

I've been dithering about how best to encapsulate the wealth of experiences and impressions that have been crammed into one wonderful week at Clairefontaine in a way that is both comprehensible and not too long-winded. If the blow by blow is too much, the poor suffering reader can skip to my overall reflections at the end. The four tutors were Janice Dunn- directing/acting, Graeme Du Fresne- singing/acting, Mitch Mitchelson comedy/acting and Lyndi Smith acting/devising.

## **Day 1**

A beautiful day augured well. Any apprehension about being confused initially, proved to be misplaced, as explanations were clear and instructions intelligible. It bore all the signs of being a well-oiled machine, but the palpable anticipation in the air dispensed with any feeling of staleness. The group consisted of 2/3 repeaters and 1/3 summer school virgins so I did not feel alone or more lost than anyone else.

After lunch the four tutors treated us to a taste of the different THEME projects all having to do with the overarching theme of war. They would attack (sorry) the subject from different angles, i.e. comic, song, etc. Voting followed for the project that people were most interested in. This was followed by some warm-up exercises where we were made to do silly things stretching our bodies, voices and minds. This, incidentally, would be a feature in one form or another every morning after breakfast. Then we voted for the SKILLS project. Dinner. Throughout, particularly at meals, it was fun to meet people of all ages (13 -75plus) residing in different countries coming together to play for a week.

Results. Exultation as I was allotted the choices I had plumped for. In my case THEME: acting, SKILLS: comedy.

After dinner was the first theme workshop. Among other exercises we separated into groups and wrote letters home from the foxholes of WWI and more recent conflicts, and read/acted them to the group. Language gave clues, as to which was which, but the universal element was the personal nature of the epistles. An interesting and thought provoking way of exploring the work we would continue later.

Bar.

## **Day 2**

After breakfast and a warm-up wiggle in the sun our SKILLS group proceeded to do three hours of double takes. While this may sound repetitive and boring on paper, I can assure you that it was a hoot! It surprised me how many ways there are to do it, and how this simple movement can convey different things depending on the timing. Mitch's course was based on Comedia della Arte, an Italian dramatic form of the 14th century usually performed with masks. Elements of this form have filtered their way into all kinds of dramatic performance. The course was like learning a new set of vocabulary with which to communicate and was great fun!

Lunch. The carnivores were upset because the vegetarians got prawns, but they would, wouldn't they?

After lunch we were killed...repeatedly. THEME looked at wars and the art that they have inspired. We started work on the play "Oh, What a Lovely War" They shot us ...many times...to make sure. Then we had dinner.

It was rather a welcome switch to be clowning again in the comedy course. Learning first to use and react to an audience, we then continued our exploration of stock comedia characters, adding text and the promise of masks the next day.

It was beginning to dawn on me that the choices I'd made investigated opposite ends of the spectrum of this acting lark. This did not displease me at all as each was an antidote to the other enabling me to approach both with fresh eyes and energy despite the long days.

Baarr and poetry night. Anyone was welcome to share and they did.

## Day 3

Just when you think you're beginning to get on top of things, knowing more or less what to expect, they throw two new elements into the mix. The first was SHARES/THEME. Here one class gets to look in on another's work in progress. This serves a few purposes. 1) It allows another taste of what the others are doing and what you are missing out on. 2) It confirms whether or not you made the right choices. 3) It gives some of the tutors a well-earned break. 4) It whets one's appetite for returning another year. 5) It permits one to familiarize oneself with the work of people that you may have met in the bar or at meals, but may not be in a class with. This is a real icebreaker as it provides a shared experience to talk about which invariably leads questions and comparing of notes on other topics.

As if this were not enough, we were introduced to PROJECT 3 in which students who have expressed an interest in directing can have a go using their colleagues as cannon fodder/ guinea pigs- you get the picture. The actors are cast by the tutors for each project. No one escapes.

All of the above is in addition to the continuation of the SKILLS and THEME work, which had been started on the previous days. Sang WWI songs in THEME.

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## Day 4

Again something new! We began the day with our first SWAPS. Our SKILLS group had DIRECTING while other groups did our COMEDY. This was another in-depth look at the kinds of things that the other groups were doing. Then PROJECT 3, which in our case was really fun because we had a good student director who knew what she was after and had a nice gentle way of coaxing things out of the actors. It was also a great play to work on. Then SKILLS where we learned to tell a story with our feet- by the way we walked and carried ourselves.

Then surprise, surprise something new! A SPECIAL SESSION in which they separated all the men from the women (another way to bond with those not in one's

own classes). Each group learned a song with Graeme and then did some staging and simple choreography with Janice. Then each group performed it for the other group to riotous and well-earned applause.

THEME in the evening started on staging excerpts from two more plays. Then we collaborated with another group where we staged and sang a song together from "Oh What a Lovely War". Reduced Graeme to tears.

Baaa

## Day 5

We began with another SKILLS SWAP. This time we tried out a bit of improvisation with Lindi. We played several games to help us to think on our feet followed by a couple of situations. In the first we reacted to audience suggestions. In the second we devised with another actor in turns and also in front of an audience. Great fun!

SKILLS and THEME continued to build on what we had done before. A theatre quiz was planned for the next slot that on other days was reserved for DVD showings or free time. I opted to skip the quiz as our PROJECT 3 SHARE was still to come after dinner.

I very much enjoyed PROJECT 3. The share was a chance to show whomever was interested the work in progress, that is, if the group were prepared to show it. We had concentrated on a couple of scenes and it was great to have the opportunity to see whether they worked with an audience. We were pleased when they did. We then circulated freely, sampling other's work. This was fascinating as the pieces varied widely in genre, period and approach.

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## Day 6

Another testimonial to the thoroughness of the planning. After four consecutive twelve-hour days, we were ready for a break. (This in addition to a half-day on Saturday and a full morning on Thursday.) Thursday afternoon began with a feedback session on PROJECT 3, then a picnic and free evening when most participants went to Luxembourg ville in the bus provided.

## Day 7

We still had one remaining SKILLS SWAP to do with Graeme where we learned some singing techniques and sang a rather complicated song. The rest of the day we continued work in THEME and SKILLS.

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## Day 8

Another full workday culminating in a SHARE of SKILLS and THEME showcasing the work in progress.

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r enlivened by witty song composed about this year's experience courtesy of one of  
the participants.

Long, after all, I hear you sigh. Munsbach is a well-honed machine. It is obvious that the program has been built upon; improved and tweaked over the years and that the organizers have listened to feedback from the participants. It is varied enough to make one able to face the long days without becoming completely exhausted. I liked the introduction of new challenges throughout the week, which staved off any feelings of complacency or routine and kept one on one's toes. The tutors (who change every few years) are sensitive to the rhythms of the day, knowing when to do the serious work and when to lighten up. Breaks come at the right times and for the right durations- long enough to settle down or enjoy a peaceful meal, but not so long that one has to rev-up again to get going.

The food is satisfactory as is the accommodation.

Were they all a bunch of theatre lovelies with cliques and inside jokes to which outsiders were not privy? There was a little of that, but not much and the whole spirit and design of the effort militated against it. It is true to say, though, that I have been accused of being naïve in these matters. I repeatedly heard people comment that they felt that others were more knowledgeable about this than the other which proves to me that the opposite was the case and that we were all more or less in the same boat.

It impressed me deeply that it is possible to accomplish a great deal in an extremely short time to a very reasonable standard given the right prodding and conditions. Finally, IT'S A LAUGH !!! Thank you Pirates.

David Mittel (2007)