

From the 1st to the 7th of July, I represented England at the 2013 German ASSITEJ International Directors' Symposium (bi-annual event).



This year, the seminar was co-hosted by **Theater Gruene Sosse in Frankfurt**, and aimed to discuss and dramatise questions of “Heimat”, which (loosely-translated) means “Home”. The week was a mix of group sessions, cultural outings and 4 performances including Theatre Gruene Sosses' *Little Klaus*, *Big Klaus* and *Testosteron*.

Home *going home, it feels somehow good & somehow, not good.*

Home *is often about losing something or changing something.*

Home *is push and pull. Life and suffocation.*

To try and explain exactly what happened and how it happened seems an impossible exercise, which is not a great place to be in as I sit writing this report. Capturing the essence of the week would be as easy as capturing the essence of the people I spent my time with. Their generosity of spirit, creativity and openness to see each and every one present succeed whilst offering their own creative ideas was such a wonderful gift to receive as a director.

At the beginning of the week, each artist was invited to bring an item no larger than a fist that either smelt or tasted (or both) of ‘heimat’. These items were to be placed in its own 150 year old jar on the windowsill to form a physical reminder of our stimulus ‘heimat’. As an Australian living in and representing England with Dutch culture embedded in my

upbringing, this decision rattled around my brains for weeks. Seriously. What do I bring? I finally made the decision to make something new and bring three separate individual smells – three conjoined pouches the colour of the three countries flags containing 3 smells. I married this ‘three squared’ object with a written response. I’ll admit I was perhaps a tad keen (and if I’m extremely honest, it was also a tad lame), but I did write it out as neatly as humanly possible (I thought this was a rather smart disguise). My response went a little something like:

An item that smells or tastes of home.

Title: My home of smells

An explanation of sorts

I stand before you proudly representing the UK. But home presents to me a relentless battle of place, culture & heart. I did not have an item that truly smelt or tasted of ‘home’. So; with the help of my mother I created a bespoke homely item the size of my fist with smelliness of homeliness.

A journey of home for me in 3 chronological verses.

3 Pouches: PLACE, CULTURE, HEART.

TASMANIA *I was raised on the last piece of land before the Antarctic – Tasmania. An island pinned in place by the roaring 40s. An island so unique a person could get lost in the beauty. From here, I bring the smell of my youth – my heart: eucalypt.*

HOLLAND *A proud descendant half convict, half immigrant from Holland. A mixture of unfortunate circumstances and trail blazers who sought new opportunities & peace. From this, I bring the smell of my culture & my Oma’s kitchens – Spakkalaas.*

UK *From traveller’s blood, off to see the world, I settled my adult self in the UK. Here I find my adult home, my love, my career & further knowledge. From here, I bring the smell of my choice, the pebbled beaches of fish & chips & mushy peas. Vinegar.*

However sitting in the circle surrounded by 29 other artists from nothing short of 16 different countries, the realisation that this gathering of creatives was as *international* as the word can possibly get did nothing short of smack me square in the jaw. The sheer enormity of what that meant to me, both personally and professionally, left me a shaking leaf. I sat trembling as I listened to others’ ideas of home. I was moved by Dana from Tel Aviv’s offering of sand that represented the soil that she lived on, created on, that same soil that was fought over and that buried dead soldiers; and Cymbeline from Australia’s crumbled eucalypt leaves that had been carefully transported all the way from the Blue Mountains in a brown paper bag. When it approached my turn, I promptly rushed through my carefully thought-out (and neatly written) speech explaining my hiemat item at such speed that I’m certain Usain would have had more than just a Bolt to the finish line if he were timed against my delivery. No-one understood what I said. I became the only native speaking English person who couldn’t actually be understood.

Collecting myself, I assumed my position in my 'focus' group made up of 10 directors from Germany, Croatia, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, Russia, USA, Switzerland and of course, England. The structure of the week literally was; here is your group, here is a stimulus – GO. This allowed for everyone to make offerings and play together. This 'loose' structure also meant that each individual literally experienced something completely different that week. We were able to sculpt our own journey. With no time for preparation, I had to trust what I knew to be able to share. This liberated me.

I became fascinated and challenged by the vast difference in each of our approaches to our work and yet the undeniable similarities were blindingly obvious: most prominent being our love of story. At the start of the week we promised each other a gift: to speak in a common language – namely, pigeon English accompanied by a gestural vocabulary. This language/gift opened up a newly found love of all things spoken and kinaesthetic for me. The poetic nature of fusing broken English laced with another language, foreign sentence structure overlaid by English and the confused nature of charades not only fuelled my creative brain with ideas, but my spoken language became an acute or a highly scrutinised tool that I as the vessel with the skills to use that tool, had to utilise in a whole new light. A reminder of the decisions I make about text in performance on a daily basis. A reminder of my role within a creative room and the importance of effective communication. My mind was forced to articulate my contribution.

The most delightful relationships formed and transcended spoken language as I watched Lai from Vietnam command the space leading exercises with movement, Maria from Russia shape and move paper and objects in ways I had never considered and Santo from Germany continue to talk even when his English made absolutely no sense whatsoever with a sheer determination to offer his opinion (I will now forever refer to my garlic breath as a 'garlic flag' and always delight at just how ridiculous it is to call an owner of a house or flat a 'Land Lord'. Omnipresent).

The political conversations that riddle my professional conversation like how to improve the quality of the work or programming issues (the dreaded 'known' titles), are suddenly overcome with a desire to create the work that I feel needs to be seen. This state is only reached by the same conversation with my international counterparts who face the same debate on a daily basis. This is comforting and exhilarating.

I returned to England with a rejuvenation I have never felt before. Ideas about exercises, approaches and techniques filled my head (and notebook) with infinite avenues to explore. This sudden notion of what 'international' means occupied my head presenting images of travel at every turn. The squiggly wiggly lines of an autobarn or flight path became a map of artistic possibility.

The experience left me with a quiet confidence to be able to face the work I have carved out for myself. It gave me a self-assuredness that allows me not only to trust in my own decisions but that celebrates my individual creative contribution. Perhaps, most importantly I am now not ashamed to own where I am at in my career which includes my naivety, my strengths, my mistakes, my successes, my choices and my love of story. The experience left me feeling better equipped to face my work and more confident in my ability to create,

especially in the knowledge that our global village of artists are creating, developing and exploring work the world over, separated by distance, united by common cause.

Now that I have written the bulk of what will be my report, I realise that I have not relayed exactly what happened in the week or capture the essence of the artists present, BUT, I do not feel I have to. What I can do is leave one thing with you, the reader, from my experience – an encouragement to actively seek international work, conversation, culture, travel and conversation. Do not wait for it to come to you. Seek it out. There are many opportunities to explore. This vital discourse sits side by side with professional development. We have a responsibility to ourselves, as artists, to continually engage with our global village. This will both inspire and stimulate you to create work that grows with you as an artist and has a desire to be better than the last.