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Of Empathy, Imagination and Good Gloves

Experiences with Drama and Theatre at University College Cork

Marvin Schildmeier

During my four-month semester abroad at University College Cork (September – December 2015), I not only experienced Irish student life first-hand but also had the chance to learn a lot about dramatic and theatrical pedagogical methods, which afforded me an entirely new approach to texts. The practical work helped me to physically experience what theatre can achieve and why people without art are like gloves, of which not even the best last forever.¹

1 Theatre and I – A Difficult Relationship

From the moment I first stepped in the door to our seminar room I was aware that I was a foreigner here. That was not just due to the fact that I had set out from my familiar Hannover on an Erasmus semester at University College Cork, but rather particularly due to the fact that in choosing the course *Drama and Theatre of the 20th and 21st Century*, I set foot in hitherto untested territory. As far as theatre and the performing arts were concerned, I was, in fact, a blank page. My stage experience was limited to playing Joseph in the Christmas nativity play, the canon of plays which I had read to those which were a part of the core curriculum in secondary school. I was a foreigner. The mental image of going up on stage made me feel uneasy and at moments when eyes were focused on me, I had the feeling that I could no longer properly control my body language.

However, as you must sometimes set yourself new challenges, and as I thought that there could be no better point in time for such a peek outside the box than a semester abroad, in which you have many new experiences in any case, I took a seat and waited in quiet but nevertheless excited anticipation for the beginning of the first session.

I knew in so doing, that the Drama and Theatre of the 20th and 21st Century seminar aimed to introduce students to (excerpts from) works of 20th and 21st

¹The following observations are based on entries from my learning journal in the setting of the module, *Drama and Theatre of the 20th and 21st Century*. The module description is available at the following link <http://www.ucc.ie/modules/descriptions/page032.html> — GE2129.

century dramatists who have had a considerable impact on the development of German language theatre. As an interface between theory and practice, the seminar tried to find answers to questions such as, ‘how can it come about that there are differing interpretations of a play?’ and ‘what can theatre teach us?’ through first hand experience with the planning, rehearsing and performing of scenes.

Demonstrate how selected extracts from a dramatic text could be performed, ran the sentence in the module description which I read over to myself time and again and which increasingly gave me a headache. *Performed?* I thought. This word generated a reverberation in my head which still lasted in the first session, even intimidating me a little. Yet as early as four months later, I turned in a performance which I would never have dared attempt at the beginning of the semester.

2 Who even needs a stage?

We found an entry point to the world of theatre with Christoph Ransmayr's *Eine Bühne am Meer* (*A Stage by the Sea*). It very soon became clear to me why we should begin with this text, because it is more than just a literary work about a man, who builds himself his own small stage and so brought the theatre to his doorstep. Ransmayr leads us back to 19th century Ireland and thereby to a time, in which the theatre had an important role in the building of communities, especially for the inhabitants who lived scattered around the country. In his text, he conceived of an image of a theatre for everybody. On a stage, which “until the very recent past and six days of the week still was only a cattle run with a great view of the sea,” [...] “anyone from the audience could transform into a celebrated actor on Sunday evening.”² It is not only that one needs neither an ostentatious hall nor an impressive stage with decorations, lighting effects and stage smoke, it also becomes clear that both the enjoyment of and the active participation in theatre are no longer the privilege of a certain group of people; everyone who is interested in, passionate and enthusiastic about the performing arts can contribute. Theatre is thus more than just an artistic form of expression, it is really a form of social togetherness and it creates group identity and feelings of community.

The lack of technical equipment and decorative scenery as well as the fact that only certain instruments such as the harmonica and the tin whistle can be used as a result of the deafening surge of the waves behind that makeshift stage, do no harm to the functioning of the theatre which Ransmayr describes. It still seems to the spectators as though they we're hearing a fiddle or a harp. Imagination, fantasy and creativity are central elements of theatre.

A question which I personally asked myself at this point was:

Does that which occurs there on the makeshift stage, which cannot really be

² Christoph Ransmayr: *Eine Bühne am Meer*. In: *Scenario* 1/2 (2007), 1-3.

termed a stage, conform far more to the actual meaning of theatre? Are the power of imagination and fantasy not the heart of the latter? And does this heart not come more strongly to the fore when one finds no props or scenery whatsoever on a simple stage? Is that perhaps exactly that which distinguishes theatre from film: the necessity of using one's imagination, which is so essential here and which is becoming less important in film, because of sophisticated computer animation.

This much is certain: the intensity of all the actors' experience in *Eine Bühne am Meer* does not suffer from insufficient visualisation. Ransmayr writes that with one step onto the stage, they actually "leave an entire world behind them" (ibid.).

3 Theatre and Empathy

3.1 One Play, Many Perspectives

While fantasy and the power of imagination are basic intellectual capacities which theatre requires, the ability to put yourself in someone else's position is of equally central importance. In order to experience this first hand, we developed still images on the basis of the *Der goldene Drache* (*The Golden Dragon*), a play by the leading, contemporary, German dramatist Roland Schimmelpfennig.³ In groups of two, we had to depict aspects of the text which in each case we thought captured the essence of the play. In the process, we were impressed by how differently the results turned out. It became clear, that there were definitely some scenes which we all thought were central, however, the individual groups differed largely from each other in their choice of scenes. It fascinated me how much our perceptions actually differed from each other.

As we talked afterwards about why we found certain scenes to be noteworthy and important, it became clear that everyone had read *Der goldene Drache* with their own eyes, with their own wholly personal background knowledge and their individual life experiences. Collecting the various, personal interpretations concerning the importance of the individual scenes helped us to take on new perspectives and to remove from our eyes the blinkers which guided our interpretations.

Furthermore, I became aware that you have to discuss a scene intensively in order to be able to perform it. You must thus go into depth, so that many new possibilities for interpretation are revealed to you — almost as a pleasant side effect. Then you begin to subliminally reflect on what the characters would do, if the rest of the plot were not to proceed as it had been planned. Through the process of feeling your way into the character which you intend to portray, you find easier answers to questions such as: how would I react if something unexpected were to happen now? What would I do in different situations?

³ Schimmelpfennig, Roland (2014): *Der goldene Drache*. Berlin: Fischer Verlag.

Being open to other interpretations can moreover open you up to the extent of accepting other perspectives and points of view on the one object of reflection and if necessary, of questioning your own attitudes.

We carried this to extremes with other methods in a later session. Now we were no longer encouraged to just construct still images, but rather, working in pairs, to act out a scene from *Der goldene Drache*. It was once again especially important in this task to specifically feel our way into our characters. It is self explanatory that this can only be achieved when you concentrate intensively on the character. As a framework — or far more as a kind of small rope ladder, on which we could slowly climb deeper into our characters — we received a sheet with a multitude of questions about them: *How old am I? What do I look like? Which activities are typical for me?* but also questions such as, *which general attitudes to life do I have? What do I like about myself? With what aim do I act?* All in all: they were questions which really went into depth.

The more I tried to answer about my character, the more strongly aware I became that I knew really little about them, as the play did not provide much background information. So, it was now up to me to create this for myself. However, was I really allowed to do that? All this information about my character's biography and personal history had never been envisaged like that by Schimmelpfennig. I soon became aware that I had to give them the necessary depth they needed, so that I could really put myself in their shoes. This is how I learned how important it is as an actor — even as someone who is only playing a two minute scene — to engage with your character. During that process, the following question occurred to me almost by itself: How can (?) theatre help us to put ourselves in other peoples' shoes?

At that point in time, I was already convinced that this act of putting yourself in someone else's place is part of the essence of theatre. It is just that actors do not, as a rule, put themselves in someone else's position, but rather in those of the roles, of the characters whom they play. In the end, I am, however, convinced that someone who possesses the ability to feel their way into a character can do this just the same with real people — it is just that, we are then speaking of empathy. Theatre, that is, the experience of having done this already with characters, into whose roles we have slipped, helps us to take on other perspectives and viewpoints, but also to be able to empathise with other peoples' suffering and feelings. And so, the core element of theatre becomes an important core element of being competent in living together as humans.

It is precisely in the times of the refugee crisis that empathy is of vital importance. It is the ability to empathise with the perspective of those fleeing people, to share their fear and to be able to understand their problems and worries, which makes the difference between rejection and hatred and everything done by volunteers, who do all that is humanly possible to build a culture of welcome.

3.2 The Green Dragon — A Crucial Test of Empathy

Yet the ability to treat strangers and unknown people properly is in no way something with which everybody is born. In today's times, we find all extremes in society from open rejection to quiet uncertainty right up to friendly welcome. We ourselves spent some time on an example which shows that drama-based exercises can help us to live in an open and humanitarian way. We were dealing with the text *Seeing the dragons dance together on the wind at sunset*, which was about exactly this confrontation with the unknown. The basis is the imaginary assumption that you're sitting in your room when suddenly a green dragon comes in.⁴

Thereupon, almost by coincidence, our door swung open and a visitor, who waited with interest for our reaction, stepped into the room. While one classmate jumped up, screamed and bolted with quick steps over desks and benches, others remained sitting in their chairs as though in a state of shock and tried not to make any violent movements, in the hope of not being noticed. Others again stood up, confronted the dragon and warned him not to come one step closer to us, and there was also someone who drew slowly but surely closer to our guest, with an outstretched hand and a friendly expression in their eyes. In this improvisation exercise, we were forced to react within seconds to an imaginary unknown, who was, moreover, alien in his entire being and appearance. The reactions to the green dragon were diverse and varied as our temperaments were different. A similarly multifaceted range of ways of behaving is described in the above-mentioned text, which contains the reactions of University College Cork first year students to the unexpected guest.

Statements such as "I'd try to talk diplomatically with the dragon, try to reason with it and make peace with it", "I'd keep on reading or working and ignore the dragon because it didn't have the manners to knock on the door before entering [...]", "I would tell the dragon that I was just about to put the kettle on and ask him if he would like a cup of tea [...]", "Pull out my revolver which I had lying conveniently under my mattress and shoot the dragon. [...]" or "I'd laugh, I'd shout, I'd scream. [...]" show differing reactions to the foreign and the unknown even among the first year students.

The example of the imaginary green dragon helps to make us aware of the multitude of possible ways of behaving which are available to us and shows alternatives to our own behaviour. It invites us to reflect on the way we handle the new and unfamiliar and as a consequence, to question our own behaviour and the related personal attitudes:

Must I really be afraid of the dragon? *Is being afraid of refugees really justified?* Do I have the right to ignore the dragon, just because knocking on doors before one enters is apparently not part of the cultural practice of his homeland? *May I punish the people from Syria and Africa for not being familiar with our ways,*

⁴ Beug, Joachim & Schewe, Manfred Lukas: *Seeing the dragons dance together on the wind at sunset. An aesthetic approach to understanding another culture.* In: *Fremdsprachenunterricht* 6, 418-422.

modes of behaviour, customs and habits, while I myself know just as little about their cultures? The list of questions could go on. Naturally, there are no hard and fast answers, which are correct in every individual case. It becomes clear, however, that there are always alternatives for our own behaviour and that interculturally competent conduct need not fail because of differing languages and cultures. In fact, chances and possibilities, which would not otherwise be open to us can arise from openness and our own engagement with other cultures.

For this reason, I find the following reaction to the imaginary dragon especially noteworthy:

The dragon plodded in the door with a charming smile on its face. It sat down on the bed, curled its scaly tail around its big green clumpy feet and stared intensely at me. I was shivering like an aspen leaf from head to foot and offered my hand out to greet the dragon. The dragon looked anxiously at my outstretched hand. Slowly still peering deep into my eyes, which were gaining its trust it began to extend its own gnarled, scaly hand until it was parallel to my own. I gazed into the anxious eyes, knowing that the next move was in my court. Not wishing to distract the dragon with my quick movements and break the fragile thread of trust built on a stare, I slowly moved my hand closer to that of the dragon. It's penetrating eyes flickered momentarily and then the dragon's hand moved to meet my own. Then the moment arrived, a meeting based on trust. Two hands, one gnarled and scaly, the other pink and smooth clasped together and both pairs of eyes seemed to shed a cloud of distrust. (ibid. 422)

4 On Good Gloves

That theatre can in certain ways be a kind of teacher of humanity was brought home to us by an extract from Bertolt Brecht's *Furcht und Elend des Dritten Reiches* (*Fear and Misery in the Third Reich*): a Jewish woman packs her luggage, telephones her friends, tells them that she is going away and plans the words she will use to explain to her husband that she is leaving him. She burns the book in which she keeps all her friends' numbers and approaches her spouse to confront him with her plans. He is a doctor with an important position, however, due to the germinating Nazi ideology which was gaining currency in Germany at the time in which the play is set, he is experiencing increasingly bad treatment from his colleagues. He was even threatened that his position as senior physician could be taken away because of his marriage to a Jewish woman. The wife's plan to leave him is consequently a reaction to the steadily spreading Nazi ideology, which threatens to put not just her but likewise her husband in danger. While she formulates and rehearses the words which she would like to say to him, it becomes clear that although she seems to love him on the one hand, she despises him just as much. According to her, he is like a good *glove*, long lasting but not made for eternity. She thinks that even the strongest, the most enlightened mind is not forever untouchable against propaganda and

that ideology which is now becoming so dangerous to her. She condemns her husband for his susceptibility to it and begins to hate him for this weakness.

As a preparation for reading this text, we were given a small text excerpt which dealt with the core of the scene — leaving your familiar surroundings, your own homeland. In small groups, we were tasked with fleshing these short dialogue sequences out into a full scene by improvisation.

Now and then, we were interrupted and were given prompts and ideas from outside, which steered our improvisation in a new direction — more precisely: in the direction of the original scene — so that with what we were acting out, we unconsciously drew ever closer to that scene from *Furcht und Elend des Dritten Reiches*, which at this point, we knew nothing about.

That had two interesting effects on the subsequent, actual reading of the above described scene about the woman packing: for one thing, we read significantly more attentively, as we found it fascinating how close our professor's prompts brought us to the track of the original scene without our noticing. For another, through acting out the improvised scene, we put ourselves in the positions of our respective characters, so that we could identify with them to a certain degree and as a result, fates and actions moved us more deeply and personally affected us, to a certain extent. Through this practical groundwork, we received a way of accessing the text, which let us question and reflect on the behaviour of the characters more intensely and above all more consciously.

For this reason, I reflected all the more intensively on the woman's behaviour. I began to consider: Are people even today still like *gloves*, of which not even the best last forever? How strong is our society? How well enlightened is it? Will we manage to smother the newly emerging right wing mindset in Germany and in large parts of Europe?

The example of the husband in the play, who was proud of his Jewish wife only a few years before, however, later assimilated equally racist ideas, led me to reflect about how dramatically people can change.

Can theatre therefore contribute to keeping values high in our society? I am convinced that it can. It is not just that art can demonstrate the excesses of humanity and show up society, it can also make clear to all those who indulge in the grand belief that they will never fall prey to barbarity that no one may believe themselves fundamentally immune to external manipulation of the mind. For this reason, the role of protecting and preserving our humanity is assigned to theatre and art themselves.

5 The Schimmelpfennigs

We as a group experienced first hand over the course of the semester that theatrical work can bear socio-dynamic fruit. That which Ransmayr so delicately demonstrated in *Eine Bühne am Meer* also happened with myself and my classmates during our preparation for the practical final exam: we became a proper community, with which I still feel connected. As a reference to *Der goldene Drache* by Roland Schimmelpfennig, which served as the basis for our

practical exam, we also named ourselves the *Schimmelpfennigs*. This name was supposed to be a special sign for the fact that we as a group had actually become one.



Figure 1: “The Schimmelpfennigs” group in the *Drama and Theatre in the 20th and 21st Century* module at University College Cork

And I am sure that we also noticed this when we got to put on our little play. I personally felt it in any case. We rooted for everybody, hoped that everyone did their part as well as possible on stage and were happy at the end to have performed something of which we were all proud.

In addition, I not only got much food for thought which went far beyond the scope of theatre itself and let me reflect on general questions on humanity and responsibility. I also noticed, during the many practical exercises, how much progress I had made in the areas of self confidence and body language. Being able to speak freely in front of people, which we had especially practised through improvisation exercises and practical elements, helped me not only in the presentations, which I had to give during the semester in other seminars, but also during the final performance of our play, which showed me how much I had grown in four months.

Translated by Máiréad Jones

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