NTQ Reports and Announcements

doi:10.1017/S0266464X11000315
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Contemporary Circus Celebrated

Report on the Fifth Festival Novog Cirkusa, Zagreb, in November 2009.

Festival Novog Cirkusa, a five-day festival of contemporary circus and physical theatre held annually in Zagreb, Croatia, brings together a very impressive selection of new and innovative works from around Europe. The Festival Director, Ivan Kralj, curates productions according to an annual theme and also manages to deliver international premieres of new works. In 2009 Kralj with Jana Drasler also co-ordinated an interdisciplinary conference on the theme of 'Women and Circus', which was held in conjunction with the excellent boutique festival, 26 to 30 November 2009, and invited speakers like myself attended both events. A number of leading producers and venue programmers from around Europe were also in attendance.

The 2009 Festival delivered artistically innovative art by female performers and their artistic collaborators in an inspiring programme. Contemporary (also called new) circus has gained considerable momentum over the past three decades – and can best be defined as body-based arts with apparatus. These well-chosen Festival performances reveal yet again that the core circus skills – acrobatic, aerial, and object manipulation – in combination with other performance forms continue to produce highly imaginative productions. The best circus-like performances can be appreciated for a seamless assimilation of complex concepts.

Three Festival Novog Cirkusa shows stood out for this spectator for their physical delivery of current ideas. *Éloge du poil* by Compagnie Bal took object manipulation to the edge of current concerns about our relations with other species; *Miroir, Miroir* by Moglice-Von Verx dissected female self-image with profound aerial artistry; and the acrobatic dance action of Nova Voda's *Bambula* distilled the rituals of life into tragic-comic moments. These works are indicative of the inventive capacity of female performers and current artistic visions in the milieu of contemporary image-based performance, including circus and physical theatre.

The Festival opened with the solo *Éloge du poil* with Jeanne Mordoj, directed by Pierre Meunier, which delivered a highly original visual text and a verbal text in French with Croatian subtitles. This show began with Mordoj in a white knee-length skirt and jacket sitting at one end of a promenade stage next to a covered bench with her back to the audience on three sides. Her lower face was covered with a black cloth as she pulled out several long skewers holding up her hair and then threw the skewers like darts half the length of the stage. They stuck in a painting at the other end that showed two hairy legs. The performer's acrobatically trained body moved with consummate control, and in heeled clogs, as she held a position and looked around expectantly.

When Mordoj raised her face mask to reveal a beard, I was reminded of Circus Amok and its founder Jennifer Miller in New York, who is also a small-bodied woman with a beard which she uses for visual impact in comic acrobatic acts, although Miller's beard is not a prop. As Mordoj's act progressed, a range of props and apparatus were brought on stage by Pierre Mathieu. A tyre slipped up and down Mordoj's body; a basin of shells was thrown to rattle across the stage. Balancing the basin on her head, and rolling around the stage, Mordoj slowly picked up each one with her hands, then her feet, and returned them noisily to the basin. The sound of the shells becomes part of the sequence, contributing to the pacing and comic effect. In what was part sideshow and part contemporary performance, the performer rolled around keeping the basin on her head.

I was slightly distracted from my admiration for her performance skills by the props being walked on and off the stage. But the covered bench contained a surprise that made me completely attentive. Two skeleton heads emerged to function as puppets: the jaws of a skeleton ram head complete with horns, and a small badger skeleton head propped up over a larger bone. In a very clever ventriloquist act the skeleton puppet heads sang and talked to each other and the performer and the audience about life and its ironies.

This highly original sequence resonated with cultural significance, especially about the status of non-human animals. Energized into animate characters, the skeletons so aptly revealed how humans control the bodies of non-human animals, and in this instance even their bones were literally manipulated. Although framed with black humour, the dead animals seemed like an apocalyptic warning even though the utility of the ram and adaptability of the small badger denoted their survival. In giving them spoken language the performance underlined how humans do not listen in our relentless control over the life and

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X11000315 Published online by Cambridge University Press



Jeanne Mordoj in *Éloge du poil*. Photo: Christophe Raynaud de Lage.

death of other species. Even though the two skeleton puppets engaged in quick retorts, they radiated larger ideas of loss and extinction. The reclaiming of bones discarded after eating and accidents also became a macabre reminder of how extinct species are known only through their skeletal remains.

The smaller skeleton was put into a square metal box with holes, and long metal darts were pushed through the box in a parody of the sideshow swords thrust into a box containing a human body. When the performer put her finger inside the box, she drew blood. The stage floor was opened up and a two-piece wooden scaffolding erected with a pulley for rope to hold and lower the box into a tank of water. Lifted into the air, the box became a sieve as water sprayed out on to the stage. Eventually a small, somewhat subdued puppet was rescued.

Snails' shells were thrown across the floor in a pile and the performer moved them to create the sound of waves moving shells on the shore. Raw hen eggs were rolled down a long tube on to the stage; the symbolism of life rolled out with them. Instead the performer broke an egg on stage, and juggled with the yolk, rolling it up one arm across the top of the body and down the other arm. I watched in anticipation that it would break, but this only happened when it was rolled down on to the chest. A delicate juggling act.

The ensuing sequences seemed a little anticlimactic. Mordoj in a red coat-dress swirled around the stage in a slow dance with six long dried plant stems balanced across her head and body. At one end of each reed was a bird-like head that suggested a flattened skeleton and transformed her into an amorphous priestess figure moving in some timeless ritual. Another section of the stage was removed to reveal dirt, as the performer in a green petticoat got into a box of dirt. Yes, this had all the connotations of a grave and coffin except that the performer shovelling dirt by hand on top of her body meant her liveness displaced deadness.

The finale was a chorus of skulls appearing as if they were singing to the music. The artistic accomplishment of this show, with its highly imaginative manipulation of objects and voice, was its visual impact. The show echoes back through ideas of consumption inclusive of recent explorations of a consuming dynamic underlying performance.

The main Festival programme included an over-long comic clowning show and two further trapeze shows, *Poppins Silazi* by Zagreb artists Triko, and *Human Document* by Psychological Art Circus from England, described in detail in the beautifully produced Festival and Conference programme. (Other publications last year included one of the 2007 Project managed by Mladen Koncar, and a large calendar for 2010 with photographs providing a retrospective of the festivals.)

In 2009, *Miroir, Miroir* by Moglice-Von Verx, performed by Melissa Von Vépy with Stephan Oliva on piano, was captivating because this classic non-verbal performance invited a multitude of complex interpretations. Von Vépy's red hair con-

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Miroir, Miroir by Moglice-Von Verx, performed by Melissa Von Vépy. Photo: Goran Katic and Festival Novog Cirkusa.

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trasted with her casual black trousers, brown knee-length top, and low heels as she sat on a metal stool beside Stephan at the piano. A sustained pause ensued. Slowly the female performer began to move, fiddling with her necklace, sucking distractedly on a bead, and the pianist began to play. He continued playing throughout the action without distracting attention.

Some beads fell. Von Vépy looked to a large mirror of square panes of glass suspended above centre stage. Very slowly she moved towards it and stood below. Then she used the stool to climb up to look into the bottom of the mirror. Was this an encounter with self? She removed a shoe and very suddenly crashed it into the glass. A segment at the centre of the mirror shattered noisily. I jumped, caught completely by surprise. Von Vépy extracted another section of the mirror. Then she began to climb into the mirror, her body poised halfway through it, as if she was being pulled in (or pushed out).

Children's stories came to mind – 'Mirror, mirror on the wall, who's the fairest?' and *Alice through the Looking-Glass*. These were followed by Lacanian ideas about the developmental mirror stage for the self and language – except that the mature female performer pushed these psychoanalytical inferences into precepts of the narcissism and fetishization of femininity. Meanwhile the mirror reflected the audience back to itself like a twentieth-first-century performance ritual. Such meanings were brought by the spectator since the performance did not offer its own psychological narrative.

Instead, the show presented a woman moving through the centre of a mirror as aerial apparatus suspended in mid-air accompanied by a pianist who played both the keyboard in an orthodox way and the piano strings like a xylophone or percussion object. The female performer struggled wildly, unable to escape, her arms and legs flailing. She remained hanging for some time, her body halfway through the mirror apparatus. She clambered through in a contorted position and, coming out behind the mirror, hung suspended from a bar. She worked across both sides of the flat surface. Towards the end of this routine, the whole apparatus turned through 360 degrees, her body lying flat across the rotating surface. Finally she dropped down to crouching position on the ground, one shoe still on her foot.

Bambula by Nova Voda was performed and choreographed by Julia Christ and dramaturg Ante Ursic. The visual aesthetic was completely white, like snow or purity. A woman in a wedding dress spun like an off-centre dancer or a whirling dervish until she fell down. Then she repeated the action, again and again. . . .

The ground was covered with crumpled white paper that sounded like fallen leaves, and Christ rolled over and over as she moved along. Eventually she discarded the dress so it too was like the crumpled paper or an outer skin. Her crawling action and responses shifted in tone and moved from desperation to delight, these shifts replicated through the soundscape. Drawings on paper on the top of the table were torn off and held up, layer after layer, and crumpled up to be discarded like white fallen leaves. The action of the performer, stripped to her underwear, became acrobatic repetition across the top of a white table. She rolled on and off and around it, combining impulse improvisation and acrobatic twists.

Again this was a strongly classical style of physical performance, without extraneous elements that allowed the spectator to find narrative in the fluidity of the text – perhaps in *Bambula* a woman married and then, disappointed, left to find other dimensions to her identity and self. Her emotional distress was revealed in the wear and tear on the physical body, so that the falling down and the rising up became significant.

The 2009 Festival Novog Cirkusa programme captured how contemporary circus arts create meaning through a body-based visuality that makes spoken delivery redundant. It confirmed yet again the importance of new directions in circus and physical theatre in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

Bambula by Nova Voda, performed by Julia Christ. Photo: Goran Katic and Festival Novog Cirkusa.



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