As Divorce Approaches, a Bilingual Blood Wedding Opens a New Door

<https://www.newplaysfromeurope.com/blog/2018/12/20/making-theatre-across-borders-gill-foster>

In May 2018 I travelled to Madrid with a company of student actors preparing for their first performance of a new, bi-lingual adaptation of Lorca’s Blood Wedding that would take place just ten days later. The 16-strong company had been working on the play since January as part of an intensive rehearsal process, sharing ideas and development exercises aimed at accessing the deeper layers of ritual and symbol in Lorca’s poetic meditation on fate, nature and freedom. All pretty standard stuff. Except for one big difference – one half of the company had never met nor even been in the same room as the other half. While they had shared a rehearsal process of exploration and discovery, until our arrival at the airport all communications between the actors in London and those in Madrid had been entirely virtual. And here we were – arriving to meet the other half of the company for the very first time, yet already knowing each other and eager to finally begin work in a live rather than a virtual rehearsal space.

At the beginning of the process, the actors had been paired together, sharing their journey through rehearsals in blogs, emails and by Skype. What was significant about this project however, was that they were also going to be ‘exchange’ partners playing host to each other as the production played in London and Madrid. For two weeks in Spain, and subsequently England they lived as well as worked together which created an immersive experience that demanded a different type of personal commitment from all of them; forging deep bonds of trust and empathy between performers from different countries, speaking different languages and working together for the first time in a dynamic, creative process.

I have been developing this method of creating bi-lingual adaptations with trans-European casts of young actors for some time. In every project the country, the play, the language has been different. Yet at the heart of each creative endeavor is the realization that while there are numerous artistic and educational outcomes for the project participants, the primary one may, in fact, be the opportunity it affords to engage experientially with European culture and society in a way that delivers life-long impact and fundamentally transforms young actors’ ability to forge identities as both artists and citizens of Europe. For these students the excitement of travelling and working in a different country with professional creatives from those countries energizes and drives the artistic process in a quite remarkable way. Within two days of meeting, the students were taking the kinds of physical and emotional risks that one might reasonably expect from a much more experienced ensemble company.

The additional benefits to the project were, of course that the adaptation itself, was imaginatively developed in the rehearsal room as the actors, director, dramaturge and choreographer explored both the text in its original language and in translation; focusing on finding the rhythms and synergies and discovering creative pathways into the heart of the play. All the actors were required to perform in both languages and performing in a second language, whilst undoubtedly challenging was ultimately empowering as they discovered a new confidence in their ability to work with the new theatre form we were creating.

Ten days after arriving at Adolfo Suarez airport, the first work-in-progress performance of Bodas de Sangre took place in the theatre of the Transforming Arts Institute, Madrid. Everyone was exhausted and exhilarated. The show was subsequently performed in London and in the summer of 2019 will tour in England and Spain. Meanwhile, the actors have become more than just a company – they are friends and have kept in touch in the months between the shows. If you ask them whether they would ever consider themselves able to work as an actor in a different EU country – the answer will be ‘Yes!’. As we prepare for Brexit this kind of creative collaboration feels rather like a life-line for young people; keeping them engaged with, and responsive to, their lives as Europeans beyond the narrow confines of national borders which if we are not careful will only shut down the artistic opportunities and access we have collectively worked so hard to achieve.