NTQ Reports and Announcements

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Mark Brown

Mixed Fortunes in Oldenburg

Report on the PAZZ Performing Arts Festival, held in Oldenburg, Germany, 20–29 April 2012.

THE BIENNIAL PAZZ Festival, held in the charming little German city of Oldenburg, Lower Saxony, has the atmosphere of a friendly, creative village; and not only because much of the 2012 programme was performed in and around 'Containercity', a little cluster of performance spaces built from the kind of large metal containers which are used to transport goods on cargo ships. There is a sense in which PAZZ considers the interaction of invited artists from various European countries ranging from Germany to Finland, England, and Scotland to countries further afield from Canada to Iran, to be almost as important as the presentation of the work itself. This international cultural exchange is admirable, of course, but I have rarely experienced a festival (the now defunct National Review of Live Art in Glasgow aside) at which I got such a sense that the audience was so largely comprised of participating artists.

The programme itself consisted of a varied collection of conceptual and devised theatre, live art, and physical and visual performance works; for instance, the delightful and clever show *Leo*, by German company Circle of Eleven (which I also had the good fortune to see at the Chamäleon Theatre in Berlin in the summer of 2011) was one of the opening productions of PAZZ 2012. The piece, in which we see our titular hero (played by the superb Tobias Wegner) locked in two identical rooms (one set at a 180-degree angle to the other), uses circus acrobatics, live projected video, and early cinema techniques to create the illusion of a man defying gravity.

Leo is that rare theatrical creature, a work that is simultaneously populist in its appeal and intelligent in its construction and execution. This was evinced by the enthusiastic full houses it received both in Berlin and at the 2011 Edinburgh Fringe (where it packed out the main space at the Universal Arts venue). One couldn't help but wish for such an emphasis on quality and audience engagement across the PAZZ programme.

For instance, the aptly entitled live art piece *Untried Untested*, a Belgian/New Zealand co-production conceived by Kate McIntosh and performed in the large Exerzierhalle in Oldenburg, is the kind of hollow, self-indulgent, self-consciously postmodern piece which encourages ridicule for the contemporary avant-garde. In the show, four performers construct and deconstruct meaningless structures. By using incongruous materials such as books, rope, sacks of vegetables, and rocks, in combination with human bodies, the piece is – according to its supporting publicity material – attempting to surprise and amuse its audience. In reality, the performance is every bit as futile and boring as an accurate synopsis makes it sound.

As is too often the case in the live art firmament, *Untried Untested* seemed to work on the premise that anything mildly quirky or surreal, no matter how unconsidered or poorly executed, can claim a place at the cutting edge of performance. Such work appears like the cigarette-end of the avant-garde. Disengaged from the most path-breaking forms of twentieth-century modernist theatre (whether the works of Gertrude Stein; the Bauhaus; Dadaism; Surrealism; Happenings in the 1950s and 1960s; western European situationism; or eastern and central European imagist theatre) and from the cultural and socio-political contexts which gave rise to them, such work becomes a vacuous, self-perpetuating parody of aesthetic radicalism. Indeed, witnessing the contemporary European avant-garde (in the shape of companies such as Poland's Teatr Pieśń Kozła and Teatr Zar, Italy's Sineglossa, and Russia's Akhe, Derevo, and Do Theatre) at the Summerhall and Assembly Roxy venues during the last Edinburgh Fringe – to say nothing of Théâtre du Soleil's glorious *Les Naufragés du Fol Espoir* (*Aurores*) at the Edinburgh International Festival – served as a painful reminder of the huge gulf which exists between the genuine contemporary avant-garde and McIntosh's insipid, postmodern travesty.

If the programming of *Untried Untested* was something of a mystery, the invitation of English company Analogue, with a piece entitled *2401 Objects*, made considerably more sense. Also playing in the Exerzierhalle, the show (co-written by Hannah Barker, Lewis Hetherington, and Liam Jarvis) centres on the story of Henry Molaison, the man who, in an attempt to cure his epilepsy, famously underwent experimental brain surgery in the United States in 1953. As a consequence of the surgery, he entirely lost his memory.

A short work (running to less than an hour), performed touchingly by Alexandra Maher, Paul Hassall, and Simon Yadoo, the production subtly draws one into the life of Molaison and, even more affectingly in many ways, the lives of those

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closest to him. It does so at least as much through an atmospheric use of design, sound, and multimedia effects as through performance.

One can see the basis of the widespread critical acclaim it has enjoyed, but, despite its brevity, I still felt, by the play's end, that form had superseded, almost substituted itself for, content. I couldn't help but wish that Analogue had taken me deeper into the psychological and emotional ramifications of their story.

Immediately outside the Exerzierhalle, the Containercity throughout the PAZZ Festival hosted a succession of small-scale, experimental pieces. *Etiquette*, conceived by Ant Hampton and Silvia Mercuriali for their English company Rotozaza, is a piece for two audience members who also perform the piece. Using only a pair of MP3 players, two sets of headphones, two chairs, a small table, and a series of miniature props, it was like a twenty-first-century Dadaist experiment.

Wearing the headphones, one audience member is instructed by a pre-recorded voice to speak parts of an unexceptional narrative (a mild thriller), use the props on the table-top (which has become a miniature stage), and engage in modest physical contact with their fellow participant. The effect is curiously conservative and restrictive, because one is required to give up one's agency in an intimate, one-on-one situation.

Rotozaza might claim that they are facing their audience with the plight of the actor, and, perhaps, making a case for the superiority of the contemporary deviser/performer (who presents her or his own work) over the traditional player. However, throughout my participation in *Etiquette*, I never once felt placed in the position of a real actor, as I was being asked to improvise with a very basic, uninteresting script.

In fairness to Hampton and Mercuriali, perhaps their point has less to do with the position of the traditional actor than that of the traditional audience member. Even then, however, metatheatrical experiments have been questioning and problematizing that role with much greater impact for decades. In recent years, for instance, *Internal*, by Flemish company Ontroerend Goed, has provided a far more profound experience for the audience member as participant. It does so by providing the audience member with agency, while also setting the terms for an intimate, one-on-one experience between an audience member and a performer. This is followed by a collective gathering in which the performers control the development of the situation and breach the established expectations of intimacy. There is in this something cynical, but not especially vicious (for the more unpleasant, misanthropic aspect of Ontroerend Goed's work, one should see the show entitled *Audience*).

There is, in *Etiquette*, a certain hubris in the creators' apparent belief that their concept is so brilliant, at both the dramatic and technical levels, that two 'virgin' performers, with no prior knowledge of the production, will be transfixed by it, and that (unlike the case of Ontroerend Goed's *Internal*) no live involvement by professional performers is necessary. To my utter astonishment, it seems that some participants do claim to have had an epiphanic experience of the piece. For instance, according to Rotozaza's website, Angela Mattox, curator of Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco says: 'It completely changed my perspective on what theatre could be.' For my part, I found it a mildly distracting experience in which I had the good fortune briefly to make the acquaintance of a pleasant German man. Nothing more.

Another intriguing small-scale work in Containercity was *Blind Lunch* by Italian artist Katia Giuliani. Based, as its title suggests, on the concept of the blind date, the piece sees two participating audience members ushered into a container by a member of festival staff. The interior of the container has been transformed into a kitchen and dining room, with a partition between the two and a large window replacing the 'wall' beyond the dining area; consequently, the festival audience members who are walking around Containercity can stop and look in at the two diners.

The audience members/diners are introduced to Giuliani and shown through to the dining room, where one-legged chairs are extracted from the table and offered to them. When Giuliani has cooked the lunch, the plates are placed on top of the circular holes left in the table following the extraction of the chairs – the design of the piece is ingeniously economic.

Sitting, or, more accurately, perching uncomfortably on one-legged chairs, with people of all ages (especially intrigued young children) peering through the glass at you, one is aware, as one introduces oneself to a stranger, of just how brilliantly Giuliani has magnified the awkwardness and embarrassment of the blind date. Of course, as this is only a brief theatre piece from which one will soon be free, the stakes are not as high as in an actual encounter. However, by introducing these other elements (the one-legged chair, the window on to the world), the piece finds additional ways of making one feel uncomfortable (both physically and psychologically). I have never been a great admirer of zoological gardens, and my empathy with animals which urinate on or throw mud at gawping humans was much enhanced by the experience of being turned, in effect, into a living object to be stared at.

As to the conversation I had with my companion (a woman who works, inevitably enough, in the arts), it was pleasant and interesting enough (and the same can be said, just about, for the food). It carried the kind of uncertainty, the

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careful testing of boundaries, and attempts to convey bonhomie which typically attend meetings between total strangers. However, the sense that we were being watched from one side and listened to by Giuliani from the other helped to create an additional circumspection.

Defiantly low-tech and thoughtful, *Blind Lunch* feels very much like a Dadaist experiment gone right. Indeed, I felt as if I could have been four hundred miles south of Oldenburg, at Cabaret Voltaire in Zürich in 1916. It is not, in truth, the most profound of theatre works, but is a thought-provoking, beautifully executed piece in the true spirit of the avant-garde – and as such the most rewarding of the productions I experienced at PAZZ.

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Simon Trussler

Arthur H. Ballet, 1924–2012

Tribute to the long-serving Advisory Editor of *New Theatre Quarterly*, who died on 30 January 2012.

ONE of the articles Arthur Ballet contributed to *New Theatre Quarterly* was entitled 'After-Dinner Thoughts of America's Oldest Living Dramaturg'. This was based on a speech he had made in 1994 to the Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas – an organization which would never have existed had not Arthur become part of Sir Tyrone Guthrie's inner circle in the early sixties and pioneered the role of dramaturg at the theatre which still thrives under Guthrie's name. Since 1959 he had also been teaching hugely popular, always oversubscribed courses at the University of Minneapolis, as he continued to do until he retired in 1986. But the teaching was always in conjunction with other roles, on all of which he left an enduring imprint.

In 1961 he became Director of the Office for Advanced Drama Research – a grandiose title not of his choosing for an 'organization' run entirely from his own desk. From that desk he not only gave unstintingly of time and advice to hundreds of aspirant playwrights – Terrence McNally and Sam Shepard among them – but guided their work towards likely outlets. He also selected and edited no fewer than thirteen chunky volumes of the 'Playwrights for Tomorrow' series, at a time when getting a new play published by a new playwright was a risky venture. We got to know Arthur on the old *Theatre Quarterly* when he advised us on starting a rather humbler series of our own, called (unimaginatively) 'New Plays'. (This failed to reach thirteen titles, let alone thirteen volumes, though we did see new work by Howard Brenton, Caryl Churchill, and Arnold Wesker into print.) In 1975 he accepted our invitation to become one of our advisory editors, and gave stalwart and unwavering support during the crises that regularly afflicted the original journal; and he returned to that role from the first issue of *New Theatre Quarterly*. The journal has happily been free from crises since then: not so my own life at the time, when Arthur remained always a true friend and counsellor.

Arthur was also a regular dramaturg for the O'Neill Playwrights' Conference, and during the Carter presidency he served as an innovating Director of the Theatre Program at the National Endowment for the Arts. After his retirement to San Francisco, he became dramaturg for the American Conservatory Theater and the San Francisco Ballet, until the onset of Parkinson's disease slowly deprived him first of the capacity for travel and work, and eventually the capacity for communication. This was a huge tragedy for a man who so relished the use of language, whether in the lecture theatre or on the stage – or over a pub table. But it was more rarely that he committed himself to the written word. Early in his retirement I tried to persuade him to write his memoirs, and I have a 48,000-word file of what he sent me. It is full of wise words for playwrights and theatres – and dramaturgs – but it is short of the personal memories I had hoped he would share.

So I fall back on my own personal memories. Among these is a day spent in his company in 1980 at the Aldwych Theatre watching one of the all-day performances of the RSC's three-play version of *Nicholas Nickleby*. This was in the autumn of the year when the first round of Thatcher's Arts Council cuts had recently extinguished the old *Theatre Quarterly*, and Jimmy Carter had just been thrown out of office – which meant of course that Arthur lost his curacy at the National Endowment for the Arts, and rightly foresaw the downhill journey on which it would be set. So the talk was sombre when we met for breakfast, and we had to confess we were not altogether in the mood for a nine-hour marathon. But over a late lunch and then an early supper we rejoiced in the capacity of theatre to inspire and thrill and renew our faith that – let Thatcher and Reagan do their worst – the voice of the theatre, often of protest and surely of sanity, would not be stilled.

Courteously though needlessly, he would apologize for the occasional quiver in the hand that held his glass when, later on, we would adjourn to some pub to discuss a play and the state of the theatre and the world, about which he was always wise and never pretentious. I find that American obituarists have already used about him a phrase which is maybe un-English but which I have no hesitation in repeating: he was a sweet man.

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