc. Their musical 'The King and I' dealt with cultural clashes as the distinctly British Governess came up against the male-dominated ways of the Orient. 'Oklahoma' too, revealed its darker side as well with local society apparently condoning the murder by hanging of poor Judd.

'Synchronicity' became the buzz word of the week as we discovered many instances of coincidence as the courses started to overlap each other and we were able to apply our newly acquired skills in many ways. For example, we were able to apply work done with animals to Project 3, which is a fairly recent summer school invention, deserves a special mention. It is student-driven although the course tutors are on hand to offer suggestions and help as and when required. Those people participating in the directing course, plus a small number of other interested students were invited to bring with them texts on which they wanted to work. Mike West, Jan Horsburgh and I were assigned to work together on extracts from the play 'Summit Conference' where Hitler's and Mussolini's respective mistresses take tea with each other in a bunker and their unfortunate guard is forced to assume the role of a young girl. In the extracts we studied all the actors were required to swap backwards and forwards between male and female roles. It proved to be a fascinating and challenging experience.

The week progressed and we soon fell into step as we became more at ease with each other and the course work. What is achieved at Munsbach is achieved by trust given and taken at all levels. For those people working with masks and creative writing trust is and was an essential element as this work can involve much self-exposure.

Thursday was picnic day and a day of welcome respite from what was proving to be an emotional and tense week. Friday evening saw the traditional musical evening when many talented people shared a variety of material with us late into the night. Linda's and Valerie's offering on the subject of breasts was outstanding (no pun intended !) and we collapsed with helpless laughter. For some, this evening is the only time in the year when their voices 'get an outing' and there are others who perform regularly and are comfortable doing so. For others, standing alone in front

of an audience is still a traumatic experience. I think the fact that people were still singing beyond 4am gives a clue as to how at ease people felt.

Saturday saw us struggle valiantly and vainly against the cumulative effects of lack of sleep and too much alcohol. The course ended on Saturday night with Julia's theme group sharing a medley of music called 'Rogers & Hammerstein on Broadway', a complicated piece of unison and harmony work which we had only sung through once in its entirety. Since we were not 'performing', it mattered not that we missed entries or sang wrong notes – what was important was the thrill of rising to meet the challenge and HAVE FUN.

I had to bid a sad farewell on Saturday night and thus missed the Sunday morning 'wear 3 pairs of knickers' (skills, theme and school) de-brief but doubtless a lively debate ensued as well as suggestions for alterations, improvements, etc.

There were only two black spots in the week. Quite early on Julia injured her leg which meant a lot of behind-the-scenes reorganisation which included the recruitment of able and willing young men to transport her around. For the special project involving all the students Peta rose to the challenge of taming an unruly bunch into a chorus worthy of performing Hamlet's 'to be or not to be' speech. The other black spot was the fact that students from Luxembourg had to sleep in their own homes, or someone else's or even in a mobile home parked in the chateau car park! Returning to 'real life' at the end of an intense day is not easy, especially when the last thing you feel like doing is communicating with 'normal' people who find it difficult to understand the weird and wonderful goings-on at Munsbach.

Outside the course work new friendships were forged and old ones renewed. Time and distance are no obstacles to nurturing these friendships and many of us are in almost daily contact thanks to the Internet. If you want a glimpse of the week's activities go to http://photos.yahoo.com/nwtc_lu and click on the 2002 Munsbach album, where I have put all the photos. There are also some from previous NWTc productions.

My thanks and those of all other Munsbachers go to Chris Bearne and John Brigg who organised yet another successful summer school. To Mike, Peta, Julia and Jen – thank you too for sharing your skills and your friendship. Long live the spirit of Munsbach !

* Peta will be performing her one-woman show 'Topless' based on her life, at the Unity Theatre in Liverpool on 19, 20 and 21 December 2002