

Julie Goes To School – report from Clairefontaine 2006

Being greener than green I have written this from my perspective of knowing nothing at the beginning of this journey, realising how much more there is to know by the end. To those of you who have been to Summer School (SS) before I apologise for my probably unnecessary long-winded explanations and/or observations, but I can only write as I find. It's a little longer than I'd anticipated, so go get a fag, coffee - alternatively turn to the last page or just hit delete!

When making my decision whether or not to apply to go to SS I wanted to get as much understanding as I could about what it entailed. Therefore, I set about reading the after-the-event summaries written (see <http://www.leadss.lu/>) and then asked ex-students why they went, what it happened, how they felt about it and what they got out of it. All said that Summer School had given them a chance to learn in a safe environment, with good tutors, ways to move forward with their craft. Without exception, fun and laughter were mentioned by each ex-student. What really struck me though was the depth of enjoyment students had found attending and the eager anticipation of their returning.

My inquisitive nature managed to just about outweigh any shyness and nervousness that would normally prevent my going any further and so I applied. However, it was still with butterflies mutating in my tummy that I set off on my adventure. Would the week away be worth the feelings of sadness and worry I had leaving the family for the first time? Would I regret opting for the residential course by being shackled up with an 'acting lovey' who was just a little too loud and too fond of 'sharing'? Would I find myself surrounded by awful know-alls who give their knowledge unreservedly and are equally appalled by the utter lack of mine? Worst of all, would I be expected to actually stand alone in front of people and perform?! Quite frankly, by the time I pulled off the motorway I was having serious doubts. Luckily the school was nearby and, so picturesque and tranquil is the setting that my fears were calmed by just arriving there. It is absolutely beautiful.

On arrival we were greeted by Janice Allgrove and John Brigg. They had already sent some information out preparing us for SS and were on hand all week organising various things. I have to say that they did a superb job overseeing the smooth running during the week. Thank you both!

Overview

After settling in and lunch, there followed an introductory afternoon. Each day was to begin at 9.00 with a half-hour warm-up. This turned out to be both wonderfully bizarre and fun (Janice's dramatic wake-up with Edith Pilaf blasting out 'No Regrets' followed by her chant is something is still very vivid in my mind today!) after which we were to more or less work through to 21.30 each day. Our time was to be divided up into four areas (with weighting being given the first two) (i) Theme Workshop, (ii) Skills workshop (iii) Project 3 and (iv) Swops & Shares.

The Theme and Skills courses each had four options to choose from and to help us decide the tutors presented an overview of their course. This was especially helpful I believe as, unlike previous years when there were usually a handful of newcomers, this year we made up nearly half of the 50 or so attendees. The theme options this year were (i) Singing and Acting Project, "The Satire in Song" with Graeme Du Fresne; (ii) The Acting/Directing Project "What does it really mean?" with Janice Dunn; (iii) Acting Project "Tell it like it is" with Sally Ann Gritton and (iv) The Comedy Project, "So you think that's funny do you?" with Mitch Mitchelson.

In all honesty, I think you could have ended up on any course with any of the tutors and had a fantastic week. However, most people ended up with their preferred choice(s) due to a well-thought through voting procedure. For those of us who didn't get our first choice, our second was awarded. I was impressed that so much care had been taken over this and it was clear from the start that tutors/organisers listened to, and heard, the students.

(i) My Theme Workshop: The Satire in Song

There was a note for this option that it would be helpful if you had sung before so I was a little concerned opting for this, my first Theme choice. Other than singing at home with my children or in the bath, I'd only sung with Pirates a couple of times and always in a chorus. However Graeme was happy for me to have a go. The course focused on the juxtaposition of horrendous/bizarre words with happy/beautiful music. We sang "Blame Canada" from Southpark the movie and The Avenue Q Theme from Avenue Q. It was terribly funny to have such jolly music put to such sad and awful words.

This followed with Graeme announcing we were going to look at Operas. In my ignorance, my heart sank. How on earth could I sing opera – I decided to mime and hope he wouldn't notice (fat chance!). Even the names "Beggar's Opera"/"Threepenny Opera" didn't alleviate my fear, but hearing "Mack the Knife" did. It was a revelation to find that a song I'd been singing along to quite happily for years had such a sinister background. Focusing on the story rather than the tune helped me to try to sing as a character, rather than just sing. It was exceptionally interesting to me to witness the change in each of us from our first encounter of the song to adopting a persona. It was also great fun and being led by Graeme helped me to stop worrying so much, concentrate more and just enjoy it.

One of the things that stood out for me this week was that I was constantly discovering music (and plays too) I'd never heard of. I don't know how to explain how exciting I find this and can only relate it the feeling I had as a child when I realised I could read the first page of a book which felt like I had found a whole new world that I didn't know existed before. It's just a great feeling. "Would I Might Be Hanged" from Beggar's Opera is one piece of music which moved me with its beautiful music and heart-piercing words. It was whilst singing the duet "Knocking Shop Tango" that I realised for the first time that I can really sing and feel a character. Having the opportunity to find something like this about you is special I think.

We also looked at Jerry Springer's Opera. We had to assume a pseudo name (a pet's name with your mother's maiden name) then make a character to introduce (by singing) ourselves to the audience, who in turn shouted vile and obscene replies. Naturally the music was beautiful! I spent the morning crying with laughter and it this led me to blurt out "this is one of the best birthdays I've ever had!" Fellow Pirates, I wonder if you can match who's who from Beverly Atkinson, Janice Allgrove, Fran and myself to their alias – a sausage stuffer – Smudge Fryer, a Jehovah's Witness – Tina, Carson, a pole dancer – Muffy Macklesworth and a frustrated receptionist – Poppy Arnott (with two t's please!). We considered how difficult it might be to be God in "It Ain't Easy Being Me" and perhaps most enjoyably harmonised our way through "This is My Jerry Springer Moment". Priceless.

What can I say? It was a great course!

(ii) My Skills Workshop: Acting through Instinct. I have spent a lot of my working-life having to employ reasoning and analytical skills and whilst useful, I think they can (and have) inhibited my instinct to 'just do', so this course was really quite perfect for me. Acting is something I've avoided with a passion. I've always got so stressed-out about what people expect and learning lines that enjoyment has come so far down I've never reached it. It was therefore with considerable surprise and joy that I found myself to be fully engaging in and even comfortable participating in this workshop. Sally Ann focused on the process rather than the end result. This took an enormous amount of trust (which, not unnaturally, wasn't present at the beginning) as at times you couldn't see where it was leading to. This process is something I shall never forget and was perhaps a big lesson for me. I also think it was advantageous that it was a small group of six and that we were lucky enough to work with Sally Ann. She used various methods to get us to act through instinct.

(a) Stick throwing! Many sessions commenced with throwing and catching sticks at each other – initially seeming quite abstract and purposeless – nevertheless every day we noticed the trust and confidence building between us.

(b)Visualisation. The heat was a constant challenge but the importance of focusing on the here and now by clearing the mind and accepting and working with the external environment was achieved by visualisation techniques. One time we were an imagining an ice-cream melting over our heads, the other listening to an extract of Under Milk Wood which we then had to imagine and act out. We also imagined a human character as being an animal, but see project 3 below.

(c)Improvisation. The thought of improvisation has always filled me with dread until I realised that it was not so dissimilar to what I do each day when I play with my children, but actually far funnier because it's adults who should know better! I think each member of our group had reservations in some way but Sally skilfully guided us and having established a basis of trust, she was able to build each of us up.

(d)Stream of consciousness. Letting the mind be free (how scary is that?!) was explored by speaking without purpose, just letting a stream of words be said without having to make connections. I'd never done that before and found it quite liberating. This was built upon by writing down a stream of consciousness then coming together and making a short sketch from only the words each of us had written down. I had read that out of chaos comes order, but I hadn't actually seen that sense (almost!) could come out of such confusion.

We then worked on a part of a play by Polly Teale, "after Mrs Rochester". Using all of the skills above we each developed our character and to my complete surprise I found it such a natural process that the words seem to come almost instinctively. That's not to say I was completely relaxed when we had to 'share' our work with the other groups, but it was far more enjoyable than I could ever have imagined. So, successful option there too!

(iii)Project 3

When I read the literature sent by out before the course, I understood it was for people who wanted to have a go at directing, but being so new I felt I wasn't ready. I didn't realise that we all had to take part and when my name had been omitted from the lists I assumed the directors had chosen which students they wished to have act in their projects. Don't get me wrong, I was happily off to read a magazine for the sessions until I thought I should maybe check my understanding – which proved to be quite wrong! All students participate either as a director or actor. I was assigned to John Brigg who introduced us to "The Imbecile" by Luigi Pirandello, a tragic piece with a fitting conclusion. After reading through the play John prepared us for the parts by asking us to imagine the character we had as an animal. This was far more powerful than I would have thought possible and helped all to assume a certain air, walk and way of communicating that I would have never thought of. When the whole group did this it was quite dramatic to participate in and easy to believe in the characters people took on. I can't decide if it was fortunate or unfortunate that the heat seemed to get the better of us at this time as we were all finding it hard to concentrate. I'm not sure why, but John decided to turn it into a farce and this lightened the whole atmosphere and helped us all to engage again. However, I think the time is so limited with project 3 that we didn't have time to see the process taking form and, for me, it didn't sit well with the approach taken before. Nevertheless, that in itself was interesting and the power of visualising animals is something I shall definitely use in future.

(iv)Shares & swops

The 'share' sessions were planned throughout the week and gave all of us an opportunity to share our work with the other groups. Personally I preferred the early share sessions as we got a real sense of the processes being employed to explore and develop the work in progress. Naturally, toward the end of the week some of the work had been developed to the stage where it was seemingly complete and so the share session seemed to be more of a production, which whilst enjoyable to watch perhaps wasn't as informative as earlier sessions.

'Swops' entailed our having a taster of the courses we were unable to attend and I think this is a great strength in the Summer School schedule. Learning from Mitch's course how the simplest of movements can make a mundane movement become hilarious was quite wonderful and entertaining. With Janice I got the opportunity to see my original first choice for skills when considered what being a director

actually means. Exploring this was informative and made me want to know more! I felt quite spoilt that the organisers had gone to such lengths to insure we all got a chance to experience each course.

Social

Having to work such long hours with the same people I think can often result in disharmony but I think that three things help minimise this:

Firstly and most importantly, the quality of the courses is so good you can't help but feel happy to be there.

Secondly, the people who came to this SS I found to be, on the whole, great people. Despite there being some people with a vast knowledge of theatre I didn't feel intimidated, in fact quite the opposite. There was an openness, supportiveness and desire to help from tutors and students alike, which not only resulted in a great week but encourages people to return.

Lastly, the social side is as social, or not, as you choose it to be. There are opportunities to talk with one another just as there are opportunities to wander off for a walk, drive into town or have a rest. The bar is open each night with one evening being designated for sharing of poetry and another for song. A picnic was organised followed by a trip to Luxembourg for the evening which most people participated in and enjoyed. There was also a quiz one of the evenings. Mealtimes were never quiet (although the last Sunday morning breakfast was poorly attended and very subdued?!...). By staying overnight it was easier for me to frequent the bar (!) and obviously was an opportunity to chat to everyone.

There is one thing I think could enhance the already good atmosphere, and that is that I think for newcomers it would be nice to be offered (but not compulsory) either an orientation and/or buddy system to help with those first few days.

Feedback

Sunday morning was dedicated to a feedback session of the whole week and seems to be at the core of how SS has developed over the years. All feedback was invited and discussed openly. There was also the opportunity for you to write feedback for each course and the opportunity to express your thoughts throughout the courses. I think it would be impossible for the organisers to improve on this!

Conclusion

So, it was worth leaving the family. I missed them, but enjoyed being just Julie for a while and was able to be in the moment without distractions (although I look forward to the day I can take them). I did meet some 'lovies' who were actually great fun. The variety of backgrounds, ages and experience made the group real. Nobody "shared" *too* much although Graeme did start sharing rather more than any of us expected during our theme sessions – but I think that he just got carried away with the whole Jerry Springer moment! I overcame my worst fear, that of being heard alone. By far the biggest surprise to me was that I enjoyed the acting part so much and felt so comfortable doing it.

A few people have asked me if it was life-changing. I believe that in some ways most days are. Summer School wasn't dramatically life-changing in an Educating Rita, divorcing husband, dying your hair kind of way. Nor was the feeling of liberation whilst writing a stream of consciousness going to result in my burning my bras. But, I have changed in small ways. The first I realised this was when a friend of a friend knew I was in Pirates and asked if I could sing – without hesitation I said 'yes, I can'. Before SS I would have merely said 'I like singing'. I also want to try my hand at acting and hope to audition soon. I think whenever you step out of your comfort zone (which I definitely did!) there will be change even if it is short-lived and therein lies the challenge for all of us returning to normal lives: to keep alive the skills, passion and confidence we were given. Time will tell.

So Pirates, many thanks. You have given me something I will always cherish. To those of you who have thought of going but hesitate – don't waste another moment having doubts. Nothing but a great week awaits you!

Julie Fraser