

SHAKESPEARE TODAY

International Shakespeare Master Class - Ghent, Belgium.
26th October – 2nd November 2008



Through our links with various international amateur theatre organisations DAW was able to offer four people from Wales the unique opportunity to work closely with internationally renowned Shakespeare Director Michael Bogdanov alongside their counterparts from Belgium, Slovenia and England. We asked some of the participants to give us some feedback on their experiences of the week.

It was in this very publication I first read that a "Shakespeare Today" Masterclass, to be led by the world famous director Michael Bogdanov, was being held in Ghent, Belgium as part of the Opendoek Festival of Drama. "Nothing ventured, nothing gained", I thought as I applied to be one of the four representatives from Wales joining representatives from England, Belgium and Slovenia for this marvellous opportunity.

I was elated to be selected but then the worry set in. It was a long time since I had studied Shakespeare at school so I dusted down the volumes of Shakespeare I could find on the bookshelves for some study. Unfortunately, I couldn't understand what I was reading. The nearest I had ever been to performing Shakespeare was a Farndale Avenue Townswomen's Guild production of the Scottish play. How many lines would I have to learn? My memory isn't what it used to be and I wouldn't be able to "wing it" with Shakespeare! I boarded the Eurostar for Brussels with a great deal of trepidation.

We had a wonderful week. The participants were a very diverse group of people - different ages, personalities, nationalities, shapes and sizes but by the end of the week there was a strong bond between us. It was no holiday - we worked very hard -

morning, afternoon and evening but I loved almost every minute of it (almost because of eight lines of Shakespeare that refused to go into my brain - I cracked it eventually though and they will be with me forever!). Bogdanov himself was inspiring and passed on his knowledge of Shakespeare with an enthusiasm which made everything very interesting. I know I will never be a great Shakespearian actress but I do now have much more knowledge of and admiration for his plays.

Our focus for the week developed into a study of the "To be or not to be" speech from Hamlet. The participants are now experts in this speech - we can sing it, dance to it, rap to it, identify with it and extend it in iambic pentameter! Our performance at the end of the week (which was sold out before we even started such was the draw of the name Michael Bogdanov) was presented with precision and great attention to detail under the instruction of the Master and very well received by our audience.

It was very sad to say goodbye to my new found friends who had shared this experience but we are already planning a reunion in Slovenia where we will again sing together with gusto our anthem "To Be or Not to Be" in harmony and as a round to an original piece of music created overnight by one of our number. Should such an opportunity arise again I would not hesitate to apply for a place but I know others must be given their chance and I would definitely encourage them to grab the opportunity with both hands. I am looking forward to passing on my knowledge and dropping into a conversation "When I was directed by Bogdanov..."

Christine Rees, Cardigan

It was a cold and wet Sunday afternoon in October 2008, when fifteen representatives from four nations descended on the Youth Hostel in the beautiful city of Ghent in Belgium. All were there for a common purpose; to participate in an International Shakespeare Masterclass organised jointly by the Flemish, English, Slovenian and Welsh National Drama Associations.

As soon as this motley crew were gathered, there was an immediate bond, as all were there for a common purpose; to learn, and share in their love of theatre. It is difficult to explain how fifteen strangers can become so close in the course of one week, but that was the overriding feeling of this enterprise. One week; four nationalities; fifteen individuals; one goal; one family. And the head of this disparate family was one Michael Bogdanov, world celebrated director and expert on Shakespeare.

Following an evening of bonding, and imbibing, the masterclass commenced with introductions, readings and asking the participants what their expectations and aspirations were for the week ahead. It was generally agreed that the group wanted to understand Shakespeare's work and not be intimidated by its illustrious standing in the literary and theatrical world.

Throughout the week, therefore, the group worked on de-mystifying Shakespeare. They were tasked with writing in iambic pentameter, translation and contemporising the dialogue. Effectively playing with the text whilst still remaining faithful to the source; an enterprise that showed just how talented and imaginative the participants were.

As a consequence of the resulting pieces, the decision was taken that the group would perform Hamlet's "To be or not to be" soliloquy, but perform it in a variety of ways which would assist in the de-mystifying process.

Various groups and individuals, thereafter,

worked on interpreting the soliloquy in different languages and format with a 50 minute performance scheduled for the final evening.

The final programme ran as follows:

- The "To be or not to be" soliloquy – broken down into six parts and performed by six individuals, firstly in English, then in the four different languages and then recited by the group as a whole.
- An interpretive monologue – written and performed by Christine Rees. (Wales)
- A Rap Version – Marko Ujc and Grega Mocivnik (Slovenia) on vocals, Mateja Palcic (Slovenia) on bass guitar, Elke Geirnaert (Flanders) on drum, and Louisa Norman (England) on saxophone.
- The soliloquy through Tap dance and speech – Lynne Baker (Wales) and June Grice (England)
- The soliloquy in Welsh – adapted into a political debate – Brian Jones, Matthew Cox, Gaynor Little and Christine Rees.
- An interpretive monologue – written and performed by Mateja Palcic (Slovenia)
- The soliloquy in Flemish – adapted into an Art Gallery viewing – Johan Droeshout, Ben De Keyser and Elke Geirnaert.
- An interpretive monologue – written and performed by Johan Droeshout (Flanders)
- The soliloquy in English – adapted into a Washer Women scene – Lynne Baker, Louisa Norman, Lindsey Pearson and June Grice.
- The soliloquy in Slovenian – adapted into a tragic love triangle – Mateja Palcic, Marko Ujc and Grega Mocivnik.
- A musical/choral version of the soliloquy – arranged and conducted by Matjaz Smalc (Slovenia) and performed by Johan Droeshout, Gaynor Little, Ben De Keyser, Lindsey Pearson, Matthew Cox, Christine Rees and Brian Jones.

The final piece was an original sketch written by Michael Bogdanov with Matthew Cox as Shakespeare, June Grice as Oxford, Brian Jones as Bacon and Gaynor Little as Marlowe.

The presentation was extremely well received by an appreciative audience who were then given the opportunity to pose questions to Michael Bogdanov and the cast. A lively debate ensued and the event drawn to a conclusion.

This masterclass showed what could be achieved when nations work together towards a common goal. (Politicians take note!) The sense of achievement, camaraderie and resulting friendships will remain with the participants forever. Our thanks must go to all the organisers of this event and, especially to our friend and mentor, Michael Bogdanov.

"The currents of this great enterprise will most certainly NOT turn awry".

Brian Jones, Beaumaris, Anglesey

If anyone had told me as I set out for Belgium that by the end of the week I would be tap dancing to "To be or not to be", would I have believed it? Read on! Lots of "firsts" lay ahead – a trip on Eurostar and a week's Masterclass with one of theatre's undoubted "greats", just two of the reasons for apprehension. I needn't have worried. Eurostar was smooth, efficient and comfortable and Michael Bogdanov was a joy.

Fifteen participants from Wales, England, Slovenia and Belgium worked together all week, challenged to make Shakespeare more accessible to modern audiences. At first we practised reading the iambic pentameter with Michael explaining its intricacies extremely clearly. But, just think, for nearly half the group English was not the first language! Our admiration for their skills knew no bounds. We had great fun trying our hands at writing our own iambic pentameter and translating the "To be or not to be" soliloquy into modern language.



Back Row (l to r): Lotte Schalck (Administrator), Elke Geirnaert, Grega Mocivnik, Johan Droeshout, Marko Ujc, Ben De Keyser, Brian Jones, Louisa Norman, Matthew Cox, Matjaz Smalc. Front row (l to r): Christine Rees, Lynne Baker, June Grice, Michael Bogdanov, Gaynor Little, Lindsey Pearson.



Brian Jones.



Christine Rees



Matthew Cox



Lynne Baker

Michael's knowledge of the texts and the stories behind them is awe-inspiring, but he is also easy to talk to, offering practical solutions to problems.

After the initial text work, Michael decided to concentrate on that one speech from Hamlet and approach it in as many different ways as possible. We were divided up and encouraged to play around with various scenarios. So, eventually, "To be" was presented in a Flemish art gallery, a Welsh debating chamber, a pre-war washhouse and as a highly charged Slovenian love triangle.

As if that were not enough, we also produced a rap, choral pieces (both sung and spoken), a tap dance and modern soliloquies in Glaswegian, Slovenian and Dutch.

To round off the end-of-week performance, Michael wrote an amusing sketch depicting Shakespeare struggling with "To be or not to be", while being heckled by Kit (punch-drunk) Marlowe (our very own Gaynor!), Francis Bacon and the Earl of Oxford. Michael's attention to detail was illustrated superbly by the precision with which the final performance was put together.

Thanks must go to the organisers at Opendoek – the Belgian DAW. Our masterclass was just a small part of the Landuweel Festival. The hostel was filled with puppeteers, storytellers and youth groups, all inspiringly committed to theatre. We were made extremely welcome

and it was fascinating to hear how amateur theatre works in Belgium and Slovenia. A great group of thespians.

The accommodation was basic, but warm. If our shower had produced more than a trickle, it would have added to our comfort, but we were well fed and Ghent is a beautiful city. Our timetable meant that we were working until 10pm, but I did some sightseeing before the morning session. The beer is great and the youngsters managed to entertain themselves well after hours!

The Tinnenpot theatre was an amazing building with some nine separate performance spaces, including one set out like a big top, the most ornate chandelier I have ever seen and the hugest mirror.

Thank you so much DAW for allowing me to attend, to fellow actors for a brilliant week, and especially to Michael for his patience, inspiration and humour and thanks for advice on the tap dance. Look out for the DVD!!

Lynne Baker, Elandysul, Ceredigion

Periodically, DAW is able to offer its members opportunities like these and we let you know about them through these pages. Keep your eyes peeled for more opportunities as they arise. And if they don't appeal to you, please pass the information on to other members of your group – it could be a life changing experience for you or a fellow group member.