

There is a certain kind of likeable theatre practitioner who combines a general weariness of the theatre grind with excitement for its ever-fresh possibilities. Michael Batz is one such artist.

The Scottish writer, producer and set designer is in Brussels to start work on *La Femme fantôme* (*The Bogus Woman*), which is having its Belgian première on November 1 at the Théâtre de Poche. The work, by British playwright and actress Kay Adshad, follows an African woman's terrifying and absurd experiences as a refugee and asylum-seeker. It has won plaudits across Britain; Batz says he loves its grit and poetry. In fact, it's a piece that sums up his philosophical performance criteria – politically committed, intellectually challenging and transfrontier.

Of German Jewish extraction on his mother's side, Batz says he is resolutely European "in his guts". He is a confidante of notable European theatre folk such as Nobel Prize-winner Dario Fo. Trained in theatre and psychology in Britain and Germany, Batz has an earthy commitment to what he calls (echoing Orson Welles) "theatre – the biggest train set a boy can play with".

He studied at Birmingham alongside playwright David Edgar and then was lucky enough to work at Bristol's Old Vic with Daniel Day-Lewis and Adrian Noble. While one can hardly get a better start, he has little nostalgia for Britain. "It's too orthodox," he complains. "At their best, the great British actors have uniquely verbal and intellectual skills, but they only act from the neck up."

The director discovered an eye-opener in French theatre director Ariane Mnouchkine's company in the late 1980s – a cooperative that produced socially aware theatre and relied partially on improvisation. He set about building a similar troupe in Yorick in Paris. The result was at first a huge success (with an adaptation of Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits*) but had to close due to lack of funds. "Keeping a company like that going is impossible financially," he laments.

MARIO DEL CURTO



Michael Batz: European to the core

He has since found in France not only a practical welcome – "it only took me a year to get established from scratch" – but also an intellectual one. "French theatre has room for lots of traditions," he says. "They are immensely open to other languages and writers. Where in Britain could I get young actors prepared or able to work in French?"

He realises, of course, that each tradition has its advantages. "The French theatre tradition can get too abstract, but then the British seem frightened of the big ideas."

Batz is at his most interesting when he talks about the way in which TV is bleeding theatre dry of talent. "Britain is good at producing talented young writers," he admits, "but then they all want to work on *Coronation Street*. That's no way to develop a genuine theatre writing practice!"

The next few years are busy. Batz is in residence at St Denis, Paris, where he will première the French language version of *The House of the Spirits*, and then he will be staging Debbie Horsfield's *Red Devils* – a play about female Manchester United fans – in the run up to the World Cup. That one might take some creative marketing. "For all their openness," he says, "the French find the idea of theatre and football incompatible."

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Théâtre de la Poche, 1a Chemin du Gymnase, Brussels, November 1 to 26, 20.30, Tuesday to Saturday. Tel 02.649.17.27.