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## Valley pupils take Macbeth to Berlin

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As cultural exchanges go, it was unlikely: pupils from a tough Valleys community performing the "Scottish play" in baroque Berlin, writes Andrew Mourant. Yet a common interest in the Bard lay behind the success of a pioneering visit by 20 performing arts students from Merthyr College in Merthyr Tydfil to Friedrich Ebert Oberschule, a highly academic school in a prosperous enclave of Germany's capital.

Staging a performance of Macbeth appeared a tall order. But with few props, just two days to polish their performance and not one German speaker among them, the students, led by former thespian Andrew Thomas (pictured on the hillside overlooking Merthyr Tydfil this week), took to the task like professionals, he said.

The onus of communication fell to the German school's resident Shakespeare enthusiast, Martina Baasner, while the Merthyr students' command of Macbeth enabled them to take a lead in joint workshops.

"In a strange country, they showed a high level of professionalism," said Mr Thomas. "They got the job done."

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Among the group studying for a Btec national diploma in performing arts was 17-year-old Shaun Aldred, whose interest in Shakespeare was triggered at Afon Taf High in Merthyr Tydfil when, aged 14, he took part in A Midsummer Night's Dream. He feels the Berlin trip taught him valuable lessons in dealing with the unknown.

"I felt a lot more self-confident doing things independently, such as making different sets," he said. "But the German students spoke English and that helped a lot."

Shaun hopes to go on to university and become a professional actor.

Meanwhile, there are plans for a reciprocal visit from the Berlin school early next year.

The students' visit followed one to Berlin by a Merthyr College lecturer as part of a professional development scheme that was funded by the Assembly government. The aim was to develop cultural understanding and a best-practice model that could be replicated by other FE colleges.

For some students, Berlin was their first taste of a European city.

"A lot of pupils come from backgrounds where the idea of doing that is alien," said Mr Thomas. "It's a way of improving their self-esteem and feeling valued in the community."

When the Berlin students visit Merthyr, Mr Thomas, whose acting career included a spell with the Royal Court, plans to draw on bodies such as the Welsh National Opera.

"We'll give them a taste of Welsh culture," he said.

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