Pan-European actor training methodologies and bilingual Shakespearean performance in *Night Horses* (2014)

This paper describes some of the discoveries associated with the development of *Night Horses*, a bilingual adaptation of several early modern plays, devised in French and English, with a company of actors in training. It challenges the authority of British Received Pronunciation (RP) as a hallmark of good Shakespearean speech, and interrogates certain received Anglocentric ideas about Shakespeare’s verse and text in European Shakespearean performance. The paper concludes with a call for a somatic, pan-European approach to performing Shakespeare and the early modern drama.

Part 1: Bilingual dramaturgy in *Night Horses*

*Night Horses* was commissioned by French colleagues at Montpellier III University for the 2014 IRCL conference on “Scènes de la Nuit” (“Night Scenes”). The brief was straightforward: I was to select and rehearse a series of scenes from the early modern drama, to be performed as the opening event of the conference; it was hoped the performance would prompt or support subsequent academic discussions about the staging and performance of “night” on the early modern stage.
Initially, the scope of the project was modest: I planned to present excerpts from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Macbeth*, performed in English by three actors in training and one professional dancer from the Guildford School of Acting, where I teach. However, confirmation of the venue for our performance prompted me to look at the IRCL project in a new light. La Chapelle Gely is a desacralized church in Montpellier’s so-called cité gitane, or “Gypsy City” [Figs. 1 and 2, Appendix 2]. The creative possibilities offered by the venue itself led me to embark on a new piece of site-responsive practice of research, which generated questions about what might be specific to acting Shakespeare in Europe.

La Chapelle Gely provided us with a ready-made theatre-in-the-round, with great acoustics and high, stained-glass windows. The Shakespeare scenes I had chosen would naturally work well in this configuration, but as the project grew in scope and ambition, it also began to resonate with material outside of Shakespeare’s work. Partly because La Chapelle Gely was formerly a sacred space, and partly because ideas like “actions”, “choices” and “stakes” represent a kind of *lingua franca* in the rehearsal room, my consideration of “night scenes” quickly developed into a wider consideration of “darkness”, specifically the demonic “dark arts” in Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus*. Who could resist the prospect of conjuring in a desacrilised church? I certainly could not! Instead of choosing to stage the whole of Marlowe’s play, I decided to retain the Shakespeare scenes I had selected for the original project, but to encase them in heavily-cut versions

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1 Artistic director Etienne Schwarcz, established an arts centre at La Chapelle Gely in 1990, serving the surrounding community with a diverse programming policy encompassing dance, music and theatre events.
of the opening and closing acts - the conjuration and the damnation – of *Doctor Faustus*.

The Faust myth has deep European roots, but it is fair that more recent contributors to an ongoing tradition of neo-Faustian performance have roots in the American blues. Robert Johnson famously credited his extraordinary musical abilities to a demonic pact he once made; this he called “going to the crossroads”. Johnson’s own recordings (most notably *Cross Road Blues*, recorded in 1936) enshrine and mythologise this idea, to the extent that his death at the age of 27 became incorporated into a wider mythic narrative, in which Johnson is located as a kind of modern Faust figure. Subsequent musicians who have met untimely deaths at the same age – Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, Jim Morrison, Kurt Cobain and Amy Winehouse to name but five – have joined the “27 club”, adding their legacies to this grim, on-going Faustian narrative, and in a stab at modernity, I co-opted references to this on-going narrative. We marked a “crossroads” in the form of giant “X” on the floor of the Chapelle Gely, and the company devised a bespoke provocation-cum-prologue [Appendix 1] which asked: what if Shakespeare, like Faustus, went to the crossroads?

Casting Theo Poirier - a French-born actor in training at GSA - as the central Faustus/Shakespeare figure, opened up opportunities for bilingual performance, making (we hoped) the production more accessible for the largely Francophone patrons of La Chapelle Gely. To this end, Theo translated the
prologue/provocation\(^2\) and later developed further short linking commentaries between the (English) Shakespeare scenes. This newly scripted French framing narrative suggested that the central Faustus/Shakespeare character made his pact and sold his soul not for wealth or power, but for love: in return for his immortal soul he was given the capacity to create Juliet, the perfect love [Fig. 3, Appendix 2]. Faustus/Shakespeare first writes - then writes himself into *Romeo and Juliet*; in this he violates conventions of theatrical privacy by voyeuristically observing Juliet’s “Gallop apace” soliloquy. In a Pygmalion-esque breach, he falls in love with his own creation, which precipitates his downfall. I re-christened the newly-augmented script *Night Horses*, enjoying the associations with nightmares, with the “fiery-footed steeds” of Juliet’s “Gallop apace” soliloquy and with Faustus’ plea at the end of the play, “*o, lente, lente, currite notcis equii!*”

Hearing the linking sections in French in juxtaposition with the Shakespearean scenes in English, I became concerned about the way we were using Marlowe’s opening act. Faustus conjures in Latin, and this posed (for me) a problem: though I wanted to retain the “unnerving performative potential” (Sofer 2009, 2) in the Latin conjuring sections in *Doctor Faustus*, I was unnerved by the prospect of asking the audience to negotiate three different languages within the first ten minutes of the piece. I was also quite prepared to argue that the Latin represented a linguistic bridge too far for the actors already negotiating bilingual performance, whatever its potential effect on the audience. That said, I wanted

\(^2\) For subsequent performances in the UK the French language version was retained for Anglophone audiences, and the English translation was reprinted in the programme notes.
to make the most of the performative potential of the venue, and to retain the element of risk that evidently struck the first audiences for Doctor Faustus. In choosing to enact the raising of demons in a church – albeit a desacralized one – we were obviously exploiting Doctor Faustus' darker legacy, and choosing to “enact theatre’s potential to escape from the character’s (and actor’s) control and unwittingly bring into being that which it names.” (Sofer 2009, 3) This being the case, we decided to “own our choices” in this regard, and to articulate them more directly to our Francophone audience, by substituting Marlowe's Latin incantations with some demonic French poetry.

These, and other considerations – chiefly of the conference theme – suggested the inclusion of excerpts from Rimbaud’s poem “Nuit en Enfer”. Rimbaud's expansive rhetorical schemes and the speaker’s evident hubris leant our new bilingual piece an appropriately overreaching air, and the first excerpt below underscored the act of conjuration:

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Je vais éveiller tous les mystères: mystères religieux ou naturels, mort, naissance, avenir, passé, cosmogonie, néant. Je suis maître en fantasmagories.

Écoutez !...
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[For translation see Appendix 1, and Fig. 4, Appendix 2]

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More of Rimbaud’s poem is used in the final scene. The climax of our play shows the Faustian figure being destroyed by his own act, hubris and work – he drinks the ink/blood drawn from his arm as part of his pact with Mephistopheles, and dies in a choking, chaotic paper nest of crumpled abandoned work:

J’ai avalé une fameuse gorgée de poison...Les entrailles me brûlent. La violence du venin tord mes membres, me rend difforme, me terrasse. Je meurs de soif, j’étouffe, je ne puis crier. C’est l’enfer, l’éternelle peine !

Voyez comme le feu se relève ! Je brûle...Va, démon !

[Fig. 5 and 6, Appendix 2]

From this debris, the Muse – played by the dancer Phyllida Crowley-Smith – retrieved Cleopatra’s famous eulogy for Antony, and read it to the audience:

“Think you there was, or might be, such a man as this I dreamed of?” before the play closed with Puck’s epilogue, spoken by Theo, in French.

Thus far this paper has considered choice and dramaturgy in bilingual performance, in a very localised way. Since the opening of Night Horses in Montpellier, the piece has gone on to be performed in the U.K., prompting further consideration of the possibilities contained in bilingual or multilingual performance of classic texts.

Part 2: Working with blank verse as a second language: “Iambic pentameter doesn’t exist in French”
My limited experience of working with Shakespeare in French suggests that iambic pentameter presents a number of issues to the Francophone actor in training, over and above those one might expect any actor new to Shakespeare’s language to encounter. As Theo pointed out more than once during rehearsals, “iambic pentameter doesn’t exist in French”, because French syllabic length and dynamic intensity is largely uniform (Poirier 2015). Indeed, the iambic foot, central to a metrical understanding of Shakespeare’s form, cannot easily find equivalency in French; this is because French words of two syllables exhibit no “stressed” syllable, and in words of three syllables or more, only the last is lengthened or emphasized (Lian 1980, 34). If iambic pentameter does not articulate the “heartbeat” for Francophone actors in the same way verse and text coaches maintain it does for Anglophone actors (Block 2013, 8), it does suggest other strategies, and Theo relied heavily on vocal tempo and weight, when performing Shakespeare in English:

...you have to hit [the words] so that the speech becomes clear... but if you slow it down too much it’s not clear what’s going on...I think it’s easier for English people to get the pitch range in and make it sound natural.

(Poirier 2015)

At first glance this seems an uncontroversial and even innocuous comment, but the suggestion that weight and tempo are more important tools for emphasis for Francophone actors of Shakespeare than, for instance, variances in vocal pitch or rhythm, is worth noting. Though it has been my experience that this particular
actor does indeed typically uses weight/volume, and not pitch modulation to emphasise key words, one can of course only speculate as to the degree to which this is a cultural rather than personal vocal characteristic. Of the relatively small constituency of non-UK EU nationals currently enrolled at GSA (see below) Theo Poirier is unique in having spent exactly one half of his life in his native France, the other in the UK, and in speaking English without traces of a native (French) accent. Colleagues in the GSA voice department are certainly in agreement that non-native speakers of English bring a range of different strategies to bear on Shakespeare’s language, and there is also a consensual view that wide ranges in pitch and tone are not significant features of French-inflected English. However, this is not to say that French speakers of English lack variety in vocal choices; rather, one might instead argue that French-inflected English is characterised by an enhanced sensitivity to the weighting of different words.

In 2014-15, The Guildford School of Acting (GSA) enrolled 14 EU actors from countries outside the UK. Of these, 7 enrolled on the one-year MA programmes in Acting, Musical Theatre, and Creative Practices & Direction. The remaining 7 enrolled on 3 year BA programmes in Acting and in Musical Theatre. As the student population at GSA (and presumably, comparable conservatoires throughout the UK) is becoming steadily more international in composition, it is timely to consider a methodological language that allows for bilingual or multilingual performance of classic texts. Night Horses is a partially-devised, partially-conflated collage of early modern and modern poetic texts and music, developed rather quickly in the studio relying on only two key methodologies:
the Viewpoints system as described by Ann Bogart and Tina Landau⁴, and Rudolph Laban’s Effort Actions. These methods share an emphasis on kinaesthetic learning and somatic approaches to performance, and as such, both Viewpoints and Laban seemed appropriate to a multilingual approach to performance. Though Viewpoints and Laban are used extensively in physical theatre pieces, the rest of this paper concerns itself chiefly with the ways in which Laban’s system can be used to create, explore and manage shifts in the dynamics of bilingual spoken performance. Weight is a primary consideration when working physically or vocally with Rudolph Laban’s Effort Actions; this suggests at once a natural fit with the vocal characteristics exhibited by Theo and described by him, above. Laban uses a system of notation designed to describe how bodies and voices move through time and space⁵. [See Appendix 3]. The effort actions are composed of three pairs of components:

- DIRECT or INDIRECT effort
- SUSTAINED or SUDDEN effort
- STRONG or WEAK effort

When combined, these components produce the following Efforts, expressed by these verbs:

⁴ Appendix 3 lists Bogart and Landau’s Viewpoints, and suggested further reading, but full consideration of their application to this process lies outside the scope of this paper.
⁵ There are in fact four motion factors: weight, space, time and flow. For more information about how flow can modulate the effort actions discussed in this paper see Cecily Dell, *A Primer for Movement Description Using Effort-Shape and Supplementary Concepts* rev.ed (New York, 1977) pp.13-19.
Looking at the first Rimbaud quote again with regard to Laban's efforts will also demonstrate ways in which speech can affect performance dynamics whether the words spoken in the given language are understood by the audience or not. When preparing a remount of *Night Horses* for an exclusively Anglophone audience, an emphasis on Laban’s Efforts was uniquely helpful in the process of making the French text performative. Producing sounds unfamiliar to speakers of English, using switches between the Direct Efforts of PRESS and GLIDE, Theo was able to communicate the slightly artificial quality of incantatory speech or conjuration. The last utterance, “Écoutez!...” by contrast used FLICK reducing the weight of vocal effort, and taking out the agency which an imperative might ordinarily employ, to give a sense of suddenness and surprise, the uncertainty of the outcome. The Laban “scoring” of the speech in performance would read as something like the following:

[GLIDE effort] Je vais éveiller tous les mystères: mystères religieux ou naturels,
[PRESS effort] mort, naissance, avenir, passé, cosmogonie, néant.

[PRESS effort, increased weight] Je suis maître en fantasmagories.

(Pause)

[FLICK effort] Écoutez !...

[For translation see Appendix 1, and Fig. 4, Appendix 2]

Of course, this is a very simplified scoring of a piece which contains within it lots of rhythmic variety, and the capacity for vocal and physical variety in performance choices, but the broad strokes indicated above will demonstrate the dominant efforts, and the “mood” created at this moment for an audience without a sound understanding of French, or indeed, French demonic poetry.

For the second extract from “Nuit en Enfer”, applying the vocal Efforts of WRING and SLASH effectively communicated Faustus’ agony and desperation:

[WRING] J’ai avalé une fameuse gorgée de poison…Les entrailles me brûlent. La violence du venin tord mes membres, me rend difforme, me terrasse.

[SLASH] Je meurs de soif, j’étouffe, je ne puis crier. C’est l’enfer, l’éternelle peine !

[WRING] Voyez comme le feu se relève ! Je brûle...

[SLASH] Va, démon !

Va, démon !
Therefore, the combination of physicalized action, gesture [Figs. 5 and 6, Appendix 2] and strong vocal Effort choices combined to make the French poetic narrative clear for an Anglophone audience. Of these elements, it is fair to say that the vocal Efforts are most easily translated by an audience as “emotional states”, even though the actor is making largely technical adjustments to vocal technique.

An effective approach towards vocal performance must account for linguistic variations, whether these are between languages within the same continent, or regional dialects within the same language. As a Hungarian national who wrote in German and practiced extensively throughout central Europe, Rudolph Laban’s technical vocabulary suggests itself as one uniquely useful to pan-European multilingual performance practice. Many, if not all, actors in training in the UK will arguably feel encouraged to equate a standardized Received Pronunciation (RP) dialect as the benchmark for “good Shakespearean speech”; the casting for Night Horses implicitly encouraged the actors involved to challenge the authority of RP, and to adopt Laban’s system as a primarily somatic approach to performance. I would therefore argue that Laban’s system can offer “European Shakespeare” a European benchmark for performance, allowing for great regional and national vocal variety: instead of holding up Received Pronunciation as the model to emulate, the Night Horses project adopted a somatic approach which provided cohesiveness, without the need for everyone to sound the same.
Laban Efforts do not reside in, or privilege any particular regional or national dialect, but can be found in all speech varieties. Moreover, choosing the desired Effort is something entirely within the actor’s control, whereas certain dialectal sounds may be very difficult for certain speakers to produce. Whether working in their home language or in translation, every actor can produce variations in weight, tempo and duration by using the Efforts: while iambic pentameter may “not exist in French”, everyone can glide, whether in French or English. For the director of Shakespeare’s plays, Laban provides a methodology by which both the spoken text and the topography of physical storytelling can be shaped, manipulated, and to an extent scored, to produce the desired shifts in physical and vocal dynamics, using the actors’ awareness of weight, space, time and flow.

I discovered during the rehearsal process for Night Horses and performances of it in France and the UK that the relationship to early modern English dramatic language held by the non-native speaker of English is inflected by a complex of influences, some of which stem from linguistic or verbal habits which may be traced to country of origin. The implications of these warrant further research, but the scope of this paper means that at this point it can point only to areas and observations for which I hope time will provide the scope for further investigation.6

6 In 2016 I will co-direct a European, multilingual production of Romeo and Juliet at Verona’s Teatro Romano, using Laban as the lingua franca for rehearsals with actors and dancers drawn from across the continent. This process is the subject of a recent bid to the ERC, for which the outcome is as yet unknown.