

Remarkable Things

“If we had lived in another place, another time, would it have been different? Our sense of life? Or are we, like the birds, what we are, no matter where we happen to be?”

These words, written by Sri Lankan born, British writer Romesh Guneseckera in his novel *Heaven’s edge*, are spoken by Marc, trapped in a spoilt paradise, caught between memories of his father, a military airman, and passivist grandfather. “Marc” was being performed by 17 year old Manuel Jorge Figueira, playing opposite Alina Nóbrega in the role of his lover and eco-warrior, Uva, in an impressive adaptation of Guneseckera’s tale being played at the RDP auditorium in Funchal, as part of a remarkable series of events.

The novel had been adapted for stage by Teresa Jardim, a teacher at Escola Secundaria Francisco Franco in Funchal and was a part – albeit a major part – of the schools’ celebration of ‘the author of year’. It might seem impressive enough that the English department of a secondary school would adopt a single author for a whole year, but that is only the beginning of the story. I was to find this out when I was taken around the school by the leading lights of the enterprise, teachers Maria Carmo Marques and Ana Maria Lomelino, though hints of what to expect had been there all the time for those with eyes to see: the design of the posters advertising the play from the art department; the music that accompanied the play carefully researched by the music department; the costumes designed and made in the school.

I was taken to see an art exhibition in the school’s small gallery tucked away at the back of the building, above the gymnasium. Here a riot of colour and imagination from pupils from year 10 was on display. Dozens of paintings inspired by the works of Guneseckera – sometimes depicting rich landscapes and luxurious vegetation, at other times illustrating a moment in the novel...love...betrayal...capture – lined the wall, the hub of which was an enormous canvass telling the story in one sweep of the eye. There were the lovers, the giant peacock, the myriad butterflies that filled the valley, the rich, tropical flora in which were nestling dangerous fauna – camouflaged soldiers fingering automatic rifles.

In the weeks before the play, the school had hosted a number of events, including the opening of the art exhibition that I was now witnessing. This opening had been preceded by a talk by history teacher Fátima Abreu, entitled *‘De Ceilão, de Inglaterra e do Império Britânico’*. The following week there had been a performance of music either from or inspired by Sri Lanka, including songs by Mahinda Jayatilaka and Badraji Mahinda, given by students and teachers of the school. A month before that, the author himself had visited the school (as part of a tour organised by the British Council’s BritLit project) when he had addressed a large assembly of pupils and teachers and read some of his work. He had then been interviewed by a smaller group, with whom he shared some of his unpublished poems, before witnessing the play in rehearsal.

What had brought about this extraordinary burst of activity and energy in the school? What could possibly have galvanised the teachers into embarking on such a remarkable and exhausting programme of work that was clearly far and beyond the normal demands of a school curriculum?

The answer was even more surprising: it was simply business as usual; simply a continuation of work that the school had been involved in year after year. Which made the whole thing even more extraordinary.

Next to the art exhibition was a smaller room in which previous ‘authors of the year’ were highlighted. It would seem that, far from being a single, mad one-off event, the Gunsekera feast of delight was in fact staple diet for this school, and had been since 1987 when Carmo and Ana had launched their first ‘*escritor do ano*’ – Charles Dickens. What followed in subsequent years was to establish a pattern that simply has got to be the envy of English departments all over the country. Ranging from Shakespeare (the only one to get two years to himself – and why not?) through the Liverpool poets Roger McGough, Adrian Henri and Brian Pattern, to Roald Dahl; from Chaucer to Ray Bradbury; from Lewis Carroll to Oscar Wilde they established a pattern of work which included one school department after another – mathematics with Lewis Carroll, science with Chaucer (alchemy, you see!), philosophy, art, history, geography, Portuguese, music – and which lasted an academic year that, since 1995 (when Teresa Jardim joined the staff) has culminated in a play based on the author or one of his works.

One year the school entrance was covered by a giant spaceship (for Ray Bradbury) and during another the entrance hall contained a very, very dark space – perhaps like a rabbit burrow – where lovers of Alice could dream of their own wonderland. I asked how many students got involved in the project over a year and both Ana and Carmo looked a little puzzled before I realised the question should have been how many students at the school *didn’t* get involved.

I was still trying to get the enormity of what was involved into my head when Carmo and Ana took me to see another exhibition on another floor (on the way we passed a student – “one of the candidates for the literature prize,” I was told. The literature prize?) and this exhibition was put on by the schools clubs, and its presence provided me with the evidence I had been looking for: ESFF was not so much a school as a vibrant community within the heart of the city. Further evidence was revealed when I realised that the activities – curricula and ex-curricula – were actively supported also by ex-students and ex-teachers as well as by parents.

It was at this point that I said, or rather sighed, “I wish I’d been to a school like this.” To this, both Carmo and Ana agreed whole-heartedly. Here was the key: motivation. Such an extraordinary degree of motivation that the word ‘remarkable’ simply repeated itself in my head, over and over again. And that degree of motivation led to a difficult question:

“What about the school syllabus?”

I had forgotten that the expression ‘an old fashioned look’ existed until Carmo flashed one at me. I was never sure, before that moment, what it meant exactly. But now I knew, as sure as eggs is eggs. It is a mixture of knowingness, warning and amusement all rolled into one.

“It gets the attention it deserves,” says she. “All the requirements are met.” It is quite clear that the syllabus is treated not exactly as an unwelcome intruder but rather like a rather tiresome elderly aunt who has to be placated and comforted while the family’s real life goes on regardless.

I was shown worksheets made by staff – there are a series of bulky folders of shared work in an annexe to the staff room – and the quality was outstanding. For example, one of the worksheets on Gunesequera ‘year’ was a linked reading series called ‘from Camões to Gunesequera’ and placed Portuguese cultural references clearly at the centre of attention, while drawing inspiration from the first Portuguese Diaspora and using that to focus on current life in Sri Lanka, all in simple steps that also had depth; perfect for those difficult year 10 classes of mixed ability English learners. “One day we’ll think about publishing it,” I was told. Why not do it now? was the only decent reply I could think of!

The amount of work involved in such a holistic approach to teaching is daunting to anyone who sees teaching merely as job of work. I pushed the two dynamos behind so much of the schools success on this point, trying to find the points where support hadn’t been given, searching for cracks in the scheme of things, and I was told in a very matter of fact voice that “There are, and always will be, two kinds of teachers.” The point was not elaborated. It didn’t need to be. Teaching was a vocation, not just a job, was what they were saying.

Luckily I didn’t have to go too far to find more vocational teachers. From the back gate of ESFF it was just a steady 20 minute walk uphill – a very steep hill, I might add, but that is part of the charm of Funchal – to APEL, where Graça Valeiro and her team of teachers talk in English to their students not just in class but in the breaks, over lunch and in the street too. No easy sliding into Portuguese here. Graça and some of her students had also been at the performance the evening before and part of the reason for that was a shared interest in Romesh Gunesequera. He had also visited the school and spoken to and with the students a few weeks earlier. In fact it was Graça’s class who had taken one of his short stories, ‘Carapace’ (which I had introduced them to a few weeks before that) and turned it into a charming playlet which they’d performed, on stage in costume, before the amazed and deeply appreciative author. They’d cunningly turned the first person monologue into a diary of reminiscence, the young, unnamed girl who was the narrator, now being an old woman looking back on a key moment in her life. This had the effect of heightening the debate which the readers inevitably have with themselves about what happened next – did she or did she not marry Mr Anura Perera? In terms of class management what seemed to have happened here was a classic case of what my colleague Joseph Guerra calls non-linear teaching or, to be more precise, non-linear learning. The opportunity had arisen to respond to a series of apparently casual circumstances – the introduction of a new story set in a new culture; the challenge of the language itself as well as the cultural overtones; the advent of the author visiting and the decision by both students and teachers that they would not be merely passive recipients for this event, but active participants, exchanging rather than just taking ideas. Here was

an almost perfect example of the interaction of language acting as both catalyst and means of communication between teacher and students. While the dramatic offering at ESFF might have been grander in scale and more daring in scope, what had happened at APEL was more intensely driven by the students, more personal – more ‘owned’: the students sense of ‘value’ in their own terms was enhanced. In both schools this sense of ownership and partnership was what made the efforts stand out though the way in which this energy was released was significantly different. While the tremendous work done by ESFF took a vast commitment of time and resources – albeit time and resources that are available to every school in the country, ESFF had no priority or favours shown – the impressive offering from APEL was available through the work of a few short weeks, snatched hours and stolen moments. Naturally this meant that a considerable amount of work was done outside of regular class time; which brings us back looking at our vocational teachers.

“I enjoyed the interview we made with him (*Romesh*). I must confess I was really, really nervous before it, because of his importance, and it went so well that I phoned my sister immediately after to tell her how much I was proud of myself, and how nice, kind and interesting Mr Gunsekera is,” wrote Raquel after the visit.

An ‘interview’ had been worked on by students from both schools, and in the case of APEL, Raquel’s school, this was conducted as a round table discussion by four students plus the author in front of an audience of peers in the school auditorium. The dynamic produced by this student lead initiative spilled over into the enthusiasm from an otherwise potentially passive audience who themselves contributed positively in written comments after the event. (The more teacher-inspired interview (in that it was an idea expressed first by teachers rather than the students) at ES Francisco Franco was conducted in an even more formal setting, with the school principal and representatives of the school board in attendance, along with a large and previously uninvolved audience. As a result the experience at ESFF was more passive for most of the audience, though not any less nerve wracking for the interviewers!)

This theme of preparing for the visit to APEL, and the importance given to it by students, is mentioned frequently in their reports:

“The work that we did preparing his arrival was very exciting and when we put it into practice it produced a great result,” said Isabel. Equally, the value drawn from the opportunity of meeting a writer was mentioned time and time again reflecting that something out of the ordinary had happened, though something which could be measured in subjective terms only.

“Meeting Romesh and studying his work were one of the most different and pleasant activities I have ever made in all my English lessons.....thank you!” said Sara, while Ana added, “Most importantly we had someone who could directly express his experience as a writer through interaction. A fun way of getting knowledge!”

All in all, then, my experience of working with the talented teachers and students of APEL and Francisco Franco schools was almost overwhelming. In a brief report he wrote about his experiences, Romesh says that his Funchal experiences were “both moving and inspiring”. So mutuality was flavour of the month here – the writer inspired the students and teachers, and their efforts inspired the writer. Could there be a story in this somewhere?!

The good news is that this experience could happen anywhere. Conditions like these are created not out of money or material substance or access to large resources (though these would always be welcomed!), but rather the simple will to succeed, and the determination to carry it out. The fact that there are two models to follow is encouraging, to say the least. At ESFF, the work of the students was goal-led: there was a clear structure and purpose of achievement to be attained, backed up by years of positive experience. One might say that the early days of this project in this school were linear in design, with a clear starting point and a fairly clear objective to work towards. The result was a clearly teacher-led model, involving considerable commitment from individual members of staff. Students’ creativity was much encouraged within this linear model, especially when this could be measured in students’ own perception of success. At this point in the project, the project started to become less linear and open to variables that only a non-linear model would produce or suggest. The goals were set high, but achievements met their targets and success was considerable.

At APEL, the approach was far more student orientated for its inspiration, and required a far more non-linear approach from the teaching staff from the very start. A non-linear approach does not require a goal to be set by the teachers from the outset, but is far more negotiable, relying on the interests, strengths, needs and demands of the participants to a far higher degree than adopting a linear approach. The strengths of this approach need to be measured against its weaknesses, notably elements of directionless or apparently chaotic process taking over. The outcomes are less predictable and therefore less controllable by the teacher, but they do tend to be more student orientated, within an agreed boundary. In this case the teacher doesn’t dominate, but exercises necessary power in more subtle ways.

In both cases in Funchal the results were spectacular, leaving all participants - the teachers, the students, the audiences, the author and myself – rapturous with excitement at what had been achieved from a literary input. This was ‘animating literature’ at its best.

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