

2001 Mike West

How do I capture what happens at Munsbach and pin it down with words? The answer to that question is, 'With great difficulty.' I've been sat here for a while already staring out of the window, and I've only managed two sentences that have survived the backspace button.

On one level it's very simple to describe. It's a summer school for people who are interested in theatre. There is no element of performance. Imagine it as all rehearsal and exploration. It's very intensive – 9:30am to 9:45pm – and very rewarding. The main part of the week is devoted to two courses, each of which is one selection from four on offer. Options, this year included, amongst others, directing musicals, cabaret, puppetry, history plays, writing, and looking at very recent writing on the theme of remembering. The choices are always varied and stimulating, and this year many people were saying that they wished exactly the same eight options could be available again next year because making a choice was so difficult. There is a lot of work-shopping and improvising which gets you involved. Invariable we split into threes or fours to work on any given piece and then get back together to see what work others in the group have been doing. The courses are very social and very hands-on. Just the way it should be. In addition, there is a third, shorter, option where would-be directors can practice their skills on volunteer actors, and then finally there are times – shares and swaps - when students get to see what other groups are doing and times when students get to have a taster of the other courses on offer.

Guiding all of this are the four tutors. Mike, Barb, Noel and Graeme are professional and successful actors, writers, directors, singers (just to list a few of their collective talents), teachers and theatre lovers who willingly make space in their hectic schedules for what must be the most exhausting week's work they do. They work hard to put together the courses, and they work very carefully to build an environment where students feel safe and supported. Mike often uses the metaphor of a safety net, and they ensure that it is in place. I'll come back to this later. The fact that Mike and his team are so keen to come year after year tells it's own message of the quality of the week.

Then there's the bar. There is no social pressure to go there, really there isn't. Some people enjoy their sleep and just pop in now and then. It's not going there that causes any problems. It's getting out again! If I say that two o'clock in the morning can be considered by some (ok, me) an early night you'll get the idea. There are just so many people to get to know. There's one evening set aside for sharing favourite poems and another for sharing favourite songs – both are wonderfully friendly occasions. Add to all the above, food (ever improving) and sleep (ever decreasing) and there's the week at Munsbach.

That's the easy bit done – describing the basic mechanics of the Summer School. But it's only the tip of the iceberg. At Munsbach you look at the text and try to give it a chance. You try to get past what other performers have done (try reading Richard III without hearing Olivier!) or your own expectations, your own filters. In the courses there is a friendliness and a trust that allows you to try new things, to explore emotions: to be a risk-taker. But the safety net is there. Everyone is ready to catch you, and you know it. So you don't look down. You soar. And it's truly wonderful. This atmosphere doesn't just happen. The tutors work deliberately and, as I have said, incredibly carefully to put it together. It's a great achievement. As the week progresses the trust and security allow you to open up and the level of creativity climbs. It is incredibly fulfilling to experience. Of course, an exploration of

emotion (isn't that what theatre is?) can be itself emotional, and if you find your eyes welling with tears sometimes, don't feel embarrassed - just look around at everybody else. People often talk about 'moments' at Munsbach, and invariably they are about a shared experience which arose from the exploration of the work; the joint discovery of understanding. Sharing really is a key word for the week. Moments can also be very comical: a giant puppet stalking past the window or two people marching by in step as they quote Shakespeare. Heaven knows what the gardener makes of it all! And let's not forget Noel's writing swap this year which couldn't continue for a full five minutes because everybody was shaking with laughter (you could put cheese in a bucket of water to keep the smell in). There's an awful lot of laughter at Munsbach.

By the end you find that you are part of a large circle of very close and trusted friends. You probably only know their first names and the places they live, but you have become tremendously close. And this isn't like that childhood friend you met on holiday in Brixham and promised to write to but never did; these are genuine, caring friends. Why else do people do everything they can to be there year after year?

If you've been thinking about going but you're not sure if you'd like it, do it. If it works for you, you'll just have to go again.