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Teaching and Professional Fellowship 2004-2005

Donatella Barbieri - A Framework for Networking for the Study and Research of Costume for Performance

The three months Teaching and Professional Fellowship, which ran from October 2004 to January 2005, has been a very significant and valuable experience. It has set me up on a developmental route which is benefiting students and staff, as well as the subject as a whole.

The ideas behind this fellowship emerge from teaching the subject, from the research into contemporary practice undertaken and also from my own practice as a costume designer. The aim was the creation of an international network that will facilitate the exchange of information, student exchanges, collaborative projects, and research projects to raise the profile of the subject.

The motivation for my application was one that goes to the core of the subject of costume for performance. There is no question that costume makes an enormous contribution to the performance as a whole and to performers' interpretation of characters. However it is equally true that costume specialist at all levels of the profession have routinely reported their poor status within the industry when compared to their set specialist counterparts.

The idea of an international academic forum would elevate the academic debate on the subject, and draw attention to the some of the incredibly valuable work which costume designers and costumiers produce and which I believe in certain cases in particular ought to be seen as an artistic and a cultural product per se.

The fellowship allowed me to travel, meet colleagues and make international connections and set up a number of project which are slowly coming into fruition.

Capitalising on existing links with UK costume and design for performance courses, I was asked to talk about costume education at the Oistat Education Committee in Istanbul (Oistat is the International Organization of Scenographers, Theatre Architects and Technicians). There I met with educators and theatre designers from 21 different countries. An immediate outcome of this encounter has resulted in the organisation of the Oistat Education Committee

Symposium in November opening here at London College of Fashion and continuing at Central Saint Martins, Central School of Speech and Drama and Nottingham Trent University.

As well as presenting the UK education landscape in the subject of costume (which is enormous compared to anywhere else) I was able to present the work of the course at LCF, and the ideas behind the fellowship. This allowed me to make contact with like-minded colleagues. With them I am currently organising a series of costume centred events to coincide with the Prague Quadrennial in 2007, which will involve students, practitioners and academics from all over the world.

During the 4 days Oistat Education committee in Istanbul I created particularly strong links with Marina Raytchinova from National Academy of Art Scenography department in Sofia, Bulgaria, who also teaches in a number of institutions in the USA, Maija Pekkanen, Helsinki City Theatre Finland, who was at the time president of Oistat, and Hye Suk Chang from Sangmyung University, South Korea. All of us view ourselves as costume specialists. Through our interventions at that meeting we began to put in place the basis for an international network of academics which would promote the role and the value of costume within performance.

In her presentation Marina Raytchinova described the work of her students and the underlying philosophy. She placed the designer very strongly as the centre of the creative process, the designer being the visual artist in the process of creating theatre, and theatre being seen very much as a visual art form. The director, by contrast, was an interpretative artist. This philosophy has not hindered Marina from working as an international designer. It has, however, supported the visual ambition of her students. This is a philosophy which has strengthened and enabled me to articulate more clearly ideas of self empowerment in my teaching practice, and one that can live side by side with the fundamental awareness that performing arts is ultimately a collaborative artistic practice.

Another key encounter was with Prof Barbara Tumova from Damu Czeck Republic (Theatre Faculty, Academy of Performing Arts) who invited me to Prague to meet the costume design staff and to do some teaching.

Similarly, to the National Academy of Art in Sofia, the Theatre Faculty in Prague offered a working model which placed a very high value on its students' own visual output, in terms of drawings and in particular in terms of presenting dramatic moment through drawing. The focus is very much on individual students work and creative thinking, even in the development of collaborative performance projects with students from the acting course.

This was particularly highlighted by the work the students produced on stage, critiqued through the drawing and design work that the students produced to prepare such work. The imagination and creativity demonstrated on paper was considered over and beyond what we saw on stage, valuing process over product and seeing the process as a product per se.

We discussed possibilities of collaborative projects with a small group of students from both colleges. As a result, two Damu colleagues are visiting us next week with 6 students to begin devising a visual costume centred performance based on Czech and a British text. We are

going over during Easter 2006 to finally stage the performance which will have been developed through week long workshops as well as through use of Blackboard and email to continue the dialogue between students.

Another positive collaboration that emerged from the trip to Prague is the encounter with Artist Petr Matasek, whose work is displayed in the Czeck National Art Gallery in Prague and who, having seen some of the work our technical effects students produce, is keen to come and work on a project with them. He produces object theatre, and is fascinated by the consolidation project which we run in the first year which is effectively a puppetry project.

My next journey was to Italy where I met a number of designers and costume specialists. I followed the same criteria I had employed in all my research, I tried to find educators who were, themselves, valued practitioners.

At The Accademia di Belle Arti di Brera, in Milan, I met up with Luisa Spinatelli, a very experience and renown designer, who has taught for 25 years at Brera and has worked with Giorgio Strelher at the Piccolo Theatre in Milan. In a fruitful discussion we brainstormed possibilities of a week long project where students would work together to produce fabrics in a workshop near Lake Como in an intensive project and then come over to London to actually cut and construct costumes. Again, the idea was to create a project where students would work together with a shared outcome and negotiated progress through Blackboard, ahead of working together and whilst working separately. This project, unlike Damu, is at an embryonic stage.

Whist in Italy I was keen to meet some of the heads of the 'sartorie' (costume houses) who have produced work for International Designers such as Sandy Powell and Nicky Gillibrand. I was interested in talking to them about research opportunities, but also about placement opportunities for some of our students. I met with Tirelli, who are now offering two placements this Summer. The structure of our course does not allow for international placements, but given the current revalidation / review process, we are looking at ways of changing the second year to facilitate international placements.

This visit highlighted the skills gap that currently exists in Italy and how little companies such as Tirelli struggle to recruit quality tailors and cutters. Many of our students leave with excellent skills in those areas. This gap is partly being addressed by the Accademia d'Arti e Mestieri dello Spettacolo, (roughly translated as Academy of Arts and Crafts for Performance) which is the vocational college attached to La Scala in Milan. The students there have been working for years alongside the professional staff on their main house production. Students would, for example, have worked on the production of 'Salome' directed by Robert Wilson and Designed by Gianni Versace in 1987. I was able to meet colleagues from the Costume department and look at their archives. The discussion here was more about staff secondments and research than actual project involving students. Such discussions are ongoing. One of the most interesting aspects of the Academy here is that much of its funding is generated through the European Social Fund and also European Transnational Funding for collaborative projects. They are currently putting a skill sharing project through the EU funding process in which we are now partners.

One of my favourite encounters of the whole fellowship was with Caterina D'Amico and the Head of the Scuola Nazionale di Cinema and talking with Piero Tosi, designer for some of the best of Italian Cinema, working with directors such as Luchino Visconti, Liliana Cavalli and Federico Fellini. Tosi now teaches at Scuola Sperimentale di Cinema, and is interested in a collaborative project with us as well.

The fellowship has made it possible to

- **Take a central role in the organisation of OISTAT Educom's visit to London in November here at LCF, thus encouraging a particularly costume aware agenda**
- **Hold initial discussions on a number of potential joint project with international partners, one with Damu already coming to fruition**
- **At least one bilateral contract with one partner college with another not far off**
- **So far, one visit to LCF from an eminent Japanese theatre practitioner Mikio Ogawa and visit by designer Marina Raytchinova. Students have benefited by the contact and some have followed up the contact in their own country gaining placements**
- **At least two international student placements contacts**
- **Become part of the organisation of Scenofest at the PQ 07, responsible for Costume events including a shared student performance project, presented by LCF and partner colleges**
- **An MA in Costume Design at LCF is currently being developed with a focus on international collaborations**
- **Leverhulme Trust Costume Network application is planned**
- **Plan collaborative external projects with the help of e-learning and ITRDU**
- **Begin to investigate potential projects/networks which could be funded at European level**

Another indirect result of the Fellowship has been the opportunity offered to me by Michael Spencer at CSM to take part in a two weeks Lacoq/ Complicite workshop at Back Hill in September. This is now being transformed into an exhibition with I am co-curating with Complicite's Natasha Freeman to be held at LCF in conjunction with the OISTAT international symposium which will benefit teachers from all over the world as up to 75 academics and practitioners are expected to take part in the symposium.

To conclude, the Fellowship has been a transforming experience, not only for me but also for the students and staff who are beginning to benefit from the work done so far. On many levels, much of the work is still going on and its potential needs to continue to be exploited, time permitting. I sincerely hope to continue to develop the many projects that have been discussed. The only obstacle is the paucity of time that I can now dedicate to the network and related fundraising. I now feel that I owe it to all of those who have placed their faith in me, both within LCF and UAL, to attempt in any way possible to continue the work that has been possible through the Fellowship.

Donatella Barbieri

23rd October 2005