are either in tandem with or in counterpoint to the main protagonists.

There were few productions, all told, in the 'experimental' category: *An Old Woman*, which is a solo piece for voice based on the story by Daniil Kharms, was marred by technical problems that made it hard to assess; and *Gvidon*, described as a 'folk-liturgical choral opera without an orchestra', which I did not manage to see, at the School of Dramatic Art founded by Anatoly Vasilyev ('Vassiliev', in his preferred transliteration).

However, what I did see at the Academy was *Opus No. 7*, created by Dmitry Krimov, an erstwhile pupil-associate of Vasilyev, which won the Golden Mask's 2010 'Experiment' prize (albeit that I saw it in 2009). It is a fitting accolade for a powerfully inventive installation-theatre piece where, in the first part, forceful air blows hundreds of bits of paper out of holes in walls that are subsequently torn down. These and other images merge the Wailing Wall of Jerusalem and the Holocaust in one. In the second part, three copper grand pianos move of their own accord to be played on by a puppet that comes down from the arms of his giant puppet mother.

The puppet represents the Motherland – that is, the former Soviet Union of the 1930s. The 'child' represents Shostakovich, who 'confessed' to Stalin to writing 'cacophonic' music; and the recorded voice of his public confession, which was a matter of expedience, hauntingly plays over the top of the action of Krimov's concluding 'pictures'. *Opus No. 7*, while arresting on a conscious level, works hardest on a subliminal level, and obliges the spectators to be responsible for trying to deal with the large moral questions that it raises. There can be no question that Krimov is one to watch.

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Patricia Keeney and Don Rubin

A Barrage of Coward

The Shaw Festival, held annually in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario, highlights plays from or about Shaw's lifetime. Patricia Keeney and Don Rubin, who teach at York University in Toronto, here report on the 2009 festival.

BACK in the late 1960s and through much of the 1970s – during the reign of actor-director Paxton Whitehead – Canada's Shaw Festival was often accused of turning the plays of the irascible Bernard Shaw into productions that seemed closer in style and spirit to those of the more neurotic Noël Coward. Productions of plays such as *Private Lives* properly worked as a play by Coward, but plays like *Candida*, *Major Barbara*, and *The Apple Cart* did not. When Whitehead left the festival, Coward remained an occasional treat and Shaw retreated to his customary role and style. In the 2009 season, however, Coward had a place of honour at the world's only Shaw Festival, and a place of genuine curiosity.

Jackie Maxwell, the Shaw's current artistic director, had decided to stage not one but ten Coward plays – not ten full-lengths, but ten one-acts over four separate theatrical packages spread over all three of the Festival's stages: the 2,000-seat main stage (*Still Life*, *We Were Dancing*, *Hands Across the Sea*); the 300-seat Court House *(The Astonished Heart*, *Family Album*, *Ways and Means*); and the 200-seat Royal George (*Red Peppers*, *Fumed Oak*, *Shadow Play* in one grouping; with *Star Chamber* on its own as a lunchtime entertainment). All ten could be seen in a continuous sweep over a single weekend. A number of patrons, it seems, actually did that, including your humble correspondents, curious to see what such a barrage of Coward would do to the soul.

Maxwell called it all a 'once-in-a-lifetime' experience. Coward called it *Tonight at 8:30* when he packaged these ten curtain-raisers together for publication. Seeing them one after another may actually go a long way towards explaining why curtain-raisers have all but disappeared from modern theatrical practice. Seeing them *at all* may go a long way towards explaining why most of these mini-Cowards have faded from the theatrical memory of any but the most devoted.

These little works were, of course, star vehicles for Coward himself and his long-time stage partner, Gertrude Lawrence. Looking at programme photos of these two quintessentially theatrical creatures, one can hear the dialogue popping and fizzing like champagne bubbles, sense the precise rhythms in every raised eyebrow, and appreciate the challenge of every pivoting heel and ironic shrug around which these stars – and Coward's ten confections – revolve.

Without Coward and Lawrence and their wry perfection, and given the flimsiness of many of the scripts, the ultimate sense is that the Shaw Festival has tried to reconstitute a theatre that may have frothed its way out of relevance altogether. In sum, the attempt is alternatively fascinating, surprising, annoying – and occasionally also downright embarrassing.

Each trio of these theatre miniatures combines the light with the serious in an ostensibly sensible mix. Coward considered *Still Life* 'the most mature play of the whole series . . . well-written, economical, well-constructed', and, as he put it, 'with true characters'. A single snapshot, a caught moment, it portrays Laura and Alec, two respectable members of upper middle-class British society, both married with children, who meet in a

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train station and over a series of brief encounters (as the far better remembered film version was titled) fall in love. He appreciates her calm serenity; she is fascinated by his ambitions for the development of preventive medicine.

The station itself is fully realized, redolent with the comings and goings of trains – an appropriate metaphor of transient and illicit passion. It is populated with the colourful working-class fixtures of the Milford Junction refreshment room, where the lovers are sullenly assisted by Myrtle Bagot, the tea lady, played affectionately by Corrine Koslo, and teased and tormented by Stanley the porter and the broadly amorous stationmaster, Albert, all of whom provide a boisterous foil to the strained and doomed love of Alec and Laura. In their forced isolation, these two anticipate the sadly stranded hotel guests of Terence Rattigan's later *Separate Tables*. She, particularly, shrinks from the scandal of their affair.

What happens here is nervous talk: 'Let's enclose this love of ours with real strength and let that strength be that no one is hurt by it but us.' It's a psychological poem that leads nowhere, building a tension that has no release and remaining, therefore, a moment in time, a truly stilled life.

The transitions out of one playlet into another can be inspired and hugely amusing. Here, the station chugs off as inevitably as its trains, and we are whirled under a brilliant canopy of stars onto the tropical island of Samolo. *We Were Dancing*, billed as a comedy in two scenes, is, under Jackie Maxwell's enthusiastic direction, a hilarious farce, ably assisted by the antics of Goldie Semple as Clara Bethel, the shocked and awed witness of flagrant infatuation in the steamy South Seas.

Actors Deborah Hay and Patrick Galligan have catapulted out of the clenching tensions of *Still Life* here and morphed into Louise and Karl, deliriously besotted victims of love at first sight. Louise's husband Herbert is asked to be rational and understanding. His sister, the ebullient Clara, storms and rages at every deadpan declaration of passion. 'Come home,' she demands after the night's carousings under a full moon. 'I can't,' insists Louise. 'I'm in love.' The dialogue is sharp and literal, comically resistant to all reasonable importunity.

When reality hits, it is ridiculously awkward. Karl must go to Australia to interview agents for his company. Louise, therefore must go with him. But Australia? 'What's wrong with Australia?' he asks. 'That's just it,' she replies. 'I don't know.' Besides, the only ship going to Australia will also carry the MacVities. 'And,' she demurs, 'I can't travel in sin with the MacVities.'

This sublime silliness continues until we reach the distraught Hubert's desperate question to his wife: 'What has happened exactly – how do you know so surely, so soon?' This is the cue. The reply comes in demented song: 'We were dancing.' At this moment, gamelan bells and erotic thunder drums fill the night as the whole cast whirls ever more wildly into a Bollywood extravaganza. It's a wonderful spoof full of bare male chests and bow ties, and the only way to go with the words of Coward's songs and farcical nature of the situation he sets up. A brief second act brings everybody soberly back to reality and the dawning of day, as Karl cheerily calls to the boy servant: 'Wake up – wake up, it's morning.'

And with that, the sky darkens, pulling us into London's grey solidity relieved by the wealthily untidy Gilpin drawing room where a maid is soulfully playing the piano – director Jackie Maxwell's appropriate entrée into the topsy-turvey world of *Hands Across the Sea*, 'a Light Comedy in One Scene'. Then comes the first telephone ring, that signal of complication rising. The maid scrawls down a name. Commander and Lady Gilpin enter, bright with social banter until she spies the caller's identity on the telephone pad and leaps into panic mode.

At this juncture, an airborne zeppelin floats lazily by, wafting us into an Ionesco-like absurdity reminiscent of *Rhinoceros* or *The Bald Prima Donna*, revealing hollowness at the heart of high-faluting frippery. Little farcical arrows zing and fizzle the hot air balloons of British aristocracy and colonial superciliousness now visually filling the sky behind the antics of these people. Mistaken identities are decoded in silly ditties between husband and wife to the strains of 'If these are not them who are they? / Under the light of the moon – dear, you'd better find out pretty soon, dear.' Tangles of telephone wires, engagements made and broken, deceptions real and imagined. fill this hilariously self-absorbed world where manners, devised and dissolved in the shake of a martini, are the only morals recognized. And those only if they are precisely paced, timed, and delivered – as in this production – to achieve a moment's wit, often at the expense of good taste or someone else's fleeting discomfort.

How serious does Coward get with these diverting little curtain-raisers? *The Astonished Heart* is an unsettling story. The playwright thought that, while 'the decay of a psychiatrist's mind through personal sexual obsession was too esoteric to appeal to a large public', it provided 'good opportunities for dramatic acting'.

But how to interpret this darker tone? Can the Coward hallmark of brittle wit mask its disturbing subject? This possibility continues to bubble up in the language, but under the direction of Blair Williams is slowed to the freighted pace of 1940s film melodrama, feeling black and white, heavy with destiny all the way to its fateful finale. The best thing about it is Laurie Paton's wronged wife, mature and reasonable, angry and understanding. But she comes from that sobbing film, not from a Noël Coward confection. Claire Jullien's

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'other woman', Leonora Vail, feels far too shallow to cause the mental breakdown of the eminent psychiatrist Christian Faber, whose personal demons she raises.

Following an established pattern, the stage flips – literally and with eye-catching, audience-gasping agility – into *Family Album*, 'a Victorian dainty with music'. This is where proceedings become embarrassing. A father's passing, a family in fake mourning, and a gleefully altered will are the main ingredients in this 'sly satire on Victorian hypocrisy'. Content and characterization are so slight that director and cast cannot resist the temptation to indulge, with Michael Ball, swaying like a ship in stormy seas as the wily old butler, and the rest of the cast mugging unrestrainedly through dippy ditties about winding clocks and childhood make-believe. It is also in this stultifying class-enclosed moment, so unapologetically of its time, that colour-blind casting does little but draw unnecessary attention to itself. *Family Album* simply refuses to translate and would certainly be best left in its dusty Victorian drawing room.

With *Ways and Means*, on the other hand, we are back in the familiar territory of Coward's own unscrupulous upper class and a couple of harmless 'professional guests' or spongers who, constantly gambling themselves into debt, live elegant but precarious lives off their various hosts. Like a shaggy dog story, this one ambles and sprints its desperately light-hearted way through zingy one-liners: 'Do you think I could do a little light prostitution in the casino tonight?' or 'We've got to face facts', followed by 'Your passion for facing facts is rapidly becoming pathological', until at last it arrives at a punchline that, in the nature of tumbling farce, restores honour among thieves.

Married to the theatre, Coward mocks his lifelong partner with brusque affection. On one of London's West End stages, the playlet *Star Chamber* throws a motley crew of theatre people into a meeting about a Charity for Destitute Actresses. From the stage-hand to the lead performer, they are so uniformly self-involved, so sidetracked by their instinct to mug and caper and dramatize, that they sabotage the best of altruistic intentions. The dulcet tones of Coward's own unforgettable lyrics waft through. The piece offers an irresistible invitation for excess to which all succumb with the wink of Sherry Flett's sardonic eye and the permissive direction of Kate Lynch. The most innocent offender is actress Xenia's Great Dane, a docile beast played live here, who, responding to her gentle caressing, managed on this particular day to develop a bright red erection onstage just before the line: 'He's quite human, you know.'

The piece frolics its way to the finish line with a truly frantic version of 'Mad Dogs and Englishmen' that quickly degenerates into early rock 'n' roll – just in case you thought the period a bit too dated. Not as effective as the earlier Bollywood finale to *We Were Dancing*, these dogged attempts at pop culture relevance start to strain.

Staying with the showbiz theme, *Red Peppers* begins a trio of plays involving elements of dream and fantasy, collectively entitled '*Play, Orchestra, Play*'. As director Chris Newton, another former artistic director of the Shaw Festival, notes, 'dream is the primary image' that seems to link these plays. Vastly different in tone, each one of them stretches and yearns towards some ideal life that can be maintained only through the destruction of what is real. Coward's theatre-life vignettes inevitably anticipate the more sombre pathos of Osborne's *The Entertainer.*

Here we meet George and Lily Pepper, a washed-up music-hall act, clowning around the provinces in second-rate houses on a vigorous carousel of tired old jokes. Miserable onstage and off, exhausted with the 'pain under the patter', their ultimate demise happens at the hands of a disgruntled orchestra master who whirls them into a frenzied tempo of song and dance until they fall into the orchestra pit, brawling with one another.

That underlying sense of psychic fragility, brutally comedic in *Red Peppers*, flattens into coarse domestic violence with the next piece, *Fumed Oak,* in which Coward opens a dirty little window on a completely dysfunctional family of nasty people he thought fun. But, again, dark underpinnings drag it far too deep into anger, visuals of rain and sleety snow keeping it there. The father, henpecked by all the women in his family, remains silent throughout the first act, and wreaks his heartless revenge by abusing and then deserting them in the second act. These are minor notes for a major tragedy Coward never quite wrote.

In the last playlet, *Shadow Play*, Steven Sutcliffe makes an impressive acting transition from the highly unappealing paterfamilias of *Fumed Oak* to the dashingly desirable and sympathetic Simon Gayforth. Arguably the most complex of these works, *Shadow Play* evolves around the mind of a lovely young socialite (Julie Martell) distracted at the disintegration of her marriage and unhinged by sleeping pills. The piece toys with time, sliding its musical merry-go-round through happier pasts of the couple's relationship. Sheer romantic melody and lovers gliding under the moon – smooth as Astaire and Rogers – it bristles with sarcastic warning and the mad social whirl of a class genetically addicted to it.

In this trio of plays – deftly designed by Cameron Porteus – projected stills and video are adroitly employed to melt the lines between desire and disappointment, pain and possibility, now and then. Shoddy reality constantly collides with an irresistible ideal. He wants a divorce. She

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must know where she failed – something she wore, something she said. Much of this is continued through musical reprises of past moments and lines repeated with ever darkening import.

Taken as a whole, these ten curtain-raisers include levels of existential angst that the playwright's own preference for froth instinctively fights but that the best of these emphasize with the manic frenzy of psychological drama, often musically scored. It's an awkward mix, but genuine somehow and important in understanding Coward as a writer. *Private Lives*, *Hay Fever*, *Blithe Spirit* are still his masterworks, but we must be in the Shaw Festival's debt for allowing us to see so clearly the erratic creative process of one of the twentieth century's comic masters.

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Maria Shevtsova

BITE at the Barbican

An overview of an 'event' which has become an indispensable element of London's theatre life, with a closer look at productions of 2009–10.

THE BARBICAN International Theatre Event is computing its twelfth year in 2010, and this should be a cause for celebration in the pages of *NTQ*. BITE has been of immense service to theatremakers and theatregoers of one kind and another in Britain, 'theatre' here being understood to include dance and music theatre as well as all those variegated forms that cannot – nor should – be categorized with ease. Indeed, BITE has drawn attention to how traditionally named modes of performance can mix and match – the so-called 'hybrids' of the late twentieth century – or simply be something other in their unique way; and, in doing this, in stretching perception, BITE has helped to inspire makers of theatre working in Britain to explore their art and craft in greater depth and breadth. Seeing provides kick-starts for doing, even examples or models for doing, and, at the same time, cultivates a sense of adventure in audiences. The whole, interactive process creates relative degrees of complicity between practitioners and spectators on which the very heartbeat of theatre depends.

So it is that the Barbican has invited some of the most interesting theatre in the world, whether it is established or breaking through to prominence or still on the edge, waiting to be caught up in the international circuit. The Barbican has selected from continents and subcontinents – India, Africa, North and South America, Australia, and Europe, both east and west. It has shown numerous small-scale groups, all with different performance horizons; among these have been Song of the Goat from Poland (2005), the shamanic ritual-based Mokhwa from Korea, (2006), and Grupo XIX de Teatro and Nos do Morros from Brazil (2008). The former, an all-female cast, who defetishize female hysteria, played at St Bartholomew's Hospital. This was a site specific to the work, as was Liverpool Street Station for the Australian Back to Back, made up of actors with disabilities (2007).

BITE has also sought innovation in companies or productions headed up by such big names as Ninagawa, Dodin, Wilson, Simon McBurney, and Deborah Warner, who, from 2003, was a three-year resident at the Barbican, followed by Declan Donnellan and Cheek by Jowl. In the music field, there are the well-established Laurie Anderson, Philip Glass, and Heiner Goebbels, and in dance Merce Cunnigham, Pina Bausch, and Lin Hwai-Min, choreographer with Cloud Gate Dance Theatre of Taiwan. The Barbican also hosts installation- or circus-style shows, as well as mime artists appearing at the London International Mime Festival. And it co-produces large as well as boutique pieces – say the 2009 *Raoul* by James Thiérrée. This is the smallest of pictures, but it gives some idea of the range and scope of the BITE programmes and the cultural role that the event plays.

What follows is an overview of selected productions from the September to December 2009 and January to April 2010 seasons. It is meant to give a BITE of the cherry rather than to cover everything presented during this period.

The post-summer theatre season began on a high note with Teatr ZAR from Wrocław, whose triptych comprised *Gospels of Childhood*, *The Overture* (the title of the triptych), *Caesarian Section*, *Essays on Suicide*, and *Anhelli. The Calling* is a remarkable spiritual journey, whether it is taken fully in its religious dimensions (although not necessarily tied to any particular religious denomination), or is seen as an inner journey of a psycho-emotional but fundamentally secular kind. This journey is structured through polyphonic chants and songs which integrate movement, speech, and the play of instruments by the performers themselves – piano, accordion, cello, violin, and flute in the case of the first two parts and most noticeably in *Caesarian Section.*

Occasional gongs and bells chime at strategic moments in *Gospels*, recalling that it is composed, in part, of the 2,000-year-old funeral songs ('Zar') and Paschal chants of the Svaneti people, who live in the mountains of Georgia, and also of liturgical songs from the Sioni Church in Tbilisi. Apart from Georgia, ZAR has collected songs from Bulgaria and Greece, learning them orally *in situ*, subsequently adding Corsican polyphonic songs to *Caesarian Section* and Sardinian ones to *Anhelli.* The latter songs were also transmitted

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