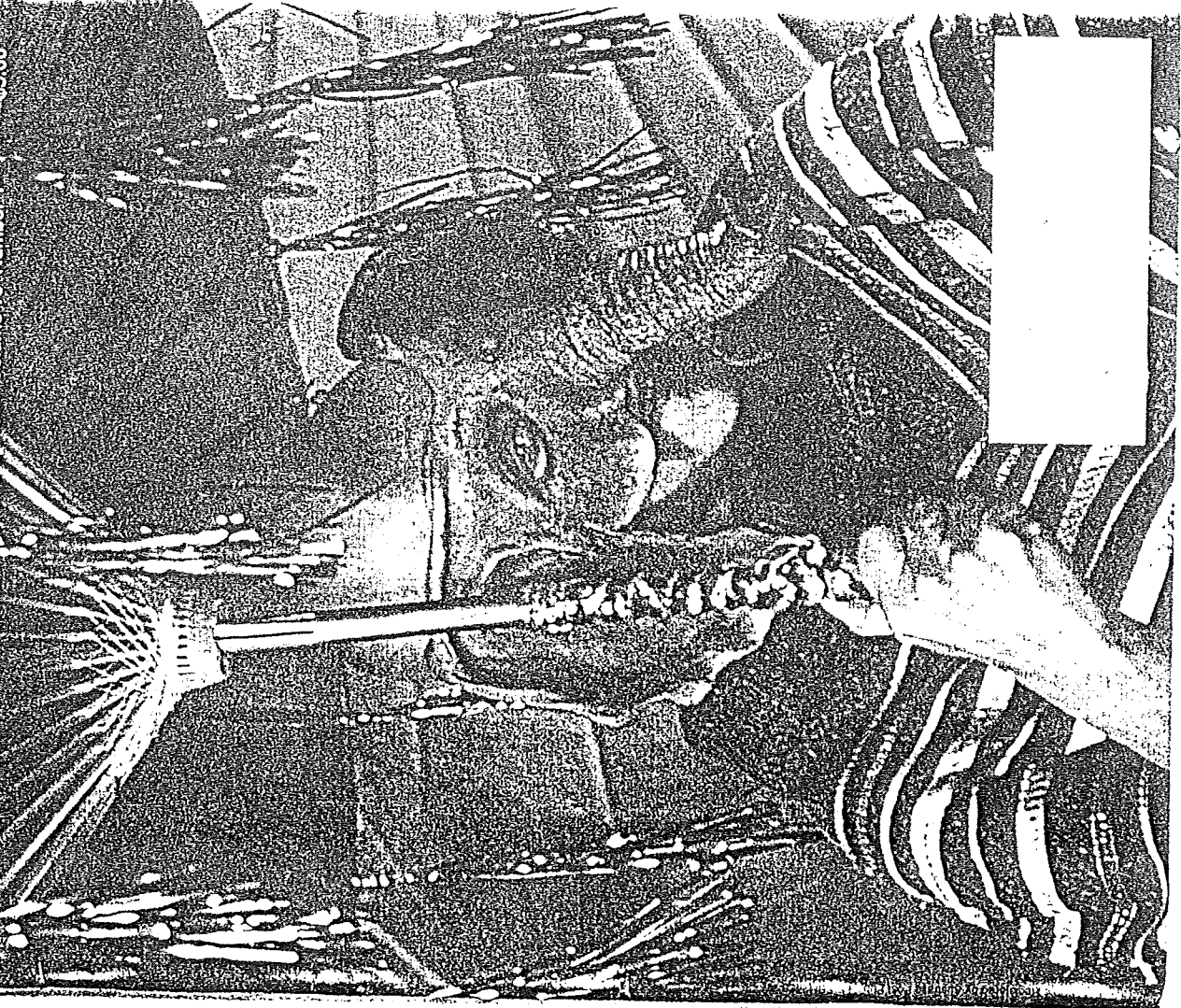


LOWDOWN

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THE LANGUAGE OF Theatre



Robert Germay

Professor Robert Germay was in Australia recently to raise interest in the First World Congress in University Theatre, to be held in Belgium in October this year. Polly O'Neill spoke with Dr. Germay about his journey from a student of languages to Head of Theatre at

Liege University and his quest to establish a world network of university theatre groups.

If, when Robert Gormay first attended Liege University in 1958, someone had told him he would still be there 35 years later as the Professor of Theatre, he would probably have said they were "crazy," "verruckt," "gek" or "fou". As a student of Germanic languages, his ambitions were set firmly in the classroom. It was the theatre, however, not the his forum for teaching.

Belgium is divided into three speaking areas: Flemish (North), German (East) and French (South). Although Liege falls into the latter category, it is situated at the junction of the three. Like a great number of Belgians, Dr. Gormay is multi-lingual. A degree in teaching English, Dutch & German seemed like a "natural choice" when he enrolled at Liege University in the late 1950s. In his third year there, however, he unwittingly took his first steps towards a career in theatre.

Robert Gormay formed a theatre group, "for pleasure & utility," with a couple of like-minded fellow students. Although he "sang a little," Gormay had little experience on the stage. The initial intention of the group was to use theatre as a way of combining the enjoyment of performance with the study of foreign language. Classical and contemporary plays were presented in German. The group provided an alternative to the University's French Theatre Group which had been in existence since the 1940s.

Gormay graduated in 1963 and gained a position at the University as a Librarian for the Department of Germanic Philology. Employment at Liege provided him with the opportunity to continue his involvement with theatre. "A natural ability to organise people and encouragement from friends" led him to later assume the position of the Director of Foreign Language Theatre at Liege.

During the social and cultural revolution of the 1960s, Gormay witnessed a shift away from conservative, traditional theatre towards the support and development of contemporary youth theatre. "In the late '60s, theatre began to change. A continual process of evolution began with the rise of young theatre and continued with international influences."

Unlike the "municipality" theatre of earlier years, youth theatre was highly influenced by changes occurring in other countries. For example, French-speaking theatre in Belgium reflected trends in France. In response to the changes, Liege University began inviting overseas theatre professionals to teach students. Their influence was evident in what Gormay describes as "an

“Young people show you the necessity of moving forward by proposing new and interesting things.”

increasing willingness, by students, to present theatre on the international stage". By the time Gormay was asked to take over French Theatre at Liege in 1980, he had established a name for himself as a director of culturally diverse, innovative university theatre.

As the director of Foreign Language Theatre and French Theatre at Liege, Gormay is responsible for seven theatre groups and over eighty students. The groups vary in size, style and direction. Every production is also different, not only in the choice of theme but in the choice of language. According to Gormay, the work is not didactic but rather caters for a need for entertaining, relevant theatre. "The productions have a political content but not for politics itself. Nor is it entertainment for entertainment's sake. It is entertaining theatre...speaking about important issues."

Touring is a very important part of University has taken three different

the personal and professional development of the students. Over the past five years, the groups have toured to Canada, Mexico, Bulgaria, Germany, France, Hungary, Lithuania, Morocco, Yugoslavia, Poland, Italy, Spain, Portugal and Great Britain, as well as extensively within Belgium. As well as being funded by the University, ticket sales and government subsidies. Destinations are chosen according to the level of funding, time available and demand.

"Our strength is that we travel a lot. The students discover many things from travelling which means I have less to teach them. Less work for me," he adds with a grin.

But the Professor of Theatre is not one to shy away from hard work. When he is not travelling, you can find him organising tours, directing theatre, teaching theory and practical drama studies or presenting seminars and workshops. In his spare time (!), he directs professional theatre groups in Belgium and Germany or works as an actor on Belgium film and television. As someone who has never "left" University, Gormay views himself as the eternal student.

Working with young people has taught him about the need to continue learning, to adapt and change. "Young people show you the necessity of moving forward by proposing new and interesting things."

It goes some way towards explaining his longevity as Professor of Theatre at Liege. By continuing to "develop with the students" he avoids the boredom so often felt by those who have worked in the same environment for years. Rapport with the students is established through empathy and reciprocal trust. "They [the students] have the liberty to choose what they want to do. I try not to impose but to guide."

In a career that has spanned over three decades, Robert Gormay has seen many generations passing through the gates at Liege. He has been both observer and active participant in the evolution of university theatre. "Theatre at

necessary to strengthen lines of communication world-wide, taking into account all areas of university theatre, such as vocational training, amateur theatre, spontaneous theatre etc. In order to meet these goals, Liege delegates were asked to set up a structured, international meeting. Gormay has drawn on years of experience in University Theatre and a contact list of over two thousand to organise the '94 congress. In early December, he extended his range of contacts to include Australia, while attending the Australasian Drama Studies Conference in Perth. He hoped his visit would lead to Australian participation in both the preparatory talks this month and the congress in October. There are also plans to ask an Australian student group to perform at Liege.

The First World University Theatre Congress will involve representatives from five continents. They will participate in workshops and plenary assemblies covering themes ranging from "Relationships

forms. You have spontaneous theatre: students who take up theatre as I did, by forming a group. The second group are students who are guided by a professional or a director. And the third group are pre-professionals: students who have already trained to be professional in theatre."

University theatre is unique in that it has a high turnover of young participants. This turnover creates a dynamic environment of continual change and fresh input. Gormay regrets that Universities do not have the means to make theatre studies available to students from all disciplines. At Liege, drama was introduced to The School of Communication Studies and Journalism. Places in the programme had to be restricted due to overwhelming demand and limited resources. In Israel recently, Gormay lectured to a group of technology students as part of their general university studies. The experience reinforced Gormay's belief that theatre is the best place in the university for students to express themselves. "Personality develops through having to face many individual and collective problems as part of a theatre group. It is also a different way of learning about literature. As well, when we are on tour, students have to find the time to study and come on tour. Therefore, it is also a question of organisation."

If it is a question of organisation, Gormay's experience is clearly evident. At present, he is undertaking the task of organising the First World University Theatre Congress which will be held from October 13-16, 1994 at the "Palais des Congres" in Liege.

The proposal for a world congress was first raised during a conference at the 9th Festival of International Student Theatre at Liege in 1992. Representatives from University Theatre Groups around the world began discussing the need to redefine student theatre on an international level. They agreed it was

Between University Theatre & Education" to "Repertoire and Audience." The congress will lay the foundations for a new International University Theatre Association which will be responsible for structuring communication between members and organising subsequent congresses. Gormay believes the congress will increase and strengthen the existing global network, expand knowledge and create more opportunities for students internationally. The individual and professional aims of Robert Gormay are much the same. "My future will look like my past; always increasing our range of contacts. That is what I have been doing for thirty years. I started with one contact, then two and now I have over two thousand around the world...."

Polly O'Neill

Polly O'Neill is employed as an Editorial Assistant/Advertising Officer at Lowdown.

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