

## **A CRITICAL CONNECTION**

**UK ARTS IN EDUCATION PRACTITIONER JULIE WARD OF JACK DRUM ARTS VISITS**

**ADAM BETHLENFALVY OF ROUNDTABLE THEATRE IN EDUCATION CO IN HUNGARY**

**MARCH 2010**

### **Day 1 – Monday March 22<sup>nd</sup> 2010**

Adam and I meet in the flesh for the first time! We have been communicating via email for nearly a year, flung together by IDEA (International Drama in Education Association) as joint co-ordinators of a Special Interest Group for the international congress due to be held in Belém, Brazil, in July 2010.

This 'Critical Connection' has been made possible by Arts Council England North East and we have been planning how to spend our time together since December. I recognise Adam from his skype photo. We don't yet know each other but we already share a bond of common practice, a life-long passion for theatre in education.

My first morning is spent with Adam. He explains how his TIE company, Roundtable, operate. There are 5 core company members and a pool of associates. Adam has been involved in the company for 12 years along with Arnold and Ildikó. Zsuzsa joined in 2006 and Orsolya in 2008. At 20 she is the youngest member. The others are all in their 30s. Roundtable has a range of TIE programmes in its repertoire and I will be seeing 3 of the current programmes during my time in Hungary. I am very grateful to the company who have planned their programme for the week around my visit, aiming to show me a range of work for different age groups.

The company has no administrator. All the members undertake planning, administration, fundraising and so on. They do this alongside a full programme of TIE work which requires them not only to perform several different TIE shows within a given period but also to undertake stage-management and technical duties such as lighting and sound, and the exhausting task of setting up and taking down sets, and the loading and unloading of hired vans when they are touring programmes to other parts of Hungary and into neighbouring countries.

The company is based at the Marczibányi Cultural Centre in Buda, not far from the famous castle district with its palatial buildings. For those that don't know the capital city of Hungary, it is an amalgamation of two urban communities separated by the River Danube. (Buda is the hilly side and Pest is the flatter area.) There is a geographic parallel with Newcastle-Gateshead.

Roundtable has the use of a small office at the cultural centre. They also have storage space in the building for sets and costumes and the cultural centre hosts most of their TIE programmes for school-children from Budapest itself. Adam explained that the centre also

hosts another TIE company and the offices of a number of important national and regional cultural organisations.

I ask if Roundtable paid rent for the office space and Adam explains that although the facility is free at present they would prefer to pay a small sum so that they could broker a more official arrangement with the centre and thereby achieve greater security of tenure. The company performs its programmes at the cultural centre and tours to schools and centres across Hungary and into neighbouring countries such as Slovakia, Serbia and Slovenia.

We talk about how the company operate financially and I learn that, like my own company (Jack Drum Arts), Roundtable has no revenue funding. Like us, they are constantly trying to make ends meet through a variety of project grants. Cash-flow is often a problem, and at the present time they had not yet received a grant payment from the previous year. Adam explains the labyrinthine and bureaucratic processes associated with some of the country's grant funding programmes, for example, after successfully applying for a particular grant, Adam discovered that the criteria had been changed, requiring him to rewrite the programme, get stamps of approval (quite literally) from local authorities' along with individual letters of confirmation from participating schools. Adam explains that the company was considering giving up on this particular programme as it had become too difficult and time-consuming to pursue. He also explains that this particular system of grant-funding operates a first-come first-served policy regardless of applicant's track-record or the quality of the proposed project.

It is obvious that the company operates in a collective fashion, with all hands on deck to ensure that every task and chore is done. I suspect that, like many collectives, tasks tend to be completed by those who have the necessary skills and capacity, which can sometimes lead to an unfair distribution of work-load. In pressurised times, it is often hard to share tasks more equally or to delegate effectively or to take the time to pass on skills to each other. Adam seems to be the figurehead of the company but that might only be my perception as a foreigner because he speaks the best English. However, he does have an international standing and wide perspective and is currently the International Officer for Hungary's national drama association.

I ask how they paid themselves for doing company work and Adam told me that the 5 core members receive a very basic weekly salary. However this isn't sufficient to live on and everyone in the company is doing other things, either teaching drama students or running youth theatre sessions. Zsuzsa works as the administrator of the national youth theatre association. Arnold, Ildikó and Adam do some drama teaching at schools, colleges and university.

As well as the demanding work for Roundabout, all the company members and freelance actors I subsequently meet are engaged in higher education and/or professional development. Arnold is studying for a teaching qualification through a distance learning programme, specialising in communication studies. Orsolya is in her second year of study at a drama school, Zsuzsa is about to give up the national youth theatre co-ordination job so she can give more attention to her MA in Literature, and Adam has just enrolled as a PhD

student at the University of Birmingham, under the supervision of David Davis. Later in the week I meet Robert, a 24 year old actor who, when not performing with Roundtable, is training to be a history teacher.

In the afternoon Adam shows me something of the city and explains how I can use the excellent public transport system to orientate myself and travel easily from place to place. There is an old underground system but the trams are excellent and very cheap to use with a weekly pass. I have chosen to stay in a hotel just around the corner from where Adam lives with his partner, Fanni. This makes things easier for all concerned.

We had originally planned for me to accompany Adam to one of his Monday after-school drama sessions in a local school but Adam explains that the sessions have not been progressing as well as he had hoped and today he is going to tell the group that he will not continue. It is therefore deemed inappropriate for me to attend. We talk about this later, sharing a common concern that work with young people needs to be given value by the funders/commissioners and energy and focus by the young people concerned. We both affirm our practice as youth theatre NOT youth work – this distinction is crucial for me back home.

In the evening we meet up with Ludovic, an old friend of Adam's who is working on a tri-lateral cultural exchange project on the theme of 'tragedy' with young people from Hungary, France and Finland. The impetus for the project came from a student shooting incident in a Finnish school. We discuss the problem of language in international projects, an issue that Adam and I will have to grapple with when we facilitate our Special Interest Group in Brazil in July.

## **Day 2 – Tuesday March 23<sup>rd</sup> 2010**

Today Roundtable are conducting a day-long programme at the Marczibányi Cultural Centre with a primary school class. The programme, called "In Captivity", is inspired by the story of The Emperor's New Clothes. The children are very excited. They begin by sitting in a circle on a carpet with Arnold, Ildikó and Zsuzsa. The teachers sit on chairs nearby. There is an introduction and simple explanation of the day and then the children meet a spoilt prince played by Arnold. He is a horrid child - rude to his nanny and rude to the children. They play a game of Grandma's Footsteps and he won't let anyone win. Next we meet a guard who reveals the contents of a secret note he has found which talks about dreams. Even though Adam has talked me through the programme and the story I am not sure if the children know at this stage about the imprisoned boy they will later meet.

Next there is a wonderful scene in which two tailors discuss the merits of different cloth samples and what can be made from them. However, I am distracted by the teachers who seem to have abdicated responsibility for their charges. They sit apart from the children and chat amongst themselves. This makes me very cross, as it would back home. One of the teachers gets up to scold a child who is not paying attention and I think that setting an example by being good role models might help somewhat!

After lunch we return to the room which has been changed slightly, with a dividing curtain. The children are invited to creep into the prison (behind the curtain) where they discover the boy (played by Adam) and learn his story. He is the child who spoke out publicly, telling the Emperor he was not wearing anything at all, and he is now imprisoned for having the audacity to tell the truth. Together the children and the boy escape from the prison through a labyrinth. They then re-enact parts of the boy's story such as a scene from the Emperor's dressing room. Sometimes the action appears to get out of control, for example, when the children mob Arnold who is in role as the Emperor. Luckily, the actors are generally able to bring the situation back under control but the situation makes me edgy, especially as the teachers seem so disengaged.

I admire the actors' ability to stay calm and on track in such challenging circumstances. They do not lose their patience and remain in role when required and on the same physical level as the children. Zsuzsa, in role as a guard, aided by her imposing physical presence, helps the actors to assert enough authority to maintain the momentum of the story.

At the end of the day everyone is very tired. I help the company strike the simple set and put the various items back into their storage areas. Before we leave Adam introduces me to Kati Németh, director of the cultural centre. She obviously values the company's work and it is easy to see the mutual benefits for both parties; a home for the company and the development of new audiences for the arts for the centre.

### **Day 3 –Wednesday March 24<sup>th</sup> 2010**

I get up very early to catch a train to Győr where the company will be presenting a version of Edward Bond's "11 Vests" to a group of high school students at the Révai Miklós Secondary School. The actors have already left several hours earlier, in a hired van.

The company are noticeably anxious as they have not performed this piece for 3 weeks and are trying a new approach today with a pre-show workshop. Although I cannot understand a word of Hungarian I observe the proceedings which begin with a discussion about a school blazer and what it represents. Pupils who contribute ideas to the discussion are asked to try it on and say how they feel wearing it. The blazer bears a badge with a school motto. The 20 sixteen year olds (7 of whom are boys) spend some time discussing badges and mottos that might be appropriate for them. It is interesting to note that the students at Révai Miklós do NOT wear a school uniform. I note how well behaved these sixteen year olds are and how engaged in the discussion. Adam has warned me that the school has some problems and is concerned about the integration of some Gypsy Romany Travellers. The students are so engaged that I assume they must be a class of students who have opted to do drama and attend the session; it is not until later that I am told the session was compulsory for everyone.

After break the students watch a performance of "11 Vests", a harrowing piece of drama which observes the effects of inhuman institutions on young people – set as it is in a school and then in various military zones. The first scene is dominated by the sound of a crying girl

and a cynical teacher juxtaposed with the mute anger of a teenage boy who has vandalised the girl's blazer with knife slashes. (He has also desecrated a dictionary in a similar fashion.) Later, we see the same boy as a young soldier being subjected to the brutalizing behavior of a senior officer. The final scene is a nerve-wracking stand-off between the boy, his mate and a sniper, punctuated with moments of exquisite humanity such as when the men play with a toy train.

When the play has finished the students are invited onto the performance area where they discuss the significance of the objects in the story. They are asked to place the objects in such a way as to tell the story of how one thing leads to another. The objects include the slashed blazer and dictionary, a woman's shawl, the toy train, a map, a palias, guns and soldiers' helmets and back-packs, the pen-knife and bayonets, the teacher's jacket, all the jackets/vests.

The students are completely engaged in the discussion. They argue about some of the objects eventually reaching consensus to complete the task.

After lunch the actors repeat the process all over again with a group of 18 students (6 of whom are boys). This group apparently includes a significant proportion of disaffected young people, but I cannot tell as their attention is clearly focused on each task, whether as workshop participants or as audience members. In fact, if anything, this group is more involved in the programme than the morning group. They are quicker to offer suggestions and volunteer for tasks such as trying on the blazer, and they have a livelier discussion about the narrative symbolism of the objects.

In both cases, teachers are engaged in the programme, as interested observers. There are also some student teachers in attendance and members of a nascent theatre company who are looking to set up their own in-school programme. When it is all over, it takes about an hour and a half to strike the set and load the van. I take a ride back to Budapest with the company and we all help to unload the van which Arnold then drives back to the hire company. I figure that the actors must be exhausted. Back home in Britain, a gig such as this would have necessitated at least one night in a hotel!

#### **Day 4 –Thursday March 25<sup>th</sup> 2010**

After Wednesday's punishing schedule, everyone is taking it easy. The company has some administrative tasks to complete and so I decide to try and find the capital's holocaust memorial which I have seen on a photograph – cast bronze shoes strewn on the quayside by the Danube, near to the parliament building where the city's Jews were assassinated and pushed into the water. Racism and xenophobic activity is on the increase in Hungary, especially in respect of the Gypsy Romanies. Roundtable's work at Győr is, in part, a response to this.

Adam and I meet in the late afternoon in order to go and see some shows as part of a youth theatre festival. Adam tells me we must be early as there are always huge queues. The festival is happening right across the city in a variety of venues. We go to Vörösmarty

Secondary School where we see “Shhh!” a very odd show about love. It follows the fortunes of a group of school-girls, one of whom has a relationship with her teacher. I find the material dodgy, not in a prudish sense but in the way it doesn’t deal with the difficulties such a relationship would cause. Fiona Evans, a north east playwright, has written a play about this taboo subject – “Scarborough” – but her work doesn’t skirt the issues. I find it odd that a youth theatre director could allow a group of pubescent teenagers to pursue a subject like this without a greater depth of inquiry. It seems irresponsible to me to produce such ‘fluff’.

We then watch a very clever, original and accomplished show called “Consumer’s Basket” which explores our relationship with food and each other, through an extraordinary playfulness with a wide range of kitchen accoutrements and a shopping trolley. This piece uses the strengths of the young actors, incorporating comedy, music and songs with rhythms beaten out using cutlery, cheese graters and so on. The performers represent a diverse group of young people including a confident young man who is very large. I have my own parallels back home. It is a universal reminder of how youth theatre can provide a place for everyone, no matter whether or not they conform to the youth ideal promoted by the media.

#### **Day 5 –Friday March 26<sup>th</sup> 2010**

Today the company are presenting a devised piece called “Brothers” to a primary school group at the Marczibányi Cultural Centre. Both actors and audience are on the stage in the main auditorium. The set is a simple depiction of a boy’s bedroom. Adam plays the boy who is having some problems in his relationship with his mother and brother. Father is absent, possibly dead. The play uses the boy’s interest in a Hungarian folk story as a device for exploring family responsibility and issues of maturity and growing up. The action moves from fantasy to reality and vice versa in an easy charming way that feels in tune with the age and interests of the audience.

The programme is a combination of well rehearsed scenes and interactive workshop activities. Before the play begins the actors ask the audience for suggestions as to whose bedroom it is. They draw attention to a variety of objects in the room which have the potential to become many things through play. They ask for suggestions as to what these might be and improvise each suggestion, much to the audience’s delight. Throughout the programme the action stops at key moments for the actors to ask the audience questions. The most important questions relate to the central character’s behaviour, in particular his attitude towards his mother. I note a boy with blonde hair who is greatly affected by the piece. He is very absorbed by the drama and has much to say. At one point he announces with enormous wisdom, “Our brains are still growing – we are not adults yet.” A teacher remarks, “I’m surprised they know so much,” and another says, “Listening to them makes me want to cry – they know so much.”

At the end of the programme the children work in small groups with the actors, writing diary entries for the boy and letters to the absent father. These are then read out by the actors

on stage. This programme and “11 Vests” both demonstrate the power of carefully planned, well-executed TIE work, performed to small class-sized audiences. They are in a style developed during a golden age of British TIE which has sadly now largely disappeared. It is salutary seeing something so good that we have now lost. I contrast this with the pressure my own company feels always to perform to larger audiences, sometimes whole schools. Perhaps the time has come to try out something smaller and more intimate again?

After lunch I have a brief meeting with Kati who tells me a bit more about the cultural centre and its broad spectrum of arts activities. Then I have a meeting with the Roundtable company members as they are keen to have some feedback from me about the work I have seen this week. I tell them I am impressed by the seriousness with which they approach their work with young people. The design of the TIE programmes seems very thoughtful and focussed. Their choice of material and the attention to detail speaks volumes about quality. The work has a deep emotional connection with its audience and does not shy away from difficult issues. I like the intimacy they create with small audiences and the prolonged actor engagement with young people both in and out of role. I wonder, however, about their relationship with teachers as I have seen both positive and negative, productive and unproductive teacher behaviours this week. I feel this is a common area which many theatre practitioners need to address, including myself. It is something that Adam and I must certainly take on board as part of our role as IDEA SIG co-ordinators.

The discussion is timely as Adam and I have set aside Friday afternoon to do the SIG planning. We have already agreed a set of aims for the SIG and these have been circulated to the wider SIG group. Our main starting point for the detailed planning is the age group (12-19) and the special position that this constituency of young people occupies, as they bridge the gap between child and adult. Adam suggests the theme of ‘thresholds’ and, inspired by this concrete metaphor, we are able to plan our SIG fairly quickly. I am sure, however, that the process has been aided enormously by us being in each other’s company much of the week, sharing information and conversing about our work, our passions and our concerns.

### **Day 6 –Saturday March 27<sup>th</sup> 2010**

Adam and I meet at Vörösmarty Secondary School again to see a couple more youth theatre shows. He points out a woman whom he says is the head teacher and I am impressed to see youth arts activity being taken so seriously by a leading educator from the formal sector.

We watch two shows, the first being an exploration of a ballad, performed by a youth theatre based in a rural area. It is a well-executed piece which uses ensemble storytelling in both vocal and physical action to good effect. It is the kind of piece I can imagine doing with some of my groups. The next show is a weird take on the circus theme which misses its mark and leaves the young performers exposed in a performance which falls apart through lack of a clear narrative structure. Despite the unevenness of the youth theatre shows I have seen during the festival, I am pleased to discover a healthy sector which is well supported by a national network.

Adam and I have dinner together and talk about our wider interests and aspirations for the arts, and our concerns for the immediate future. We have much in common, with neither company being in receipt of revenue funding and with both lead practitioners pursuing post-graduate research and perhaps not able to give such undivided attention to ongoing management. We also begin to talk about whether it might be possible to do some work together in the future. I would be interested in seeing a version of “11 Vests” being developed for Durham secondary school audiences and can see a model whereby we might create a company of young actors who could work with Adam as a visiting director. However there is still the huge challenge of a multi-lingual international drama Special Interest Group to oversee so all else must wait!

## **FINAL WORDS**

Making this ‘Critical Connection’ came at a very important time for me and helped the development of a professional relationship which had already begun in a virtual manner but was deepened and enriched through personal contact. My fillip for making the connection was the fact that both Adam and I had been asked to act as co-ordinators of the IDEA SIG, however I realised very early on, during my week in Budapest, that our wider interests were perhaps more significant. Delaying the SIG planning until the end of the week helped to build the bigger picture of our different and shared worlds.

I also realised that the ‘connection’ was not entirely for my own benefit, neither was it simply a useful mechanism for Adam and me as SIG co-ordinators. The meeting I had with all the company members to offer my observations and feedback on their work was of huge interest and importance to them. Peer evaluation based on careful and detailed observation is uncommon for most of us, yet it can provide useful feedback, affirmation and challenges. We are so close to our work and so busy doing it that we cannot take a step back to regard ourselves in action. I believe this ‘critical connection’ also made me a ‘critical friend’.

Huge thanks are due to Adam and his colleagues in Roundtable for allowing me a window into their world. The generosity with which they shared their practice has enabled me to reflect on my own work and also on the history and legacy of TIE work.

### **Julie Ward, Artistic Director, Jack Drum Arts, County Durham, UK.**



Julie is a writer, theatre-maker and director of Jack Drum Arts – an award-winning creative co-op she co-founded 1986 in Durham, England. She previously worked as a drama facilitator for Contact Theatre in Manchester, as a festival director in Coventry and Nottingham, and as the co-ordinator of the north-east’s arts and disability agency. In 2003 she was named Woman Social Entrepreneur of the Year and subsequently served as a board member of Culture North East. In 2009 she joined Arts Council England and commenced a Masters in Education and

International Development at the University of Newcastle. She is governor of her local Performing Arts College and has also worked as a freelance journalist for the BBC, The Guardian and The Stage.

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