



# FEATS NEWSLETTER

## May 2021

At around 19h15 on Friday 14<sup>th</sup> May, I turned on my computer to find the screen filled with small pictures of members of the FEATS family: old faces and new. (Apparently there were around 240 participants registered for the evening.) What fun to be able to see people again!

The Virtual FEATS 2021 began at 19h30 with an introduction by our MC for the evening, E.C.C.'s Sandra Lizioli, who welcomed us all, mentioning that there would be performances from groups in Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Portugal and the Netherlands. She thanked the technical team for their hard work in bringing together the 'offerings' which had been sent in by the various groups. Each performance began with the red curtains opening to reveal the name of the play and the group. I must say that I thoroughly enjoyed the three evenings and was really impressed by the quality of the productions. One small thing, I did have a problem hearing some of the actors despite having the volume turned right up. However, to show you how impressed I was with the performances, here are just some of the comments I made at the end of each evening: «A beautifully acted piece of theatre»; «A stark and thought-provoking piece of theatre»; «A hilarious romp»; «excellent camera work»; «a gripping piece of theatre»; «profound and moving»; «beautifully portrayed emotions»; «a moving tale beautifully told»...

As Annie was unable to do write-ups for me, - she is currently busy with a production which we are putting on at the beginning of July – in the open air and followed by a picnic, I have taken over the job this time to let those of you who were unable to join us to learn a little of what we enjoyed over the weekend. My apologies for any mistakes with names, plots, etc.

First up were the Lisbon Players, Portugal with Dolly's Frocks, the first of three scenes from *Offstage Stories*<sup>1</sup> by Jonathan Weightman. Here we see the wardrobe mistress, surrounded by racks of clothes, busy re-modelling various costumes, while reminiscing on how she got into backstage rather than on-stage work.

Then followed a collaboration between ESOC, Stuttgart and ACTS, Darmstadt with A Clinic too far, written by Stuart Marlowe. This piece, filmed in black and white to evoke the time of the events – the 1920s – recounts the all-but forgotten case of Elsa Kieler (sorry if I have spelled this incorrectly) and her fight for women's rights.

Next came some light relief in the form of the Brussels Shakespeare Society's The Commissioning Department directed by Patrick Stephenson, and featuring twenty actors playing twenty parts in the same amount of time! A new, young, female, American commissioner has been appointed to update BBC programming and we see the joys of Zoom meetings between the new appointee, two other members of the committee and the old Luddite in the corporation. Nothing impresses him. Not the early morning show with an updated Brexit version of the Saint Crispin's Day speech from *Henry V*. Not the 'guess who's coming to dinner?' with Titus Andronicus, nor yet Claudius the fishmonger. The newer versions of *Bachelor Night* and *Bachelorettes* did not do much for him either, with the putative dates being, among others, Hamlet or Lady Macbeth.

---

<sup>1</sup> The Lisbon Players are hoping to upload the eight plays of *Offstage Stories* onto their website by the end of the month.

The Lisbon Players, Portugal returned with a second scene from *Offstage Stories*, Manna for Margaret, which portrays Stage Manager Margaret going back over things and looking forward to her forthcoming wedding.

Já International Theatre, also from Lisbon, gave us a dark mystery At Zephyr's Turn by Suresh Nampuri. It tells of a death on an archaeological dig in Egypt some thirty years previously. We meet the (only) female archaeologist on the dig; the illegitimate daughter; the former PhD student. We hear of the change in atmosphere when a ouija board is produced and played with, the professor who becomes 'eerily quiet' and the smell of rotten fish. There certainly was a death, but was it an accident, or was it ...?

The first half of the evening ended with the third scene from *Offstage Stories*, by the Lisbon Players. Scotty's High Kicks shows us the resident theatre accompanist seated before the organ ready to play. The scene recounts the loves and losses of Scott and he regales us with a lovely version of the Black Bottom. Great dancing!

The Copenhagen Theatre Circle, Denmark gave us an insight into Love in the Age of Lockdown, written by Ellen Paulig and described as a One act Nordic Noir film. Oh, the joys of Zoom meetings! Directing plays is hard enough and so I take my hat off to directors who are currently trying to rehearse a play at a distance. Especially when no-one is listening to anyone but him or herself as was the case here! Do we have doors or not? And then the technical difficulties.

The final offering of Friday evening came from BATS, Antwerp with What do we know about E? by Adrian Veale. It opens with two paparazzi in their car doing a stake-out to take photos of the mysterious 'E'. Follows a 'documentary' about her life starting with an interview with the former Ambassador who tells of E saving the day when the soloist at a Wigmore Hall concert is taken ill and she steps up from the audience and plays Stravinsky's *Firebird*. Her female ex-partner reports that E had always been very generous with her love, while the curator of a Biennale exhibition in Venice recalls a 'mesmerising, protean' installation and a biochemist accuses E of having stolen 15 years of her research and, with it, her Nobel prize. Who do we believe?

The first performance for Saturday, introduced by MC for the evening, Hannah Riley, was Shirley Blake's harrowing That's Not What Happened performed by Now, Now Productions of Amsterdam. The victim recalls the terrible incident when a colleague rapes her in the ladies toilets at an office party. She remembers finding the strength to kick him where it hurts and escape back to the safety of the party. However, she then admits to herself that this was not what happened. Instead, she had returned home and showered, calling in sick the following day. When she does return to work she finds that her attacker has left the company. She asks herself why she did not report the attack, what were her reasons? Nevertheless, she still tells herself that she had won.

Next up was the performance by the Irish Theatre Company, Brussels of GSOH where we see two people filling in an on-line questionnaire which had been prepared by a friend of the female. He is trying to ascertain whether it would be possible to fall in love with someone on the strength of their replies. Each one gives fairly stock answers: 'I enjoy living life to the full'; 'I am looking for the ideal man', etc. Then we see the pair preparing for their on-line date and the preliminary stilted conversation on generalities and about previous relationships. They continue about 'trying to improve themselves', she with meditation and mindfulness, he with line-dancing! Finally they start telling the truth to each other and arrange a second 'date'.

We were then entertained by I.D.E.A.'s (The Netherlands) digital panto written by Sébastienne Hol, with its traditional panto characters including the technically-challenged Dame Piggywinkle, the good fairy and her bad counterpart Fabularis Bloodgood. The good fairy attempts to stop the thigh-

slapping of the principal boy, but only manages to transfer the thigh slapping to the other characters before cutting them all from the screen. It is Fabularis who manages to bring them back and she transforms into more of a good fairy. Everyone dances and they all live happily ever after.

From Amsterdam came Downstage Left's Are You in Love Yet?, written by Dennis Burke. Here is an experiment to see if one can fall in love in five minutes by answering questions such as 'what have you been thinking about recently?' For her it was the silence during lock-down, for him - 'apart from the obvious' - it was the future. Another was to tell an embarrassing story still told about the subject by his/her parents. For him it was about his Dr Rabbit, for her it was breaking into a building site with her little brother. The couple end up making a date.

We were then led into the rarified atmosphere of cactus collectors, with AATG's, The Hague, On Point, written by A. Rose. We are present at the filming of a documentary about a group of cactus fanciers and listen in to the 'cactus chat' phone-in. There is a hilarious shot of the interviewee taking her cacti for a walk! and later we see other aficionados arriving for a cactus competition, one participant bringing her entry in a pink cat-box. And there is an incident with hairspray which, apparently, can be used to give a shiny aspect to the cactus.

The Monday Ladies from Munich performed a live improv called Between You and Me, based on a potter, a suggestion from the audience of a profession. The potter is visited by a petshop owner delivering fish. The actors took over from each other with «between you and me» before continuing the story. We hear the psychiatrist listening to a voice, though we learn that the former has no qualifications; a writer; a panicked traveller doing breathing exercises to calm down for the flight and on to Francesca whom we learn is actually a ghost who has been haunting a castle for the past 350 years. She wants the traveller to climb to the top of her castle and tie a ribbon to the cross on the top then climb down fourteen floors, clamber in the window and murder her husband – who has also been dead for centuries! The body takes over the spirit and we return to the original actor who has become a medium.

Grace and Peter and his first English Word, performed by The Bonn Players is a beautifully written and heartwarming tale by Tara Meddaugh. It begins with a black and white shot of refugee children arriving in New York waving excitedly at the Statue of Liberty in the distance. A fairly severe-looking lady takes up the story. How come she, a middle-aged, childless, Jewish widow has been entrusted with the care of a small, refugee boy from Germany, she asks? She tries to teach him English but all he says is «Ich will nach Hause» (I want to go home), until one day they go into the library where she hopes he will be able to make progress. He stops by a picture of a garden with tomatoes and says his first English word: 'garden'. We are left knowing that victory is on the cards as they leave to go and buy seeds and garden tools.

Two students from the University Players, Hamburg gave us Confab set one Friday night in the luggage compartment of a train. The scene opens with girl A sitting among the luggage reading her book. Girl B enters and begins a conversation. A is not too keen at first on joining in but replies that she is going home for the weekend to see her mother. She asks B's name, but B says that names are irrelevant as we have no choice in them. B likes to talk to strangers and share their personal thoughts, but A prefers to be alone and watch the world go by, however, she asks what B is doing. B replies that she is returning home from boarding school for the weekend. She really wanted to excel at tennis but, although she no longer enjoys it, she is continuing with it as this had always been her dream. A confesses that she has no particular goal in life. The train arrives at its destination and B asks if they should exchange phone numbers, A says 'no' as this was a special encounter and will only exist on a train. They finally agree to meet up in the luggage compartment of the same train the following week. And their names? It turns out that they are both called Clara.

For the final performance of the evening we are transported to an on-line business meeting to

organise 'Pet Fashion Week' as told by The Pretenders of Nürnberg in Jenny Richardson-Schloertt's Home Sweet Home Office. We see the assistant in her pyjamas and eye mask, participants having problems with Zoom, the use - or not - of mikes and backgrounds, the views of the ceiling rather than the participant. I think we have all lived through similar events in the last couple of years. Let us hope we shall soon be able to have face-to-face meetings again.

Creative writing sessions, says David Parrott, led to Maybe Next Year, a set of linked vignettes presented by the Lucerne World Theatre Company. In the first we see two girls celebrating a birthday. The 'hostess' would have liked to give her friend a big party, but 'maybe next year'. In the next a couple wishes they could visit their son and decide, to the tune of 'Dear Liza' they will book tickets in First Class, 'but the flights are booked solid'. So, they will drive, but they would 'need a new vaccine', but there are 'long waiting lists' and 'borders are closing' as there is 'a pandemic raging' so they will travel 'maybe next year'. Scene three shows a customer in a menswear shop trying on scarves (!?) as they are reduced by 50%. He hopes to go on a cruise to Alaska – well, maybe next year. Next a woman is enjoying being on her own – for a short while at least. She starts to read *Anna Karenina* but cannot get into it. She wonders if she really wants to read seven hundred pages not knowing who she likes. There is nothing on TV and she does not want to do a jigsaw puzzle of kittens. There are two hours to her video call with her grandchild whom she would really love to hug. She has on-line technical problems and, anyway, how much can you say on Zoom? It will be better – maybe next year.

In Ensnared Bird performed by AATG, The Hague, Lorna Wijma gives a re-imagined version of *Jane Eyre*. Lockdown has taken its toll on the two characters. Jane loves the isolation: she cannot go and visit her sick aunt, trains are virtually empty. But she needs to leave. He gets drunk all the time, rings his mother at least five times a day. It makes her feel like a caged bird, so she is leaving. He ripostes enumerating her annoying habits: she, too, snores, she does nothing all day, she is unemployed. But he loves her and asks her to marry him. She accepts and they kiss – through masks.

Time-Wasters Need Not Apply by Anne-Marie Mendes, performed by GEDS, Geneva, opens with Mr Hope doing a final check on his hair and tie before his video call. She, the Head of School, at first forgets her mike, but then the interview for a Head of Pastoral Care for the school begins. He feels he is ready to take on a new, more demanding rôle. He yelps as small son, who is under the desk, bites him on the leg. While son is being dispatched from the room, the Head eats a biscuit and deals with various problems by phone to her assistant. The interview continues, though it is more the Head who is opening her heart and telling of all the problems. Mr Hope gasps – for air this time, as the dog 'must have been eating vegetables again'. The dog is put out of the room. The litany of problems continues. Asked if she has any hope for the future, the answer is 'no', she is just going to feel her way through. She has tried for thirteen years to help, but there is just not enough to go round: as her grandfather said 'you can't take the knickers off a bare ass'. Who helps her? No-one. There had been someone once, but she had not heard from him for years. Mr Hope applied for the job because he knew of her, that she was a leader and a do-er. He has hope. She says that the happiest part of her week is when she is teaching her only remaining class. She then jumps up saying she has to go as a member of staff needs her. He asks if he got the job but she has gone.

The family gather together on-line for Mum's birthday in Hamburg Player's Until Next Time by Julia Claussen. Dad, self-isolating in the spare bedroom as Mum had a bit of a cough a couple of days ago, complains about having to switch everything on separately on the computer. Son Paul comes on saying Sophie will join shortly as she is busy putting the twins to bed. Dad says they are being very lax bringing up the children. Daughter Laura has broken off with Luke, much to Mum's chagrin, but she has been promoted. Mum continues to comment on the break-up, ignoring the job promotion. Second daughter Katie announces that she is pregnant. Mum is ecstatic. Paul and Sophie announce he is changing jobs and they are moving to Toulouse. Mum says that moving children is

a bad thing - and is it not time they thought of getting married. Paul says that they did, a few days previously. Mum asks who were the witnesses and is less than thrilled when she hears that Laura was one, along with one of Sophie's friends. Becoming even more outraged on hearing that Sophie has not taken Paul's name Mum, metaphorically slams the door by angrily ending her connection.

Next followed Entity Theatre, Munich with Carl J. Sorheim's All the Rage. We see 'Alex' who, he says, is twenty two, skates and listens to punk music. He is watching a girl in a coffee shop. She finishes her shift and he follows her down the escalator. But he is hampered by a man standing still. He pushes past and realises he is on the wrong platform. He is worried that he will get on the wrong train. Then he sees the girl again and follows her. He knows that she lives at number 67. There are no lights on the street. She has reached number 57 and has not picked up pace, but gets out her keys. They arrive at number 67 where he pushes past her and shuts the door. The girl screams. He says 'I am Alex and I am about to rape my girlfriend'. She replies that fantasy is not healthy. He is ashamed. He is Reggie, thirty five, he listens to Michael Buble and cannot skate. She makes tea.

The Ghost Sheep, Brussels, performed a live improvisation after an oil rig is suggested as being a location comprising many places. Captain Conrad is going over the safety regulations on the rig with newbie apprentice, Sara. He instructs that, if the floor seems to slope during bad weather, one should make one's way to the lifeboats, even though it would probably be too late by then. Shot moves to the kitchen where a meal of lobster bisque and cheesecake is being prepared and it is clear that the cook and Margaret love each other. As the weather is deteriorating, Conrad sends Sara to the kitchen to ask about the meal. But to knock before entering. She bursts in to find the cooks canoodling. They tell Sara that the meal will be ready when it is ready. The storm increases and the rig tilts. Margaret and the chef get into one lifeboat but they have no food and do not know how to work the lifeboat. The captain and Sara take the other lifeboat and row. Margaret and the chef pledge undying love and end up eating each other while the captain and Sara make landfall.

All Dressed up by John Brigg was the last performance of Virtual FEATS 2021 and came from our hosts for FEATS 2022: NWTC, Luxembourg. It featured several small sketches linked by a storyline The Red Dress, which gives different versions of the meeting between a man and a girl in the red dress. He follows her into a bar, tells her he had sat behind her in the bus and was taken by her red dress and red earrings. Can he buy her a drink? Answer 'no'.

He says he had taken notes about her on the bus as he had to observe something and write about it. About her red dress, matching earrings and nail varnish. She agrees to a drink.

He tells her she stands out even more under the lights. No, he is not chatting her up, he just wanted to tell her she is special. She throws the compliment back in his face but then apologises. Not having been out for a long time she dressed up for herself. They agree to begin again. He found her striking on the bus. She admires his jacket. They decide to have a drink together. She buys.

She complains that he had sat behind her in the bus, staring at her, which she found most unpleasant and scary. He denies stalking her. She is stalking him! She denies dressing up for him and he replies that she should expect to be looked at. He then apologises saying he could not take his eyes off her. Would she like a glass of champagne? No.

He is still drawn to her but she does not wish to see him again.

He pushes past her at the bar and they quarrel.

A male couple quarrel as one has removed his wedding ring and was talking to another woman.

Tim tells Julia about the girl with two left feet. She went round in circles.

Cathy and Greg are chatting on-line. He is re-painting. She thinks that white is boring and she can still see the places where the pictures had hung. He is going to re-position them.

Mark and Nick argue about whether strawberries really need cream and Nick leaves to get cream

out of the car.

On-line Kathy asks Tina where the sharp knife is. She suggests the knife drawer...

Greg and Julia discuss whether a posy of roses or just one single bloom is more appropriate.

Mark and Nick are sitting in deckchairs watching the stars. Mark tells Nick he loves him.

\*\*\*\*\*

### FEATS Forum

The Forum was held on Sunday with around thirty people (I think) logged in. John Hall, AATG, The Hague and current President of the Steering Committee opened proceedings by welcoming the attendees and thanking the ECC for a successful Virtual FEATS 2021. He congratulated the whole team on managing to bring together the event. Kerry Lydon of the Organising Committee said it had been a community effort with everyone pulling together. When it was obvious that a 'normal' FEATS would have to be cancelled, they contacted the mailing list with the suggestion of a Virtual FEATS and were extremely happy with the response. It was decided that performances should last no more than 20 to 25 minutes in total, so a group offering three seven minute scenes was acceptable. The chat rooms had been very successful, allowing people to get together as usual to meet up and catch up. It was noted that any chat room which had 'bar' in its name, was always well attended... Unfortunately I was unable to join any of these break-out rooms thanks to incoming phone calls during the interval or the – unsuccessful - attempts to resuscitate my phone which had not appreciated having an accidental bath.

It was suggested that, given that many people are unable to travel to FEATS, a streamed, paying, version could be one way forward to bring in more audience. Or, perhaps one afternoon of the Fringe could be devoted to this. But this could be problematic because of rights issues, however, it could be interesting for original or out-of-rights scripts. Could there be a complete virtual festival at another time in the year? But who would host it? Or would there be a core team? Lots for the Steering Committee to discuss. «Watch this space», as they say.

John Brigg of NWTC, Luxembourg then explained his concept for FEATS 2022 to be held from 26<sup>th</sup> - 29<sup>th</sup> May 2022. The theatre in Mersch has an open, thrust stage thus bringing the actors into close contact with the audience, there are entrances from the exterior and also through the audience. These facts, he feels, will bring a more liberating aspect to the festival as will the lack of a marking sheet. In effect, there will be no marks, thus no prizes. The plays will be assessed by Mike McCormack, Senior Lecturer in Drama at Liverpool John Moores University, but there will be no grading of the productions. Given that there will be no marks, there will not be any possibility for a play to go forward to the GODA All Winners' Final in 2022.

It was stressed that the changes to the festival format for the 2022 edition of FEATS are only temporary, though there is no reason why a future Organising Committee should not incorporate some of the ideas into their festival.

-----

It is good to see that groups are beginning to think of future, live performances. In the meantime, take care, stay healthy and enjoy the summer.