

schaubühne am lehniner platz

A LEAP IN THE DARK

by David Lan

A few weeks after I was asked to give this talk, a large cardboard box arrived on my desk. When I opened it, I discovered it was packed to the brim with brochures, each beautifully designed, all issued by the Goethe Institute announcing hundreds, maybe thousands, of events the Institute has sponsored, arranged, underwritten, endorsed or enabled over recent years. Performances, conferences, exhibitions, readings – each a carefully constructed bridge (some wide, some narrow) linking a conversation taking place somewhere in Germany about fine art, about philosophy, about theatre, about literature with similarly lively conversations taking place in other parts of the world.

The theatre I run, the Young Vic, appears on some of those pages. The Institute has supported us most generously. It has enabled us to bring to London leading theatre designers, celebrated in Germany though unknown in the UK, to work with us in my theatre. It has enabled two groups of my young directors to visit the many exceptional theatres of Berlin (once in 2006, once in 2009) seeing shows, talking to their directors, meeting younger German directors and so on.

When I invite young colleagues of mine to visit Berlin, I have one intention and one only. This is, to use a phrase associated with the 1960s, to blow their minds. There is a more vulgar version of this phrase, inappropriate to these august surroundings. I want to suggest that vulgarism even if I don't actually say it because I want to convey my intention to shock these young people. I want to thoroughly unsettle them and shake them up with the discovery of what extraordinary things it is possible to do on a stage.

Until you experience Berlin theatre you can't imagine it – a production of Moliere where it snows non-stop for 6 hours, or another which involves the lead actor plastering himself with a whole picnic's worth of food while wearing a scooped-out watermelon skin as a helmet. I offer just two typical examples. And when you do experience this theatre, you become a little bit more free as an artist, and consequently a little bit more capable of communicating *through art* the complexity of your own special and individual experience of living in the world.

I know that when I say Berlin I could as well say Germany more generally - Hamburg, Frankfurt, Cologne - I could refer to the magnificent *Three Kingdoms*, a co-production between our own Lyric Theatre Hammersmith and Munich's Kammerspiele (as well as Tallinn's Theatre No99) now playing in London until the end of this week.

Why are the minds of these young directors blown? Well, they're impressed by the strength and subtlety of the acting. They're overwhelmed by the exuberance and expressiveness of the design. But those are symptoms, I think, and not the underlying cause.

The cliché is to say of the work of the Schaubühne or the Volksbühne, for example: 'this is directors' theatre' whereas our theatre is a 'writers' theatre'. For decades the English theatre has



closed its eyes – or, more accurately perhaps, held its nose - at this theatre, aghast at the arrogance, the egotism with which German directors rethink and remake plays which, amongst us respectful, tactful English, are considered sacred in conception as well as in detail.

But disdain gets us no distance. Is it possible to say anything enlightening about what these apparent butchers and blasphemers are trying to achieve?

Well, they're all individuals, and each no doubt believes all others are sheisters with similar generosity of spirit to that which English directors display when they talk about each other. All the same, I want to generalise a little and try to describe what *I think* is going on. I'm sure I won't get very far but this event this evening celebrating Anglo-German collaboration seems, paradoxically, an opportunity to try to give a sense of where, in my opinion, the difference begins.

That's one paradox. Here's another.

Despite the fact that the Goethe Institute has been at work in the UK with energy and success for 50 years, Britons barely know the work of Goethe at all. Perhaps we know *Faust* Part 1. But Part 2? Or his other plays such as *Tasso* or *Goetz von Berlichingen*? We know some of the poems because Schubert transformed them into songs – but the novels? How many non-German speakers in the room have read *Elective Affinities* – or even that global best-seller of its day *The Sorrows of Young Werther*?

The same is true of me. I know *Faust* Part 1 and that's about it - but the reason I know *Faust* Part 1 is particular.

I grew up in Cape Town. While I was at school – I think I was about 16 – the drama teacher of a girls' school down the road decided to direct *Goethe's Faust*, an imaginative choice, you might say, but an odd one as it contains very few women's parts– two, in fact, if you except sprites and witches. Having decided, for reasons I can only guess at, not to offer the men's parts to her students to play *en travesti*, she looked to neighboring boys' schools. I was invited to give my Mephistopheles. Which, I must admit, I was delighted to do. Skin tight black leotards and a pair of nifty red horns. I must have looked ridiculous, though people were, as I remember, kind enough not to point that out to my face - my heavily bearded and mustachioed face, that is. Anyway ...

Whenever I think about Goethe, whenever I think about *Faust*, one line of dialogue always comes back to me over the now more than 40 years. At some early point in the play Mephistopheles describes himself like this:

'I am he who wills evil but who does good.'

What on earth did that mean? I'm sure that even then I was aware that getting to the bottom of this most ambiguous of plays was asking rather a lot of a bunch of adolescents. Even so, to play the part I had to speak this line and it puzzled me.



It's a paradox, a contradiction. He wills evil but he does good. But if he *knows* that by doing some particular kind of evil he is, ultimately, doing good, why doesn't he find some more effectively evil sort of evil to do? How can the Devil consciously do good? Thinking about this - to recycle a phrase I used earlier - blows your mind.

Of course, you remember the story.

When we first meet Faust, he is profoundly bored. He has studied and mastered all legitimate forms of knowledge:

Philosophy have I digested

The whole of Law and Medicine.

From each its secrets I have wrested,

Theology as well thrown in.

Poor fool, despite this sweated lore

I am no wiser than before.

So - new idea - he decides to explore *illegitimate* knowledge, *secret* science, the *dark* arts. In doing so he inadvertently conjures up Mephistopheles.

What Faust doesn't know is that, in a prologue, Mephistopheles, whose job it is to corrupt human souls and win them over to the dark side, complains to God that human beings are such a push-over, are so easy to corrupt that he, like Faust, is bored to tears. God, knowing Faust to be an inherently good man, sets Mephistopheles the challenge of trying to corrupt *him*.

So the Devil offers Faust the famous bargain. He offers Faust secret knowledge - in fact, omniscience. Faust, if he agrees to follow the Devil's path, will lead a uniquely privileged existence. He will solve all the mysteries of the universe. But, if he is ever so enthralled by any part of this experience that he loses his cynicism and his *ennui* and begs for time to come to a stop, if he finds even one experience so enthralling that he longs for it to last forever, then his soul will be damned to hell. In that case, game over: Mephistopheles 1, God zero.

However, however, however - and here's the paradox - it is Faust's character that in everything he does he pushes himself to the utmost limits. He can do nothing half-heartedly. He's not that kind of guy. In the very act of sinning, of breaking God's laws, he is exploring and discovering his true God-given nature. Yes, he is bad. But he is so thoroughly, rigorously bad that *in being bad* he is giving expression to his essence. And so, in the end, even though he sins he is saved.

Which is why Mephistopheles '*wills evil but does good*'.

I can't be sure I quite saw all the way into this, in some ways, quite conventional argument of enlightenment theology while wearing my skin-tight black leotard. But, as I say, the paradox bothered me and I have never able to quite let it go.



What is the paradox *exactly*? That to find yourself, you have to lose yourself? Or perhaps, better, to save yourself you *have to be willing* to lose yourself forever. You must be prepared to risk eternal damnation. Faust had no idea, after all, that in the prologue God had decided to take time out from all his other duties and keep a close eye on how his story panned out, that God was standing by, like a doting nanny with an infant, ready to catch him should he fall.

No, Faust has to blindly risk the lot, absolutely the lot. He has to take a leap in the dark.

Thinking of my young directors tempted by me to set out for Berlin, I find it interesting that, as soon as the pact between Faust and Mephistopheles is signed, at once the Devil invites Faust to go on a journey, to fly over oceans, to cross many borders in order to see the old world in a new way.

Faust: Whither away?

Mephistopheles: By any route you please

To see both high and low, by lands and seas.

Faust: What means of travelling do you intend?

Where are your servants, coaches, horses?

Mephistopheles:

I only have to spread this cloak, my friend,

To bear us both, at will, on airy courses.

To questions of your luggage pay no heed

On this bold trip there's no such paltry need.

A little jet of fire I have in store

To lift us from the earth. With strength to soar,

We'll mount the quicker, being light of gear.

Congratulations on your new career.

And off they fly. Whether they delayed a day or two to make an application to the Goethe Institute for a travel grant is not recorded.

Ok – what do I take from this?



That the Devil, because he *is* a devil, tries to do a bad thing despite the fact that he *knows* – and tells us at the first moment we meet him – that it's all going to go *wrong*, in other words it's all going to go *right*, in the end.

And Faust, likewise, is totally committed to doing bad things but - provided he does these bad things *enough*, with total conviction, 100%, then he's really doing a *good* thing and will end up in heaven.

In sum: if you are by nature a sinner, sin can be your salvation.

As this evening is a celebration of Germany in England and England in Germany, I'm going straight from Goethe to a writer that, famously, had a profound influence on him: Shakespeare.

Another memory from my childhood.

My father's family came from a town in southern Lithuania now called Kaunas, then – when it was part of Russia – known as Kovna. They lived in the Jewish ghetto called Slobotka. It was right on the border with Poland, a border that over the centuries was constantly fought over. Sometimes Slobotka was Russian, sometimes it was Polish.

Here's my grandmother's favourite joke:

One Lithuanian Jew to another: Oh Mottel, how I wish the Poles would invade.

Second Lithuanian Jew: Are you crazy? Why do you wish the Poles would invade?

First Lithuanian Jew: Because I can't stand another terrible Russian winter.

My grandparents were intellectuals and Trotskyites. In the late 1920s they escaped poverty and pogroms and crossed many borders and oceans to arrive in Cape Town. There they joined a cultural organization called the Lenin Club where they listened to Brahams on 78 rpm records and read Shakespeare. My father acquired the habit and when I was a kid he used to read Shakespeare to me. You may say that the Lenin Club has much to answer for.

I remember particularly his analysis of Polonius' speech to his son Laertes. *Hamlet Act One, Scene Three*. Laertes is leaving Elsinore and heading back to France. Before they part, Polonius gives him all sorts of advice and, as everyone knows, ends up like this:

To thine own self be true

And it must follow as the night the day

Thou canst not then be false to any man.

This to my father was wisdom. *'To thine own self be true.'*

And so it seemed to me. Until, when I was a bit older, I saw a production of the play and realized that, when you see the play in action, Polonius is undoubtedly, to put it simply, a fool. So as soon as I could I said to my father: 'You tell me that what Polonius says is wisdom but even Hamlet says of him: 'These tedious old fools.'



But my father, of course, quick as a flash, had the answer: 'It doesn't matter what else he says in other parts of the play. Here in this speech he is talking to his son who is about to leave him.' (This is my father speaking to *his* son who, he knows, will soon leave *him*.) 'In that moment,' said my dad, 'Polonius speaks from the deepest part of his heart and tells his son the very best he knows. When he does *that*, trust me, he knows what he's talking about.'

Game, set – but not quite match.

Years and years later, I read an insightful piece in the New York Review of Books by the very brilliant Zadie Smith. She was writing, as I remember, in the context of the current widespread criticism of so-called 'multi-culturalism'. Her point was how easily this brave social experiment can be misunderstood when it is assumed that each individual has only one identity.

Let's pick an example at random. Pakistani Muslims. If such people choose to live in a closed community of similar people and consequently fail to assimilate - to become English in England and French in France and so on - this is held by certain critics to be a bad thing, a social experiment that has failed.

But it is too easily assumed by these critics that Pakistani Muslims living, say, in East London are Pakistani Muslims and nothing but. Whereas, and here I'm paraphrasing Zadie Smith, don't we know that a person may be a Pakistani Muslim in their parents' home speaking Bengali to them but work, say, for Goldman Sacks - or the Green Party - speaking a distinctive dialect of English in that context and go clubbing at the weekends speaking yet another lingo there? And read chick-lit and the London Review of Books and Noam Chomsky and the Motor Bike News. And be gay and in love with a Maori and vote Lib Dem and store on their iPod Bob Marley, Stephen Sondheim, Lady Gaga and Shubert's setting of *Der Erlkoning*. (I had to bring Goethe back in somewhere.)

Polonius is a fool, she says, writing of this same speech of a father's advice to his son, because *no human being has a single self to be true to*. We all have many selves, multiple selves.

You may be a Jewish intellectual and the son of a Lithuanian Trotskyist who was sometimes a Russian and sometimes a Pole but you're also a small time businessman and a South African, a white South African at that, and so on and so on. Or son of same.

So here's the gospel according to Zadie Smith: accept and inhabit the paradox of having a complex social existence. Be a devout Jew or Muslim or Christian at home, a socialist agitator at work and sing karaoke on Thursday nights in a Dalston pub. And live these contradictions each to the nth degree, totally, irresolvably.



This is the theme of *Hamlet* – ‘I am this but I am also that’. It’s not, as it is sometimes crudely expressed, that he is a man who can’t make up his mind. Rather he is a man of *many* minds which contradict each other. ‘I am entirely this kind of person but I am also entirely that kind of person.’

At the start of Act Five he has given up trying to resolve it all: is my mother good or evil? Is my dead father an angel or a demon? As he puts it: *‘The readiness is all.’*

And at his death he is, like Faust, found acceptable to God, if only in the eyes of his best friend, Horatio, who knows him well in all his contradictoriness:

Good night, sweet prince,

And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest.

But as soon as he’s dead, folks start trying to simplify him and sum him up. Enter Fortinbras:

Bare Hamlet like a soldier to the stage

For he was likely, had he been put on

To have proved most royal.

How the hell does he know what Hamlet might likely have proved to be? He doesn’t know him from Adam, he’s only just entered the room - but Hamlet can’t speak for himself and everyone who’s left alive is too upset to tell Fortinbras to shut up and Shakespeare lets this bunch of clichés end the play.

I remember somewhere Claude Levi-Strauss writing that a human being is like a species. When someone dies it is like a whole species has been wiped out.

How do you know which species you are? As the great Polish adventurer and journalist Ryszard Kapuchinski will tell you, you discover who you are by discovering who you are *not*. And you do that by encountering ‘the other’ – whatever or whoever that other may be. If you’re black maybe it’s white – if you’re English maybe it’s German. And in that way you discover that *what you are not* may actually be merely *what you are not – yet*.

The readiness is all.



Or - to bring in a third wise man, F. Scott Fitzgerald:

The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function.

This is what I love about the Berlin theatre. It is a theatre of unresolved paradox, of multiple selves, of salvation through sinning.

It is authentically Shakespeare's *Hamlet* - here I am thinking of Thomas Ostermeier's Schaubühne production recently seen at the Barbican - but every rule we take for granted is broken. It is set on a muddy field of battle - or is it actually (or also?) a rain-drenched Glastonbury-like rock festival? One actress plays Ophelia but also at the same time Gertrude. The electronic score was written yesterday. Hamlet improvises, swears, abuses the audience as he wanders round the auditorium. And, by some miracle, one's impression is that everything Shakespeare knew about being human *and* everything the director and actors and designer can tell you about what being human means *to them* is intermingled in real time. We are knee-deep in renaissance Denmark but up to our eyes in the present instant. The show is profoundly this and profoundly that. And inside and because of that paradox it is intoxicatingly alive.

Or the Schaubühne's current *Misanthrope* directed by Ivo van Hove. As you'd expect, Alceste is full of bile, a man exceptionally depressed by and disgusted with mankind. That's what one expects of this character. But what is thrilling is that at the same time he is a man overwhelmingly in love, literally floored by crazy, romantic, sensual adoration - and this wild, rubbish strewn, extravagantly trashed up performance tells you as much about what love is like as you're ever likely to discover from any stage.

It is only rarely that I find this quality, this ability to express the violently paradoxical nature of human psychology and society - the profoundly irresolvable contradictoriness of it all - in English theatre. To try to sum it up, what I miss is a theatre in which the human mind and human heart are pushed as far, as far, as far - to their furthest possible extent, until just before they snap - and in which they are as alive as anyone can be before they die.

We English editorialise, we rationalise, we explain.

The English theatre is a place where, by and large, one leaves in the cloak room one's deepest, most adult understanding of what it is to be human alongside one's umbrella.

Does it matter?

Yes. Because there is a truth about ourselves which we are not telling, perhaps that we are not equipped to tell. Or perhaps we do not really believe that the theatre is a place where it can be told.



If I were to be harsh, I would say that we English, like Faust in Act One Scene One, think we already know it all. Or that we English, like Polonius, are under the delusion that to be true to oneself is a simple, straightforward thing.

And, in case my English colleagues feel I am ungenerous towards their achievements of which there are indeed many, let me be clear that I am not suggesting, though I may seem to be, that British theatre should become like German theatre or, indeed, like any other particular kind of theatre. How could it be? It has to be intensely itself – that's the point. But I *am* asking a simple thing: *how can we know what we are except by encountering others?*

Which is why I am so thrilled that the Goethe Institute made it possible to send my bands of young directors off to Berlin. Later this year another group will spend some time in Munich.

What will they come back with? I have no idea. Honestly, I'm not bothered. My job is just to say: travel the globe, study the rules and then break them, find out who you are. Take a leap in the dark.

Speech held by David Lan (Young Vic Theatre, London) on the occasion of the re-opening of the Goethe-Institute building. London, May 2012.

