

## **SUMMER SCHOOL 2009 - Uta Hagen's seven questions**

This is an attempt to set out for those who don't know and to represent for those who do; what summer school 2009 was about. Let's start at the beginning and take the seven steps with Uta Hagen, (actress and renowned acting coach who practised in New York, Al Pacino is an aficionado), a reference point for this year's course that may lead to identifying a character that defies description.

### Who am I?

I was one of a group of 44 students who came from various places in Europe (from Copenhagen to Geneva) and four tutors two of whom attending for the first time, ready to participate in a week's course on English speaking amateur theatre. All of the tutors are experienced professionals who take time out of hectic schedules to devote a week to the summer school. There is no student archetype, the age range extended from 15 to 81, some of them are native Anglophones, but many are not. The acting experience too is broad going from the curious enthusiast like myself to people who have professional training and those who have been acting and directing for many years. About two thirds of the students had been before, some many times. Obviously coordination and conception of the course is a serious task - Graeme, Nola and John – how do you do it?

### Where am I?

Clairefontaine, is a Cistercian Abbey in Arlon, Belgium close to the border of Luxembourg. The abbey provides a home for retired members of the order and a centre that's hired out for conferences, children's summer camps whilst schools are closed - and us. The accommodation is clean but austere. I shared my small rectangular room with two small pictures of religious icons, a narrow bed with a thin mattress, a desk a chair, a sink all placed on a linoleum floor. I woke up early each morning to the dawn chorus, sung by cows this was usually followed by the sound of the bell of the clock tower. Clairefontaine is set in generous grounds and surrounded by forest, this combined with the fact that I had no reception on my mobile phone definitely made me feel cut off, ensconced in another world.

### When is it?

The last week of July beginning on 25 through to 2 August. I've been living between Belgium and Luxembourg for the past four years and was amazed to find that we enjoyed a week of unbroken sunshine. It meant that the morning warm up could take place outside in the grounds. I stepped across the dew drops barefoot to join the large circle and go through various exercises to the amusement of the local kids who were attending a daily summer camp and who would watch us move our unwilling bodies into bizarre shapes. You'd find yourself becoming intimate, trusting your neighbour whose name you probably didn't know, cradling their head or rubbing their back.

### What do I want?

Apart from to have a good time, everyone is there with a purpose and commitment. The intensity and focus is both powerful and inspiring and it has left me with a lasting impression. I signed up because I'm fascinated by the art of story telling, and of course the stage is one of the most important mediums through which stories are told. I wanted to discover new things about myself – whether I could use myself as a tool to express and convey a story.

### Why do I want it?

That's an easy one – to communicate to as large an audience as possible whilst being entertaining at the same time.

### How do I get it?

My first impression of summer school was the time-table which I received at work by e-mail. To be frank I panicked – its daunting. The time-table is a two dimensional paper tardis. Some how it manages to pack in everything, Einstein's theory of relativity, the universe and time travel - its all crammed into what looks like a sheet of landscape A4 paper. All of the hours between 9.00 am and 9.15 pm were accounted for each day. Practically the first thing that happens is that the time table is explained at the first session on Saturday afternoon. Each of the tutors introduced their courses. I wanted to do all of them apart from sing. The voting procedure was explained and I was happy as I was allocated both of my first choices - Lawrence's acting class and Claire Russ' voice skills. We then got straight down to work which meant for me learning to walk.

The other part of the summer school process is swapping and sharing all of which is covered in that timetable. Swaps refers to those slots where students have the chance to try the options working with tutors that they didn't choose or weren't able to follow due to demand. Following the swaps I've developed a soft spot for singing. Sharing provides a chance for all participants to see what's been going on within the groups they've not worked with. The emphasis at summer school is on process rather than finished product, so it's a snapshot of work in action rather than a performance. Project 3 is a particular form of sharing where students work on a text with a student director; it's a three-way dynamic process between the cast, the student director and the mentor (one of the tutors)

### What's stopping me?

I can't recall the exact phrase, but it was something to the effect that nothing in the rehearsal room is wrong - everything is valid. As a result, what we created at summer school was a safe environment where individually and as a group we could explore what's stopping each of us - lack of skills, lack of confidence, lack of a medium, lack of knowledge. It's difficult to convey the atmosphere in Lawrence's class. We laughed a lot both at and with each other. But, there were some unique occasions when we were all occupying the zone together the atmosphere was palpable, charged with energy. We worked through a series of abstract exercises on building a character, working on focus, and carrying the intention through. I worked with Claire Russ on voice, a tool we all use every day, but actors and singers apart, how many of us really know our own voice? With Claire we became acquainted with our voices, learning about its possibilities and scope and how to manipulate it. Another benefit of Claire's class was that I became reacquainted with writers who are old favourites and was introduced to some new authors through the texts we worked on. It was amazing to see how each person developed over the week through working on their monologue. Some of us began by simply reading aloud, but were transformed over seven days into actors giving our individual interpretations.

### Summing up

The sharing and the laughter is what I'll remember most. Not only what was timetabled, but somehow people have the energy and generosity between classes to chat in the sunshine, the canteen or late in the bar during the evening into the small hours. To share ideas, talents and experiences. We had the benefit of Evelyn's glorious classical accordion recital in the chapel, our poetry evening and impromptu singing and playing late into the night.

Its not one of Uta Hagen's questions, but would I recommend it? Yes, without hesitation. You get out of it what you put in, if you come with an open mind and a willingness to work hard you'll leave with a full glass regardless of how much you consume in the bar into the small hours.