NTQ Reports and Announcements

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Strength in Depth in Romania

Report on the twentieth Romanian National Theatre Festival, held in Bucharest from 30 October to 7 November 2010.

ROMANIA has no shortage of theatre festivals. Sibiu and Craiova are internationally known, and there's a good onr also in Cluj, but the big one for Romanian theatre people is the national festival, in Bucharest. It aims to present the best of the couple of hundred new productions seen in the country each year, as well as inviting major companies and directors from abroad, all backed by a full programme of lectures, films, and book launches. A new feature of the recent twentieth festival was its showing of the work of a number of leading foreign directors with Romanian companies – Tim Carroll with *The Odyssey*, Mathias Langhoff with *Measure for Measure*, Rodrigo Garcia with *No Dogs Allowed*. In a reversal of the process, Romania's Silviu Purcarete arrived with a French company in Ionesco's *Exit the King*, which I had previously seen in Skopje.

The two other big visiting productions, both seen already in Britain, could not have been more different. Krzysztof Warlikowski's 2003 *Dybbuk* goes beyond the classic by Anski which lies at its centre, adding a prelude of typical Hebrew stories told by the cast, and going on to dramatize a more recent story of possession by Hanna Krall. Its two-part stage consists of a larger, open area which serves as ritual bath, ante-chamber, psychiatrist's office, and mythical park (with roving unicorn), while the enclosed space beside it becomes the wedding banquet room, the synagogue, and other spaces in which the play's lost souls can prowl. Faced with a choice between Polish dialogue and Romanian surtitles, I cannot claim to have grasped all the production's nuances, but its deliberate pace impressed, as did the actors' fine, committed performances and some very specific lighting. It seemed to me that Warlikowski's staging was trading on Hebrew sensibilities to raise the embarrassing question of Polish complicity in the Holocaust, and hence perhaps reducing the universality of these tales of possession, demonic or otherwise; overall, however, the effect was strong and moving.

Romeo Castellucci brought us his *Hey Girl*. I gave up on the controversial Italian director quite early on, after a particularly repulsive, shit-smearing *Hamlet*, but his subsequent career has been so notable that I determined to give him another try. *Hey Girl* is more depressive than offensive, fraught with stunning images from the very first, when a young, naked girl emerges from a blanket of primordial slime (which continues to drip suggestively for the rest of this short show). Heavily monochrome (as was *Dybbuk*), the show's progress is often in half light. At one point a mass of men invade the stage, engulfing the girl. From the mass a black *alter ego* emerges, and the rest of the action shows the bonding of the two women. A young girl's physical and emotional progress to maturity, male oppression of femininity, the end of the world – read into it what you will, Castellucci seems to be saying. And here he is in the company of the world's great painters. But theatre has the added weapon of text, and can engage the brain as well as the subconscious – for me ambiguity, however beautifully presented, can never be enough.

The local showcase was a reminder, if needed, of the considerable strength in depth of Romanian directors. Even without the presence of such stars as Victor Ioan Frunza (whose *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, winner of the year's Best Production award, was a curious omission) and Gabor Tompa, the roll call was an illustrious one. Someone I have not encountered before was Vlad Massaci, who had two shows in this year's programme. The one I saw, his adaptation of *Festen*, gained power from its setting in the Nottara Theatre's basement studio, where the collapse of the tyrannical, abusing father, charted in the Dogme film, was rendered all the more striking in its closeness. I missed Massaci's other contribution, *Elling*, another film adaptation, but will be looking out for more work from him.

Versions of Nordic movies were a keynote of the festival, as it happens, the others being a version of Lars von Trier's *Breaking the Waves* and (what was for me the highlight of the week) Andrei Serban's essay on *Cries and Whispers*, Ingmar Bergman's 1972 masterpiece. Drawing on the script itself, and Bergman's memoirs, Serban has had the temerity to weave in his own thoughts on the art of the director – and also the art of dying – as we see the progress of the film regularly interrupted by the actor playing Bergman (who also plays all the other male roles in support of the four actresses), whose emotional journey is the heart of film and play. Once again faced with a performance in one unknown tongue (this time the Hungarian of the company from

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Cluj) translated into another (Romanian) I can only speculate about the true depth of the production, but its technical perfection and the superb acting of its entire cast led me to believe that one masterpiece has been created out of another.

Beside this perfection, there were inevitable disappointments, such as the *Cherry Orchard* of Felix Alexa, a director whose work I greatly admire. Here he made his actors the slaves of a meaningless concept – the titular orchard was represented by 150 jars of preserved cherries stacked on the back wall of the National Theatre's smaller, amphitheatre stage, later placed on it as an obstacle course for the unfortunate cast. Alexa eschewed surtitles, so that it was a long time before I picked out who was playing Lopakhin. Maia Morgenstern, probably Romania's finest actress, had a decidedly off night in which it was hard to discern that her matronly Ranevskaya was a member of that profession. It says much about this misguided evening that its undoubted stars were the two servants, Yasha and Firs – the latter taking a centre-stage curtain call as if his dominance was intended.

Not a lot more joy to report in *Here, at the Gates of Darkness*, a development by the respected Mihai Manutiu of Euripides' *Hecuba*. To that story of Priam's queen exacting a terrible revenge on the killer of her son he has stitched on sections of *The Trojan Women*, making for an over-long introductory scene in which the victorious Greek army – here a bunch of biker boys singing popular Turkish songs and football chants – drag up to mock the Trojan women's lamentations. The show gains strength as it becomes calmer with the approaching bloody denouement, and there is undoubted strength in Valentin Codoiu's leather-boy setting, complete with sidecars for chariots, but the final effect is of discomfort rather than catharsis, not helped by some lacklustre acting from its cast from the National Theatre, Iasi.

Another director whose (much lighter) work I have enjoyed in the past is Dan Puric, but his expensively mounted revue tribute to absolute monarchy, *Royal Fashion*, complete with naff ballet scenes, Benny Hill chases round the gardens of Versailles, and a tableau showing the execution of the Romanoffs, was a cringeworthy experience – though I'm duty bound to report that the reaction of its target audience, composed largely of ladies of a certain age, was ecstatic. A growing suspicion of a serious decline in Romanian directing standards were joyously put to rest by Radu Afrim's manic, Monty Python-meets-Ionesco production of Tankred Dorst's *Herr Paul*. On Iuliana Vilsan's marvellously Gothic cabinet of curiosities set, featuring a large number of unfeasibly stuffed animals, his splendid cast (from the Youth Theatre of Piatra Neamt) seized the play's ample opportunities for flights of performance fantasy. Funny, sexy, and quite barmy.

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Mark Brown

Pain and Patriotism on the Armenian Stage

Report on the Armenian theatre showcase held in Yerevan from 15 to 19 June 2010.

THE 2010 WORLD CONGRESS of the International Association of Theatre Critics (IATC) was held in Yerevan, capital city of the Republic of Armenia. In conjunction with the event the congress's host, the Armenian Theatre Workers' Union, organized a showcase of Armenian theatre. Over the course of five days, IATC delegates and Armenian audiences were offered some of the most acclaimed recent productions in Armenian theatre, from a stylishly designed presentation of Dürrenmatt's *The Visit* to an accomplished performance of Gogol's *The Government Inspector*, played in Russian, and a high-energy staging of Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera*.

Despite the predominance in the programme of classic plays from the modern European repertoire, however, it was the first presentation of the showcase – Armen Elbakyan's epic stage adaptation of Franz Werfel's novel *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* – which left the greatest impression. Werfel's 1933 novel is the most famous literary account of the genocide of 1.5 million Armenian Christians by Ottoman Turkey between 1915 and 1923 – a systematic mass murder which historian and journalist Robert Fisk calls 'the forgotten holocaust'.[1] The continued denial of the genocide by the Turkish government – despite the fact that it was, at one time, acknowledged by the founder of modern Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, himself[2] – ensures that the Armenian holocaust remains an open wound in the national life of the young Republic of Armenia (which was established in 1991 in the territory of the former Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic).

It is impossible to escape the question of the genocide when one visits Yerevan. The city is home to the Armenian Genocide Museum, which was opened in 1995. From many points in the city one can see Mount Ararat, reputed final resting place of Noah's Ark, and ubiquitous national symbol of Armenia. Yet the great mountain stands, not in the Republic of Armenia (the territory of which is in historic eastern Armenia), but in Turkey (which reasserted its control over western Armenia during the period of the genocide). The very national symbol of Armenia is a constant and painful reminder of dispossession.

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