

Monday 6th June 2016

In Berlin, the seasons announce themselves with more clarity than they do in London. While Sven and I enjoy breakfast on our sunny terrace, fluffy white poplar blossoms dance prettily about in the breeze, marking the evolution of spring into summer, and landing in our jam. But I can't dawdle over cheese and several varieties of cold meat. Having come to the realisation, for about the twelfth time, that I'll never learn German by osmosis, I'm going back to school. I kiss Sven goodbye, and hare off to class.

Excited, anxious and late, I bring my bike to a halt in front of a handsome building that stands uniquely old amongst the modern blocks mostly inhabited by Turkish families on Wassertorstraße. Its neo-gothic edifice of red and yellow bricks is freckled with black metal-framed windows, and, to the pile of bedraggled bicycles chained up in front, I hastily add mine. Pushing open a heavy glass door, I inhale the familiar smell of freshly-cleaned educational institution and race up the stairs clutching my shiny new textbook in search of Room 204.

There's only one unoccupied chair, which I quietly slip into, nodding a silent hello to my neighbours, horribly conscious of the fact that I'm the new boy, though an old boy at that. I seem to be about twice as old as any of them.

Frau Thälmann, our language and integration instructress, is a pale and unquestionably pretty, round-faced woman of around fifty, though I notice she sports a kind of 80s mullet, which is obviously a bit of a worry. To my relief, she's friendly and perky and breezy and jaunty, especially when she insists we don't have to stick to the usual *Sie* formalities. She will *du* me and I can *du* her. "Call me by my first name," she instructs me –

in German obviously. We must all speak German all the time. That's the point. It's torture, but we're all in it together. Her first name is Almut.

With the referendum only two-and-a-half weeks away, the threat of a possible Brexit stiffens my resolve to tread the path to full integration. Through a study of language, but also history and politics, it normally takes a year of intensive classes that last three-and-a-half hours a day five mornings a week. Plus exams. Trouble is, I've often had to return to London for work, so I've repeatedly lost my place on the course, and found myself obliged to start afresh with new classmates and a new teacher. I'm joining this group halfway through its journey, at the beginning of the last of the elementary modules, the snappily titled A-2-2. It's taken them a little less than six months to get here, while it's taken me several years.

If I can get German under my belt, I know I can pass the citizenship exam, should I have to. But nothing makes the task easy, because German is tricky. It's horribly tricky. In fact, I find myself mired in a predicament best described by Mark Twain when he wrote that "a gifted person ought to learn English (barring spelling and pronouncing) in thirty hours, French in thirty days, and German in thirty years." Obviously, I don't have thirty years. In thirty years I'll be dead. Even alive I have little talent.

I've tried French, Spanish, Swedish, Italian and Dutch. I've loved each one but tragically failed to get conversational in any of them. Still, everyone tells me, and deep down I know, that study will allow me a deeper engagement with my newly chosen world. And, having spent half a lifetime in theatre rehearsal rooms telling other people what to do (I write and direct plays), I'm really excited to be on the receiving end of some teaching, and overjoyed to be a student again.

The school's called the VHS (The *Volkshochschule* – literally, the people's high school), and it's hard to ignore the fact that Room 204 is clean and airy and perfectly

pleasant. I remember teaching acting in London's equivalent, the City Lit, where every room smelled of gym shoes, however aired it was.

Almut's very much the focus. A square of tables is arranged so that she and her paraphernalia takes up one side (textbooks, pencil case, flask, mascot and an old bread bag a quarter full of sandwiches), while the twenty-or-so of us occupy the other three. To kick things off, she invites everyone to introduce themselves to me by providing their name and saying where they're from. At once, all faces stare in my direction. I'm keen to make a good impression, but I'm so self-conscious that, at first, it's impossible to absorb much. Evidently, I've placed myself between a smiley, pleasant-looking chap called Roberto from Italy and a young, pale woman from China who seems to be drowning in an oversized, blue anorak and is called perhaps Joo? I'm immediately drawn to Roberto's warm, open aura and convivial face, while Joo's evidently a more cautious customer.

Far to my left, there's an Arabic bunch. Fairuz is hefty and dour, and probably the next oldest to me, and Leyla is small and pretty and sports a black headscarf. It's apparent that, like me, Leyla's also new, because next to her sits a young man who's not on the course – her husband. All grim and anxious, he refuses to leave. He's brushed over by Almut, and we don't get introduced.

In the middle, between me and the Arabs, there's an effusion of dark curly hair belonging to several nice-looking girls, most of whom seem to be called Maria. There's some Italians and one other Brit, whose name is Carola I think. She's sort of black, and wears tangerine, or, more charitably, tan-coloured contact lenses. I notice heavily tortured hair and a sprinkling of dandruff. And closest to our teacher sits a young blond man exuding an aura of – well – madness, really. His body unusually erect, he appears to have an oversized head, along with pursed, rosy lips. His skin shines bright. He's not unpretty, in a chubby, Aryan way, and his voice is bassy and bland. It's loud like thunder, but colourless, as if he's

speaking from the back of his neck. I think he's from Iceland, and, though not particularly overweight, he gives the impression of having extremely heavy bones. He radiates 'the only gay in the village' and seems totally uninterested in saying hello to me.

My initial sense is that the class functions well. The atmosphere's friendly, and I'm at once envious of the camaraderie. Because they're so young (Fairuz aside), I guess most of them are launching themselves into a foreign land for the first time in their lives, while I'm already on my fourth migration at least. I've lived – sometimes for work, sometimes for love – in a bunch of European capitals, never settling anywhere for longer than a year-and-a-half. But I've lived in Berlin for more than four years now, which is also how long I've been with Sven.

The VHS's large-sized classes are counterbalanced by ridiculously low fees, which suits me, theatre work paying what it does. Of the many more expensive options, Chinese businessmen and the daughters of Russian oligarchs are generally sent to the Goethe Institute, where it costs about ten times as much, and the teaching has a great reputation. But the VHS is good enough for me, and the German government makes it even cheaper by subsidising EU citizens who elect to study the language. As long as Britain chooses Remain, my ambition is supported by the system.

Once the excitement of my arrival has receded, Almut focuses our attention on the use of *trotzdem* (nevertheless), and I'm teamed up to practise with my immediate neighbours, Roberto and Joo. It's quite shocking that slack-mouthed Joo makes no attempt to pronounce any of the words properly. I mean, God knows what I sound like to a native speaker, but it's clear she's cutting corners when, for *trotzdem*, she comes out with *traz* or *tra*, or occasionally just *tan*. Next, we study the conjunctive. 'I would eat cheese at every meal if it weren't so expensive', for instance. Roberto and I are paired together to work through an exercise which we positively smash, sitting back smugly in triumph and watching the others struggle.

Pretty soon, it emerges that somebody thinks class is all about her. Well, there's always one, isn't there, and this one is called... to be honest, I didn't get her name. In Almut's mouth, it sounds like 'bonbon', but it obviously can't be. She's another hijab-wearing Arab, but she doesn't sit with the others, and is altogether different. She's a talker. When Almut asks her a question, she pedantically describes the level of difficulty of the question, then prissily offers an estimation of the likelihood of her success in answering, before eventually doing so, often cackhandedly. And when she can't bring a word to mind, her MO is to go for loud lingering 'erm' noises. "Eeeeeeeeeerm, eeeeeeeeeerm." I'm already annoyed by her and it's only day one. The best thing about her is her hijab, which is a wonderfully life-affirming orange.

Tea break announced, I immediately turn to Roberto to strike up a conversation (Italians are my favourite of all the world's peoples), but it takes a while to mentally rehearse a question I feel confident about in German, and by the time I'm ready, he's chatting to someone else. I notice Almut conversing darkly with Leyla's husband, presumably assuring him that no harm will come to his little wifelette here. And then, suddenly, Carola's standing in front of me. Smiling and assured and terribly tall, she addresses me in perfect English, which, after an hour-and-a-half of low-level German is a wonderful relief, and off we go together for coffee. Her relaxed, warm manner makes me feel I've known her forever.

A snazzy handbag hangs from the crook of her arm and she walks with palms up, as if demonstrating that she's the sort of person who's habitually draped with loads of expensive clothes or laden with garlands of flowers. Ploddingly, I inform her I'm from suburban Teddington, to which she replies that she spent most of her youth in Botswana, then modelled in LA and toiled for good wages on Wall Street. The English branch of her family stretches from Reading to Salford, she says.

I tell her about the sleep-reducing ball of anxiety currently squatting rent-free in my stomach, otherwise known as the threat of Brexit, but she doesn't seem too fussed about England's political incubus. I enquire whether she's arranged a postal vote for the referendum, and she assures me that she absolutely intends to. A sister's visiting from LA, you see, so she's been super busy. I hear all about living bi-coastal in the States and how much she prefers New York, and how she's struggling with the grunginess of Berlin, but that sometimes it can be nice, plus there's a lot about America she doesn't miss.

Waiting for class to resume after the interval, I mean the break, I have a go at talking to Chinese Joo. I gather she's here as an *au pair*. She looks so young, I wonder whether she's still a teenager. She speaks a language that, according to her, is "very like Mandarin", and a tiny bit of English with an opaque accent. In German, she reveals she's from *Hochchina* (literally 'High China'), which I'm pretty sure doesn't mean anything, but I imagine mountains. She hasn't the language to reveal more, but seems eager for me to learn, so I draw a map – an oval with two crosses at 2 p.m. for Beijing and 5 p.m. for Shanghai – and offer her my pen. She puts a cross in the middle. Right in the very, very middle.

After class, I should head home and practise German if I'm really to progress. But I have to earn money as well, so my afternoons are ringfenced for work. I was thrilled when a commissioning producer in the UK asked me to devise a new stage adaptation of Jane Austen's *Emma*. The much-loved English novel about class and power couldn't be a more perfect fit for the times. Will pompous, self-sufficient Emma realise her folly in refusing to marry? Will England realise the danger of withdrawing into its own kind of singularity? Everyone knows the book and respects it as a huge cultural landmark, but the Brexiters appear to lack the wisdom that Emma gains when she finally acknowledges her fatal flaws of self-righteous isolationism, turns her back on her own sovereignty, and thus earns the love of Mr Knightley, becoming a fully-rounded member of the larger community.

However, adapting it for theatre is not an easy gig. Austen's narrative is tightly wound up around early nineteenth-century notions of marriage and courtship, and I'm finding it fiendishly tricky to prize my way in. The rules of romantic engagement have been revolutionised since Austen's time, so every situation in which Emma finds herself lacks a precise contemporary equivalent, and I can't see how to tackle it without ripping its heart out, or, to put it less dramatically, losing all the good bits. Additionally, my obsession with the referendum is an on-going obstacle to progress. It's almost impossible to delight in the predicaments of Ms Woodhouse and Harriet Smith, and who-loves-who in empire England, when half the country wants to send us back there.

Despite my obsession, there's not much I can do for the Remain campaign beyond counter Leave nonsense on Facebook. This afternoon, a few friends reach out to the hive-mind with requests for information. Largely musical theatre people who've never read a newspaper in their lives, they know nothing of current affairs unless it's about dancing or cakes, but they feel it's their duty to vote on the 23rd. If they're keen to make an informed choice, I'm keen to send them links.

I notice that a Facebook friend, in a spirit of Europhilia, has shared a time-lapse video of Europe with its ever-shifting boundaries. National colours disappear and coalesce with astonishing speed; century upon century of bloodshed, land grabs, political triumph and catastrophe all collapse into a couple of minutes. It's a sobering snapshot demonstrating the extent to which Europe has been addicted to civil war over the millennia. The graphics don't rest until a few seconds from the very end when, for six decades, affiliation to the European Union creates peace for those inside it. The shapes stop morphing, and the colours remain still. I make a mental note to mention it to Carola tomorrow. She didn't say, but I assume she's pro-Remain, though you never know. Is it too early to friend-request her?

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