

Theatre for Young Audiences in France

Across December 2008 and January 2009 I gave 28 performances in France over three visits, providing an opportunity to see things there close up and personal.

C(H)AT is a bilingual show for 8-10 year olds starting to learn French and English. It takes the form of a celebration, in which the audience are the descendants of an elderly couple who met fifty years ago on a cross channel ferry, fell in love and engendered a huge extended family living in England and France. In the course of telling the story of their life together, the couple refer to the thousand years of love-hate relationship, wars, misunderstandings, cultural differences, but also the joy of having two languages and cultures to play with. So there are counting rhymes, songs, stories and a bit of history. Both languages are used by both actors, Sylvie Bloch and Paul Harman, with added music and occasional interjections in Arabic from Lakhdar Boussaf, a Moroccan musician long resident in Paris.

Played in districts of Paris and the suburbs where the population is very mixed and largely poor, this show is highly popular with teachers who like the affirmation of the value of language learning but also with those who recognise that the French system neither favours those who most need educational success nor respects cultural differences. Lakhdar's Maghrebian-flavoured classical Arabic astonishes children who never hear the language at the heart of their home culture in school.

Child-Centred?

For anyone coming from the UK with its tradition of positive relationships between theatre and schools, open doors to artists and the general sense, even today, that education of the whole child is about more than instruction in skills, French schools can be a challenge. For a start, French schools are bleak places, compared to the rich and lively atmosphere in most UK primary schools, where artwork covers the walls, assemblies encourage a sense of collective responsibility, birthdays are celebrated, team sports are practised. Discipline as we know it is poor as very little effort is devoted to socialising children. There are few support staff of any kind, no classroom assistants, or even a school secretary. Building maintenance is very poor and the government is proposing to cut thousands more teachers' jobs. You won't be offered a cup of tea on arrival!

The core practice of today's TYA companies in France is, wherever possible, to bring the audience into a theatre or some sort, where lighting, decor and effects can play a real part in the experience. We played in a small, rather rundown but welcoming theatre space with 150 raked seats not far from the Gare de Lyon. The more prestigious, and the only dedicated space for TYA in Paris is [Dunois](#), a modern studio theatre on the southern edge of the inner city. Here the programming choices are very strict and only the most refined and artistic of shows will be presented.

Frankly, this usually means excruciatingly boring philosophical tracts about childhood made by adult artists who believe children should be initiated into 'Culture' and respect for 'theatre tradition' and told to listen carefully to their elders and betters. About *Debout*, the less said the better, as it already thinks too much of itself, wallows

in too much talk and wafty dance, video projection and overblown music and recorded narration.

Paradox?

The British tradition since the 1960's and earlier, which regards theatre as a medium through which to explore issues of real life importance to most people, doesn't wash here. It is amazing that Peter Brook, who announced his relinquishing of the directorship of the **Bouffes du Nord** the week I was in Paris, has pioneered a truly multicultural theatre in a country where society is far more divided on cultural grounds than the UK and an artistic elite holds most of the resources for middle class audiences.

The great delight of my time in Paris was to discover the International Visual Theatre (www.ivt.fr). Their current show *Entre Chien et Loup* mixing deaf actors, signing and imaginative puppetry interprets La Fontaine's 18th Century version of the classical fables, Fox and Crow, Hare and Tortoise in delightful comedy, visually witty and full of positive energy. IVT has its own charming modern theatre not far from Pigalle. This show should be brought to UK somehow as the start of a bigger collaboration between artists of all kinds and abilities. In most technical respects, other than acting, the French invest more and produce better results in presentation than averagely in the UK. This show exemplifies both collaboration and technical prowess.

Music

My third show, *Nine Months in the Big Box*, (*9 Mois de Grosse Caisse*) is a clever musical show for children from two years old – they claim - based on the stages in pregnancy, from conception, through food cravings and wild imaginings about twins, to bathing rituals and lullabies. It is a series of musical numbers, jazz flavoured, based on percussion and electronic sound manipulation. The couple, she dressed flouncily as a pop or jazz singer and, he, the bespectacled jazz percussionist are stereotypically in love and soppy about the first child. Such text as there is ranges from baby language to a scientific description of the meeting of sperm and egg. A lovely Russian song accompanies the gentle bathing of a dozen plastic babies while another sequence is composed live with sampled sounds from squeaky mechanical toys. Of course, the Big Box is represented by an increasingly large drum – think heartbeats or pounding pain as you like.

While the premise for the show is pretty banal – to help parents explain to small children how their new brother or sister will grow and what the effects upon their mother will be, musically it is highly accomplished and worth booking for that reason alone. There is already some English in it – after all, most jazz standards have English lyrics!

Nuts and Bolts

Of the three shows, the first was produced by an independent, small scale company, the second was a co-production between a house and a puppet company and the third is an in-house production by a subsidised venue. **Pointure 23**, which tours *C(H)AT* in France, is an un-funded independent company with a repertoire of half a

dozen different sorts of shows, using different combinations of actors and artists, some of whom have worked with the Company over the whole 20 years of its existence.

The financial viability of such companies – more than 200 are registered in France – depends upon balancing two contradictory tax and benefit systems. On one side – positive or negative depending on your political persuasion – is the requirement that employers pay an additional 50 per cent of all fees and wages in social security charges. That makes employing people expensive. On the other side, the ASEDIC system, now under threat, has allowed performing artists who achieve a certain number of contracts – individual paid performances – to qualify for an equal amount of automatic unemployment benefit. In practice, this means that long rehearsal periods are financed by the state through unemployment benefit – a concept which would cause steam to emit from the UK Treasury today, although it funded much of the arts and community activity in the UK in the 1960's.

Understanding

In many ways you cannot get two countries less alike in their attitudes to Europe, children, the arts, education, public funding and services and any combination of all the above. I have got used to seeing the European stars flying alongside the French tricolor on every town hall or other public building – as in Spain and elsewhere on the Continent, but never in my part of the UK. The assumption still rules that public service, like public transport, takes precedence over private activity. Many French arts people are currently fearful that Sarko will take France too far in the direction of Anglo-Saxon barbarism. But while we need to learn perhaps a greater respect for the essential values of the arts, France could do with a dose of British scepticism about the value to society of the elite arts or arts practised by an elite.

Paul Harman December 2008

Useful sites

www.onda.fr Office National de Diffusion Artistique

www.theatredunois.org Paris theatre dedicated to Young Audiences

www.theatre-enfants.com French site promoting TYA events