

# FEATS NEWSLETTER

## June 2022

Competitive or non-competitive? Thrust stage or proscenium arch? Open curtains or closed curtains? So many points of discussion for FEATS 2022 held in Mersch, a pretty town some 27 kms from Luxembourg city. The participating groups were encouraged, but not obliged, to perform pieces on the theme of 'changing times'. There were changes for this festival as it was non-competitive, using a thrust stage with open curtains. It was good to be in theatre mode again after such a long time, but the relative paucity of hotel accomodation near to the theatre meant that the mingling of participants and audiences over breakfast was not really possible for most people. A pity as meeting new people is one of the strengths of FEATS. Also, many of the 'usual suspects' were missing. Conflicting productions, difficulty of getting to the venue (I could not find flights to get me there for the first night), continued reticence to travel, or the fact that the festival was non-competitive were all contributing factors. A pity, as the organising committee had obviously worked hard to make a success of the event.

As I was unable to be there, Nicky Clark and Pat Butler wrote a summary of the first evening. Thank you, Nicky and Pat for a great job..

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The opening play on Thursday was not really a theatre piece. It was untitled and devised by the performers in order to probe the darker emotions. With few words and lots of physical activity, it explored various themes, such as violence, pregnancy, loss and marriage breakdown. It was explained afterwards by the evaluator that the piece has been/is being used in workshop situations with people who have problems similar to those dealt with. The purpose of the workshop was to encourage people to talk about what was upsetting them and was used in prison contexts to unleash emotions. It was performed with energy and commitment by the four actors and the depiction of the marriage, pregnancy, domestic violence and subsequent loss of baby was quite harrowing.

The second play *LANE 147* was an original script by Stuart Marlow, based on true refugee stories, about a refugee who tries to persuade a lorry driver to smuggle her into the UK. Unfortunately, the actor who should have played the refugee was unable to perform on the night, and delivered her lines via a pre-recorded video projected onto a large screen at the back of the stage. As a result, Andrew Gollodge, playing the lorry driver, had to play to an empty space. Despite a valiant effort on his part, it was difficult for the audience to engage with the action on stage as there was no physical relationship between the characters. In addition, the ending of the play had been re-written at a late stage, which meant that the actors were using scripts. Although the play was interesting, timely and well worth writing, the group could not do it justice on the night because of the absence of one of the main actors. The evaluator commented that the group were brave to go ahead with the project having encountered so many problems.

The last play of the evening was the first of two performances of *Contractions*, a rather sinister play by Mike Bartlett, consisting of a series of interviews between a manager and a salesperson about the latter's relationship with another employee in the company. It was originally written as a play for the radio. It was quite comic at first but the tone of the interviews became gradually more disturbing as the play progressed and ended in the surreal desperation of Emma, the salesperson. The evaluator was impressed by the skilled performances and commented that the setting of the furniture was well thought out.

Friday started with *A More Perfect Human*, written and directed by Henri Colens and performed by AATG, The Hague. This is a political drama and, as our evaluator, Mike McCormack, commented, it

was very timely! We are party to the machinations and untruths as we see behind the scenes in a cabinet minister's office, where the minister is about to go live on TV to explain away a colleague's reprehensible actions. (Does this sound familiar?) We hear the exchanges between the minister and her assistant; the minister and the PM's fixer and the assistant and the fixer. These three-cornered exchanges were cleverly mirrored in the triangular siting of the minister's and her assistant's desks and the fixer's sofa. Does the minister follow her own instincts or does she let herself be swayed by the representative of Number Ten? The scenes are separated by beautifully performed dance sequences. Though what they represented, I am not sure.

ECC Brussels presented what are really two of the *Queers* monologues: *Missing Alice* by Jon Bradfield and *Something Borrowed* by Gareth McClean, but they were cleverly intertwined, moving between the 1950s and the present day. Alice found out after her wedding that her husband is a homosexual. However, she has come to terms with the situation and her marriage is stable and happy, but she muses on whether this will continue given that homosexuality has become decriminalised. In *Something Borrowed* we eavesdrop on Steve as he prepares his wedding speech for his upcoming nuptials with his male fiancé. Abi Greef and Caraigh McGregor gave fine, story-telling performances.

Last up on Friday evening were the Irish Theatre Group from Brussels with George Bernard Shaw's *Augustus Does His Bit*. A huge 'Hats Off' to Conrad Toft who brilliantly took over the lead rôle at a moment's notice, stepping in for Geoffrey Mamdani who had tested positive for Covid and to whom we wish a speedy recovery. This was good old-fashioned satire with a blatantly obvious plot, lovely 'of the period' costumes and set – great gramophone. Brian Holland gave a skilled performance as the clerk and Jane McBride was a great 'not spy'.

Saturday began with the English Youth Theatre of Brussels in *Boom* by Vincent Eaton. Here a trio of young people, X, Y and Z, are planning the destruction of the world by setting off a bomb. All three, very young actors, played with energy, confidence and skill. There were comic routines and an almost child-like fascination with the bomb which clearly would not go off, packed as it was in a shoe box.

The setting for Lucerne World Theatre Company's production of *Fourteen* was a huge table, beautifully laid for fourteen dinner guests in a well-heeled American town in the early 1900s. The social climbing hostess becomes increasingly agitated as guests telephone to cancel at the last minute with varying excuses meaning that the butler, Dunham, played with just the right amount of understated exasperation by Derk van Mourik, had to remove place settings and then replace them when the next phone call requested that another guest be added to the invitees. This production contained strong elements of farce leaving the audience laughing.

The last performance on Saturday was by Homerotheater of The Hague who gave us a cut-down version of Laura Wade's *Breathing Corpses*. Unfortunately the cutting of the first scene meant that we were not able to understand the significance of the last scene. The second scene, where the husband murders his wife, was played with real passion and violence, (I am sure the 'wife' must have ended up with bruises!) and the action in the hotel room was good. The scene changes were efficient though the sound effects were too loud and the water drips seemed interminable.

Sunday evening began with a second production of Mike Bartlett's *Contractions* performed by The Hamburg Players. The Manager, played by Jocasta Gottlieb, seated at the long diagonally-placed conference table, is interviewing one of the staff, Emma, Naomi O'Taylor, regarding a potential breach-of-contract with co-worker Darren. At first the Manager appears supportive but she becomes increasingly monstrous and skilful in her handling of Emma who ends up realising that she is no longer a valued member of staff but merely a slave in the organisation. A chilling performance.

In FEST's *The Scheme* by Mike Reipl, two partners come up with a sure-fire means of making huge

amounts of money. All that remains is for A to come up with the final written touches before the launch. Unfortunately he has writer's block. Enter a delivery woman with a parcel which B has ordered. Using the gun which was contained in the parcel, B forces A to finish his writing. This done, B puts down the gun, which A takes up and shoots B before shooting himself. Unlike many of the performances, every word could be heard from these actors.

The last play of the festival, *Shortly to go*, was performed by the Brussels Shakespeare Society. The stage was split into two halves with an IKEA chair and table stage left, an Elizabethan-style chair and table stage right and connected by a small square table centre stage. During the pandemic Mary Fortnite tries to write a biography of Shakespeare and discover what really happened during his seven 'lost' years. She becomes delusional and 'meets' Shakespeare in an intermingling of time, she later attempts suicide, and is saved by nurse Mike. She writes a best-seller, Mike dies of Covid. At the same time Shakespeare is trying to finish *King Lear*. He also becomes delusional and is being looked after by the maid Mary Mountjoy who loves Shakespeare but finally is married off to someone else and dies of the plague.

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Each evening, evaluator Mike McCormack gave his appraisal of the performances and on the last evening he concluded by mentioning the 'extraordinary, effective four days' we had had. The settings of the plays had always been appropriate and the lighting almost universally effective. On the whole costumes had been appropriate and direction never misguided. He admired the support which had been shown between all the groups and he praised the exemplary technical coordination and front of house coordination.

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Next year's FEATS is to be held in Frankfurt and should you be free and interested in helping out on the technical side, please contact the organising committee at [committee@festfrankfurt.org](mailto:committee@festfrankfurt.org) who would be delighted to hear from you.

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Have a good summer enjoying the freedom to meet up with family and friends once more. Stay safe and keep well.

## WHAT'S ON IN THE THEATRE

<u>When</u>	<u>Who</u> <u>Information</u>	<u>What</u>	<u>Where</u>	<u>Where</u>
<u>July</u>				
7-10,14-17,21-24	Entity Theatre, Munich	<i>The Comedy of Errors</i>	Theatron, Westpark	entitytheatre.com
8,9,15,16,22,23	Fest, Frankfurt	<i>Gladys Nights</i>	Wiesbaden Performing Arts Center	<a href="mailto:info@festfrankfurt.org">info@festfrankfurt.org</a>
<u>August</u>				
5-7	ESOC, Darmstadt	<i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i>	Prinz Emil's Nachbarschaftsgarten	esotheatre.org
<u>October</u>				
7-9, 14-16	FEST, Frankfurt <a href="mailto:info@festfrankfurt.org">info@festfrankfurt.org</a>	<i>And Then There Were None</i>		
<u>November</u>				
15-19	ATC, Brussels	<i>Almost, Maine</i>		<a href="mailto:info@atcbrussels.com">info@atcbrussels.com</a>

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