Review: The Newsletter and Journal of Dramaturgy, volume 18, issue 2

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In the Spring of 2003, in advance of the Chicago LMDA conference, I wrote about borders. I can’t recall what started my thinking on the subject, but I really haven’t stopped since. Now, I’ve survived the organization of an annual conference of my own, one that was given the title and theme “Crossing Borders.” Belatedly, I’ve re-read that editorial. Here’s a passage that seems to aptly summarize some of the ideas I had in mind:

If there is a language of limitation that applies to our work it seems to stem more from social, personal, institutional, and economic boundaries — the divisions that separate individuals and communities from each other. The table that anchors a dramaturg in a corner of the rehearsal room. The street that separates an affluent college campus from the working-class neighborhood that abuts it. The discomfort that […] kids feel, bussed [from their public school] to a multi-million dollar arts center. The proscenium arch. Niagara Falls. All of us in some way mark the borders of our experience, not from “some geographical or moral terra firma,” as Diana Taylor has put it, but from the shifting ground of someone who crosses those borders daily (179).1
Of course, living in San Diego as I do, a discussion of the US-Mexico border is obvious and necessary; but as our colleague Silvia Peláez pointed out in her presentation on Saturday June 28, language can be as much a border as any line on a map.

I recently visited Montréal, where this complication of bordering was made abundantly clear. Though many people spoke both English and French with facility, almost no one who I met wanted to speak “Franglish” with me. Broken French is the best that I can muster, but in Paris most people were content to play along. In Montréal, any time I changed languages, I was immediately asked, with great emphasis, “English or French?” I suppose the issue was partly one of courtesy: no one wanted to accidentally speak English to a Francophone. But the persistent maintenance of a strict division — so different from my experience of the fluid use of Spanglish here at the SD-TJ border — suggested an investment in preserving an us-and-them distinction through language, in the absence of a strict geographical border.

I’m grateful to everyone who joined the conference in San Diego, where we began to consider and work through several boudaries and borders. Language and translation have become an abiding concern of the Dramaturgy Focus Group of the Association for Theatre in Higher Education, and I’m pleased to see that interest cross over into LMDA as well.

And I am especially excited about the translation discussion begun in this issue of Review: this issue includes selected scenes from the new German play The Ballad of the Pine Tree Killer, by Rebekka Kricheldorf. These selections, and indeed the full play, are translated by LMDA member Neil Blackadder. Neil is interviewed by Beth Gallagher, who asks him about his recent translation work, especially the London production of Neil’s translation of Sexual Neuroses of Our Parents. Neil’s translation of this latter play will have its US premiere presented in New York City by Electric Pear Productions in November 2008.

I gratefully acknowledge the support and vision of Jutta Brendemühl, Project Manager for Theatre and Literature at the Goethe Institute in Toronto. Brian Quirt provided the connection, Jutta handled planning and permissions, and her staff provided a beautiful layout of a section featuring this fascinating, funny, challenging play, The Ballad of the Pine Tree Killer. The play is introduced by dramaturg Jürgen Popig. If you’d like to read more of the play, you have options: the Goethe Institute has an easy process for dramaturgs to obtain texts and rights information about plays through the link to their online resource: www.goethe.de/theatre/library; you can also check out Adam Versenyi’s e-journal The Mercurian (which specializes in translation), in which the full script was published in March.

Expect lots more coverage of the San Diego conference in the next issue. As a souvenir, the photo below shows three of the featured speakers on the Theatre at the Border panel. In the meantime, enjoy these echoes of our conversations there. And start GREENING YOUR THEATRE, with tips and inspiration by Jackie Goldfinger!

Finally, don’t miss the latest juried article from ATHE’s Dramaturgy Focus Group Debut Panel: Dennis Schebetta discusses his work on an exciting, thought-provoking devised theatre adaption of Othello.

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Istanbul


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Inquiries from prospective contributors are welcome. All inquiries should be directed to D.J. Hopkins: dhopkins@mail.sdsu.edu. Review gratefully acknowledges the support of the School of Theatre, Television, and Film and the College of Professional Studies and Fine Arts at San Diego State University.

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Rebekka Kricheldorf’s The Ballad of the Pine Tree Killer: A generational battleground

The Goethe-Institut Toronto and the LMDA have teamed up again to open the curtain onto the vibrant European theater scene. We are presenting excerpts from young, up-and-coming German playwright Rebekka Kricheldorf’s tragicomedy, introduced and contextualised by Kricheldorf expert Jürgen Popig, but read for yourself...

The Play

Jan Mao is the victim of anti-authoritarian upbringing and in search of limits. In doing so he stages himself as a modern Don Juan and squanders his father’s money. Father Franz, formerly an idealistic hippie, has become the head of a flourishing advertising agency and wants his son to succeed him. But Jan refuses (also because he doesn’t have the chops). He only gets through the day with the help of his unemployed but enormously overqualified friend Rudolf. Elvira, formerly Franz’s companion and now his best client, is supposed to put Jan on the right path, but is stressed out already by her daughter Anna. And then there is Tine, who sells herself and cell phone contracts for cash.

Communication between the generations seems next to impossible, the characters encounter one another as strangers armoured in irony. The main influence on all of them is the myth of Don Juan, but not even the admonishing, serenading ghost of Franz (by now dead) can save his son and a flock of flamingos from a tragic(-comic) ending.

“Kricheldorf’s best play yet: subtly elegant and pointed, she mixes the myth of Don Juan with a screwball comedy about generational and class conflict.”

—Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung
The Ballad of the Pine Tree Killer

or: “Go ahead. We’ll wait. It’ll be fine.”

“Personally, I was never actively involved in the incineration of a Christmas tree, and I was not brought up by those determinedly permissive parents of the sixties. But I did have a childhood friend who was. In retrospect, he has – rather inadvertently – become an object of study.” – Rebekka Kricheldorf

The Ballad of the Pine Tree Killer has its roots in the 2003-2004 writers’ workshop “Poets into the Theater”, held at the Stuttgart State Theater. A number of young, contemporary German playwrights were asked to write a piece for the theater. Among them was Rebekka Kricheldorf.

At the time, I was working as dramaturg for the Stuttgart Theater and was full of enthusiasm for Kricheldorf’s first play, Princess Nicoletta, which had been premiered at the Gießen Municipal Theater. In record time, Rebekka handed in a synopsis of The Ballad of the Pine Tree Killer – a witty, comical piece involving three generations facing off: the generation ‘68’ of hippie parents confronts their GenX children as well as their millenial grandchildren—all of this set against the Don Juan legend.

In the play, the ‘68ers’ have long betrayed their ideals and comfortably arranged themselves with the very society they once scorned. But their permissive parenting style has left their children ill-prepared for life. They have a clueless, infantile attitude and an odd aversion to taking responsibility—traits that are personified in the play’s protagonist, Jan Mao. The grandchildren, in turn, display a strange combination of conservatism, vigour and sense of purpose. This completely mad-cap mix had us instantly convinced that this was a play we wanted to premiere! The project moved forward quickly from that point on. The premiere was scheduled for May 2004, which would give Rebekka enough time to finish writing the manuscript. We needed the time because the ending was still missing, and I felt that the roles of the three women were not sufficiently developed. Rebekka, however, gave us nothing. She was happy to answer questions and provide ideas for the play but did not finish writing it.

When we were scheduled to test the stage props, we did not even have a set because the designer refused to work on an unfinished play. What would later become the charming allure of this Stuttgart production—an empty stage and the improvised use of props—had its origins in our dire predicament. Rebekka wrote of this peculiar period: “Right from the beginning, there was a certain calmness about the whole project: Nobody rushed, no one became insistent, or pressed for more text. Go ahead. We’ll wait. It’ll be fine. Four weeks to the start of rehearsals and the play is not finished? No reason to become hysterical. Go ahead. We’ll wait. It’ll be fine. I felt totally serene about it. And that’s how I sat through the rehearsals. The entire set had to be thrown out? Go ahead. I’ll wait. It’ll be fine. – and it was!”

As it turned out, it really was fine. When the writing was finally done, the text was felt to be excellent. The ending was truly climactic with the clash of the generations and the Don Juan legend merging beautifully: Jan Mao and Rudolf really did become Don Juan and Leporello. Even the ghost appears in the form of Franz, the late father. Instead of being ushered to hell, though, Jan Mao is declared legally incapable of managing his own affairs and a guardian is appointed for him. A descent into hell of sorts.

Rebekka kept visiting us during the rehearsals, and the premiere production was the result of a close collaboration between her and director Erich Sidler. His staging of the play was an amazing journey into the imagination. On an empty stage, and only using chalk marks, each single scene and location of the play was conceived. All of the actors were always on stage. Everything happened as if improvised. The text was more often questioned than acted out. It was an intelligent and entertaining piece of contemporary theater with six interesting roles. The performance was witty and fast-paced. It turned out to be one of the most successful plays of the season for the Stuttgart Theater. The Ballad was invited to be performed at the Mülheim Theater Festival in 2005, and critics of the “Theater Heute” magazine voted it Best Play of the Year. Other reviewers felt Kricheldorf had written her best play to date. The audience loved The Ballad, giving it a two-year run. But there is more. In 2007, I organized a Festival of Second Runs for seven plays at the Osnabrück Theater, where I had become head dramaturg: The Ballad of the Pine Tree Killer was one of them.

In Stuttgart, we had used a small 100-seat studio stage. Now, in Osnabrück, we wanted to perform it on the main stage with 660 seats, which meant adapting both the mise-en-scène of the play as well as the style of the actors. Instead of intimate improvisation, we had to go for large stage sets, surprising transformations and very physical and almost choreographed acting. In Stuttgart, we had put on the entire play. For the Osnabrück production, we called Rebekka and decided to drop entire sections. As I had produced both stagings, I wondered: Would the magnified and somewhat coarser Osnabrück production harm the play? The answer was: No. Rebekka was happy and surprised how well her play worked on a big stage. Most reviews were full of praise. The audience loved it. And the Osnabrück Theater was invited to Bulgaria’s Danube Festival.

In an interview, Rebekka was asked: “Why did you call the play a ‘ballad’?” Her response: “First, the language is more lyrical than everyday speech and the characters tend to describe their circumstances very explicitly. I also wanted to have the protagonist’s attempt to return to traditional values reflected in the title. Have I said enough?”

Not for me, really. I continue to work with Rebekka Kricheldorf at the Osnabrück Theater. She is writing another play. The plot? I don’t really know. But I am not worried. I am confident: Go ahead. We’ll wait. It’ll be fine.

JÜRGEN POPIG was born in 1961 in Germany. He has worked as a dramaturg in Singen, Freiburg, and, from 1993 to 2005, at the Stuttgart State Theater. Jürgen Popig is now head dramaturg at Osnabrück Theater.

About the Playwright

Rebekka Kricheldorf was born in Freiburg in southern Germany in 1974. She studied Romance languages at Humboldt University Berlin and Stage Writing at the Berlin Academy of Arts. Awards for her work include the Publisher’s Award, the Audience Award at the Heidelberg New Play Festival, the prestigious Kleist and Schiller Awards.

In 2004 Staatstheater Stuttgart premiered Die Ballade vom Nadelbaumkiller. The production was invited to the Mülheim Theater Festival and to the Heidelberg New Play Festival, Germany’s best-in-show festivals, and will tour to Bulgaria soon.
THE BALLAD OF THE PINE TREE KILLER

[Die Ballade vom Nadelbaumkiller]

By Rebekka Kricheldorf

Translated from the German by Neil Blackadder. Neil Blackadder translates drama and prose from German and French. Rebekka Kricheldorf's The Ballad of the Pine Tree Killer was presented in a staged reading in 2006 at the German Theater Abroad New York City. In February 2008, Neil directed his translation of Kricheldorf's Rosa and Blanca at Knox College, where he teaches theater.

This translation was originally commissioned by German Theater Abroad and has been supported by the Goethe-Institut.

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14195 Berlin, Germany
Fax: 011 49 30 823 391 1
info@kiepenheuer-medien.de

PROLOGUE

When I was young

ANNA
When I was young
I think the cookies
In the ads on TV
Are just as big
As the cookies on the shelf
I’m so excited
About the big cookies
When I buy the cookies
And take them out of the packet
I’m disappointed
And I cry

FRANZ
When I was young
I’m in love with the daughter of an old school general
And I have to make it official
By asking him for her hand
When the general sees me
The blood rushes to his head
He doesn’t say a word and I leave
I have long hair
And a dove of peace on my jacket
What the general doesn’t yet know
His daughter’s pregnant

TINE
When I was young
I have an identity crisis
I’m not sure of myself
So I take a piece of paper
And write a list
Of all my good qualities
Then I read it out loud to myself and record it
On cassette
And every morning I play the cassette

RUDOLF
When I was young
I hate the marketplace
I feel like I’m being put under pressure
By the yelling of the vegetable women
Going on about how great their beans are
Really loudly and relentlessly
I prefer to go
To the discreet quiet of the supermarket
Where the merchandise calmly sits there
And silently lets itself be picked out by me

ELVIRA
When I was young
In the black and white of the new TV set
There are pretty women
Demonstrating vacuum cleaners
And combing children’s hair
With impeccable side parts
I feel paralyzed
And it takes me years afterward
To get rid of that paralysis

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CHARACTERS

Jan born 1970
Franz born 1940
Rudolf born 1975
Elvira born 1950
Anna born 1985
Tine born 1980

JAN
When I was young
I smash the window of a bank
Out of protest
The police come
And my father
Is also there right away
He pulls out his camera
And captures the moment
Me
Distraught and full of hatred
In the background the shattered glass
And at the edge
Like in a painting
A handful of policemen
Only five weeks later
I’m an advertising campaign
The city’s covered with posters
With my photo
And under it the name
Of a bank
And the slogan
We’re clearing the way

1. FATHER’S DAY

A picture, hung facing the wall.

RUDOLF
Your father’s on the phone he says
He wrote you a text message in which
He let you know about a letter which
Contains the date he sent the email from which
You can find out exactly when you’ll receive the telegram that
Tells you what day he’ll arrive

Enter Franz
There
It’s him
Can you

The sound of doors slamming

Show him in
Pleasant flight

FRANZ
You might as well ask me
Whether I had a pleasant time breathing
Whether I had a pleasant time gasping for air
That’s how often I fly
And for me flying
Just like breathing
Has nothing to do with
Pleasant

RUDOLF
Are you thirsty
Water OJ Coke coffee
Wine champagne beer schnaps

FRANZ
Thank you
I could drink a coffee
What's that I'm smelling

RUDOLF
Are you hungry
Fries cookies soup beans
Chips chicken fruit steak

FRANZ
No thanks
Are you frying a halibut
This place smells of the sea
I'm taken aback and disappointed
Yes I'm put out
That my son keeps himself from me
And I'm sorry
But finding you here
Also comes as a surprise
I thought
You'd moved out a long time ago

RUDOLF
And I don't live here
I'm just here all the time

FRANZ
What's the difference then

RUDOLF
It's not a matter of where you are
But of the feeling that goes along with it
I'm here
But I'm ready to go
Any minute
I've only set myself up like this
Temporarily
Until the right job comes along and I can settle down

FRANZ
How are the studies

RUDOLF
I finished ages ago
But the job market
Well you know how it is
Every day I fill out a thousand
Applications before breakfast
That costs a pretty penny
One thousand stamps
Every day

FRANZ
Who finances that
Don't tell me
I can guess
I finance it
My son
His soft heart

RUDOLF
If we're talking about the consistency of his heart
Soft isn't necessarily how I'd put it
We have a deal
I do certain things
And he pays for my stamps

FRANZ
Certain things what things
If one is allowed to ask

RUDOLF
Well whatever comes up
Cooking washing cleaning ironing
Sewing scrubbing shopping running errands
Filling things out dropping things off
Answering the phone answering the door

FRANZ
He can do all that himself
My son can

RUDOLF
He can't do all that himself
Your son can't
I understand
That it's traditional for a father to see his offspring
Through rose-tinted glasses
But
You must have some idea what he's like

FRANZ
I know
He makes heavy weather of things
He had to be dragged through his graduation
Like a wet rag
And after that
For a few years he did
Secret things
But basically he's neither stupid
Nor lazy

RUDOLF
The years turned into a decade
And those secret things
He's still doing them
And as with most secret things
What's hidden behind them is
Nothing

FRANZ
You
And your function
In my son's life
Aren't clear to me
You don't live here
You're not his lover
And you're not his friend either
So what are you anyway

RUDOLF
I'm the last liana
That every now and then
Gets him out of his swampy jungle
On to firm ground
Without tearing

FRANZ
You talk about him
As if he was mentally handicapped

RUDOLF
He's emotionally handicapped
He needs a handicapped ID
For his disposition
But unfortunately there's no office
In the country that will give him one

FRANZ
I can't believe that
He was brought up very freely
And has all the best aptitudes
There's nothing sickly about him
You're playing his lackey
For some questionable private reason

RUDOLF
You mustn't think
I'm a servile person by nature
It's the circumstances which force me into it

FRANZ
Speaking openly man to man
Your intentions
Are extremely unclear to me
You've attached yourself to him
In order to profit from his wealth

RUDOLF
Speaking openly back
He's attached himself to me
In order to profit from my work
He goes through the world like a boy without a bucket
You can't even send him to the bakery
Instead of coming back with rolls
He shows up with women
Even if you give him a piece of paper with perfectly legible writing
Saying in big letters
A dozen rolls
Not
A dozen women

FRANZ
I'll talk about that
With him in person

RUDOLF
Yes well
It would seem that paternal love
Has not won a special place
In his soul
Otherwise he'd be here

FRANZ
Where is he

RUDOLF
Yes well
Out

FRANZ
Today
When I told him I was coming
RUDOLF
Yes well
To be precise he fled
From you
He guesses
Why you came

FRANZ
He's acting as if I came to force him into a marriage
Or a work camp
But all I want is to
Entrust to him a flourishing firm
That anyone else would be only too glad to take
What's he doing all this time
Out there
In the streets

RUDOLF
He's looking for some resistance

FRANZ
That's not a full-time job

RUDOLF
It is for him
In all the years we've known each other
I've enrolled in four different degree programs
And completed all of them
While your son
Yes well you know him yourself

FRANZ
I don't understand
He ought to be grateful
For the times he's living in
And choose a bull that suits him
And take it by the horns
Back in our day
We were paralyzed
And had trouble moving
They wanted to chisel us
Like statues

Or cut us out
According to the beloved fifties pattern
Stop signs and warning signs
Were our lighthouses
We kept on banging our heads
Against obstacles until they were bloody
And there were so many stones
Lying in our way
That in the end
They made up the route
Which by the way was so straight and narrow
That anyone whose feet had grown too big
Automatically strayed from it
Today
So much is possible
Perhaps even anything

RUDOLF
If anything's possible today
How come I'm here
And don't have a job

FRANZ
Your own fault you daredevil you
With the right get-up-and-go
You'll take off like a rocket
And zoom up to any heights you can imagine
Wherever you like

RUDOLF
Can you prove that theory
With a living example
If anything was possible
Then the son of a fishmonger could
Climb up to the board of directors
No problem
Provided he had the skills
That I
As you'll see from my papers
Definitely do have
FRANZ
So you want to climb up high
And higher still
In business
Noone could call you immodest

RUDOLF
That's the reaction I expected
The miller can become a model
The plumber can become a pop star
The blacksmith can become an action hero
Everything is possible
In the new world that you so selflessly
Won through fighting in the streets
Only the fishmonger
Won't join the board of directors
Yes well I suppose I'd have been better off
Investing my time in singing lessons
Instead of finishing four degrees
Cum laude

FRANZ
Now don't start with
The whole classic story
Of the genius born in the straw hut
Who at twelve dies of hunger undiscovered

RUDOLF
Very funny
I'm going to die laughing
So your social revolution
Led to
Scorn for the masses
You sure sound harsh
For an ex-communard

FRANZ
What do you think we fought for
For you
A land of milk and honey
Look around you
Everything became friendlier
I run my business humanely
My employees receive birthday presents
They're treated without sex discrimination
And they have a vote

RUDOLF
How nice
But it does sound
Forgive me
Measured by the goals that you once had
A bit toothless

FRANZ
I grant myself the right
To age with dignity
And to exchange the excesses of yesterday
For the smarts of today
Now I put the long march
Ahead of the short stone's throw

RUDOLF
Well of course you never had to march much
To keep your business
Only over a small hill
The hill of your father's grave

FRANZ
You're reproaching me for the state of the world
Just because I couldn't change it
In a big way
And because I've nevertheless
Made my place in it
And find it quite cosy
You think
I owe you something
Alright well let's hear it

RUDOLF
I consider myself
Excuse the arrogance
Of above-average talent
And yet I cannot find
A career track
Corresponding with my qualifications
That's due to the scent of something unfamiliar
They won't let me in
Into the shrine of German business
A form of discrimination
That you presumably once
Planned to eliminate from the world

FRANZ
I could point to
You yourself
As an example
In order to prove
How wrong you've got it
But in any case I don't know
Of how much help I can be
I run an advertising agency

RUDOLF
What I lack is the necessary contacts

FRANZ
Contacts
Contacts
I have a bag full of contacts
RUDOLF
Then open it for me
As I know from your son
For years you've had
A business relationship with Donna Elvira

FRANZ
Elvira
We've been advertising her products for years
Elvira
The timing is good
Elvira
She's about to give a small reception
Which I want to use as a pretext
For introducing my son to her
Come with us
While I find you
Extremely
Dislikeable
I owe this to my biography

RUDOLF
Stupid
You'd have to be stupid
To commit yourself to an idea
But still
Thank you

FRANZ
He still isn't coming
What can he be doing
Where can he be

RUDOLF
He's unlikely to be back
Until after it gets dark out
If you are still hoping to see him
You're welcome to wait here
And wait
And wait

3. PARENTS' COMPLAINT

Franz sitting with a cup of coffee. Rudolf stands next to him in servant posture with a coffee pot in his hand.

FRANZ
Should have procreated more
Back then
Just one child
What a risk
I didn't realize
It can die or be a failure
Such thoughts never occurred to me
Back then
Now a good substitute
Would be just the thing
The kind you can bring in off the bench
Just whistle and there he'd stand
He'd keep on carrying the torch without stumbling
He'd throw himself into the current and swim
Not flawless

But tender
He holds up the empty cup. Rudolf pours more coffee.
All the stuff that we
Showered on you
Leather shoes
Music lessons
Growing up without worries
Anything good that I didn't have you had it
Anything bad that I had you didn't have
So in keeping with the ideas of the time
We liberated you from the reign of terror of rules
In the belief that he would grow up
Into a valuable person
A mature citizen
And now
Holds up empty cup. Rudolf pours more coffee.
You're refusing even to talk
Conversation the basis of any process of understanding
Conversation with the one who loves you your father
Who means you well
But however well he means you
His goodnes has no chance of reaching you
Because you retreat
Remember
How much fun we had
At Christmas
We were still a team back then
I'm your friend and always was
And yet you wage a war against me
The trench warfare of refusal
I feel awful
He holds up the empty cup. Rudolf tires to pour more coffee, but the pot is empty.
Okay then I'll go
Exit

RUDOLF
Well it was about time

[...]

11. THE CHILDREN OF TODAY

RUDOLF
By the way
He's here

JAN
Where

RUDOLF
Underneath the plant

FRANZ
Son

JAN
Get lost

FRANZ
Talk to me
We have to move to Switzerland
To avoid the inheritance tax
We have to introduce you to all sorts of people
We have to work you in
We have to retrain you
We have to dress you up

JAN
Where does the sudden hurry come from
And this sudden we have to
Did I used to have to do anything

FRANZ
It's just a verb

JAN
Go away

RUDOLF
Please keep in mind
He often gets like this
It passes

FRANZ
The day has come
When you too
Have to lend a hand

JAN
How can I
I'm really weak
Can't you see that
I'm really weak
Here
Points to his head
Here
Points to his arms
And here
Oh God I'm so weak
I can hardly stand up any longer
Oh how weak I am
Mimes fainting
Rudolf catches him

RUDOLF
There you see
He can't any longer
JAN
He can’t any longer

FRANZ
What tired you out so much
What wore you out so much
You’re still all fresh
Full of youthful vitality

JAN
What do you mean youthful
We’re 35
Old
Tired
Men

FRANZ
But the possibilities
The ways the means the freedom
The
Yes
I say it with envy and enthusiasm
Opportunities for self-development

JAN
We have no idea which way to go
We know nothing whatsoever
The more we read
The more we learn
The more we experience
The less we know
In other words we know nothing at all

FRANZ
Rudolf I beg of you
You are an intelligent young man
Come on say something
Exercise your authority

RUDOLF
I may temporarily be servile because I have no choice
But I’m not out of my mind

JAN
It’s always just about the money
Oh God how petty

RUDOLF
It’s always the wealthy
Who complain
That it’s always about the money

FRANZ
What we have here is the problematization
Of the lack of a problem
I’m stuck in the middle
Of an effort to create a problem

JAN
How can anyone have gone to the dogs as much
As you have
He turns the picture around. It shows Franz as a hippie.
This guy
Wouldn’t have even shaken hands
With this guy

FRANZ
Forgive me for having changed
Would you like to see a photo of you
From ten years ago
I’m not confronting you with yourself
In an early stage
You’re not playing fair

JAN
But in that early stage I sat there peacefully
Completely given over to myself in harmless autism

Whereas you fancied yourself a trendsetter
And doctored around on others

FRANZ
Every time I come up with an innovation
You hit me over the head with it
The whole time you’re acting wounded
Just because people were nice to you
During your childhood and left you alone
Get involved play your part
It would be best if you could start right away
With our little family firm

JAN
This belief
That not working makes you sick
It’s ludicrous
Why hoist the flag of action
There’s hardly any work in any case
So why should someone like me
Tire myself out with tiring activity
That will make my short life shorter still
I want a bed made of gold
I want curtains made of China silk
I want chandeliers made of crystal
I want
Genuine white oxen
Grazing outside my window

FRANZ
What shall I do
I stand here powerless
Before my own product
While it boils over uncontrollably
Like overheated milk

JAN
I don’t ever want to work
I only want friends
Who never work
So that they have enough time
For thinking
And so that conversation with them
Is more interesting
I don’t want to hear tedious stories
About tedious workdays
Never anything but tedious reports
I want friends
Who are rich enough
To afford a wet nurse
So that they don’t always
Drag their children with them to my place
And don’t always talk about nothing but kids
Tedious accounts
Of tedious days
And tedious children
I mean really do they think
That gives anyone pleasure
I want friends
Who are better dressed
Who spent
At least three hours
In their dressing room
Which of course they have
Before they visit me
I want friends

FRANZ
Rudolf I beg of you
You are an intelligent young man
Come on say something
Exercise your authority

RUDOLF
I’m sorry
I can be bought
From head to toe
With skin and hair
Even my opinion can be bought
Your son bought it
With your money
I am as it were in the public sphere
Always of the same opinion as him
It’s true that sometimes
I give him a piece of my mind
But only when it’s just the two of us

JAN
Once
Someone
Said to me
You
You can’t forgive God
For having screwed up Creation
Could that be a motive

FRANZ
Since when are you religious
Who waste days
What am I saying weeks
What am I saying months
Seducing a woman
And then give me
A detailed report
And no friends
Who look in the personals
Friends
Who look in the personals
You just have to imagine
What I suffer

RUDOLF
Please keep in mind
He often gets like this
It passes

FRANZ
So what exactly do you want

JAN
I want perfect friends

FRANZ
Perfect
That doesn’t exist

JAN
Why
Why
Why not

RUDOLF
They say
He can’t forgive God
For having screwed up Creation

FRANZ
Bullshit

RUDOLF
I thought that
You as a revolutionary
Would speak in different terms

JAN
I want a lover
Who’ll speak formally to me

FRANZ
Oh you know
There was a time

JAN
I want a horse

RUDOLF
In a Christian context
It would be heresy
To talk of Creation having been screwed up
Though if that doesn’t apply then all we have
Is a simple pose of cultural pessimism

FRANZ
In any case the pose seems to me to

Outstrip the natural attitude
As if all that was left was the wrapping

JAN
I want 23 Indian women
Of 23 different ages
Who can do 23 different tricks

RUDOLF
Better to be only wrapping
Than to be confronted with the horror
Of one’s own lack of self

JAN
I want a flock of flamingoes

FRANZ
You’re probably right there
When one’s self-image dissolves
It’s a troubling alarm signal
As if a secret devil
Had dipped all the mirrors in hydrochloric acid

JAN
I want a hall of marble

RUDOLF
But still this issue seems to me like
The luxury cruise-ship
On which a worn-out elite
Dance their last steps
Look at me
I’ve not been afraid to use the mirror
And yet still I suffer

JAN
I want a space ship
For my trips to the moon

FRANZ
You came onto the floor with
An imaginary wooden leg
That only you can see
Free yourself from this fata morgana

RUDOLF
All my bad behavior
Results from my bad upbringing

JAN
I want a saffron plantation

FRANZ
Don’t say bad
Say poor

JAN
I want an absolute love
That does not shun death

RUDOLF
He wants an absolute love
That does not shun death

FRANZ
That surprises me

RUDOLF
I’m surprised by it now too

FRANZ
Who is this stranger
This unpredictable person

RUDOLF
That’s Jan
Your son

FRANZ
So that’s my son

RUDOLF
I know him really well
I’m very good at guessing what’s going on with him
But there always remains in him
An unpredictable blank spot
That scares me

JAN
An era
Which acts as if
It offers everything
But in reality
Offers nothing at all
What can I do with this shit
Freedom
Is the most overrated good
Stupid human rights
Idiotic right of assembly
Thick-skulled legalized drugs
Dim-witted right to vote
Ass-fucking therapy centers
For child abusers
Since they did away with the guillotine
It’s been downhill all the way

FRANZ
He certainly didn’t
Take up my political views

RUDOLF
Those aren’t views
They’re cries for help
From an existence that is dissolving

FRANZ
Oh really
Well that makes me feel better

JAN
The coarsening of the country’s youth
Can no longer be treated with therapy
What kind of era is it
That sends its worse murderers
To Siberia accompanied by with social workers
Where it puts them on horseback
I demand show trials on Sundays
Let the family of the victim
Thrown the first stone
FRANZ
Well that’s certainly something one could talk about

JAN
The only way to save our culture
Is the death penalty

FRANZ
Is he saying this
Against me
Or is he saying it
Because he always says it

RUDOLF
He says a lot
But he’s harmless
He couldn’t even execute
A cockroach

JAN
I heard that and you should know
You’re wrong

FRANZ
Is he in a state now
Where one could ask him for something

RUDOLF
Try it

JAN
Why is it that
When they rank us by subjective feeling of happiness
We come number 23
And number 1
Is Bangladesh

FRANZ
Don’t shout like that

RUDOLF
He often shouts
It’ll pass

JAN
Bangladesh
Can you imagine
Bangladesh

FRANZ
Son
There’s going to be a reception
At an old friend’s place
Donna Elvira
A few important people are coming
I thought
When you’ve got a taste of the professional world
Maybe you’ll get hooked

JAN
Every wall of posters
In this country
Promises me
That I can have
And be anything

FRANZ
Will you come

RUDOLF
He didn’t hear you

FRANZ
Son
The reception
At Donna Elvira’s
My old girlfriend

JAN
Is she good-looking

RUDOLF
He’s asking
If she’s good-looking
Just say yes

FRANZ
I’ll just say yes

RUDOLF
He says yes

JAN
He says yes
I say yes

RUDOLF
He says yes

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**Goethe-Institut Theater**

The Goethe-Institut presents the latest arts and ideas to come from Germany. Visit the web site of your local Goethe-Institut to find out more about our programs, events and resources:

[www.goethe.de/canada](http://www.goethe.de/canada)
[www.goethe.de/usa](http://www.goethe.de/usa)
[www.goethe.de/mexico](http://www.goethe.de/mexico)

The Goethe-Institut theater web portal offers up-to-date news on the current debates in German theater, dossiers on directors, new plays in translation, children’s theater, scholarships and more:

[www.goethe.de/theatre](http://www.goethe.de/theatre)

In Canada, contact us any time with your ideas & projects related to Germany & German culture:

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- The Goethe-Institut collaborates with other major players such as the Stratford Festival or the International Theater Institute to initiate groundbreaking work.
- The Goethe-Institut offers audiences artistically fresh experiences through cutting-edge live performances.
- The Goethe-Institut is a trend spotter in the German and North American theater scenes and provides information about the latest happenings on international stages.
What people in the community are saying about the Goethe-Institut

The presence of the Goethe-Institut in the cultural life in Canada is indispensable. By partnering with arts organizations and artists on a wide range of projects and bringing German arts practitioners, they have become an integral part of the Canadian cultural tapestry. The European perspective we discover through the engagement of the Goethe-Institut contributes to an on-going and engaging exchange of ideas on contemporary drama and arts in general. Only through such long-term partnerships can we push the global cultural boundaries and mutually enrich our respective cultures.

Amela Simic, Executive Director, Playwrights Guild of Canada

The Goethe-Institut Toronto is the inside connection into the German arts, providing experienced knowledge on artists and suggestions on who to contact for funding possibilities and how to make the project happen.

Lynanne Sparrow, Producer, The Grand, Calgary

Toronto’s Goethe-Institut has been a valuable part of my own development as a theater artist in that they have opened windows to other theatrical styles, to other kinds of writing, and ways of theater making. This has had a profound impact on my own company’s work. I’m a big fan!

Ross Manson, Artistic Director, Volcano Theater Toronto

The Goethe-Institut has been a great ally of theater by exposing artists and audiences to work from Germany that would otherwise be unseen in this country. The opportunity to meet German theater artists is invaluable and the Institut’s efforts to bring our work to the attention of our contemporaries there has opened doors and launched new collaborations.

Brian Quirt, President, Literary Managers & Dramaturgs of the Americas

The Goethe, through its professional development series, brings skilled and engaging German voices to our community. These mutual exchanges deepen our artistic practice and provide opportunities for international conversation around art-making and its impact.

Michael Trent, Artistic Director, Dancemakers Toronto

My scholarship in Berlin taught me more about German theater, language and culture—as well as more about myself—than I ever expected. I am excited to put my new tools into practice in Canada, and to examine how my understanding of theater and art has changed. One thing is for certain—I will definitely go back to Berlin!

Ashlie Corcoran, theater and opera director, and GI-ITI Guest Artist in Berlin 2007

Without the Goethe-Institut, we would largely only know Canadian and American theater. Artists and audiences do not have much exposure to live arts outside of North America these days. The Goethe-Institut is an important source of the German and European influences we need to keep us inspired and informed.

John Gowalt, composer and musician

I feel that the workshop was a smashing success. ... What a powerful, practical, precise, expansive, open, generous, supportive and intense exploration Lukas invited us to be present with.

 Participant in workshop Text and Theater with playwright Lukas Bärfuss (Zürich)
Neil Blackadder is an Associate Professor of Theatre at Knox College. He has translated five plays from German, and one from French. One of his recent translations, The Sexual Neuroses of our Parents, by Lukas Bärfuss, was staged at London’s Gate Theatre in 2007. In this interview, Neil speaks with Beth Gallagher about translation, and the production of translated plays in America.

How do you balance issues of “actability” with a desire to be “faithful” to the original?

With difficulty, and care, and where possible, in consultation with the director (as with Carrie Cracknell for the Gate production). It seems to me that this question always presupposes that a rendering that’s “too” faithful might not be sufficiently “actable” because it might sound somewhat unnatural; but there are times, especially in the scripts I’m drawn to, where the original isn’t all that natural-sounding either. So in some cases, one could distort the original more by making it “actable”, by sort of smoothing out its rough edges. With Bärfuss’ and [Rebekka] Kricheldorf’s plays, I’ve wanted to preserve a certain stylized quality in the original. Having said all that, of course it is important that director and actors find a level of comfort with the language, and that did lead to my bringing certain lines closer to customary usage as I revised Sexual Neuroses.

How do you deal with a concept or idea for which no parallel exists in the language you are translating to?

I’m not sure this happens as much with “concepts or ideas” as it does with idioms or with cultural references and allusions. I try to find an equivalent, which sometimes works well, such as, in Kricheldorf’s Rosa and Blanca, turning “coffee and cake” (a longstanding German tradition) in the original into “tea” in the translation. Sometimes the closest you can come is only an approximate parallel; sometimes you have to simply accept that there’s no way to convey something in the original — though often there’s a quality that you might be able to capture in another passage.
Should translations be considered adaptations of an original text, or can a translation be accurate enough not to be regarded as a sort of deviation from the original?

On some level of course, translation without some deviation is simply impossible. But I do think that many translations deserve to be designated translations rather than adaptations, and I’d include my own. I think it’s to theatre’s credit that we try — albeit not as consistently as we might — to distinguish between translations and adaptations.

With a New York production of your translation of *The Sexual Neuroses of Our Parents* possible, what’s your opinion of the “market” for new plays in translation in the US these days?

I have the sense that it’s improved somewhat even during the six years or so that I’ve been pursuing theatrical translation, though I know nothing in terms of hard numbers. There seems to be more openness to producing plays in translation, probably related in a big-picture way to the post-9/11 climate, the damage the US has done to its international standing, and the efforts within the arts community to be less insular.

Do you think that if more plays were translated into English, then more translations would be produced, or is there a resistance to producing translations in the US? If so, why do you think that resistance exists?

Do you mean if more plays were translated and published, would more get produced? That’s hard, because not many plays in translation — or in general — get published without having been produced. And it’s hard to know just how many people are doing what I do — translating plays and trying to interest theatres in producing them. In theory, I imagine that yes, if literary managers received more translations, probably more would get produced. I think there is a fundamental resistance to producing translations in the US, based on regrettable but realistic notions about what appeals to audiences; it’s similar to the sad fact that American moviegoers don’t like to watch movies with subtitles. This is a broad generalization of course, but I’d say that Americans are less open to what’s unfamiliar than Europeans typically are. It’s hard to effect a shift in that kind of deep-seated inclination.

What, if any, are the differences between academically trained translators and those who are bilingual as a result of being immersed in two or more languages in a non-academic setting (because of parental or other natural circumstances)? How does this effect a translation, especially with regard to implicit or sub-textual information?

Well, I’m the former, and can’t really say what it would be like to be the latter. But I do think that the notion that bilingual people have an inherent advantage is questionable; if you really have grown up speaking two languages with equal facility, you may not have the kind of external awareness of how language works necessary for effective translation. As far as sub-textual information goes, I think how much time you’ve spent living in the culture of the original text...
is probably more important than how you acquired your aptitude in that language.

You have said that you “have selected plays that are different enough in style or content from most drama being written in English to be striking to potential directors, but are not so embedded in a different cultural context that it would be hard for directors or audiences to relate to them.” Three follow-up questions: In your opinion, what percentage of foreign plays does this rule out for translation? Also, when, if ever, do you think directors and/or audiences will be ready for or at least open to producing and viewing these culturally embedded plays? What is holding them back?

As far as a percentage goes, I’d be hard pressed to come up with a number even for those countries whose current playwriting I know. The kind of thing I have in mind is, for instance, German plays that deal by allusion with reunification: in their original context, it can be assumed that the implications in such work will be grasped by the audience, but they would likely not be in the US. I do think that what I’m getting at here is probably truer for some countries than others; I could imagine, for instance, a theatrical culture that for whatever reason deals mostly with psychological rather than political issues, whose plays would therefore lend themselves well to translation into other languages. I don’t think that somehow a day will come when people in English-speaking countries will finally be more open to work embedded in cultures they’re not familiar with. It’s always about specific situations and issues.

What was the hardest challenge you faced when translating the text of Sexual Neuroses?

I’d say: finding equivalents for the less-than-naturalistic language of Lukas’ play that didn’t make my English version just sound like a clunky translation.

What, if anything surprised you most about the production?

I haven’t had the opportunity to see other productions, but I’d never anticipated quite such a physical approach; Carrie worked very closely with a choreographer (Ben Duke) to make the transitions between scenes, and often the action within scenes, very movement-centred. I thought that worked really well, partly because it constituted a non-verbal counterpart to the script’s indirect treatment of the play’s themes.

What, if anything surprised you most about the audience reaction to the play in performance?

It’s hard to generalize. I saw it several times, and, for instance, some nights the audience laughed less, others more than I’d expected. I knew that the main character Dora would be affecting, at times heartbreaking.

Do you think this production opened doors for translations being produced in England? In America?

I’d love to think so, but no. This was the first production under brand new artistic directors (two young women, Carrie and Natalie Abrahimi) who’ve committed the Gate specifically to foreign plays — “London’s international theatre.” So I see the production of my translation more as part of their venture, and perhaps as part of a broader openness to work in translation, than as a breakthrough event in its own right.

What benefits do translations offer a US audience that they cannot get elsewhere? Why is producing translations important today?

Insights into how people in other cultures, including but not only artists, see the world we all share. For me, that benefit is greater if the play in translation reflects a clearly different approach both to dramaturgy and to the themes. Producing translations today is important in order to ensure that the US doesn’t remain too inward-looking. It’s important that American theatregoers be exposed to Suzan Lori-Parks as well as August Wilson, to Charles Mee as well as Tom Stoppard — and to Lukas Bärfuss as well as Neil LaBute.
JG: What inspired you to propose a Green Initiative at Mo’olelo?

Sueko: The inspiration was seeing Al Gore’s movie *An Inconvenient Truth* and thinking about how I contribute to this problem. The theatre community creates this world for four or, if you’re lucky, six weeks then it is trashed. If you look at the paints, they’re all toxic. It’s a bad thing to be exposing the audience and the crew to, and then thinking about energy and the inefficiency of theatrical lighting.

How did you establish your Green Theater Initiative?

I spoke with our Board of Trustees about greening up our practices. One of our Board Members’ wives, Preeti Gupta, is a LEEDS Accredited Professional.¹ We met with her and other LEED accredited architects, and no one had heard of a green theatre, so the first step was to define it. Preeti helped us create guidelines, basically the nuts and bolts, how to green our operations.² Being a small theatre company, it was looking at what we have control over, and trying to figure out what we could do.

Where are you in your “greening” process?

First, we brought recycle bins into the office and theater space. Then for each purchase we have to make, we look at it through a green filter. For example, when we bought our office supplies, we really thought about what we absolutely needed and who we were buying it from. We Googled “office supplies” and found GreenLine Paper Company which provides everything from notebooks and folders made out of recycled paper to biodegradable supplies for events.³ They do a great job of explaining the different types of recycled products, and then you choose what to purchase.

This was June of last year so we were gearing up to market the next show. The graphic designer researched FSC printers so that all of our marketing materials (inks, paper) are FSC certified and printed by certified print houses.⁴ As we got to the set and costume design phase and were interviewing designers, we presented them with our Green Initiative guidelines. We found wonderful designers who embraced these guidelines, and now that’s a criteria for hiring a designer.

For example, our set designer David F. Weiner needed to represent Wyoming, so instead of painting the backdrop we used projections. The projection screen was not made of a recyclable material, but we can save it and use it over and over again. We also used platforms from another company that had just finished a show and then, considering our exit strategy, found a local theatre company that needed platforms, and passed ours along to them. We used scrap wood from another theatre for our floor, and those can’t be used again, but they are going to be recycled.

Where do you hope to be in a year?

We’ve applied for funding which will allow us to hire LEED accredited professionals to thoroughly research the impact our theatre is having on the environment, and to find out what we can do next. Right now, I feel like we’re boiling noodles and throwing them against the wall to see what sticks, so it’d be great to have more professional guidance from the green building industry.

How do your patrons respond to the Initiative?

We have a ticket incentive that if they carpool or take public transportation or drive a hybrid then we email them a $5 off coupon for the next show. So they’re conscious of it. I think there’s a general feeling that people want to do the right thing but we don’t know...
what the right thing is some of the time, and it’s hard. We’re not feeling high and mighty about this [initiative], this is one little theatre company’s attempt to try to do the right thing. As I like to say, we’re very green at being green – so we want to reward our audience for taking these baby steps with us.

How do donors respond?

Donors and audiences across the board support it. I think what’s surprising is that some things are more expensive, but some things are not. The printing cost, not much more expensive, mainly because there’s been such a pressure on the printing industry to be more environmentally conscious from the community.

And if it costs more in year one, then explain to your donors what you want to do, because we need the support of our donor and patron base to do this. And then budget accordingly for the next year. Our experience is that donors like being a part of positive change. We’re being honest about the cost, about what we can do now and what we’re going to have to wait five years to do. There’s no shame in that.

It’s also a great part of our marketing campaign. “Green Mo’olelo” generates a lot of interest. It brings new audiences to the theatre who hear about our eco-friendly programming and are excited by it.

What are your most popular Green Initiatives?

From the public perception, it’s the ticket discounts. People really, really respond to that. From our internal perspective, I’m most proud of the shift in the paints we now use. It’s a little more expensive, but it’s better for the crew, the audience, and the environment.

What is your biggest challenge?

Lighting. Our designer was saying that there is more energy efficient lighting out there but it is hugely expensive. That’s a big area that hasn’t been figured out.

What is your final goal?

I would love if we had, in San Diego, a green performance venue. Portland Center Stage moved into a building that’s LEED certified and it’s exciting that they’re performing in a green building. That is the dream.

What would you say to other theaters thinking about Going Green?

Go for it! It’s okay to take baby steps, in fact I encourage baby steps— it makes it easier. And if you find something new, let me know, so we can use it too!

Jacqueline Goldfinger is a playwright and ECD dramaturg who recently moved from San Diego to Philadelphia. In San Diego, she worked for performing arts organizations including La Jolla Playhouse, The Old Globe, and North Coast Repertory Theatre. She currently resides in Philadelphia and is looking for work and a winter coat. Visit her online at: www.jacquelinegoldfinger.com.
The Green Top Ten
Ten Ways Your Theatre Can Go Green

10. Use energy more efficiently.
Use energy efficient light bulbs and electronics wherever possible. Have your production manager contact stage lighting equipment suppliers about the most energy efficient stage lights and bulbs. Switch to Green Electricity throughout your facility (http://www.greenenergychoice.com).

9. Use water more efficiently.
When installing plumbing, chose ultra-low flow toilets and metered fixtures.

8. Borrow/rent props, sets, and costumes from other theatres instead of building your own. Set up an exchange program in your local community between interested theatres.

7. Order food family-style and ask the caterer to provide food in reusable containers. Buy beverages in large containers rather than individual cans or bottles.

6. Use public transportation or none at all!
Rent performance spaces near public transportation. Offer a discount if a patron shows a bus/train ticket stub. Encourage groups attending a show to carpool. Have a place for bicyclists to lock up their bikes. Provide visiting artists with public transit maps and offer to pay for part of their transportation if they use public transit. Have meetings via phone or internet so company members can participate from home.

5. Buy smart.
Print your marketing campaign, scripts, and other materials on recycled paper. Order paint through the AFM (which offers environmentally friendly products and has a buy-back plan: www.afmsafecoat.com). Buy and build with recyclable woods (like bamboo). Obtain materials from salvage centers, contractors’ donation sites, and thrift stores.

4. Clean efficiently.
Use eco-friendly cleaning agents and energy-efficient vacuum cleaners. Ask House Managers to collect discarded programs after the show, smooth them out (stick them under a heavy box to eliminate wrinkles), and reuse them. Place recycling containers at the concession stand and bar.

3. Use email or password-protected websites to send and post Company Handbooks and other information electronically.

2. Reuse everything.
Encourage company members to bring their own mugs and dishware to rehearsals and meetings to cut down on using paper plates and cups. Instead of using paper cups, design company mugs to be reused for multiple events. Encourage company members (especially Stage Managers) to use both the front and backsides of paper before recycling them. Make announcements (or play taped announcements) pre-show instead of slipping extra fliers into the program. Have your designers submit their plans as early as possible, so that your shop can strategize about how to use the least material to make the most throughout the season.

1. Add recycling bins to your theater, office, and shop space.
Most companies, theatrical or otherwise, have a recycling container near their copy machine for paper. Put separate recycling bins in other office areas (the Literary Department will need their own bin), in the lobby of your theater, and in the shop space for paper and other recyclable waste (bottles, cans, cardboard).
A Member of the Ensemble

The Devised Production of

In the Belly of the Beast with Two Backs

by Dennis Schebetetta

This article is the fourth in a series, part of an ongoing collaboration between LMDA and the Dramaturgy Focus Group of the Association for Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE). The Dramaturgy FG’s Debut Panel annually selects talented Early Career Dramaturgs from across North America. For two years now, Review has invited the debutantes to revise and submit their conference papers. The results are consistently thoughtful, high-caliber work.

Introduction

Aemilia clutched an empty wine bottle in each hand as she crossed the rehearsal room and said, “I should have two of these.”

The ensemble broke out in laughter. That wasn’t Aemilia talking, but the actress Rachel Scott commenting on her tortured relationship to Iago. “Let’s start again,” said the director, Lisa Jackson, as she moved out of the playing space. Tango music blared out of the speaker of the small CD player and Aemilia went back to cleaning up the mess in the theatrical world of Storyville, New Orleans. The ensemble was entrenched in the first week of rehearsal and the second day in the studio on the fourth floor of Playwrights Horizons. The bright sunshine of summer poured in from the huge glass window.

As the music played, Rachel watched fellow actors Alex Smith and John-Andrew Morrison dance the tango. The dancing duo was Iago and Buddy (Othello in the world of our play). There was nothing arbitrary about the staging choice of two men dancing, or about what was being established in the relationships of these characters. Every movement in this devised show was being carefully orchestrated, and the story was unfolding not primarily through text, but through movement and the use of the playing space. Aemilia found herself drifting in the background of the scene, a grey ghost lurking in the shadows.

Suddenly, Bianca’s lover Jack (our Cassio, played by Matthew Morgan) jumped into the scene, wearing a women’s slip and looking for his fedora which was planted firmly on Iago’s balding head. After he performed a lewd leg-humping gesture, Jack won the hat back, just as Bianca, played by Melinda Ferraraccio, entered across the room and stood on one of the tables, cross-dressed in men’s clothes and mustache. Placing the hat on her head, Jack tossed her over his shoulder and ran off.

“Oh, okay,” said Lisa, sitting next to me, “Let’s look again at the burlesque number.” Burlesque, in Shakespeare? Sure, it’s a few scenes after the clown routine.
Certainly, this was not your mother’s Othello. In the Belly of the Beast with Two Backs was an adaptation of the Shakespearean play, conceived and directed by Lisa Jackson. Devised by the ensemble in rehearsals, it was first presented as a ten-minute piece at The Women’s Project in New York City before being developed over the next year and a half into an hour-long performance at HERE Arts Center in August 2005 as part of the American Living Room Festival. Using Othello as its main source, the play also incorporated text from the novel Coming Through Slaughter by Michael Ondaatje and the collection of erotic stories set in New Orleans called Red Wine Moan by Jeri Cain Rossi. The Othello plot was set against the backdrop of Storyville in the early 1900s with Buddy Bolden replacing the legendary moor. Bolden was a historical jazz figure, a cornet player (some say the father of modern jazz) who died in an insane asylum. In this production, Desdemona’s name changed to Nora, the name of Buddy’s wife. Many images were used as inspiration, especially the photographs of the prostitutes taken by Ernst Bellocq. Music — either jazz, folk, or the language of the text — also became central to the piece.

The text of this performance was not merely a collection of three literary sources, but also the movement of the actors’ bodies, the vocal sounds, songs, music, and even the fights. The spoken text was always malleable and became secondary to the stories played out by the images, music, and movements of the actors. In many ways, we wrote the piece as we rehearsed. Although our primary source text was Othello, the director had trimmed the Shakespearean story in order to focus her lens on the complex relationships of the three main couples (Othello/Desdemona, Iago/Aemilia, Cassio/Bianca), blocking out any political and sociological subplots inherent in the Elizabethan text.

My role as dramaturg on this project was as an active member of the ensemble. I had worked with the director as a playwright several times before and was being called upon for my experience as a dramatist. My job was to offer consultation on the narrative and structural elements, but I was not there to write or rewrite any text. I was to be confidante and collaborator, someone to witness and ask questions, but not to ultimately make final decisions. In addition, I worked as an archivist and historian, instrumental in preparing the text for rehearsal and performance, commenting on early drafts, adding or cutting text and formatting the script. But all of those activities underlined my main goal of opening up a dialogue with the director, allowing her room to discover what the piece was striving to become.

Beginning with Images

Ernest J. Bellocq was a photographer active in the early 1900s in New Orleans. A familiar presence in Storyville, he managed to take several portraits of the prostitutes working there. Many were of solitary nude women, standing near or lying on their beds. A few wore items of clothing, such as stockings. One or two even wore masks. Only eighty-nine of these photographs have survived and were found after his death. Many of the faces of the nudes were scratched out, supposedly by Bellocq’s brother, a Roman Catholic priest (Rose 60). The reason why these photographs have become so interesting is that unlike other photographs of the age taken merely for carnal entertainment, his portraits seem to have an intimacy and unique point of view. One photo in particular (plate 33) has a woman standing in front of a bed wearing nothing but black stockings, one arm behind her lower back, the other resting languidly on a bedpost. The photo conveys a casualness that is not lewd, but certainly in conflict with the completely scratched out face. As Janet Malcolm wrote in reaction to his work, “Although the ‘male gaze’...had not yet been raised as such, the friendliness of Bellocq’s eye, the reciprocity that flowed between him and his subjects, could not but forcibly strike the viewer” (12).

These photos, especially the ones with scratched out faces, became a major inspiration for Jackson when she developed the ten-minute show for The Women’s Project & Productions. I witnessed this short version as an outsider, an audience member titillated and provoked by Bianca’s burlesque number and disturbed by the final image of Desdemona searching a sea of handkerchiefs as Othello approached her. Many months later I began collaborating with the director, expanding the length and depth of the show into a longer, more developed script.

Morrison, the actor who played Buddy, called the final show “the story of Othello with digressions” (qtd. from Jackson Interview). Beast was not merely a transposition of the text of Othello resituated in Storyville but was similar to the “textual collidings” of the Iron- dale Ensemble Project (Niesen 283). Jackson used three different source texts to contrast with each other and therefore create a new text. The techniques utilized by Jackson were similar to those seen in the work of Susan Jonas, such as re-contextualization by using interpolation and interruption and exploring gender roles to serve the aim of disturbing the audience’s relationship to a classic work (Jonas 249). The other textual sources from the novella Red Wine Moan helped Jackson as she focused her lens on the couples, highlighting not only the male/female power struggles, but also the male/male

Jenn Saltzstein as Nora and Rachel Scott as Aemilia, in In the Belly of the Beast with Two Backs. Photo and copyright by Patty Melamed.
and female/female relationships. In addition, minimal selections from the novel Coming Through Slaughter allowed easy access to the world of Storyville via Ondaatje’s striking textual imagery. Buddy Bolden inhabited the character of Othello. Bolden was a celebrated cornet player, known for inventing “the big four,” the beat that gives jazz its lilting quality. His wife Nora, an ex-prostitute, thus became the Desdemona to his Othello. Jackson streamlined Iago’s character as she focused his obsession with Aemilia’s suggested infidelity to the Moor. Bianca was a hybrid of the Shakespearean character and the female protagonist in Rossi’s novella who was addicted to her lover Jack, a character who replaced Cassio.

The Othello story was the interior frame from which the piece aligned or deviated. The ultimate structure seemed collage-like, but the order of scenes was never random. The events in the narrative remain similar, but the way the story unfolds illuminates much that is hidden in the Shakespearean source As the director/writer said in an interview, “My interest always in putting a piece together is juxtaposition…and then it comes together in the composition” (Jackson interview). This juxtaposition allows Jackson to force the audience to view familiar scenes in a new way, much like Brecht’s verfremdungseffekt. Thus, the revelation of Othello’s handkerchief in Cassio’s hand (Act IV.1) becomes an elaborate clown routine in which the infamous handkerchief is presented at the end of a series of pratfalls and physical comedy. In the original classic, we never get Bianca’s perspective on the events, but in this new version she performs a burlesque number relaying directly to the audience how Jack has used her. Throughout the show there are hints of bisexuality, elements of cross-dressing, and modern pop songs mixed with Appalachian folk songs. Even dialogue expectations are broken, as some famous lines are spoken not by the original characters. For example, instead of Othello saying his famous, “Villain, be sure thou prove my love a whore” (Act III.i.359), Nora recites it wearing a blindfold and groping about in darkness.

Although Jackson has directed many traditional Shakespeare productions in addition to working in new play development, her training and background is steeped in alternative methods of theatre-making and devising techniques reliant on vocal and physical training. She used a methodology of gesture work derived from her training with Ellen Hemphill of the Archipelego Theatre in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. A “gesture,” Jackson says is:

a vocal or corporeal kinesthetic response to a prompt, which can be a word, sound or image, that encapsulates one’s own personal relationship to the prompt into a full body, or specific vocal, image. The “gestures” […] become a consistent secondary text residing beside and within the perceived primary text of the performance (Interview).

The gestures are a personal and intimate physical vocabulary repeated often throughout the piece. In the creation of these gestures, the actors collaborate in a collective dramaturgy, creating another unspoken text which allows the disparate elements of written text and songs to meld together. The combination of these spoken and unspoken texts creates an entirely new text, and thus the story of Othello is reborn.

The challenges of devised dramaturgy:

As a dramaturg, working on Beast was like working on three different concurrent shows: a classic, an adaptation, and a new work. Some of the preliminary areas of the script had been improvised using the gesture work in the initial ten-minute version, but as the schedule for the HERE production was so tight (one week of rehearsal in June and two weeks in August), textual choices and the overall structure of the piece had to be fleshed out before rehearsals began with the ensemble. My work began in the pre-production and planning phase. In many conversations with the director, I helped shape the selection and editing of spoken text as well as the rough outline of physicalizations in the form of a rough draft in play script format.

I approached this rough pre-production script in the same manner that I would as a dramaturg working with any new play: by supporting the writer to discover and unearth the story she wanted to tell. My background as a dramaturg contributed to her thoughts on the structural order of the scenes. My questions would range from, “why does this line occur here?” to “how long should the song be for the clown number?” Lisa’s initial stage descriptions were complex choreographic suggestions of behavior, as yet to be fully written in rehearsal. Some choices had to wait till rehearsal to be made. One stage description in particular merely said, “At some point, Aemilia enters.” But if she entered at the beginning of the scene it would be vastly different than if she entered at the end, and only in rehearsal would we be able to tell which would work best for the play.

The textual choices that emerged out of this initial draft created a poetic combination of selections from the source material. The play flowed like a piece of jazz music. First you might hear the horn, then a bass line, back to a horn, then a saxophone, before drums kick in and all the instruments play. Here’s an example from a page of the script using all three texts:

NORA: …You were showing all the possibilities in the middle of the story. Something about the man that carries his profession with him, always.

Enter Aemilia unseen at end of this speech.

BUDDY: Like a wife. Even in Exile. (He kisses her, then softly says) One more, one more! / Be thus when thou art dead, and I will kill thee, / And love thee after. One more, and that’s the last! So sweet was n’er so fatal. / I am drunk on the blood of this beautiful girl.

NORA: Will you come to bed, my lord?

The passage begins with excerpts from Ondaatje’s novel, then switches to Othello’s speech, then Rossi’s line, “I am drunk…” before returning to Shakespeare. At times the juxtaposition of texts was contradictory and at other times the poetic language blended in such a way that it was hard to tell the authors apart. The three source texts were in dialogue with each other, creating a new dialogue, a new context, which then had a dialogue with the audience.

In order to understand the director/writer’s vision, I thoroughly read all three of the source texts. Not only did I make notes, but I also found snippets of text that might be useful at a later point in the
process. Several times in rehearsal we found holes in transitions or areas where a line could be altered, cut or inserted. When that need arose, I easily searched my text bank and offered ideas to be selected by the director. One example occurred immediately before Iago tricks Jack into being blindfolded and pummeled by Buddy, he says “What’s he then that says I play the villain?” The rest of the speech had been cut. Unfortunately, there was some lag time before Jack entered to pick up the pile of handkerchiefs. I suggested to Jackson that since she was already playing with moving texts from one character to another, why not have Iago say one of Othello’s lines, such as “It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul.” This moment stood out as another conversation between audience and text and jarred expectations.

Jackson often directs her shows with minimal production requirements, usually without a set and only a few props. It’s an aesthetic choice as much as a practical one. As she stated, “I say my plays are Brechtian, but really they just have no budget” (Interview). Her previous works, 1st Witch, 2nd Witch, 3rd Witch and Swimmies were both designed for fringe festival parameters—each show could be packed up in a large trunk in order to take it home on the subway. This aesthetic remained true of Beast, as well. The set consisted of a few rehearsal blocks, some chairs, and a ladder. Props were minimal; wine bottles, umbrellas, straight razor, handkerchiefs. Costumes were merely evocative of the early 1900s and most of the items were provided from the actors’ closets. Jackson did not aim at doing a period piece but a show that was “always in the moment, of the moment, that we’re living in” (Interview). Our Storyville was not meant to depict a realistic portrayal but rather a theatrical space that allowed for a conversation about Othello and ownership in the context of today, knowing that the story and location brings its own ideological baggage into the room as well as audience familiarity. This familiarity allowed us to disrupt, question or break expectations.

Since Buddy Bolden is considered the “king of jazz,” music selection was a critical part of my work on the pre-production script. In one section of the play, Iago talks of the first time he heard Buddy’s cornet, and Jackson wanted some music to heighten the line. However, Buddy never recorded. Fortunately, I found a live recording of Wynton Marsalis mimicking Buddy’s tone and style, which fit perfectly. Traditional jazz songs which would have been found in the early 1900s were juxtaposed against other musical choices: Robert Johnson’s “They’re Red Hot” which we used for the clown number, Chet Baker’s “Let’s Get Lost” for a party scene, and the contemporary song “Two to Tango” by Raul Malo for the burlesque number.

My two most tangible contributions to the shaping of the script were giving the scenes titles and formatting the text in standard play script format. Both of these stemmed from my work as a dramatist sitting in rehearsals on new works and anticipating necessary revisions and methods of documenting script changes.

Giving scenes titles has been a tremendous help for me as a playwright or director working on a new script, and this was the first time that I applied the method to my dramaturgy position. Titles are like signposts on the highway, helping to guide the way towards some comprehensive idea of the story. Giving titles requires one to encapsulate the actions, images, and metaphors inherent in that scene. Scoring the script in this manner became an excellent barometer on whether or not the director and I were in agreement. We discussed the driving force of each scene by using titles with evocative language, most of which was chosen from the spoken words in her script. Some of the titles were named, “First Parade or Fuck It, Let’s Get Drunk,” “I Have a Thing For You,” or “Mother’s Maid.” Many changed based on our discussions before and after rehearsals. We did not always agree, of course, but this methodology allowed us to converse in a more creative way, beyond character wants, structure, or audience expectations.

My other function as a dramaturg was modifying and revising the script as it changed on a daily basis, thus documenting the process as I helped shape it. In order to ensure consistency and accuracy, I formatted the script in pre-production and during rehearsals. Although formatting text into a standard script format might seem a minor technical contribution, it actually had huge ramifications and a rippling effect on the rest of the production process. At the first read-thru when the entire ensemble was collected for that final two weeks, it was easier for the actors to comprehend what was going to be asked of them. The dialogue and physical actions were immediately clear, including entrances and exits, and the placements of songs, either canned or live. Even the stage directions that said, “something happens here” gave a clear indication of work that needed to be done in rehearsal. The actors had a tangible form of what the director was thinking and what needed to be filled out in rehearsal. They knew that lines would be changed and that entire scenes might be reconfigured but this script allowed them a place to begin their work of shaping character and actions. As we rehearsed, many changes were made but the script revisions were always clearly marked on a daily basis, with new pages printed out periodically. Revisions were

Rachel Scott as Aemilia and Alex Smith as Iago
Photo and copyright by Patty Melamed.
marked on each new page, usually in red, saving time and eliminating confusion. When we arrived for the technical rehearsal, we had not only the blueprint of the performance in written form, but a script that could be used as a promptbook by the stage manager and lighting designer.

For me, this revision and documentation process was exciting, like “backwards playwrighting.” I found myself translating the physical and spoken text in rehearsal onto the page, discovering the best way to translate actors’ behaviors and intentions. Documenting the physical text, including the gesture work, became a vital part of the process and required me to be present and focused in the rehearsal room. This interpretive act seemed the opposite of my dramatic writing process, where I start with a blank page and have to take the imaginative leap of seeing actors performing in my mind’s eye. Like with any play, I had to be specific in the language and directions, and yet create the necessary space that exists in all plays for future productions.

From an ideological standpoint, having this formatted script elevated the physical and ensemble-based work that was developed in rehearsal from some ephemeral idea into a more tangible element. The script started to look like a “real play” and this brought an element of validation. The director had never had a dramaturg work in this way before and consequently never documented her process or her product. As she said:

I think the problem with physical and devised work is that you’re often creating on the fly so much that there’s nobody there to document anything, and to document in an active way, to be able to see what’s working, what’s not working, and raise questions and challenge the director… (Jackson, Interview).

As a member of the ensemble, I knew the history of choices and could make suggestions based on my knowledge of the source material and presence in rehearsals.

“So Fucking Beautiful”: Four Minutes of Silence

Susan Jonas has said: “Theatremakers can employ the canon to reveal its own biases about gender, as well as race, sexual preference, and other issues and sensitivities” (244). In the Belly of the Beast, the physical and ensemble-based work that was developed in rehearsal from some ephemeral idea into a more tangible element. The script started to look like a “real play” and this brought an element of validation. The director had never had a dramaturg work in this way before and consequently never documented her process or her product. As she said:

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max of the play is not the fight scene (a sign of male aggression) but the silent scene. Those four minutes are when Jackson forces the audience to stop and take notice of what they are looking at. In the context of our play, this seemingly pedestrian act of dressing elevates to a ritualistic sacrifice in which the audience bears witness.

Conclusion

It may seem incongruous that a dramatist showers praise on the beauty and simplicity of a powerful nonverbal scene. But it’s easy to forget that dramatic storytelling involves more than just writing strong dialogue. Playwrights create a blueprint for an event in three-dimensional space; an event involving characters, actions and a plot set within a fictional world. A play is not a story to be read (though some plays can and usually are) but an act to be performed. And devising work is simply another form of playwriting.

Idolizing only the words in a play precludes the physical vocabularies of movement-based work. The body’s movements are not merely mechanical actions jotted down in the form of stage descriptions but are also a concurrent text. Debussy once said that the music is not the notes, but the space between the notes. In that same way, theatre is beautiful and powerful because of those moments in between the words. Four minutes of silence might seem baffling in a traditional production of Othello. Yet in the context of Beast it beautifully illuminated the intentions of the writer/director and a story which originated from the grainy shadows of those Bellocq images.

Dramaturgs are sometimes thought of as “guardians of the text,” but this idea is only helpful if we expand our definitions of “text” to include all its forms. As I move forward in my work as a dramatist and a dramaturg, I am now more conscious of that space between the words and the performance.

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