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EXCERPTS from "PASSAGES" the Swiss Cultural Magazine SWITZERLAND'S THEATRICAL LANDSCAPE

THE VIEW FROM THE FOOTLIGHTS (by Bruno Cathomas)

My ideal would be for actors to be able to work anywhere. But I realize that this can't be, because actors are tied to a language - so if one is German-speaking, one works primarily in Germany, Austria and Switzerland.

After training at the Schauspielakademie in Zürich, I immediately went to Germany to perfect my German. I worked and lived in Berlin for seven years, and I must admit that it was only there that my enunciation and diction really developed. But, being Swiss, I'll always have to work on my language. What it means to be an actor in Switzerland is hard for me to say, after only one year in Basle. But I seem to have noticed that it's a disadvantage to grow up in a society or environment that's always out for consensus; good theatre can only emerge where conflicts are argued out; but arguing conflicts out also means sticking them out, not immediately having to be conciliatory and pleasant. Allowing differences to stand, but many theatrical professionals in Switzerland can barely do that, which is why they have to go to Germany first and learn how.

Without that detour to a foreign country, an actor in Switzerland may be at a disadvantage. Otherwise I don't really care whether I perform in Switzerland or elsewhere - the main thing is that I get a chance to perform at all, because working conditions in Switzerland are good, the audience is nice and the salary is okay.

(Bruno Cathomas was born in Laax-Grison in 1965 and lives and works in Basle. He has made a name throughout the German-speaking world, above all for his prominent roles in Stefan Bachmann productions.)

TECHNICAL STAGE PROFESSIONS IN SWITZERLAND

Apart from the many options Switzerland offers for private theatrical training, the country has five publicly supported drama schools devoted to the techniques, skills and knowledge necessary to the most important stage-related careers: two in German-speaking Switzerland, two in the French-speaking west and one in Italian-speaking Ticino.

The Scuola Teatro Dimitri in Verscio dedicates much of its programme to movement and body language, in other words, to the "artiste" side of the theatre. Since its foundation in 1975, it has gained international recognition for a curriculum including pantomime, juggling, acrobatics, dance, improvisation, make-up, techniques and vocal coaching. Students from all over Switzerland and from foreign countries near and far go there to benefit from its specialized training.

That French-speaking Switzerland should have two schools is surprising, considering how few actors later earn their livings there. The Section Professionnelle d'Art Dramatique of the Lausanne Conservatory was originally conceived as an evening school for amateurs seeking to acquire basic theatrical skills. It continues to offer a one-year foundation course, which has been joined by a three-year course of professional training. A similar programme is offered by the ESAD (Ecole Supérieure d'Art Dramatique), established as an independent department of the Geneva Conservatory of Music in 1971. Its prime focus is teaching the techniques of the international theatrical avant-garde.

The two schools in German Switzerland-Zürich's Schauspiel-Akademie founded in 1937 as the "Bühnenstudio" and the Schauspielabteilung of the Berne Conservatory, founded in 1965 - already offer a wide range of options. As a result of the cantonal law on higher education, passed in 1998, the Schauspielakademie was merged with the conservatories of Zürich and Winterthur in the autumn of 1999 to form the new Hochschule 'für Musik und Theater'. The syllabus has also been revamped: the two programmes, for "Performing Professions" (stage actor, film actor and puppeteer) have been divided into two blocks, with a two-year foundation course and a two-year main course, specialisation beginning in the second year of the foundation course.

Where Switzerland still lags behind is in its training opportunities for stage design and technical careers in the theatre. The courses for costume seamstresses at the Frauenfachschule in Zürich (a pilot project for wardrobe mistresses, run in the Nineties, regrettably never reached the definitive stage), the Scuola di Pittura di Teatro in Geneva and the course for set painters at the School of Design in Zürich are all that is on offer far and wide. However the Schweizerischer Verein Technischer Bühnen-Berufe has recognised the problem and began offering a range of three-day further education courses. (This text is taken from: Beat Schläpfer, Schauspiel in der Schweiz, Pro Helvetia 1999)

Swiss soldiers start learning lingua franca of international peacekeeping

A Swiss army division has begun English classes for soldiers who may serve in peacekeeping missions abroad. The Fortification Guards Corps will be given lessons to help them overcome linguistic barriers in Kosovo and other troublespots.

Evacuations due to threat of avalanches in Switzerland (Feb.2000)

The authorities in the Swiss canton of Valais have evacuated several houses because of a threat of avalanches.

Officials said about a dozen people had to leave their homes in the commune of Saint Gingolph on Lake Geneva. They said it was a precautionary measure following heavy snowfalls in the region.

Warning to stay out of forests

The Swiss authorities have again warned the public not to enter forests which were damaged in December's hurricane.

A senior official said it was dangerous to walk in areas where trees are uprooted or branches could fall off. He called on communes and private owners to clear up faster, particularly in canton Berne. The federal and cantonal authorities have pledged financial aid for the operation.