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 theatre-makers 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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orally to ZAR during the company's expeditions, expressly for this purpose, to these countries.

Texts from the Bible in *Gospels* focus on the story of Lazarus, recounted in the performance from the Gospel according to St John by his sisters Mary and Martha. The second main thread of the performance hinges on the apocryphal gospels of Mary Magdalene, Philip, and Thomas – references to gnostic sources that return musically in *Caesearian Section* through the first and third of Erik Satie's *Gnossiennes.* Of the three parts of the triptych, *Caesarian Section* seems the most secular (from a narrative, although certainly not musical point of view) in so far as its dramaturgical organization on the theme of suicide concentrates on the human suffering rather than on the metaphysical implications of such despair.

The dramatic construction includes breathtaking dance on glass, comic-ironic sketches that include a woman 'hanging' herself on a small tree, unidentified 'characters' playing an inexplicable version of musical chairs, and a solo tango by a seated woman whose shoe-clad feet complement the pattern of sounds made on the floor by naked feet and hands. The counterpoint of sounds throughout the performance gathers more texture still from carefully timed Bulgarian cries and calls. Breathing in song and movement is indispensable for the feeling of communion between performers and spectators generated here, as in every part of the triptych.

Anhelli is by far the most mysterious piece – much of it, for all its song, in an illusory hush. The illusion of silence comes initially from the work's quiet beginning and unassuming but arresting images in which a floating tent-like canvas is held up at its apex by a long pole similar to the sticks deftly wielded by the performers, some of their actions resembling the movement of oars. Working by association – as does, in fact, the entire triptych – the opening images conjure up the idea of crossing the Styx, the river in antiquity that bridges life and death. And this is a journey towards a whitish oblivion, where death and salvation are intertwined. A liturgical song towards the end of the performance in what sounds like Church Slavonic asks God to accept the soul of the recumbent male figures, who, by now, appear to represent symbolically each and every human being in the space. It is a profoundly moving fragment that binds something echoing from the deep, deep past with the evanescent present. This *Irmos* (a short initial hymn of a canon in Eastern Orthodox Christianity) irresistibly suggests that it is a prayer for us all in our troubled world today.

The intensity of ZAR's performance is in stark contrast with Peter Brook's *11 and 12,* which is another version, in English, of his 2004 French-speaking *Tierno Bokar*. Like the latter, it is an adaptation by Brook and his long-term assistant Marie Hélène Etienne of the book about Bokar, *Le Sage de Bandiagra*, by the Mali writer Amadou Hampté Bâ. Brook's earlier forays into the spiritual dimensions of human life were, in my view, rather meretricious affairs. *La Mort de Krishna* (2002) mercifully did not make London, whereas *Le Grand Inquisiteur* (2004, from Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*), badly performed by Bruce Myers in its English version, came to BITE in 2006. *11 and 12*, by contrast, is really light, not trying-to-be-'light', as occurs in much of Brook's work of the past decade, but 'light' because it is infused with what can only be called light from within. It is as if the spiritual journey on which Brook took his theatre – think of the closing scene of his 2001 *Tragedy of Hamlet*, whose characters look up and outwards towards a transcendent force – has finally reached its 'destination', which is only the beginning of another journey on a higher plane of consciousness.

11 and 12 is the Islamic counterpoint of ZAR's Byzantine Christian triptych, and indeed of Brook's own *The Grand Inquisitor* (for which Dostoevsky's Orthodoxy is crucial). Its focus is on the doctrinal disputes over whether a Muslim prayer should be recited eleven or twelve times, which leads to schisms and bloodshed. Although set in the context of the French colonization of West Africa – with attendant themes of institutional corruption and manipulation of faith by politics – its underlying concerns are larger than matters of doctrine, whether religious or political. And these matters are at the heart of Bokar's pronouncement to the young writer in the story that there is 'my truth, your truth, and the truth'. The production's spiritual content, which is linked to Brook's interest in Sufism, is conveyed through the unstrained, lightly humorous acting, and the earthy colours, including real earth, and minimal props – a carpet, a chair, a would-be tree – and draped-cloth costumes typical of Brook's work since *The Mahabharata* (1985).

Mystical contact with the divine shines in *The Manganiyar Seduction*, made of song, chant, and restrained but highly expressive movements from the 'conductor' of the Muslim musicians from Rajastan who sit in red, four-storey-high cubicles framed by light bulbs, as if in actors' dressing rooms. The director Roysten Abel's reference to the theatre is one of the ploys he uses to theatricalize this glorious performance of rhythm and very loud sound that builds up towards a momentous climax. By the end, spectators are rocking to the beat, some in a trance-like state rather like the ecstatic state of several singer-musicians who each takes his turn to invoke Allah with a different timbre and quality of voice. It was an amazing, euphoric experience, as was clear when, at the last note, the whole audience was up on its feet, pretty well beside itself. This must surely have been what Woodstock was like, in another cultural climate, in the 1960s.

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On a quite other plane, but also amazing, was Toneelgroep Amsterdam's *Roman Tragedies*, directed by Ivo van Hove. This mega-technological production of Shakespeare breaks up playing space and audience space, allowing spectators to view the action close up on the stage itself, whether on television screens placed in the sofa-arranged 'alcoves', where they can sit and watch, or directly, when they are virtually neck to neck with the actors, who go through their paces but never actually acknowledge their presence. Thus, paradoxically, the distance of performance is kept in intimacy. A large screen facing the auditorium gives spectators who have chosen to remain in their seats a different kind of cinema-style close-up view, especially of facial expressions and bodily gestures.

All this simultaneity of perspectives is a cunning exercise in manipulation, also meant, perhaps, to remind those who delight in the freedom to walk about the stage, buy food, and eat and drink coffee, as if they were at home in their sitting rooms, that the media are lethal weapons of control: this includes the ZED, ticker-tape messages running before the spectators, giving them potted histories of the Roman Caesars to situate each Roman play in time, place, and space, as well as its characters and plot. It is an artful narrative device and certainly helpful for audiences, but the fact that it belongs to the bombarding methods of the information society cannot be ignored.

Furthermore, everything is timed to the second, with a miked voice telling you that you can go and get refreshments and how long you have left before the show resumes its course. Scenes are timed, as are major events of death and destruction – so many minutes and seconds to go before, say, Cleopatra kills herself. If ever there was a stage panopticon, this is it, and the seduction of it sucks you half in, while your other half kicks to remind you that you are being had – by illusory freedom, by high-tech cool, and by the showcase suavity of the actors. The latter, nevertheless, are of great integrity and scale the heights of play in their complex play of power and passion. Cleopatra, especially, climbs multiple pinnacles of emotion with complete ease – quite a feat for this extremely difficult role.

Some of the production's games of power and desire take the form of interviews, as does the encounter between Coriolanus and Aufidius, where Aufidius is cast as a twenty-first-century sports hero. Others, notably in *Julius Caesar*, are round-table journalists' or politicians' discussions or boardroom meetings. Volumnia paces about like a banker or corporate lawyer, dressed for the part in trousers and high heels. Whether spectators watch the actors directly or on the screens, they realize increasingly that this Roman world is their world of high capitalism, in which the rulers are decidedly those who control the money.

All the semiotic processes, from monitors to suits – from objects to costumes to every single bodily movement – tell them that this is the here and now. Non-stop newsreels projected on monitors placed at the back and also closer to the front of the stage show footage of war, assassinations (John Kennedy's, for instance), and other human-made as well as natural disasters of the not too distant past. *Roman Tragedies* is phenomenal political theatre that, by playing so skilfully with its theatre-making devices, looks, deceptively, as if it is not.

Set beside this, Declan Donnellan's *Macbeth* appears less political, less about sovereignty and rule and grabbing the crown and more about visceral desire between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. Although the machinations of politics are related to this couple, they are subordinated to it. Never before, to my knowledge, has there been such an erotic production of this play, which must surely take its cue from *Antony and Cleopatra,* and go sexually for broke. Even the witches are figures of some kind of sexual impulse coming out of Macbeth's unconscious. The nearest comparison for such witches might be those of Eimuntas Nekrosius, who, like Donnellan's, are almost always somewhere in the action, never far from Macbeth. Donnellan emphasizes their importance by having the witches move non-stop in a production that involves a good deal of movement from absolutely every character on the stage. They also form choruses, as do the servants and soldiers who, in their groupings, are just about always present instead of being relegated to the minor appearances of secondary characters. Donnellan's is a brilliant insight into how to keep the momentum of the production going in top gear.

The battle scenes are not only balletic in character, but also have touches of indeterminate martial arts – just enough of a whiff of another universe to suggest the mysterious. A similar effect is created by voices, which, at times, evoke *a cappella* arrangements, and by the predominantly dark, shadowy silhouettes that, when they are slightly and indirectly lit, prove to be clothed in black. This is very much a macho clan by which the initially seductive witches are 'unsexed', while Lady Macbeth herself is only ever fully sexed. Together with the carefully constructed movement score – by Donnellan's associate and movement director, Jane Gibson – that provides more continual movement flow than is usual in Donnellan's productions, all this could be a sign of a new departure for him – to be confirmed (or not) by his next work. My fantasy is that it might be *Antony and Cleopatra*.

Eroticism is not what emanates from the hundreds of naked women coming out like a phalanx from the wings of the Barbican stage. These are the volunteers who accepted to dance naked, prepared by Nic Green for this grand

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chorus line in her *Trilogy*. The chorus line disappears, but Green and her partner dance in their skin throughout. Only their shoes, sturdy but light trainers, and occasional coloured socks, are reminders of conventional dress. None of it, however, is ever vulgar or prurient. Green's bright-eyed innocence regarding the beauty of free bodies is compelling – the reason, surely, why her volunteers feel no embarrassment as they show their flesh, whether they are fat or thin, straight or with lumps and bumps. Nor do the women from the auditorium, who, towards the end of the performance, pile up onto the stage to join in the fun.

Green's is a curious genre, a mixture of ritual, celebration, movie, and lecture in which, all told, the lecture mode prevails. This is a lecture-dance where Green addresses the audience, exhorting them to think about the joys of the body and feminism. Not only does dance illustrate her various points, but so, too, do marvellous film sequences of the 1971 debate on feminism between Germaine Greer, Jill Johnston, and Norman Mailer. The film, *Town Bloody Hall*, shows Mailer at his chauvinist worst when he verbally batters the American poet in front of hundreds of women. She, small and slight, keeps her head. Only her eyes show her vulnerability. It is a violent, ugly sequence from which Johnston emerges as pure as rain. This is the kind of purity that Green seems to be seeking.

Alas, *Trilogy* turns out to be too laboured, too long, and fundamentally too preachy to ride its wave of celebration. And it raises the question of where, choreographically, such an ode to the naked body can go. Having done it once and found her 'brand', is Green to dance naked hereafter?

Pina Bausch, in another kind of female assertiveness, explores the social and sexual relations between men and women. *Kontakthof* was first seen in BITE 2002, performed by people over sixty. It returned in a double bill, paired with a version for adolescents. The steps in both versions are much the same, and it was quite touching to see that the cast of 2002 had aged, enough for the difference to be visible. The younger group was a little awkward, and the fact that they were ordinary kids, none of them endowed with particular beauty or grace, made them touching as well. What distinguished their version from that of the older people was the dialogue, which, in Bausch's way, came out of their experiences. So hamburgers and McDonald's featured among their references, which they layered into the text that they had learned from the first version.

Small everyday gestures like scratching an ear necessarily looked different on young bodies, but, in this homage to age and youth, Bausch's keen eye for the oddities of human behaviour reigns supreme. Coming less that a year after Bausch's death in June 2009, *Kontakthof* at the Barbican became a tribute to her indisputable achievement.

Finally, in this round up, there was Sarah Kane's *4.48 Psychosis*, directed by Grzegorz Jarzyna of TR Warszawa. Sober, with space divided into cleanly cut squares and rectangles, all in shadows and barely lit by oblique light, the production is one of the most powerful examples of actor ownership of work in the theatre today. Collective responsibility for performance – there is no director–puppet relationship here – is something Jarzyna had learnt from his teacher and mentor Krystian Lupa, director of the Stary Teatr in Krakow. Perhaps he had also learnt from Lupa's slow tempi how to let actors breathe and completely inhabit each moment, be there, fully present, now.

The production is awesome, taking performers and spectators quietly and calmly through the journey of going mad; and so unbelievably clear is this immersion in the black unknown that you understand what it might be like really to lose not just your mind, but your very soul. The actors of this extraordinary feat are together – simple, modest – and Magdalena Cielecka, coming to her end, is unique in the hush of pain so intolerable that it cannot speak, and yet communicates its enormity. The rest really was silence, as if spectators had lost their bearings until several could bear it no longer and began to applaud.

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Noah Birksted-Breen

Russian Theatre Festival at the Soho

As Noah Birksted-Breen, founder of Sputnik Theatre Company (noah@sputniktheatre.co.uk), starts planning the second Russian Theatre Festival in mid-2011, he looks back on why he founded the festival, what to look out for in new Russian drama, why he chose this year's plays, and what comes next. The first festival was held at the Soho Theatre, London, 1–4 February 2010.

THE IDEA of starting a Russian Theatre Festival came to me about three years ago. I had staged three new Russian plays for Sputnik Theatre Company since founding the group in 2005, and I wanted to respond to the growing quantity and quality of contemporary playwriting taking place in Russia. The festival format also appealed to me as an opportunity to bring over more plays each year. New Russian plays are incredibly diverse; there is something for everyone.

Spontaneous responses from the audiences for my company's first three productions (2005, 2006, and 2007) were at least a partial testament to that diversity: many of the same audiences came to all

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