



misunderstanding each other since 2003

LOOKING OVER THE FENCE Snapshots of Fence meetings over the years

Fence 28 Atlanta (2019) A Week With The Fence

Blog post by [Henning Bochart](#)

The Fence, this “strange animal”, as its founder Jonathan Meth calls it, is a circle of professional friends all over the world, a club, really, that operates on a recommendation basis. Its focus lies on the work of playwriting, of developing plays, working with directors and dramaturgs. In Atlanta, GA, we are a congregation of theatre practitioners, dramaturgs, and writers from France, Scandinavia, London, Germany, Belarus, from the east and west coast of the US and from the centre as well.

For five days, we find ourselves sitting in circles in varying rooms and venues, theatres, art studios, university spaces, in a mix of the same and new people as the morning workshops are open to the public and are attended by local artists connected to theatre in one way or the other. As is customary for theatre people, the fine, warm southeast American weather remains outside of the dark or even white theatre spaces, only to be enjoyed and inhaled in short coffee or longer lunch breaks. Introductory rounds repeat itself in variations every day, always leading to both a deeper understanding of the people you met the day before and a fresh image of who is there that day for the first time. A first exchange between local and international guest participants is a perfect way to engage in fruitful and informative discussion on working conditions in Atlanta. What is in the focus here, what do people deal with in their work? Asks Michael Dove, who had moved to Atlanta a year ago, the Atlantans in the room feel enticed to discuss concerns about imminent danger through investors taking over and reshaping the city, something many visitors from metropolises around the world can relate to. Housing is being built massively but not for those who need it.



Practical workshops introduce methods for development such as working with space, a writing exercise to inspire through an imaginary journey through different environments (Ana Candida Carneiro): How can key phrases and words and the imaginations around them influence our writing? Jessica Litwak regroups us with the means of sociometry, “a powerful tool for reducing conflict and improving communication because it allows the group to see itself objectively and to analyse its own dynamic” (Chris Hofmann). This technique was developed by Jacob Levy Moreno, the inventor of psychodrama. Heidi Howard, AD of the 7 Stages Theatre in Little Five Points, hosts one workshop on activism and engagement in the arts in her beautiful space, one of few engaged in international collaborations. She tells us how eating together has proven to be a marvellous way to engage your audience. Audience involvement is the focus of another group exercise around the Cinderella themes – how to work with the audience around themes of shoes (oh how culturally laden can be the wearing of shoes, the naked foot, etc.), discipline, selection, male-female (princes and princesses). Upending expectations in regards to this story, which everybody seems to know something about but that has so many variations, appears to be a very good path to follow in building a short piece. Or how about collective storytelling? Building the story with the audience: Why are you the prince, or the princess? Edward Buffalo Bromberg (Riksteatern Stockholm) and Debbie Seymour (LAMDA, UK) talk about their approaches to their work as dramaturgs. Debbie relates Liz Lerman’s methods of applying constructive criticism through a certain moderated process of question and answer between artist and audience. The discussion almost consensually concentrates on the dramaturgs’ the role of and their place within the development of a script to full production, as interlocutors to the writers, until I bring up their role as employees in the institutions that theatres are in central Europe, dealing with programming and public relations a lot.

We learn about Atlanta as much as possible in the short time, visit the Center for Civil and Human Rights, largely focussing on the civil rights movement in the US south during the 1960s, with Dr. Martin Luther King from Atlanta as a key figure.



A workshop with the Fence's Jessica Litwak

We see a few shows at night, all disappointingly shallow after the in-depth discussions throughout the days. A good memory remain the nights at delicious tapas bars in Midtown or the Intermezzo Café with its monstrous Vienna style cake display and conversations that extend beyond the professional. What is most striking throughout the entire duration of the event is the absolutely personal, warm and loving atmosphere among the participants, be

they long-standing members such as Alain Foix or Jessica Litwak, or visitors like associates of 7 Stages or writers from Atlanta. Amelia Parenteau, as if it were nothing, interpreted for the French visitors the entire time. The local organisation is perfectly handled by Rachel Parish, Michael Dove and Lee Osorio without whom nothing would have happened. Special thanks to you! As I'm leaving early, I'm sad to be missing a reading of Jessica's play THE NIGHT IT RAINED at one of the scratch work sessions where new work is presented and discussed. I don't want to go – but the next conventions are already coming up. Looking forward to be there!

Fence 26 Cairo (2018)

Egypt's Theatre Rebels

Facing censorship and worse in post-revolution Cairo, theatre makers resist and persist.

By [Amelia Parenteau](#)

Driving through Tahrir Square at dusk, crammed into a van with other U.S. and European theatre makers, headed to the conference-sponsored hotel, my eyes couldn't drink it in fast enough: the lights, the people, the gargantuan propaganda billboards and television screens signalling the impending presidential "elections." The heat, even in the dark of night, the smog, the crescent moon, the tall glass shop windows selling every item of clothing imaginable under fluorescent lights—"This is Egypt," I kept reminding myself, awestruck as we pulled into the gates of the Marriott Hotel, a former royal palace.

I arrived in Cairo in late March 2018 to attend the 7th annual [Downtown Contemporary Arts Festival](#) (known as D-CAF), specifically for its Arab Arts Focus programming, along with 13 fellow members of the Fence, an informal network of playwrights and cultural operators



based in 52 countries. I extended my trip to the seaside city of Alexandria, where I also attended several days of the Theater Is a Must festival, in its fifth edition.

Given the constraints of the military dictatorship under which Egyptian citizens are living, it is a testament to the dedication of artists—both to their craft and their civilian liberties—that theatre is still being produced at all. Playwright Rasha Abdel Monem describes the climate that has developed in recent years as “cold and fearful,” given the censorship barriers and lack of funding. You're either with the regime, she says, or you're against it. As an artist, you're afraid to be labelled as a “threat to the state,” the same umbrella term applied to terrorists. Yet the repression has led to a competitive spirit among those artists still trying to

produce work. Monem, for one, feels the “responsibility of writers to record history and reflect culture as it is.” The show, she is convinced, must go on.

At this point, censorship is operating on three levels. A state Censorship Panel, located in the Ministry of Culture, comprises civil servants (not literary people, playwrights are quick to point out). All scripts must be read and approved by the Censorship Panel before being staged, and even the smallest independent theatres won’t consider any script, even for self-production, without the censor’s stamp of approval. Ministry censors are sent to rehearsal and to opening-night performances to guarantee that their changes and redactions have been respected.

In response to the Censorship Panel, some state-run theatres have created literary offices with reading panels of “very bad theatre critics,” according to Cairo playwrights—panels that will reject some scripts before they are even sent to the state panel, citing morality concerns. Finally, given the risks playwrights take by dealing with controversial ideas and themes—particularly those pertaining to the military or government, which are the most likely to be targeted for censorship—many authors are self-censoring their work. Like other civilians, they are susceptible to prosecution in military trials under President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi’s regime.

Of course, crafty theatre people are finding ways to work around the limitations of censorship. Or, as self-taught playwright, director, and journalist Dalia Basiouny puts it, “People have always found ways around stupid rules.” Some resort to bribery, and others use the system of omission, being careful not to use certain words when they know a censor is in the audience. As another model of artists evading restrictions, Basiouny cites the historical example of performers in 18th-century England inviting people over to their houses to have tea at the price of half a quid, while a performance took place, seemingly impromptu, in the background.

Of late, directors in Egypt tend to prefer foreign texts, so that if censors drop in and have an objection, they can claim the action of the play happens elsewhere, not in Egypt. What’s more, censors only have veto power over what is written in the script, leaving room for coded expression in the visual landscape of the play. Sara Shaarawi, an Egyptian-Italian playwright based in Scotland, says, “Given this huge crackdown on the arts, you see the classic Egyptian way of using allegory to relate historic events to now. Physical theatre and movement have always been a huge part of the theatre scene, since you can’t really censor that.”

As Shaarawi and others explain it, there was an explosion of free expression immediately following the revolution in 2011. (English-language critic Joseph Fahim has chronicled developments in Egyptian theatre before and after 2011 in [AT, May/June 2014](#).) Of that post-revolution glow, Basiouny says, “So many people were finding their voices, artistically, theatrically, critically. Many voices were immature and not very well trained, but the energy creating worlds onstage was really fascinating. Not many people continued to do that kind of work, but it was amazing to witness. We were so alive.”

Now, Shaarawi says, everyone in her circles knows what tear gas smells like.

For some time now, theatre has been a way of trying to make sense of it all. “During the revolution, the theatre being made was all about ‘verbatim,’ the truth, the words of the real people there,” Shaarawi explains. “There was an urge to get the stories out as testimony, because of the bias in the media channels. No one was reporting it right, and so theatre was doing the reporting.”

But after June 30, 2013, when President Mohamed Morsi was overthrown in a military coup, “all unity disintegrated and felt superficial,” playwright Monem reports. She believes that writers’ solidarity is the only answer in fighting back against the constraints of censorship: “Theatre, out of all the forms of art, is the one most deeply rooted in community. It’s a celebration. If you don’t write for that community, what are you doing?”



A scene from “Before the Revolution” at the D-CAF festival. (Photo by Mostafa Abdel Aty)

Basiouny echoes Monem’s frustration with the lack of community, saying, “Funding is very limited, so if there are only three chances for something to be produced, the competition is real. There are 20 million people in the greater Cairo area, and the city officially has 16 stages, only 12 of which are in operation.” Further limiting playwrights’ agency, Monem adds, “Playwrights pay companies to give them the sole performance rights to their play for three years, so they can’t stage it anywhere else in that time.”

Basiouny also cites a lack of training for new writers as contributing to this dearth of community. “I believe in theatre,” she avows, “but organizationally and institutionally, there’s something seriously wrong—the way it’s run is not designed for it to improve; it’s designed to feed the status quo and have people profiting from it.”

Given this confluence of obstacles, it’s a struggle to find peers. Basiouny says, “There must be other people who are writing. Where are they? Most of the stuff we see is recycled material or classics.” Shaarawi agrees: “Egypt is stuck with issue plays, melodrama, works about artists expressing themselves rather than thinking about the audience’s place within the world of the piece. Egypt needs better writers—that hasn’t changed.”

Like many other global theatre markets, Egyptian theatre broadly falls into two categories: commercial, state-funded theatre, the more “popular” form; and independent theatre, which often takes more risks. Popular theatre tends to be satirical, often with sitcom-style humor. Carnivorous, by Issam Bou Khaled of Lebanon, in collaboration with Sarmad Louis, presented as part of D-CAF, is an example of this type of work. Egypt has a history of one of the biggest theatre industries in the Arab world—“Commercial theatre is still doing it, though

it's deteriorating," Shaarawi notes—and there is a sense of carrying on that long-valued tradition.

But state-funded opportunities are extremely limited. There are no workshops, and playwrights must present a final version of the script for censors' approval before the first rehearsal, which leaves no opportunity to make changes during the rehearsal period.

Independent theatres have more limited resources, although they do allow for a workshop process. However, if an organization agrees to accept any financial aid from the state, it is considered a state company—and, Basiouny says, "If you accept a grant from foreign sponsors, some consider you to be a spy."

"The successful independent arts scene in Egypt is made up of people who have money through other means," Shaarawi explains. "All the big names graduated from the same American University in Cairo program, one of the most expensive in the region." Works thought to be more avant-garde tend to use choreographed movement to display their sophistication, since, as artists learn at university, that's what will set their work apart. Aysha, by Egyptian artist Dalia Kholeif, also presented at D-CAF, demonstrated this trend.

I was surprised to see, in that work and others, that women's stories, particularly pertaining to mental health, were so prominent in both festivals—so much so that the theme of this year's Theater Is a Must was "Female Theater Practitioners and Feminine Narratives." Basiouny and other theatre commentators do not see this trend as positive. "So much of the art that sells in certain parts of the world is catering to the notions of people in other parts of the world about the people being written about—it's sad that women artists are responsible for creating that," she reasons. "Women should not be reduced to one tone. And if this is the one tone, can we choose a different tone? If it's only me, me, me, me—it's a shame that this is the same trope that young theatremakers are falling into, and that curators are calling for that tone."

Shaarawi agrees. "A lot of women are at the helm of making things happen and making shows—more women study the arts, fine arts and theatre, and for a long time it was seen as a women's domain, although a temporary one, because eventually they would get married." Now, what these playwrights see as stylized, pitiful self-expression is quite in vogue, and is even expected of artists trained with a Western education in Cairo.

Of course, the lack of mobility for Egyptian theatremakers, and [Middle Eastern/North African \(MENA\) artists](#) in general, limits their access to what is happening in global contemporary theatre, thereby making their practice quite insular unless they have the means to go abroad—and, in the bargain, it deprives international audiences of their perspectives. Monem adds that in Egypt there is no market for published plays, and translation of plays both in and out of Arabic tends to be of low quality, which further limits the international exchange of new work.

"The image of 'the Arab' is highly stigmatized and highly mediatized, and Egyptians want to fight that image of terrorist, victim, and refugee," Monem asserts. "We do have stories, and we don't need white Hollywood people to represent us. In our own little way, it's a means of fighting the government, the lived oppression—finding ways to get the plays on, that's a little victory, a little giving-the-finger. We can still do it, say what we want, be free a bit."

In that sense, contemporary Egyptian theatre serves as a reminder of the power of art as an act of resistance. Just cleaning up a space and presenting a show is in itself revolutionary. “I am a rebel,” Basiouny says flatly. “Revolution transformed me.”

Some works included in D-CAF, such as *And Here I Am*, written by Hassan Abdulrazza and performed by Ahmed Tobasi, were explicit in their weaponizing of art. Tobasi, on whose life the show is based, grew up in the Jenin Refugee Camp in Palestine and trained there under [Juliano Mer Khamis](#) of Palestine’s activist Freedom Theatre. Another D-CAF show, *Before the Revolution* by Ahmed El Attar, provided an avant-garde take on that radical spirit, with two performers standing barefoot in the middle of a bed of nails, voicing snippets of text and song from Egyptian culture before the Arab Spring, creating a unique sonic landscape from recent history. (Since I don’t speak Arabic and have never lived in Egypt, much of the specificity of this piece was lost on me.)

Nevertheless, when artists are perceived as threats to the state, their voices and their art become their armor, if not their weapons. Adel Abdel Wahab, founder and organizer of the Theater Is a Must festival, says, “I don’t have anything to lose [in producing shows].” This mentality, left over from the revolution, is a striking example of the courage and resilience programmers and artists bring to their work, championing what they know to be important. Basiouny agrees, “Anybody who’s still doing it is defying the odds. There’s a beautiful Egyptian proverb that says, ‘The wise woman can weave with the leg of a donkey.’ If you’re a smart, nifty woman, you can make do. I weave as much as I possibly can.”

Amelia Parenteau is a roving writer, theatremaker, and translator. Recent publications include HowlRound and Contemporary Theatre Review.



Dimitar Usunov with his workshop pupils in Cairo

The following is a letter from Gabriel Gbadamosi

Dear Readers,

A few weeks ago I found myself climbing out of a tomb in Egypt alone in the dark of a power cut. I'm writing because I have to tell *someone*. When I got home, my wife didn't want to know. My kids looked at me like that was a bit creepy. I could almost smell my own grave clothes. So, if that's OK, I'm going to tell *you* before you desert me.

It was a long way to go, crawling over loose stone slabs angled up like a slide in the steep low-ceilinged shaft that led from the burial chamber. My knee still hurts, I felt my heart pounding. I wasn't afraid, I was just crawling back to life. One moment I was looking at the huge empty stone sarcophagus, its heavy lid propped open with rocks, the next the lights went off. I later heard there was a blackout across the site, but at the time that wasn't what happened. I was buried. With no mobile phone in my pocket to light my way home. Shut in a tomb in complete darkness.

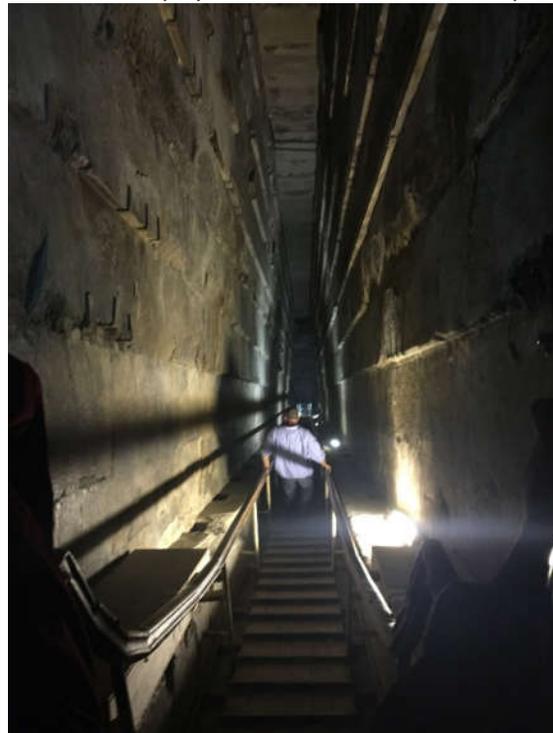
I have to tell you. It's very lonely being dead. I couldn't accept it. My whole body said *No!* My kids need me, I have to go back. So I started feeling my way up. Creeping. Dark and airless. My wife told me to stop smoking. Scrabbling up towards the surface. The wages of sin. I wasn't ready. We all die. Not today. I was determined. Not yet. I pictured the face of the Egyptian guardian showing me through the passageways above – the stone table on which they bandaged the Pharaoh's mummy, the chamber with a sunken bath in which they immersed the body. I could get out. This was the tomb of the Pharaoh's physician, at the foot of Cheops's pyramid. Outside would be the Sphinx.

But it wasn't the guardian who met me at the entrance. It was an Englishman looking at me steadily. I couldn't hide, he could see it in my face; it would get out. I opened my mouth but nothing came, not even a swarm cloud of wasps to erase his face and silence his witness. *'Hello,'* he said, *'what's happened to you?'* And then I realised, this was Egypt, the week before Passover, which is Easter. I was free to go.

Only now something was changed. When the guardian of the tomb looked at me, he said, *'You're Egyptian?'*

I shook my head and said, *'London.'* He looked at me again, *'But Egyptian?'* Sure, tourism has collapsed, there are few foreign visitors, but I also sometimes look Brazilian. He shrugged, and sent me on alone down the shaft into the after-life of the doctor's waiting room. Now I was back; I was blind, now I could see. All

those Egyptian writers I'd been meeting had felt how I feel – recoiling from the Islamist turn in the revolution they joined back into the repressive grip of an all-powerful military ruler –



Gabriel descends the staircase of the Great Pyramid

guilty, unable to speak, closed in. Struggling out of their bandages for political space, they too feel they have sinned against life.

But forget I ever told you.

Best,

Gabriel

Fence 24 Rokiskis (2017)

The following article was first published in [The Baltic Times, March 2017](#)

By Aiste Ptakauske



Neil Fleming, Aiste Ptakauske, Dimitar Usunov, Sarah Grochala, Jonathan Meth and Ulrike Syha in Rokiskis

From February 28 to March 3, twelve theatre directors, actors, playwrights, and producers from all over the world ran workshops for high-school students and cultural workers of Rokiskis, a small town in the North East of Lithuania, with a population of 15,000 people.

The main goal of the workshops was to empower youth and cultural workers of Rokiskis to create positive change and innovation in their communities. The twelve theatre professionals who facilitated the workshops were from England, Scotland, France, Sweden, Germany, Bulgaria, Hungary, Egypt, Algeria, Iran, and the USA.

They all were members of the international theatre makers' collective The Fence.

Network that unites 250 members from 50 countries

The Fence is a global network of playwrights, directors, producers, actors, dramaturges, translators and other theatre professionals who make playwriting happen. Established in 2003, the network comprises 250 members from 50 countries. The Fence runs network meetings on average twice per year. During the 14 years of its existence, the network held 23 meetings in the UK, Hungary, Serbia, Austria, Finland, the Netherlands, Turkey, Romania, Germany, Guadelupe, France, Morocco, Italy, the USA, and Kosovo. These meetings typically feature 15—50 visitor members and a similar number of home-based members of The Fence. The main goal of the meetings is two-fold. On the one hand, visitor members want to meet playwrights and other theatre makers from the host country, learn about their systems, structures, opportunities, and challenges. On the other hand, theatre professionals from all over the world come together to pursue peer-led professional development activities that focus on how to operate as an artist in general and a theatre maker in particular, in the rapidly changing social, economic, political, and cultural landscape of the world.

Lithuania and Morocco compared

member of The Fence since 2004, I have been to seven semi-annual meetings of the network in the UK, Austria, Turkey, Finland, and Morocco, the latter being the most inspiring of them all. In 2012, we gathered at Mohammed V National Theatre in Rabat, because the theatre asked us to run a week of master classes and workshops for Moroccan students of acting, directing, and playwriting. As we worked with the group, I slowly started realizing that theatre's place in Moroccan society was very different from the place it had in the West. In Morocco, professional theatre was neither strongly encouraged, nor supported by the government. What was supported was very prescriptive and predictable. It seemed that the Moroccan Government had a very particular taste when it came to theatre. Everything that was not to that taste was not welcome.



Kazem Shahryari teaches a workshop in Rokiskis

The productions that I saw in Morocco reminded me of the “barn theatre” that was popular in Lithuania at the beginning of the 20th century. At the time, Lithuania was a part of the Russian Empire that forbade any public use of the Lithuanian language, including press, events, performances, and any other kind of gatherings. But, Lithuanians would gather in empty barns to put on collectively devised shows that were a way to preserve, honour, and celebrate Lithuania, thus resisting the oppressor. This spirit of resistance became a defining feature of Lithuanian professional theatre during the period of Soviet occupation.

In Morocco, we started our workshops with improvisation and storytelling exercises that first and foremost required self-reflection and openness. At first, our workshop participants almost froze. They were afraid to tell us what they felt, thought, or dreamt of. They always wanted to please us, as well as their classmates. But making theatre and art is not about pleasing others. It is about breaking through fear of judgement and opening up to others as well as oneself. When we open up, magical things start happening. Our uniqueness and individuality start shining through, on the one hand. But on the other hand, that individuality is so rich, that many other people can relate to it. It was a pure joy to witness how in the course of the workshops our students started opening up, discovering their individual strengths, and believing in their powers to create and change the world around them. I wanted to give a similar experience to my compatriots. Hence, I organized the 24th meeting of The Fence in Rokiskis.

In Rokiskis, theatre makers from all over the world worked with students of Juozas Tumas-Vaizgantas High-School and cultural workers: directors of various cultural centres in villages around Rokiskis. All workshops had a common theme: dreams. Having discovered how many people emigrate from Lithuania every year (over 1 per cent of the entire population), guests from abroad wanted to look deeper into this phenomenon. In their workshops, they wanted to find out what people of Rokiskis dreamt of, so that they could not get in that place where they lived.

Rokiskis workshops

At the very beginning of the first workshop for cultural workers, there was an air of scepticism and even slight hostility in the room. Workshop participants greeted workshop facilitators with a series of complaints: it was Fat Tuesday, they had a lot of events to supervise, and thus wanted to cut the workshop short. The facilitators agreed, because they were there for the participants, after all. Moreover, they had worked long enough to know that hostility is but a sign of insecurity. One of the reasons for this insecurity became apparent very soon: none of the cultural workers of Rokiskis spoke English. They were afraid that they would not be able to explain themselves properly or understand what workshop facilitators would be asking of them. Communicating through an interpreter was not something that came naturally to this group of people. However, it eventually turned out to be quite comfortable.

The facilitators kicked the workshop off with improvisational exercises that required listening and collaboration. From the very beginning of the workshop, it was very obvious that the mission of preserving arts and culture in Lithuanian villages was entrusted entirely to women. There was not a single man among the workshop participants. But did these women do their mission justice! They ran puppet theatres for children, drama societies for youth, vocal ensembles for women, and folklore clubs for everyone who was willing to sing and dance. To be able to make their ends meet, all the women had to have a few jobs, but they did not seem

to care. When asked what they dreamt of, the women replied, 'We want more culture and creative people around us'.

'Having worked with both cultural workers and high-school students, I was surprised to discover that mature workshop participants had many more dreams than the youth,' noted



Bulgarian director Dimitar Usunov. When asked why they had such a hard time to come up with a list of dreams, students of Juozas Tumas-Vaizgantas High-School replied that they were afraid of being judged. 'I am surprised to learn that', commented one of the cultural workers from the workshop. 'I thought that young people would find it easier to communicate and open up in the workshops. They do not have a language barrier, for one, whereas I always have this inferiority complex about being behind the times. But these workshops have given me wings. Now I know: what I have been doing is valid. And I can do so much more with the knowledge I got here.'

A visit to the Rokiskis children's puppet theatre

Fence 19 Prishtina (2014)
The Grand Hotel Prishtina
Or
The 13th Floor Elevators¹

Based on a fictionalized Habsburgian confection, Wes Anderson's film *The Grand Hotel Budapest* - inspired by the works of Stefan Zweig - serves as a suitable jumping off point for this reflection on some days spent in Kosovo's capital.

As guests of the hotel we were all roomed on the 4th Floor – entirely. The 12th Floor was a building site – a tranche of the city's unfinished template – yet merely the filling in the hotel sandwich. For it was the 13th Floor that provided the building's real story.

Queues would begin forming outside in the early evening. Red carpets and cordoning off. Tuxedo'd young men; girls in modern ballgowns. Paperazzi. The Grand Hotel plays host to High School Proms. Prishtina's youth teems. Traffic halts.

The 13th Floor houses the disco. Swathes invade the foyer. Bouncers guard the two lifts. It is like trying to fit a football crowd into a couple of cupboards. We sneak up the unlit staircase, bypassing the hormones.

In the morning, when the boom of the drum and bass has stopped its echo, we go to the Ethnological Museum. Our Guide is witty, erudite; still only mid-20s (was he in the lift last night?). He uses vernacular English; time spent learning the museum trade - but in Finland, not London.

The museum is two rich, C18th and C19th houses which form an oasis in Prishtina's building boom-lapse (are they going up? are they coming down?). In the rooms of beautifully carved Macedonian wood, glass cabinets house assorted wedding costumes; mainly for women but also male. Heavy bridal dresses from the mountains; others with red which symbolizes good luck.

Practical, elegant, each one different.

Laden with meanings. *Mädchen with leanings.*

Jonathan Meth

¹ The 13th Floor Elevators was an American rock band from Austin, Texas, formed by guitarist and vocalist Roky Erickson

Tuscany/Rome 22 March -29 March 2012
THE FENCE 16

Duska Radosavljevic



What a week! Probably worth two or three weeks rolled into one - and that's only on the food front...

Facts first: I am here with [the Fence](#) - an 'international network of playwrights and people who make playwriting happen'. The network exists largely thanks to the enthusiasm and generosity of its members who find ways to keep it going by facilitating meetings around interesting occasions. The Fence 16 is facilitated by Claudia Della Setta, an actress and theatre director based in Rome and Tel Aviv and a founder member of [Afrodita Compagnia](#). The Fence 16 consists of two phases - 1) a retreat in Claudia's house in Tuscany and 2) a residency with [Afrodita Compagnia](#) at [Teatro Valle](#) - or more precisely [Teatro Velle Occupato](#) - in Rome. Since its occupation began in June 2011, in protest against planned privatisation of the theatre, theatre workers who inhabit the building have made opportunities available for companies to take artistic directorship of the theatre on a week by week basis. Afrodita Compagnia's week is 26th March - 2 April. Afrodita have chosen a theme for their week: 'Masculine, Feminine, Love, Resistance'. A play called Non written in English and French by two Fence members Sara Clifford and Denis Baronnett will be translated by Claudia into Italian and read as part of the residency. There will also be a presentation from the [Arab-Hebrew Theatre of Jaffa](#).

Phase 1: Tuscany

Beautiful sunny mornings. The smell of freshly brewed coffee. Distant horizons lined by Italian Umbrella Pine trees. Claudia's family holiday home is a proper Italian family home anticipating several generations of the same family around dinner tables and under the same roof. Around a dozen of us are comfortably accommodated here, and several are staying in an agriturismo up the road. The talk of theatre and playwriting is interlaced with occasional table-football playing, sunbathing and cooking - a single internet dongle doing the rounds between individual computers. Because The World Theatre Day is due on 27th March, Fence member Doug Howe is making a film which will also be screened at Teatro Valle. He splits up John Malkovich's official message for that day and asks us to deliver individual lines one by one in our own languages - in addition to English, French, Spanish and Italian, we also have Swedish, Bulgarian, Serbian and Hebrew in the mix. Doug picks interesting locations for us in and around the house - I end up squinting into the sun, my incidental anxiety-generated spikiness underlined by massive cacti behind me. Our Spaniard Beatriz Cabur, meanwhile, gets to compete with a smouldering flame in her frame.

Sarah G. and I had been tasked with making sure the work part of the meeting gets done - so we at first try to subtly keep things on track, make sure everyone gets a go at speaking about themselves and their work, schedule in some works in progress among members and allow space and time for Claudia, Sara C., Denis, Hilary and Sofia to work towards their presentation of *Non*. Very few of the people present have actually met each other before, even though the work on *Non* is a continuation of two previous Fence meetings. Sara C. is only able to join us two days after we have arrived, so she has to be brought up to date with what the group has been up to. At times it is very hard keeping things the British side of chaotic. Both Sarah G. and I do our best, though at times I realise the only option I have is to play the bad cop...

We get two readings out on Saturday afternoon: 1) An extract from [Hotel Project](#) which was written and directed by Beatriz and Doug in New York as an interactive performance and is now being re-written as a musical. They test it on us as they try and decide on the form of the piece and its revised ending. 2) Sarah G.'s monologue *Red Shoes* was originally presented last month at Theatre 503 as part of an [Agent 160](#) showcase. Sarah is on the lookout for other fairy tales to adapt and suggestions come in thick and fast especially since everyone is bowled over by the monologue (featuring a South London single mother caught up in the whirlwind of consumerist desire as it erupted rather violently last summer during the London riots and led her to a fatal pair of red Louboutin shoes).

Every evening we manage to also get in some heated discussions on our set topics of love, resistance and gender politics (though these are often quite spontaneous), and also on cultural difference - as this is quite a prominent feature of our group. But we also end up cooking some fantastic food for each other. Kazem's Iranian potato galettes (with whisky) prompted Beatriz to add a recipe section to a library she has been building during our Tuscany meeting so that all the references we invoked in our discussions could be subsequently accessed at our leisure.



On the morning of the last day we finally hear the complete reading of *Non* - a rare privilege as the Roman audience will only get extracts. The play concerns a fifty year old working class English woman N. who is about to commit suicide at the beginning of the play, but is interrupted in the act by the ghost of Sid Vicious who draws her attention to a TV ad which is playing a number N. had written with her French punk band in the 1970s. This prompts her to make a journey back to France and down the memory lane... There are moments of great wit and fantastic writing in the play, and the whole thing is all the more impressive being done as a joint project between two writers whose knowledge of each other's languages is limited.

We briefly vote for our favourite scenes and then disperse on our individual last minute missions. Doug, Beatriz, Sarah G., and I are taken to the beach by Fred, who then drives back for Mia and Sara C. Fred is our hero in every respect! Sarah G. and I do a beach version of her Ashtanga routine - which my body is extremely grateful for for a few days to come. Doug and Beatriz disappear in a long walk. Mia eventually disappears to Sienna (thanks to Fred who drives her to the station) and six of us are neatly packed into Sofia's four-seater car and taken back just in time before she has to drive back to Rome.

And then it rains.

Phase 2: Rome

'Che casino!' - I believe is the right phrase in Italian for how our day started on Monday morning. The bus driver who is taking us ten minutes down the road to the local train station at 15 Euro a head is too early - not everyone's even arrived from their agriturismo bedrooms, let alone had coffee or breakfast. There's commotion about some male abuse of female toiletries. And then, when we are all finally together, our luggage on the bus and our bums on the seats, Fred and Denis are frantically climbing over the gates back into the house to retrieve Denis's computer he had left behind.

At the station, Sarah G. has her credit card stuck in a ticket vending machine, Beatriz has her money swallowed up and some of our travellers don't even manage to get a ticket at all. Once on the train, the conductor has to spend so much time with us solving our individual ticket issues he eventually lets Denis travel without one. As we draw nearer to Rome, conversations about gelato ensue.



Rome is hot, summery almost. Sarah G. takes us expertly around the streets of Rome, walks us all the way from Termini station to our destination Teatro Valle Occupato. Almost immediately, Fred procures and supplies us with the theatre wi fi password. We are back in the civilisation. Claudia and Sofia turn up and take us for lunch to a local restaurant which has a deal with the occupiers. After lunch, I have my very first coffee of this year! We are in a cafe which does the best coffee in Rome - and I can now vouch that this is indeed the case.

In Rome we are joined by Saskia from Holland and later in the evening by Jonathan Meth.

In the days that follow we try and work out exactly what is going on in Teatro Valle on the level of pragmatic detail. This is the story I manage to infer from all the information I have gathered:

In June 2011, theatre workers at Teatro Valle staged a three day protest against the decision to make the previously state owned theatre a private enterprise of the city of Rome. Built in 1727, this was a theatre with a rich history - its current occupiers characterise it as a 'house of revolution': this was the first theatre where women performed on stage in Italy, political prisoners were hiding here during the Second World War, a fight broke out around the premiere of Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* here and - 'most importantly' as they say jokingly - this was the theatre where Mozart fucked in the boxes! The boxes are a distinct feature of the theatre whose auditorium consists entirely of boxed up spaces accommodating four chairs each. There are three tiers of boxes with 27 boxes in each tier, and a fourth additional one with 54 individual seats (without divisions between them). These became our red velvet bedrooms during our stay - just big enough for a single blow up mattress, a book and a bottle of water.

The occupation of the theatre has continued since June last year till the present day. Though the occupiers look tired - big black bags under their eyes - they keep going and are tireless in their attempts to explain to us what they are doing and make us feel comfortable in their midst. So, 'occupare', they tell us, has two meanings in Italian - 'to occupy' and 'to take care'. For them the notion of 'taking care' is a defining principle of their occupation, and

interestingly the occupiers have predominantly been women. There is apparently a Valle Occupato baby on the way too... Politically, they are keen to develop a model of governance that is entirely from the bottom up rather than top down. This means that they do not vote in order to make decisions, they discuss issues until they all reach a consensus on what to do. This is taking time but they seem comfortable with the idea. Currently they are writing their Statute, although they have defined five principles which they all feel passionate about: Agora (forum), Training, Vocation, Common Good and Eco-Sustainability. They have had messages of support from Ostermeier and Mnouchkine, and they have also included major Italian figures in their workshops and forum discussions. One of their first invited speakers was the Italian philosopher Federica Giardini and the playwright Fausto Paravidino. Currently, the occupiers have one clear aim - to raise the 250,000 Euro they need in order to become a foundation and therefore acquire a legal status. So far, they have collected 80,000.

As some of the Fence members sit around in the foyer on our last day together informally reading Trevor Griffiths's play [The Party](#) chosen by



Reading of The Party

Jonathan Meth as our present to the Valle, the occupiers spontaneously gather around us. They tell us that they wish to foreground playwriting and to change the system by which the Italian playwrights have had their work commissioned up until now through contests, judged by independent panels. We were told of an informal survey which highlighted that, among 122 playwrights, the only thing they had in common was the experience of solitude - clearly a far cry from the kind of work being done in the UK and elsewhere to integrate the playwright into the rehearsal process, or indeed even from the Fence whose *raison d'être* is networking between writers... Another one of their concerns, inspired by Giardini, is to address the notion of language and its decolonisation from recent history. Terms such as 'meritocracy', 'popolo', 'liberta', they tell us, have been completely contaminated by Berlusconi's government...

It is interesting that my journey through Europe started with the conference in Ghent where I spoke about the power of theatre to create a community - and to resurrect and rehabilitate that term after its post-communist demise. At the end of my trip I was confronted with three more models of community-building and reinvention of governance models:

- 1) There's Valle Occupato, genuinely doing things differently. Reinventing ways of relating with each other, with their culture, with their audience. Allowing things to grow organically. Believing in the possibility of genuine consensus - whatever it takes.
- 2) There is the Arab-Hebrew Theatre of Jaffa. 'An island of sanity' as they call themselves. A group of artists braving some serious storms in order to bring together the communities otherwise divided by history and politics. They introduced themselves to us as people who

sometimes violently disagree with each other but who still love and respect each other. They agree to disagree, and they believe in the importance of being together.

3) And then there's the Feneé, which Beatriz, on her first encounter with it, summarised as an 'elephant'. Its constituent parts are different, it looks different from different angles, its members don't even all have a language in common, and yet it is an entity.

All three would suggest that we are moving towards a modus operandi which is closer to an improvisation than a tightly directed show. Or in the words of Jean-Luc Nancy, we are moving towards 'being together' rather than essentialised 'togetherness'.

Fence 15 Rabat (2012)

Rabat Blog - Neil Fleming

The poet and playwright Abdellatif Laâbi spent nine years in a Moroccan jail in the 1970s. Freed by international pressure, he has lived ever since in Paris.

But earlier this month (March 2012), for the first time ever, his play *Exercices de tolérance (Studies in the Exercise of Tolerance)* was performed in the Moroccan capital, Rabat. Not only that, but it was performed in the country's national theatre, the monolithic Théâtre Mohammed V, bastion of state-sponsored light entertainment and theatre (which sports what looks like a million-foot curtain drop on its giant proscenium stage).

Directed by young Moroccan theatre director Mahmoud Chadi and acted mostly in Moroccan dialect (with French subtitles) by Moroccan theatre company *Nous Jouons Pour les Arts*, the show pulls few punches in its extended series of sketches.

Half-naked, masked girls in a harem beg an unnamed dictator/king to "come on our faces... beat us... execute us."



The covered market in Rabat

The same "dictator", taking live questions from the audience, is asked "What do you think of freedom of speech?" and replies "You are asking the question. Isn't that freedom enough?" The audience laughs nervously.

"But I would say this to you ladies and gentleman of the press," he goes on. "*Weeds need to be cut down.*"

Rimbaud and Scheherezade have a random encounter in a supermarket. Slam dancers waltz the stage.

A street sweeper meets a rich man. "What are you doing?" asks the rich man. "Cleaning the street," comes the reply. "What are you saying? What are you implying? Are you saying it's dirty here?"

Menace and unease are in evidence throughout, and it's strong stuff for what, on the face of it, is a strongly conservative Islamic country.

One swift and easy conclusion is that Morocco, which has to date seemed more or less immune to the "Arab Spring" phenomenon, no need of revolution. Because it is already a liberal place. A progressive King, for whose grandfather the theatre is named, has steadily relaxed the grip of the State, recognized the Berber language Amaziri as a third official Moroccan language (alongside Arabic and French), encouraged the arts... and built a sparkling new tram system in Rabat.

But as ever in the endlessly subtle world of Arab politics, things may not be that simple.

I was in the audience as a member of the international playwrights group *The Fence* (www.the-fence.net), visiting Rabat for a week's workshops with young Moroccan writers and actors, at the invitation of the Ministry of Culture. We didn't pay for our tickets.

But then, it turns out, nor did anyone else. All five hundred-odd spectators have been invited personally. There has been no advertising, not even a poster outside the theatre itself. There is no programme (although, as it turns out, there rarely is in Moroccan theatre).

We meet later with the well-heeled young director, who wears large Harry Potter glasses and explains his approach to the play.

"I photocopied all the pages and went through them making two piles," he says. "The parts that I liked and the parts I didn't. Then we did a sort of mash-up and the result is what you saw. That's my process." That's the gist, anyway, of what he said.

Fighting talk, in a restaurant full of playwrights.

But whatever one thinks of the process, there is perhaps a message here. And the message is that the works of Abdellatif Laâbi belong to history. His attack on the state of Moroccan politics is also a part of history: not relevant to today, available for mash-up, reinterpretation – raw material for a piece of zingy shock theatre. And zingy shock theatre is OK, so long as we know exactly who's in the audience. And we do.

Perhaps this isn't quite what it seems.

Meanwhile, down the street, tired riot police are beating up a small group of tired demonstrators outside the parliament building, as they protest, rather listlessly, about unemployment.

Uneasy is the word.

Fence 12 Glasgow (2010)

Dear Fence Playwrights (and Friends),

Allow us to introduce ourselves.

Scotland is an ambiguous province of the United Kingdom located somewhere North of London. It is where the British Royal Family come for their holidays and to shoot things.

Though most of the countryside is inhabited only by midges and sheep, it is very good to look at, and includes both large and very small places where people live.

Not very many of us. Four and half million or so.

One of these places is called Edinburgh, a magical city which appears every summer for three weeks and then vanishes.

Another place is called Glasgow, which is where you arrive if you come to Edinburgh, but turn sharply to your left.

Oddly, for a place where there are hardly any people, there is an awful lot of theatre going on, a surprising amount of which was written only moments before the show started by a hardy and quite well organised collection of playwrights, most of whom quite like each other, even though they have almost all met each other at least once.

Sometimes these playwrights are organised into doing things by a dedicated support and development agency called the Playwrights' Studio Scotland, run with frightening energy and goodwill by Fence member Julie Ellen. Sometimes they organise themselves into doing things with a sort of Trade Union called "The Scottish Society of Playwrights" who have negotiated a minimum terms contract for playwrights and theatre companies to sign, that reminds the theatre companies that paying playwrights properly (as well as actors and technicians) is a condition of their funding. This sometimes stops us from being robbed and exploited, and we try to make sure that anyone who does rob and exploit us has a really embarrassing time and doesn't do it again.

Partly as a result of our solidarity, (and support from MOST theatre companies, MOST of the time), even though Scotland is quite a small place, it's quite a good place to be a playwright, so people tend to keep doing it, and some of us, we think, are pretty good at it now, and have been able to show our plays in other places besides Scotland.

Some Scottish playwrights who have done this that you may have heard of are Gregory Burke, David Grieg, Anthony Nielson, David Harrower, Linda Maclean, Rona Munro, and Liz Lohead. There are quite a lot of other ones, and we have all their phone numbers. A peculiar thing about us is that we see each other and talk to each other quite a lot.

Another peculiar thing about Scottish playwrights is that quite a lot of them weren't born here, but they came to visit, and decided to stay and do their plays here. Which makes them Scottish as far as we're concerned.

A peculiar thing about Scottish plays is that Standard English is just one of a number of possible dialects our actors speak in, and isn't necessarily the most interesting way we have of writing things for them to say. We think this is one of the things that makes our plays

interesting. We also think it might be one of the things that might make your plays interesting too, if they were translated into English by Scottish playwrights. (Or into what we call Lallans, or Doric, or even Gaelic...but's that's a whole other complicated story). It might be a way that the people in your plays who sound like they come from very specific places don't sound like they all come from the middle of the Atlantic when they get translated into English. Just a thought.

We do this with old plays a lot, plays written by people like Molière and Dürrenmat and Checkov. But we sometimes don't wait until the playwright is dead. We think Michel Tremblay's plays, for example, sound really good in Scottish.

We also should mention that Scotland has recently acquired two things that make it look a bit more like a proper country - a national parliament and a national theatre company. We're very happy about both of these things but that doesn't stop us having lots of arguments about them at any time of day or night. We like arguments.

Perhaps we're not used to having these "proper country" things yet...and we hear that there are quite a lot of places in other parts of Europe and the world where people have similar arguments about new (or fairly new) parliaments and theatres. It might be good to compare notes before we've all got used to it. Even if you've had your parliaments and national theatres for a long time, we'd like to hear about how that works for you.

In November, lots of theatre people from all over Europe are going to come to Glasgow to have a look at it and each other. There will be shows and discussions. This is the International Network for Contemporary Performing Arts, IETM, meeting.

The Fence can come too, to see shows too, if you like. But we think it might be good as well if you met lots of Scottish playwrights and talked to them about what you do, and hear about what they do. They will have arguments with you and with each other that you may enjoy.

We have some organisations and experiences we think you might find interesting. We have a strange relationship with the Anglo-American Empire we think you may find provocative. We want to talk to you about your work, we want to see your work and we want you to see ours. But we also want to meet you. We'll find some nice places to do that, and find some other people you might find interesting.

We can pay for food and accomodation for ten of you if you'd like to come. You'll have to find your own money to pay to get here. Those nice people at Ryanair send their cattle planes to Glasgow Prestwick Airport, which is about 50 minutes away on a train, and to Edinburgh Airport, which has a bus that gets you to Glasgow in less than an hour as well. Easyjet and others fly to Glasgow Airport, which is actually quite near Glasgow...so if planes come from where you are to any of these places, that will do fine.

If you have to go to London or Paris first, we'll understand, but it might cost you more money.

If more than ten of you would like to come, we can't pay for your food or accomodation, I'm afraid, but we'll do our best to make you welcome. Jonathan and Gabriel can sleep at Peter's house, for example.

Hope to see you in November

Love

Scotland's Playwrights

ps

We're really good at parties. Ask Buff to tell you about Tam.

Fence 11 Chemnitz 2010

Fence 11 took place against the backdrop of Germany's festival "Chemnitz - Most Beautiful Flower of the East"

Introduction

The minds of the citizens of Chemnitz are haunted by a set of negative ideas: Chemnitz is ugly... Chemnitz is dying... Chemnitz is frustrated...WRONG! Today, Chemnitz is the region in East Germany that has been most thoroughly re-industrialised. Since 1995 more than 7000 new enterprises have been established in and around Chemnitz. For the fifth time in a row, Chemnitz is listed among the ten fastest growing cities in Germany.

ACTUALLY:

Chemnitz was once the most significant and wealthy industrial city in Germany until it was destroyed to 95 percent in the Allied Air Raids of 1945. At that point the town was declared a "dead city", and it is still/again perceived as such today.

Since the political changes of 1989 Chemnitz is a shrinking city, its residential areas are increasingly abandoned and it is home to the largest contingent of aged citizens in Germany. Furthermore, because their town is located in the periphery, the locals see themselves as the "fifth wheel on the cart" in the competition between the largest towns in Saxony: Leipzig, Dresden and Chemnitz. It is these negative aspects in particular that continue to shape the self-perception of Chemnitz.

BUT:

Under the headline "Chemnitz - City of Modernity" the council has begun to take measures against the self-perception of Chemnitz as an ugly, unattractive town that has long seen its prime by building connections to the city's dazzling past. In Chemnitz the political change of 1989 received strong support by the theatre. It was at Schauspiel Chemnitz that the will and courage to change showed early, and this will to take action is still present today.

THEREFORE:

The Theatre Festival "CHEMNITZ - most beautiful flower of the East!" is set to oppose the common negative attitudes and celebrate a happy, optimistic and vivid town of many talents.

The days of self-pitying and whining are over:

Chemnitz is the most beautiful flower of East!

Chemnitz is a city of today, of a future that is attractive and worth living for!

Reasons for participating

The following submissions give some insight into writers' and other theatre professionals' reasons for attending Fence meetings:

Dipo Agboluaje

I want to go to Chemnitz to continue the dialogue with my fellow Fencers, in the hope of finding collaborators to work on a viable project. The experience I had on the French wing of the FENCE in which I worked with my French colleagues to produce a work for the Les Theatrales Festival in 2007 was very illuminating, seeing how diverse work is produced in countries outside the UK. I am also working on the reception of African work in Britain and would like to extend the scope to Europe. Therefore I'd contribute in facilitating a discussion on the production and reception of diverse work in Europe.

Gabriel Gbadamosi:

I would like to participate in the meeting of The Fence network of European playwrights and facilitators in Chemnitz in order to renew my connection with a wide range of fellow practitioners and extend my knowledge of their work with a view to future collaborations such as the Liberty, Equality Fraternity trilogy of plays co-written with two francophone playwrights, Alain Foix and Ahmed Ghazali (George Wood Theatre, Goldsmiths and Soho Theatre, 2007); to re-engage as a working dramaturg (eg. Hydroponic, ACE South East/South Street, 2006-9) with developments in dramaturgical thinking and practice from the German-speaking countries; and to develop with Scottish colleagues a contribution from The Fence towards the international network for contemporary performing arts, IETM, taking place in Glasgow later in 2010.

Neil Fleming:

With the encouragement of Vienna's Burgtheater director Dieter Boyer, Neil is currently working on a play, in German, which directly explores many of the themes of the Chemnitz festival: small-town isolation, aspiration, and the challenge of self-expression. Self-referentially, of course, there is a major challenge of self-expression inherent in a UK playwright writing in a foreign language.

Neil and Dieter are in discussion about finding a way to stage the play at the festival. Engaged with and committed to European theatre, Neil's participation in The Fence to date is an excellent example of what the organisation was founded to do: promote cross-cultural development of theatre in the region, and help develop an audience around Europe and in North America for work from other languages and cultures.

Kim Komljanec:

Coming from Slovenia I have the experience of having lived in a communist state of Yugoslavia, then in the independent Slovenia with its turbo-capitalism and now (since 2008) in Britain, an old capitalistic country. I believe I could contribute significantly to the debate which the Fence meeting in Chemnitz is focused on, by presenting my own experience of having lived and worked in these three different political systems. Furthermore, I am more than willing to share my knowledge of the different conditions of theatrical creation in the two countries' in both: big urban centres (Ljubljana vs. London) and the so-called provincial areas (Devon/Exeter vs. Slovenian countryside).

More specifically, I could offer the Fence members an insight into a playwright's experience of the fall of the Berlin wall by presenting my own work which deals with the issue of how that political change has affected the personal lives in both, The East and The West.

Furthermore, I would be happy to present the work of some theatre practitioners from the north of Germany (Rostock) with whom I have worked in the past and they could offer an insight of their creative environment today.

My own motivation to attend the meeting is learning more about theatrical creation in Germany today and how this is seen from abroad.

Julie Ellen:

My reasons for attending are as follows;

To refresh relationships and form new ones with playwrights & playwriting representatives from across Europe. I will take the contacts, experience and knowledge gained back to Scotland to disseminate to playwrights and the theatre sector through my role as Creative Director of Playwrights' Studio. www.playwrightsstudio.co.uk

To share information about the talent, working practices and current issues of playwrights & playwriting in Scotland.

To explore the potential for inter-country projects with Playwrights' Studio's peer organisations.

To develop and promote the Fence activity which will be part of the IETM in Glasgow in November 2010.

Svetlana Dimcovic:

A Festival where the issues of how work is disseminated, performed and taken to groups who may not otherwise have access to theatres and performances (not just physical access issues or geography but issues of disadvantage, social and local issues and perception of these) is a very important step in my professional development, especially since I work outside of the UK too and the context in Germany would inform my thinking. It is also interesting to see how links can be established between different countries in terms of how we develop work and make it accessible, carrying a social conscience."

Sara Clifford:

I would like to go with The Fence to Chemnitz because it will be a fantastic opportunity to see theatre from this overlooked part of Europe and to meet with practitioners from both the Fence network and beyond.

The subject of working outside main centres is close to my heart, as I struggle with living in the South East of England, which while perceived to be richly endowed with culture and arts, actually relies on Glyndebourne and Chichester as flagship venues and has no infrastructure for theatre at all. We have no theatre venues and touring companies may visit Brighton Theatre Royal with a Number 1 tour, or try and find a village hall somewhere in Sussex or Kent. Whilst I have no problem with site specific work, I am concerned at the politics of the cultural leaders who have decided that we don't need or want a venue for new writing, and am currently involved in a local campaign to create a brand new building locally.

Alongside this, I do specialize in working with local communities, and am in receipt of a grant to develop a play in Newhaven Harbour, working with Zap Arts and a French company, Generic Vapeur. I am looking to eventually do a PhD in this subject, and I would like to find out what practitioners from other countries are doing in this sector.

I am also hoping to be working as a trustee with New Writing South, the local writers' network, and one of the strands I would like to develop with them is international work, and so attending this festival will support me in this.

Sarah Grochala:

Attending the Fence meeting at Chemnitz would enable me to engage with the working practices in use in contemporary playwriting in Germany. In my research into alternative dramaturgical structures in British theatre, I draw heavily on German theoretical models, particularly the work of Hans-Thies Lehmann. In Chemnitz, I would have the opportunity to see German dramaturgy in practice. This would enable me to gauge the relationship between the theory and the practice of dramaturgy in Germany, and to experience the kind of dramaturgical models that are actually used in practice. As a playwright I would have a chance to share my own experience of British theatre practice with other playwrights and cultural operators from Germany and beyond. This would offer me new perspectives that would enrich my own work. I would be able to contribute pieces of my work to public Fence readings and be an active participant in the making of scratch work. I would be able to share the outcomes of my own research into dramaturgical practice in Britain with practitioners in Germany. As a playwright with a mixed cultural background (Anglo-Polish), I am keen to connect with other playwrights and cultural operators from Europe and beyond in order to share our experiences of working within different theatrical landscapes.

Penny Black:

Chemnitz lies at the heart of Europe. The former east of Germany has always had strong links to the eastern parts of Europe and Russia but few, if any, to the west and towards the rest of the world unless in a socialist alliance. This is changing and the Fence in Chemnitz at present comes at an interesting time.. Within that closed world however, theatre was very strong and had a political base. As most of my work has a strong political base, I am looking forward to exploring that. I feel that personally I can bring my fluent German, my understanding of different - and in particular German - theatre traditions and theatrical tendencies, to provide background knowledge for the other participants, and to interpret where necessary. For myself, it will be a wonderful opportunity to be with like-minded people to explore ideas and working practice and a glass of wine. These opportunities are few and far between and are to be treasured when they come around.

Duska Radosavljevic:

I am curious to find out more about this very successful international initiative involving European playwrights and dramaturgs and contribute whatever resources, skills and knowledge I have to its further development. As I also now run one of the very few M-level specialisms in Dramaturgy at the University of Kent, I would find this sort of an event very useful for my own teaching purposes. I believe strongly that my students should be well aware of the most up to date trends in the area of dramaturgy both in the UK and on the continent and equip them with relevant sets of skills that would enable them to negotiate different trends and ways of working effectively. s graduates from a University that brands itself as 'the

European University of the UK', it's only reasonable to expect this of them. ! I would hope that I could offer my own skills and professional experience as a dramaturg, theatre translator and theatre critic to this gathering as well as possibly my own professional contacts and possibly even a useful space for any further gatherings at the University of Kent. I might be able to investigate possibilities for funding some of the expenses associated with this trip through staff development funds.

Jackie Bolton:

As a PhD student conducting a comparative study of British and German theatre cultures, the Fence's proposed trip to Festival Chemnitz presents an excellent opportunity to further extend and enrich my knowledge, understanding and appreciation of theatrical production in Germany. My research is founded upon a three year residency at West Yorkshire Playhouse, one of the UK's leading regional theatres; the festival's focus on 'theatrical creation beyond the big centres' is therefore of particular interest to a research project orientated towards the development of new work across regional theatre. Likewise, the festival's discussion of the impact of 1989 upon theatre-making processes will directly inform my research's ongoing assesment of the social, economic and political contexts which influence the work of theatre institutions in Germany. In addition to contributing a 'theory-informed-by-practice' perspective to discussions at the Festival, I would hope to share with the Fence network any interview/essay materials that I may generate by talking with playwrights, directors and dramaturgs in Chemnitz. I would be attending with a view to striking up relationships with German academics and practitioners alike; relationships which I hope would benefit not only other members of the Fence network itself, but also the institutions, academic and theatrical, that I hope to work with in the future. Should the opportunity arise, I would also be happy to (re)present aspects of the Fence's work to the relevant politicians attending the festival.

Fence 8.5 Paris / London (2006/7)
Acts of Translation - Rencontres Paris/Londres

Ecriture théâtrale, différence, dialogue et engagement culturels (London)

BME Theatre in the 21st Century?

A provocation to the sector, and Arts Council England, from Gabriel Gbadmosi

Waiting for us, the practitioners, to change it, the Arts Council England uses the term BME (Black Minority Ethnic) to describe the creative work of artists originating from Africa, the Caribbean, Asia and East Asia. Further, BME is often contracted to, and used interchangeably with, the single word Black. You can be Black as Japanese and Minority Ethnic as Indian in Leicester, but you can not be BME as Irish in Kilburn, Albanian in Finsbury Park, or Polish anywhere you happen to have migrated in the UK. We are clearly operating in a field of colour: BME is aimed at a broad geographical spread of non-white peoples. It is an attempt to describe, and counter, discrimination as it occurs across British society on the basis of colour.

Unfortunately, as BME accompanies and discloses the fault lines of, effectively, a colour bar (making what operates invisibly as discrimination visible by labelling the people it targets), it tends not only to counter but also to reinforce a discriminatory version of the world. One extreme outcome of this is the ghettoisation of BME funded work: BME, non-white, black people must have some small corner of funding to cover their minority interests and audiences – over there, among themselves. The colour of your skin starts to operate instead of you in determining the scope and meaning of your creative work – born of discrimination, marginal in its concerns. Such a view closes minds and limits horizons, denigrates the work and does a disservice to all who see the legacy to our society of the last century as its openness to diversity – a diversity including (but not limited to) its Caribbean, Pakistani, African, Chinese and Turkish influences.

Something is needed to break open the stifling contradictions of BME terminology – lumping the interests and outlooks of the artist identified as Vietnamese together with the practices and development needs of Trinidadian steel bands. How can BME account for the slide away from fixed cultural identities in the collaborations between Irish playwrights and African dancers, Philippino and Polish puppeteers, black British actors and a Sri Lankan director? Does BME begin to capture the excitement and complexity of these new encounters in our society – here, now, in Britain today – encounters between artists and peoples drawn from Columbia and Brazil, out of Eastern and Southern Europe, let alone Africa and the wide continent of Asia?

It is my hope as an Irish, Nigerian, British writer that our BME voices will become as central to the future and prosperity of Britain's cultural life as they are to global popular culture – from hip-hop to the Hindi musical. When we speak of BME as of the poor, the marginal and the oppressed, holding that as our understanding of how to pay lip service to diversity, we miss rather an important trick. Both the language and the mind-set prevent us thinking through the relationships between, say, the multicultural and the international in scope and ambition. Who, for example, is in a ghetto whose work opens windows on South India, the West Indies, downtown Lagos? Analysis of the shifting demography of our major towns and cities points already to local hubs of a globally-focused range of creative and cultural practices – in music, certainly, but also in dance, literature, and performance. The potential for cross-fertilisation among our artists is the great white hope of multicultural Britain. Our diversity is the laboratory of future culture. And it involves everyone – in that everyone is changed by it.

The success of London's Olympic bid was built on a snap shot of our athletes and the aspiring young people of the East End as multi-ethnic, multicultural and multi-talented. For creative artists unburdened by the narrow parochialism of British racism, to be transcultural in Britain ought to put you up on a world stage beside our Olympic athletes – at the cutting edge, in global competition. Yet any survey of so-called BME theatre over the last few decades would have to conclude, at the very least, that the sector as a whole has failed to thrive. Why that should be – and why Black and Asian theatre, as it used to be known, has never managed to completely die out in despite of conspicuous failure – is really a question worth asking. Though I can imagine when a theatre that doesn't employ you takes over the telling of your story that you don't like it, and you want to take back your sense of self in your own theatre.

I ask myself from time to time, do I believe my work to have been limited by being perceived as a BME artist in the prevailing circumstances of British theatre? Ask a silly question... but I come up regularly with two quite different answers. Perhaps the obvious one is yes, I should have been white. And what's more, if I have to be Black, I should have been Blacker than I am

to profit from the ongoing, if sporadic, attempts at positive discrimination and funding. But I'm not gangsta enough to do that. The other answer is no, the life of a playwright is notoriously short, a kind of mayfly that has its moment and vanishes, and I had my day. I and every other playwright I know has had to reinvent themselves in order to keep working. The problem has never been being Black but staying Young. The new Young playwright has often been at it for twenty years, and nothing rejuvenates likes success. So why bother railing about something like BME terminology, let alone the mind-set? Who cares what the industry thinks when all bets are off with a hit? Don't get mad, get made in the West End. A good BME show is always a hot ticket because people feel it should be there, somewhere.

But if success is not the solution to BME failure, what is? There appear to me to be two positions on this. That society as a whole has exercised poor judgment in its management of the whole multiculturally diverse thing and ought to do it more but better. Or, it's been a mistake from the first and society had best figure out how to retrench in native, core British values that can then be rolled out to the take-it-or-leave-it edges. Either way, there is some work to do. What are those values to be for the neo-nativists, or how to do failure better for the diversifiers? Both of these positions fail to grasp, from my point of view, the reality that our diversity is native. Diversity subsists not in a segment of our society but throughout it, in its very nature. British theatre as a whole has failed to reflect its society.

Following a recent Arts Council England sponsored consultation with the BME theatre sector, Baroness Lola Young's report, "Whose Theatre?", recommended the development of a network of buildings for BME work into the 21st century. I chaired the presentation of that report to the Arts Council and the initial engagement of BME artists with its various recommendations at the Theatre Royal Stratford East once the Arts Council had decided to back it. Whatever else, the conversation around the issues raised in the report is very lively and instructive. I think it's fair to say, on the matter of buildings – bricks and mortar, bums and seats, safe houses for beleaguered work – some people will believe it when they see it. Some existing theatre companies would rather shore up their own tenure on buildings. Others voices want clarity on the inclusive or exclusive remit of the buildings in relation different interest groups within the BME sector – who gets to use these buildings and for what?. And some others see new occasions for infighting over scarce resources. But the sector as a whole has said it wants these buildings and that is where the matter rests for the time being.

My own suggestion for this network of buildings – given, among other things, the demand for them outstripping supply among BME theatre practitioners – is to focus on their programming. Rather than encourage yet another round of unreflective and unproductive 'ghettoisation' of BME-funded work, it may be possible to solicit bids from consortia of BME-led artists and/or producers to run each of the venues on a rotating basis, say, for three years. Free to think outside of the BME box, the remit might be to develop and program work that in their view reflects the diversity of our society – their own or from across British or international theatre. It would be the content of the work and not the colour of the skin that leads in asking what should British theatre be doing to reflect its society? We might then have a network of theatres that describe us now and give us a glimpse of our future.

*Gabriel Gbadamosi AHRC Creative and Performing Arts Fellow, Goldsmiths College,
University of London*

Leeds (2006)

This was the largest Fence meeting held, at Leeds (then West Yorkshire) Playhouse – as part of the EU Culture funded Janus project, under the aegis of its Associate Director Alex Chisholm.

Participants in Leeds, May 2006

- Birgit Logar, UniT, Austria
- Dieter Boyer, director, Austria
- Edith Draxl, Janus Project Partner, UniT, Austria
- Evelyn Tschernko, UniT, Austria
- Ewald Palmetshofer, playwright/UniT, Austria
- Johannes Schrettle, playwright, Austria
- Andrei Kureichyk, playwright, Belarus
- Kamelia Nikolova, theatre professor, Bulgaria
- Sonja Novak, student, Croatia
- Vedrana Stakic, student, Croatia
- Jitka Sloupova, literary agent/ translator, Czech Republic
- Petr Zelenka, playwright, Czech Republic
- Leea Klemola, playwright, Finland
- Riitta Seppalla, Janus Project Partner, Director of Finnish Theatre Information Centre, Finland
- Claudia Gabler, playwright, Germany
- David Lindemann, playwright/ dramaturg, Germany
- Werner Paul Brodowsky, playwright, Germany
- Andreas Flourakis, playwright, Greece
- Anja Krans, Janus Project Partner, Theatre Institute of the Netherlands, Holland
- Anne Marielle van Sauers, playwright, Holland
- Judith de Rijke, playwright, Holland
- Judith Wendel, dramaturg, Holland
- Saskia Huybrechtse, theatre maker, Holland
- Janos Hay, playwright, Hungary
- Vincent Woods, playwright, Ireland
- Aiste Ptakauskaite, playwright, Lithuania
- Margorzata Semil, dramaturg/translator, Poland
- Joana Frazao, theatre programmer, Portugal
- Jose Maria Vieira Mendes, playwright, Portugal
- Alexandru Berceanu, director, Romania
- Andreea Valean, playwright, Romania
- Stefan Peca, playwright, Romania
- Marija Stojanovic, playwright/translator, Serbia
- Milena Bogavac, playwright, Serbia
- Milos Kreckovic, dramaturg, Serbia
- Jure Rudolf, producer, Slovenia
- Cem Duzova, playwright, Turkey
- Charles Mulekwa, playwright, Uganda
- Alan Lane, Slung Low/ The Mill/West Yorkshire Playhouse, UK

- Alex Chisholm, Project Partner, Literary Manager, West Yorkshire Playhouse, UK
- Alice Nutter, playwright, UK
- Alys Torrance, Hi Veld, UK
- Amanda Roberts, producer, Birmingham Rep, UK
- Anne-Marie Draycott, administrator, Writernet, UK
- Annette Brook, writernet intern, UK
- Ben Payne, Associate Director, Birmingham Rep, UK
- Chris Thorpe, playwright, UK
- Colin Buckle, Script Yorkshire, UK
- Dan Bye, Silver Tongue, UK
- Daniel Wagstaffe, Script Yorkshire, UK
- Eamon Rooney, playwright, UK
- Gabriel Gbadamosi, playwright, UK
- Gadi Roll, Belgrade Theatre Coventry, UK
- Hamish Glen, Artistic Director, Belgrade Theatre Coventry, UK
- Holly Kendrick, Director, National Student Drama Festival, UK
- Iain Bloomfield, Artistic Director, Theatre in the Mill, Bradford, UK
- Jack Meredith, student dramaturg, UK
- Jacqueline Bolton, dramaturg/ PhD Student, University of Leeds/ West Yorkshire Playhouse, UK
- Jess Inzani, student dramaturg, UK
- Jodie Marshall, playwright, UK
- Jonathan Meth, Project Partner, Director, Writernet, UK
- Julie Ellen, Creative Director, Playwrights Studio Scotland, UK
- Kara McKechnie, University of Leeds, UK
- Kerrie Leyland, student dramaturg, UK
- Laura MacKay, student dramaturg, UK
- Lily Bourne, student dramaturg, UK
- Lindsay Ashton, student dramaturg, UK
- Lynn Crosby, Script Yorkshire, UK
- Marcia Layne, playwright, UK
- Mark Catley, playwright, UK
- Mark Kirkby, playwright, UK
- Mary Cooper, Script Yorkshire, UK
- Matt Aston, Lakeside Arts Centre, UK
- Michael Stewart, playwright, Script Yorkshire, UK
- Neil Fleming, playwright/translator, UK
- Nicola MacKenzie, student dramaturg, UK
- Oliver Emanuel, playwright, Silver Tongue, UK
- Penny Black, translator, UK
- Peter Arnott, playwright, Scotland, UK
- Phil Porter, playwright, UK
- Richard Warburton, Lost Dog Theatre Company, UK
- Sara Clifford, playwright, writernet, UK
- Sarah Dickenson, dramaturg, writernet, UK

- Sarah Punshon, director, UK
- Tajinder Singh Hayer, playwright, UK
- Julek Neumann, translator, UK/Czech Republic
- Lucy Hind, Hi Veld, UK/SAR
- Ozgun Akbaba, musician, UK/Turkey
- Serdar Bilis, director/Liverpool Everyman, UK/Turkey
- Alison Watt, playwright, UK
- Chris Bridgeman, North West Playwrights, UK
- Christian Winkler, director/ student, UK/Austria
- David Overend, Lit Assistant, Traverse Theatre, Scotland, UK
- Liz Ryan, playwright, UK
- Sheila McAnulty, North West Playwrights, UK
- Christopher Rodriguez, playwright/ Literary Manager, Talawa, UK
- Catherine Coray, actor/teacher, New York, USA

Fence 7. Graz 2006

The relationship of the playwright to the theatre in the German-speaking world

Talk given by Marie Rotzer - Chief Dramaturg at the Schauspielhaus Graz, 23rd March 2006

Background

There are two key points of understanding that need to be established before investigating the relationship of playwrights to theatre in German Speaking Theatres:

1. Theatre is heavily subsidised by the state and is regarded as very important for culture. A building such as the Schauspielhaus in Graz receives around €20million a year in subsidy (which funds a programme of nightly rep, with at least six week rehearsal periods). However, only around 10% of this subsidy goes directly to artists (actors, writers, directors). The remaining 90% is directed towards running the building, administration and maintaining the repertory system (which is very expensive).

2. The work of authors has always been regarded as the basis of theatre. Historically authors were the driving force of the theatre and in the past would produce and direct their own plays with their own troupe of actors (not dissimilar to Shakespeare). This system of working is still seen in Fringe companies today, but it should be noted that often, once a company has reached a level of success, they are absorbed into the State repertory system (this is seen particularly in Switzerland).

The Relationship Between The Repertory and the Fringe

It is important to note that the notion of Fringe theatre is a little different to that in the UK. Most of the fringe companies are in receipt of financial support (making them the equivalent of UK touring companies). The largest of these receives a subsidy of around €220,000, the smallest receives €35,000. Devised theatre is not traditional in Austria, and that movement is only just developing. There is also an attempt to develop links between the fringe scene and the amateur sector. Even still, the majority of the theatre budget in Austria and Germany is directed towards repertory theatres, whose strict production methods block innovation. The support that the Fringe gets is not enough to support it and this is reflected in the quality of production. The work of many of the fringe companies is modelled on that in the reps. There is an attempt to develop a better context for their work.

New Work, New Premieres: Considerations and Tensions

The climate for new work is influenced by a number of issues which are not wholly unfamiliar. They include:

1. Premieres more expensive than classic
2. Audiences especially in provinces nervous of new plays.
3. Theatres fight for new plays and new authors
4. Theatres think young authors have fingers on pulse and want to act quickly (contemporary situation and events)

5. Press – National Press pick up on new plays – want to be a part of discovering new authors, new plays but this is sometimes compromised by the small travel budgets allotted to critics wanting to get to premieres.

Getting your Play Produced

With the advent of the Director's Theatre Movement, and the Repertory Theatre System, work in theatres was re-divided. This had the effect of removing the playwright from the centre of the theatre company and effectively pushing them out of the building.

Verlag

The relationships between theatres and contemporary playwrights are managed by Verlagen. A Verlag is a publisher/ agent, a middle-man, through whom work is sent to theatre companies. This is the normal route that takes a play text to the stage.

There are many verlagen throughout Germany and Austria and they divide the market up between them, many having a speciality (the work of Eastern European Authors, for example, the specialism of Henschel). Authors select the verlag to send their work to through this speciality. There is really only one good theatre publisher in Austria, who are based in Vienna.

Authors send their work to the Verlag. If it is accepted and the author is taken on, then their work will be featured in a published catalogue of new and available work which the verlag sends to theatres in advance of their theatre seasons (September to June). This catalogue contains information on new plays and their authors, including synopsis and CVs. Work is often divided into subject areas (globalisation for example) to make it easier for theatres to find plays they might be interested in. Theatres then order copies of scripts from the list in order to make proper judgements. In the past these were posted, but email has now made it easier for theatres to receive plays quickly.

Beyond the Verlag: Direct Submissions and Development Opportunities

A more unusual route is for a writer to cut out the middleman and send their text directly to the dramaturgy department of the theatre themselves. This poses problems though, as unread scripts pile up: there is often not the time or the resources to read them.

The Schauspielhaus in Graz is developing a writers in residence programme, a familiar practise in the UK, but relatively new in German speaking theatres. It has the advantage of exposing the playwright to theatre practise and enables the theatre to develop a meaningful dialogue with them. The theatre is also granted exclusive rights to the playwright's work whilst they are in residence. It is expensive, however, and many smaller theatres are not resourced to do it. That said, there are some bursaries available to help with this.

This has led to opportunities to try out plays in development, and rehearsed readings, which sit alongside other wider opportunities such as festivals and competitions. It's a cheap way of developing new plays and grows a public awareness of new work, giving writers the opportunity to showcase their work. A downside is that many festivals happen all over the country. The ongoing frustration is that there is not a lack of new plays, but a lack of good new plays.

Publications and Magazines

In contrast to the UK and Finland, where plays are rarely published before they are performed, plays are regularly published in German speaking countries by the verlags before, or in spite

of, performance. It is common for plays to be published and never performed. Sometimes it is acknowledged that work is published not to be performed at all, only read.

There is also a tradition of literary magazines, including Theatre Heute, which, published monthly, specialises specifically in theatre. Theatre Heute introduces young authors, publishes plays, and offers award for best author (and with it a guarantee that your play will be performed in numerous theatres).

Information on Theatre Heute (which includes an English language version) can be found on their website: <http://www.theaterheute.com/>

Becoming a writer - learning and development opportunities

The perception of the playwright in German speaking theatre is that the author is an artist and, therefore, a genius. This belief dismisses the notion that playwriting can be taught.

It is only recently, therefore, that it has become possible to study as a writer. Courses in scenic writing have been set up which focus on the development of craft (rather than ideas, which is assumed participants have)

There is a strong link between theatres and courses. The courses are taught by well-known authors who create these links. Dramaturgs also learn through these courses.

Three years ago the theatre set up a writers' night. Four writers wrote 20 minute plays which were presented during the day. Two of these writers came from Edith's course at Uni-T. It was a good way for the theatre and audiences to get to know new writers and marked the beginning of a collaborative process aimed at bringing writers back into theatres.

Out of these four, two have written full length plays for the theatre, one which was staged last year and the other to be staged this year.

The Schauspielhaus has a good working relationship with Uni-T and Steirische Herbst. They are developing processes of working together. The dramaturgical department at the theatre assists the playwrights in the development of their texts: helping to guide the play through to production, making cuts and so on. It is an ongoing working process and it's important that these collaborations continue. Working together is what theatre is all about.

What is a good play for German Theatre?

Marie offered some thoughts about what makes a good play for a German Theatre:

When you are writing about yourself own social reality, own view of the world.

More honest you are, the greater the chance theatre makers and audience believe in your work.

The present trend and longing is for story which is about people in contemporary situation.

They are not looking necessarily for plays which are well-made and conventional in writing or form

he expectation of audiences have changed recently due to film and TV. Audiences are better at reading short snappy scenes, for example.

Currently audiences long for social realism in Austria. Plays which reflect contemporary issues such as unemployment and disorientation. National tendency is to regard theatre themes as

timeless, not specific in terms of social realism, but tackling the big human themes of love, pain, aggression and loss.

Always important is the examination of the individual against society.

Fence 5 Tampere 2005

Fence Enquiry: Finnish Playwriting

Whilst in Tampere, the Fence was given the opportunity to meet a number of figures from Finnish Theatre, to better our understanding of the landscape for theatre writers in Finland. Here are some observations and notes on what was learnt.

1. Finnish Playwrights Association

Key Facts

- Association was founded in 1921
- They have the largest Finnish Library of plays (5000).
- They have 400 members and look after 120 estates.
- They are a mix of a Trade Union and Agency
- They are not a commercial organisation, are non-profit and state supported.
- Their work is to legitimise the profession of playwriting in Finland

The need to create and participate in international networks is a common desire amongst many young playwrights in Finland.

The legitimisation of the profession and work as an agency is important to the FPA, but most important is the peer networking.

The role of the Dramaturg is in decline in Finland. There are only 11 dramaturg positions in theatres. The generation who studied dramaturgy but do not practice are infact playwrights. Playwrights in Finland are often auteur playwrights, they direct their own work.

It is a different thing for you to write a play to direct yourself and that for someone else.

Playwrights in the FPA write for film, radio and television as well as theatre.

Around 80 new plays are premiered in Finland a year.

Education of Playwrights

Elsewhere dramaturges tend to be schooled primarily in science of theatre and research. In Finland they are trained to be artists with the philosophy that an understanding of the anatomy of drama comes from doing.

Therefore, dramaturges have a strong artistic identity, and less interest in analysis and logistics. The important thing is an understanding of the play in space and as part of training a dramaturg will be expected to direct. The only difference to director training is that you do not direct classic plays, only new ones.

Playwrights are professionals. However, of a 400 membership of the FPA only around 5 writers are making a career from writing theatre alone.

Although they are a trade union, they do not have unemployment funds for the writers who are not working.

Every playwright's dream is to be performed. Plays are not literature, they are a part of performance. Most plays only get one performance.

There are issues around combining a Trade Union with an agency model. You have to treat everyone equally, and you therefore are more of a collecting agency.

There are resource issues too, currently the library is only available in paper, but they hope to get it into electronic format in the future.

2. Swedish Language Playwriting

The Swedish speaking minority in Finland accounts for about 6% of the population.

It is a dying culture, as more and more assimilation occurs.

The Arts can help to support cultural identity and there is a strong tradition of poetry and literature in the Swedish language, but not a strong drama tradition.

About 5 years ago a group of directors, dramaturges and actors sought to address this. They noticed that there were very few Swedish speakers going to dramaturgy school (a coincidental 9 year gap between students over 20 years).

A laboratory was set up inviting professional and non-professional playwrights to submit texts for further development, and they were they workshopped by the group.

It was a voluntary initiative which lasted a couple of years, but didn't survive due to the voluntary nature and the fact that the soil was too thin to really sustain it. However a number of plays were developed.

The process was rethought, and it was decided to only focus on professional writers. These writers were invited to masterclasses. The masterclass group has 12 participants who meet every fortnight. The masterclasses offer nutrition, education and inspiration to the playwrights involved and have engendered an ongoing writers' group.

Plays generated from this group will soon be going into performance, and the National Theatre of Swedish People is now working with new writing.

3. Drama Agency (Riitta also)

Key Facts

- Biggest drama agency in Finland
- They import foreign plays as well as working with Finnish plays
- Work with translators
- It is not a Trade Union and does not have that duty
- The talk to dramaturges and directors, network and attempt to influence programme decisions.

When reading foreign plays four or five questions are asked of the script:

- Is it any good?
- Is it good for Finland?
- Is there a need in the theatre for this work?
- Which theatre?

- Which director?

Issues around translation

Knowledge of foreign languages is poor in Finland. It is difficult to circulate foreign texts (unless they are in English). Many scripts are therefore read through English translations (ie. Russian plays that come through the Royal Court).

The younger generation is driving mainstream drama and looking outwards.

The dominance of Anglo-Saxon texts and culture is still highly dominant.

The Finnish theatre has always in the past been open minded about work from international sources.

More and more is being translated into Finnish.

4. KOM Theatre Helsinki: Pekka Milonoff (artistic director)

Pekka Milonoff has been with KOM theatre in Helsinki for the past 30 years. They have a particular interest in new Finnish plays.

For the last 5 years they have run a script factory, working with young playwrights.

Anyone who wants to can send a play to the initiative.

800 plays have been sent over the last 5 years, of which they have been interested in 50.

Selected playwrights are assigned a dramaturg with whom they have monthly meetings.

After 6-12 months of development the play is given a reading, which is followed by feedback and perhaps 1-2 days discussion of the script. A new draft is then written which after about 2 years is given a reading in front of an audience, and more feedback from the audience. Writers are given access to actors (if they want it). The younger generation of playwrights seem particularly keen to work with actors.

It is acknowledged that this is a similar process to that in UK.

They also have an international arm and have collaborated with the Royal Court.

In Finnish Theatre, however, this was a new experience and many theatres have been interested in its outcomes. They have also worked with the Swedish lab. Other theatres are now co-operating and looking at co-productions of the resulting texts. The work has had an influence on Finnish theatre and more new plays are finding themselves into repertoires. There are many interesting new playwrights in Finland. There was a need for higher quality plays in Finland.

There is money to pay writers to write, writers can be given up to €5000, although €10 000 would be better.

In the last 30 years there have been more and more good playwrights. However, there are less dramaturges.

There is a hunger for new personal voices. The KOM don't just want to make a 'well made play'. They want to listen and be sensitive to each writer's voice, find new ways to make theatre. They are happy when they find a text they don't immediately understand. It's important to have a process which enables rehearsal without production pressure. It gives

more freedom. This is why more theatres are interested in the process and new work: but it still remains a financial risk.

The staff at the KOM includes 1 dramaturg and 1 permanent producer on this projects. Additionally there is a pool of 20 dramaturgs who work with the playwrights.

Fence 4. Belgrade (2005)

From Svetlana Dimcovic's evaluation:

As a native of the city, we asked fence participant Svetlana Dimcovic to give us her evaluation of this meeting:

Evaluation of the Fourth Meeting (in Belgrade), in a post-conflict and post-sanctions country, as opposed to the relative stability of countries and contexts in which the first three meetings of the Fence were held, poses several questions concerning legacy and working method exchange, as well as factors contributing to the development of Fence processes and methods during face-to-face meetings.

In the planning stages of the Belgrade meeting of the Fence, a visit to the Theatre Academy training playwrights, directors and actors, was suggested to our hosts from London as a means of understanding the causes of gaps of provision in terms of opportunities available to playwrights, and the position of our hosts and their work within the landscape.

While the official Academy markets itself as the elite institution of talent-nurture, it also employs a rigid teaching structure and discourages any form of student drama or staging of its' students' plays within the University programme of work. As such, it relies on the professional theatre to absorb its' writers into the mainstream upon graduation and views the Academy as a learning and not 'doing' stage in a writer's development.

The NADA Project could thus be seen as a direct result in this cause-and-effect chain in the training and employment of emerging playwrights.

However, while the NADA project does provide additional opportunities (including engaging international partners like the Fence and thus furthering employment possibilities), it is only one of many activities and companies within the Belgrade landscape.

- Legacy of having met in Belgrade for the Fence

1. This meant a broadening of horizons for Fence members and learning what the Fence can do when faced with a new landscape, or new problems the members are facing in their own countries (NADA project position within the landscape).
2. Fence members encountered a complex, post-conflict landscape and engaged with the question of how new writing fits in (socially and in agendas of art and government) - an important topic as the network grows and meets in very different contexts
3. The Fence members learnt from meeting Serbian playwrights and hearing their experiences, as well as seeing local productions of new plays by young authors, and the circumstances surrounding these

4. The Fence network learnt from meeting students and professors at the Theatre Academy and seeing the cause of problems in the landscape – rigid teaching methods, very little support for student drama groups, elitism of students at the official and oldest academy, as opposed to some of the newer, private ones

In terms of planning and executing meetings, the host country may gain management and evaluation processes not present before, after an intensive international meeting and exchange such as a Fence meeting.

Local playwrights reflected on their position in their landscape, articulated these thoughts through the framework of Fence discussions (both formal and informal) and engaged with the shared network terminology of the Fence, open to thinking around the subject of the playwright's status.

Fence playwrights and cultural operators reflected on the situations in their own countries, their views of what they saw of the landscape in Belgrade, and how the Fence can help or enable individual playwrights – actually, or from a distance.

Yugoslav Drama Theatre (where I Milos Krekovic moved to) included 'One Bed Flat' by Ze-Maria Mendes in the 06/07 production plan just couple of weeks after we had returned from Leeds. Initially it was scheduled to open around Christmas, and we started some preparations in July, including a Serbian version being commissioned and done by a very good translator, and with director

Ana Tomovic and playwright/dramaturge Filip Vujosevic assigned to the project. However, the YDT's Board decided in September to make some changes in the plan and the play (along with few other projects) has been dropped from this season's repertoire, with the production postponed (hopefully) for the next artistic year. A bit of disappointment obviously, but we'll keep pushing!

Fence 1: Clun-Birmingham (2003)

The aim of this gathering was to explore the practice of contemporary dramatic writing in many culturally diverse European contexts, identifying key similarities and differences, common problems and possible creative solutions, opportunities for further information and skills exchange. It also operated to raise the profile and status of contemporary writing for performance in all contexts.

We invited 13 playwrights and organisations that support and develop new playwriting from different European countries to share practice and look at mobility and exchange possibilities with 15 UK counterparts. We provided opportunities for information dissemination/exchange and capacity building focusing on key topics of concern (translation, publication, agents, rights, articulating points of connection). We emphasised the skills and thinking necessary for playwrights to be more entrepreneurial and to think of the contribution their work could make in a range of contexts.

This working group was particularly focused on the role that playwrights play in countering xenophobia, challenging attitudes to disability and social exclusion; the role of the playwright as part of a vehicle for social change and tolerance: From representation - reflecting the mix on the street - to the imaginative engagement of any individual playwright. We reflected on

the contrast between the culturally specific approach of countries such as the UK and whether this was helpful or could we learn from other European broader cross or inter-cultural approaches?

In looking at mobility issues we also; facilitated an initial engagement with the programmers, producers and festival Directors who make up IETM's constituency and who would be our natural allies in further development.

At this stage we were building The Fence as a person-to-person network, ie discussion and relationship-building were key. Past experience has taught us that this is what makes real partnerships at a European level. We recognise that the future of the network also relies on the input from the institutions and cultural operators who are working in this field.

This original meeting in the context of IETM enabled The Fence to examine a range of possibilities and to finally identify the need for a separate network to develop playwriting.

Throughout this initial exchange we were concerned with gauging:

- the personal profiles and country profiles of those involved, giving us a clear sense of who the network consists of, and therefore what its strengths and areas of reach are (geographical; media – whether radio, television, theatre, puppetry; cultural; mainstream or outside the mainstream)
- how we could use evaluation and documentation to deal with the notion of process being on a par with content ie making specific processes clear and developing ways of working which may be specific to the group
- and posing the question of the need for such a network and how it might be developed ...so as to involve participants from the outset in the network's growth.

