NTQ Reports and Announcements

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Maria Shevtsova

Golden Masks in Moscow

FOR the sixth consecutive year, the Golden Mask Festival presented its 'Russian Case', an event of some significance since it not only brings together recent Russian theatre productions in a concentrated form (not exclusively from Moscow), but also showcases them for potential foreign buyers. Not that market transactions are nakedly transparent: after all, the directors of international theatre festivals who attend the event are serious about the theatre as a creative process. And the seriousness of the productions shown, even when they are very funny, cannot be questioned.

Nor can there be any doubt about the commitment of Eduard Boyakov, founder of the Golden Mask Association, and Maria Revyakina, its general director. They have established a festival of high quality that valorizes contemporary Russian theatre, demonstrates the artistic and social value of the theatre as such to the government (which is currently talking of downgrading its policy and budget for the arts), and encourages new laboratory-type and otherwise experimental groups to get their acts together so as to be noticed and selected for the event. The Festival, now in its eleventh year, is largely funded by Sberbank, with a lesser amount of aid coming from the government.

This year's presentation of the 'Russian Case' featured international stars Anatoly Vasilyev, AKhE from St Petersburg (Academy of Artistic Engineering), which had great success at the Edinburgh Festival in 2003, and the newly emerging all-male dance group Top9, also from St Petersburg. Top9 performed an exciting, predominantly hip-hop piece called *Accents*. The group seemed to pose a problem for Russian critics, who could not decide whether its work is actually dance, variety theatre, clowning, or more like something from the circus. *Accents* is all of these together, full of astonishingly virtuosic steps, highly dangerous headspins and tumbles, punk attitude and excess, and witty reflexive 'commentary' on the extroverted, performative aspects of their own piece, as well as of the genres that they hybridize. A similarly reflexive quality is evident in their choice of music, which ranges from rap to Paganini and Rachmaninov. A highly comic sequence between two dancers embodying a violin and a piano was, indeed, a mixture of brilliant clowning and technically demanding dance.

The hybrid and/or mixed media-trend that appears to be characteristic of the younger generation of practitioners – directors, choreographers, composers, performers – marks AKhE, whom critics have also described as defying classification. In this vein *Mr Carmen* is made and performed by Maxim Isayev and Pavel Semchenko, both of whom came out of the St Petersburg underground art scene. Given their background, they predictably play on the ambiguity of their production's identity. Is it an installation, or mime (since no one speaks in it), or performance art? The two men compete with each other to write Carmen's name in the most ingenious manner possible, one inscribing its letters in dust on the floor or with water sprayed into the air, the other spelling it out with fire and ash. All of this is accompanied by a score of undetermined sounds designed to tantalize the imagination. 'Carmen', needless to say, never appears.

Contemporary Russian experimentation with sound and movement is highlighted in the more complex work of Aleksandr Bakshi, one of the last surviving members of the Krymchak people whose music, along with that of the Selkup minority, he celebrates in *From the Red Book of Extinction*. Bakshi is a composer best known for his remarkable *Polyphony*, involving some hundred performers, which was part of the Golden Mask Festival several years ago. *Polyphony* rethinks the nature and status of music as a performing art by theatricalizing music and turning musicians into actors. He also incorporates into what can be termed avant-garde music theatre components of ethnic music – in the case of his *Red Book*, fragments of Krymchak and Selkup song, including a beautiful ditty intoned by a middle-aged woman whose clothing and domestic activities (spinning, for example) suggest the two near-extinct nations.

The production's central focus is a pianist, on whose playing is constructed a montage of auditory and visual images. A cellist plays to his left, also on household items, and a man on his right strums an ancient instrument or hits a modern gadget – the past and present worlds of sound layered to indicate that what was in a civilization no longer exists. A ballerina on pointes is in ironic contrast with her non-European, folk origins (although, after Pina Bausch, mocked ballerinas can only look like clichés). A painter, who faces the pianist but has his back to the audience, paints on slides which are projected onto the walls facing the audience. Snatches of film are projected on those same walls. Birds twitter in a cage and

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are doubled by filmed images of them. Regrettably, the sound score, which is especially inventive at the beginning – piano, cello, vacuum cleaner, electric shaver, the cutting of wood, the whirr of the spinning wheel – is not thick enough because the visual collage increasingly takes the upper hand.

Bakshi is the composer of a sparse but evocative soundscape for Valery Fokin's production *The Overcoat*, which makes no attempt whatsoever to reproduce Gogol's short story. Rather, it uses the story as a springboard for an imagistic synthesis in which the sometimes barely audible mutterings of Gogol's anti-hero, Akaki Akakyevich Bashmachkin, merge into the compilation of sounds. There is virtually no text here except at the very end, when the protagonist falls into a shape like a grave, crying in a muffled voice that he was at fault. Of course he was not, as the solo performance of the renowned Moscow actress Marina Neyolova shows only too clearly in a *tour de force* of abjection and bleakness reminiscent of Beckett.

The stage is dwarfed at the beginning by an oversized overcoat which covers a dressmaker's dummy – a headless mannequin. Neyolova-Bashmachkin is first seen from the inside of this apparition and emerges – small, hunched, old, and bald – from its middle, as from a womb. A whimsical moment shows Neyolova seated on a low chair combing the few scraggy hairs protruding from Bashmachkin's skullcap with the tip of his quill pen. Movement is minimalist and restricted in space. Expanded space is suggested fleetingly by a shadow-play behind the scrim, when thieves rip Bashmachkin's coat from his back. Louder sounds than usual are uttered behind the scrim, whose surface is divided into squares in panels, making it look like thin Japanese sliding doors.

The mannequin-coat, the chair, and, eventually, a 'real' Bashmachkin-sized coat which he wears with pride for the briefest of scenes, are the only props on the stage. Lighting is dim, and silence crucial. A number of professionals among the spectators, critics and suchlike, found the production gloomy. A festival director best left unnamed found it too emotional, which assessment did not seem quite right given the internalized quality of the piece and its refusal to sentimentalize its tragedy of a little man. If anything, the production could be said to be an image, in a truly Gogolesque vein, of the history of Russia, of a country beaten again and again by oppression and whose ordinary, 'small' people's strivings toward a desired goal are inevitably crushed.

If this can be deduced from Fokin's wordless *haiku*, then his vision of Russia's past and present is gloomy indeed, although no less so than that of Gogol. In this respect, the production is the quintessence of Gogol's *Overcoat*. Its remarkable design is by Aleksandr Borovsky, son of David Borovsky, who was Yuri Lyubimov's scenographer and who now works with Lev Dodin.

On a more sarcastic note, but with similarly dark content, is *Playing the Victim*, written by the Presnyakov brothers, Vladimir and Oleg, and directed by Kirill Serebrennikov. (Told by an Idiot performed an English translation at the Edinburgh Festival in 2003 and toured it in the UK.) Serebrennikov is an up-and-coming, to-be-watched youngish director who works in several major Moscow theatres, including the Moscow Art. He began his career in Rostov-on-Don before making his debut in Moscow in 2001 with a corrosive production of *Plasticine* by Vasily Sigarev (directed by Dominic Cooke in 2002 at the Royal Court).

Serebrennikov trained as a visual artist, causing some discomfort to those schooled in the genre- and *emploi*-centred tradition of the Russian theatre, who expect a theatre director to have come out of the *theatre*. His production of Gorky's *The Petty Bourgeois*, which was premiered at the Moscow Art Theatre in 2004, was also included in the Russian Case. I did not manage to see it, but Russian and non–Russian colleagues either loved or hated it, which at least indicates that the production was capable of eliciting strong responses; the first group was impressed by its unconventional approach while the second was convinced that Serebrennikov's scenic effects were nothing but empty show.

Playing the Victim tells of a young anti-hero who helps the police department to re-enact the events of murder scenes. The latter are used for grotesque or absurd ends. A pianist, in a reference to silent movies, plays throughout in a pit carved into the stage. A delicious scene parodying musclemen strutting their stuff is a sly dig at Meyerhold's biomechanics. A totally hilarious number full of expletives thrown out in a monologue by an army general had the audience in stitches of laughter. All in all, this cut-and-paste collage of visually clever scenes – narrative and characterization thrown out of the window – is a mixture of slapstick and sitcom, which Serebrennikov inherited from his experience in television.

Boris Yukhananov, by contrast, was trained in the theatre by Vasilyev. His *Tale of an Upright Man* is a highly structured piece which nevertheless allows improvisation, both verbal and physical. It is built up on three layers: four actors exercise according to the schema of Fritz von Botmer, who was inspired by Rudolf Steiner's research into Ancient Greek gymnastics; a young woman with cerebral palsy sits further back in a wheelchair, typing with a few fingers on a computer; a screen above her projects her theatre manifesto, 'The Theatre of Joy', which is mainly in dialogue with Artaud, although it also refers to Brecht.

The young woman, Oksana Velikolug, jots down her interactive responses to the gymnasts'

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movements, thereby being integrated into the whole action. Her text is not piecemeal, but an articulate reflection on the interrelationship between art and life. Perhaps most striking of all is her dignity and the dignity with which she and her emblematic representation of the struggle of human beings to 'stand upright' is presented throughout the performance.

Vasilyev's influence is only lightly felt, Yukhananov having freed himself from his master while remembering some of his lessons about how you hold space. Vasilyev's own work *From Onegin's Voyage*, at his spacious, white, light, ethereal theatre (which, it is said, cost the Mayor of Moscow more than $27 million to build) is what you might expect: complex, and performed by graceful, elegant, mannered actors who hold their space supremely. Based on Pushkin's *Yevgeny Onegin*, with passages intelligently borrowed from Tchaikovsky's opera, the production knowingly intersects 'operatic' moments from the prose drama with beautifully sung arias.

The actors stride about as if they were on a catwalk and are dressed accordingly. Beautiful groupings, self-conscious poses, the magnetic presence of the actors, which Vasilyev slightly deflates with humour, and Vasilyev's characteristic play with the sound, rhythm, and tempi of words – these are but several from a myriad of details that make the production mesmerizing. Arguably, at nearly four hours, it is too long for what it does, and seems longer still when compared with the one and a half hours of most of the other productions cited.

There were Russian Case offerings which I could not catch: *Lazy Susan* and *Rag-Place* by dance groups from Yekaterinburg; *Don Juan* by the St Peterburg Komissarzhevskya Theatre; *Richard III* from Moscow's Satirikon Theatre; *Rothschild's Fiddle*, directed by Kama Ginkas at the TYuZ (Theatre for Young Spectators); *Uncle Vanya* at the Tabakov Studio of the Moscow Art Theatre, directed by the Lithuanian-born Mindaugas Karbauskis. Karbauskis received the Best Director prize at the end of the Golden Mask for his *As I Lay Dying*, also performed at the Tabakov Studio. *As I Lay Dying* was one of many other productions in the six-week Festival (but not in the shorter Russian Case). Among them were interesting puppet theatres, including the Sakha Theatre from Yakutsk.

However, I did manage to see the work of that distinctively Russian entity, the pedagogue-director, at the Russian Academy of Theatre Arts, formally GITIS. Thus, Mikhail Mokeyev's students performed *Stairs Up a Tree* in, yes, a staircase – with fire, people in cupboards, and the works. On a less student-like level was Sergey Zhenovach's *The Boys*, drawn from *The Brothers Karamazov* and performed with depth and aplomb by his third-year students.

Finally, Kama Ginkas's *K.I. from 'Crime'*, which was not part of the Festival. Ginkas first directed this production ten years ago. In repertory, it has lost none of its freshness or power. It is a monologue constructed from Katerina Ivanovna's lucid-demented words in *Crime and Punishment* at her husband Marmeladov's funeral. Oksana Mysina's performance is compelling, terrifying even, as she singles out one spectator to be her phantasmic interlocutor Raskolnikov and another who represents her hated German landlady. Constantly shifting her character in and out of madness and reality, Mysina pulls the spectators into the ambiguities intended by Ginkas.

Were they to see her as real or imaginary? Was she really accosting them, or was it Dostoyevsky's character? And were they really meant to feel visceral fear – for indeed, they did – in a situation that was of the theatre? The spectators were at once players and observers, insiders and outsiders, involved participants and alienated witnesses. It was a mighty performance, guided by a director whose iron clarity has made his reputation.

All in all, there were a number of powerful pieces at the Festival, while others certainly failed to set the house alight. Eduard Boyakov observed in his press conference that contemporary Russian theatre was not in a brilliant state: there were no new trends, no new theatre language, and no new generation of theatre practitioners. Just as bad was the fact that 'We are not producing new spectators.'

He stressed that the Golden Mask had to avoid becoming a bureaucratic structure. He anticipated the development of new production models such as project-based models that eschewed repertory companies – a positive, in his judgement, though Western Europeans might well warn him of the dangers of destroying repertory companies. After all, the Russian repertory model keeps returning in Western European debates and discussions as a strength to be embraced. Boyakov suggested also that the cultivation of new writing would help the Russian theatre find new directions. According to him, 'Moscow needs a Russian Royal Court.'doi:

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Ian Herbert

Dance and Movement in Belgrade

NOW in its thirty-ninth edition, the Belgrade International Theatre Festival, known to all as BITEF, has a long and distinguished history. Its standing compares with that of Edinburgh or Avignon, and for a long time it was the only

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'crossroads' event where Eastern European and Western theatre could meet. A glance at the list of award winners (for it is a competitive festival) is like reading the chapter headings of a history of avant-garde theatre, not just in Europe but across the world.

In this year's BITEF, dance and movement predominated over more traditional theatre forms – a reflection perhaps of the move away from text that seems to be driving theatre thinking today. Its slogan, 'Towards the Fairy Tale – and Back', was an indirect homage to Hans Christian Andersen's bicentenary, but more directly a pointer to the element of play and reversion to childhood that characterized many of its shows. Some were arrestingly childlike in the force of their naïve simplicity; others were merely childish in their look-at-me attention-seeking.

Rami Be'er's Kibbutz Contemporary Dance Company opened proceedings with a large-scale piece, *Foramen Magnum*, which showed off the physical talents of his company well. Childish needs were served by having much of the early action take place inside a transparent 'bouncy castle'; later it matures onto a large inflatable mattress, on which a delicately erotic duet was played out. Around these, the large *corps de ballet* occupied itself with a set of curious collapsible wooden props, used sometimes for ploughing and sometimes as beach chairs. Some imaginative dance was not well served by lighting which made it difficult to watch the dancers' feet, ugly costumes which hampered their movement, and a constantly jarring choice of ill-assorted music which ranged from Dowland to 'Send in the Clowns'.

Heiner Goebbels brought us the delightful *Eraritjaritjaka,* seen in Edinburgh last year, a child's *jeu d'esprit* with pretentious adult overtones in the shape of quotations form the notebooks of Elias Canetti, sonorously delivered by the actor André Wilms. The piece offers so much to enjoy, from a full-scale chamber concert by the on-stage Mondriaan String Quartet, through Wilms's endearing performance, modulated by a tour de force of hand-held camera work which apparently takes Wilms out of the theatre to a nearby apartment, where he is seamlessly joined by the musicians. The action in the apartment is projected onto the cut-out wall of a large house at the back of the stage, a blow-up of a tiny doll's house which stands in front of it, and much of the audience's entrancement comes from trying to guess how the video image is achieved. Canetti's meditations on how we see ourselves from different imaginative viewpoints are put in the shade by the fascinating demonstrations of different ways of seeing which Goebbels and his video-musical team present.

Eugenio Barba's Odin Theatre, long-time visitors to BITEF and now in their forty-first year, offered an elaborate *hommage* in *Andersen's Dream*, a curiously disjointed collection of theatrical tricks for which they had constructed their own amphitheatre, its floor fake snow, its ceiling giant mirrors. It was frankly embarrassing to watch this group of ageing hippies indulge themselves in childish pursuits, speaking now in English, now in Danish, with occasional excursions into Spanish, since the piece was apparently intended to make a worthy political point by linking Andersen's society with the slave society of Latin America. The link was attempted by putting black 'voodoo' masks on the cast from time to time, and introducing a young, token black victim who was understandably bemused by the party games going on around him.

After this it was a relief to find unadorned theatricality in Diego de Brea's staging of Marlowe's *Edward II* for the Slovenian National Theatre, Ljubljana. Eschewing scenery apart from a couple of chairs, de Brea gave his actors the whole depth of the Belgrade National Theatre's stage, from thrust forestage to scene dock, lit by some dramatic shafts worthy of Mark Henderson. Time and again de Brea's heavily choreographed direction achieved magnificent stage pictures. Drastic cutting of subsidiary characters and plotlines focused our attention on the king's affair with Gaveston and their struggle with the principal plotters, joined by an icy Queen Isabella. Unfortunately, the director had also instructed his cast to overplay to the hilt, with a neurotic Mortimer emoting all over the floor and the gay lovers capering all over the place, at one point dancing right upstage in a faithful (albeit unconscious) imitation of Morecambe and Wise. Edward's death, too, lost some of its pathos, since his murderer, Lightborn, had already nailed him, supine, to a table: after this explicit horror, a single red light left us to imagine his fate.

From the Volksbühne in Berlin came a typical piece of trash theatre, juvenile rather than childish, from René Pollesch, *Pablo in der Plusfiliale*. Performed in a set of containers ranged like fairground booths around a bar, this too relied heavily on hand-held video: its microphone-toting performers only occasionally came off-camera to conduct a mock auction of third-world white goods, sing third-rate karaoke, and above all rail in person, at globalization, exploitation, and neo-liberalism or simply defend their right to their own sexuality. Deliberately anti-theatrical, Pollesch's performers spent most of their time shouting, with a few very welcome whispered interludes. The Belgrade audience loved it, in spite of sitting in a quagmire. Those with experience of the even more provocative Rodrigo Garcia's treatment of similar themes were less excited. At least the subtitles enabled the student of Serbian to learn the local word for *Scheisse*.

The Swiss trio Metzger / Zimmerman / de Perrot had erected a high, plywood wall, which tracked

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back and forth, opening at unexpected points like an advent calendar, to allow them to perform *Janei*, a curious mix of dance, slapstick, and minor circus tricks. Music came from DJ Dimitri de Perrot, trundling his decks around the stage or scratching them feverishly in an eyrie on the wall, while most of the action was supplied by the dancer Gregor Metzger and circus-trained Martin Zimmerman. The lack of real invention, of any scenic colour, and of a perceptible programme reduced the effectiveness of what was a harmless enough entertainment. The average child would have enjoyed it, but might reasonably have expected something more.

Second childhood was the theme of Alvis Hermanis's *Long Life*. Its setting is a series of cluttered rooms off a single corridor in a manifestly warden-unassisted home for the elderly. Here two couples and a singleton struggle wordlessly against heavy physical odds to retain their dignity and get through the day. Watching them go about their survival games produces mixed feelings. At first audience laughter is stifled in the face of their obvious pain, but by the end of two hours we can laugh with them, not at them, and share completely in what has become a celebration of the sheer joy of being alive.

Performed by five remarkable young actors from his New Theatre of Riga, who totally inhabit the failing bodies of their characters without even a smear of make-up, the piece can seem no more than a detailed piece of social realism. A closer look reveals some of the considerable technical skill behind it. The carefully graded lighting states are achieved by the lamps available in the home. The very sophisticated sound-score emerges from the battered Casio keyboard rescued from some car-boot sale by one of the characters. An astonishing array of props is expertly but unobtrusively manipulated, to manipulate us in turn. It was as if some of the themes sketched in Complicite's early work on death and ageing had been refined to the highest level of theatre art.

Two home-grown productions followed. The Croatian choreographer Stasa Zurovac had the interesting idea of making a ballet for the Belgrade National Ballet from the celebrated 1980 film *Who's That Singing Over There*, with a script by Dusan Kovacevic, an international cult hit which recounts the often comic trials of a busload of Serbs trying to get to Belgrade at the time of the Nazi takeover of their country in 1941. Zurovac's dance translation is a piece which in spite of its universal themes is likely to appeal more to the local audience than outside – indeed it has been recognized with several Serbian awards.

The male corps de ballet in particular seized its opportunities in some Balkan dancing to Vojislav Voki Kostic's lively score. Some rather heavy symbolism – the Nazi threat comes from a Bob Fosse chorus girl in a Gestapo hat – gets in the way of the childlike spirit of celebration that marks most of the action before its inevitably tragic conclusion.

In the second Belgrade show, young director Bojan Dordev was given the opportunity to reveal his talents in his adaptation of a piece by the Swiss playwright Robert Walser, *No Name: Snow White*. Any attempt at criticism of this self-indulgent parade must give way to the author's own authoritative programme note, from which a brief excerpt may suffice: 'Here is a proposition of a queer form in theatre: neoclassical post-dramatic performance. . . . We offer you a drawing room drama, a storm in a teacup, utterly two-dimensional, in which figures of speech are more important than anything else.' Exactly.

It has to be admitted that Dordev's extraordinarily tedious production was performed with great style and total conviction by some fine actors on an elegant set. But the evening's arid exercise in deconstructing a fairy tale (Grimm rather than Disney, with not a dwarf in sight) offered not the slightest involvement, intellectual or emotional, for its surprisingly patient audience.

A total frankness, that of the unaffected child, pervades Anne Teresa de Keersmaker's danced solo *Once*, which was seen in London in 2003. As with *Long Life*, it could be easy to miss the subtleties of what seems a very simple piece: de Keersmaker, after a considerable time spent sizing up her audience and preparing her body to face it, plays a live recording made by Joan Baez in the 'sixties, matching its moods with her movement. Baez's anti-war lyrics now seem to make a quite strident comparison between Richard M. Nixon and George W. Bush's disastrous war campaigns, although the piece was made before the Iraq adventure. At one point the harsher voice of Bob Dylan takes over from Baez's crystal clear soprano, as video footage shows scenes of combat and carnage.

The piece, however, has greater depths. In returning to the music of her youth, unsupported by her Rosas company, de Keersmaker offers an intimate, confessional demonstration of what moves her personally, and expresses it in an unadorned exposure of her innermost thoughts and feelings, all brought to us by the most minimal, almost introvert use of her wonderfully supple dance technique. Baring her breasts at the end of an hour's close-up contact with her audience, she is not making any cheap erotic statement: she is baring her soul.

There is a childish delight in the power of dance that shines through Lloyd Newson's latest work for DV8, *Just for Show*. His nine actor-dancers move easily from the stage into the audience, enticing and seducing them. Theirs is a just-for-show world of fake glamour, of glossy, empty personalities exemplified by Tanja Liedtke, who introduces the performance in the best show-

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biz manner only to be carried unceremoniously around the stage as if she were a cardboard cut-out. It's a very funny show, which manages to encompass yoga, magic, camp bitchery, the selling of T-shirts, and a whole series of false endings in its hour's length.

Yet once again the childish humour – some of it almost too childish – masks a deeper intent. These dancers are looking for fulfilment, for reality below the superficial show, and their search is danced out in some vividly erotic, painfully unfulfilled scenes between the moments of razzmatazz. The sharp contrast between desire and pursuit is beautifully illustrated by effortless transitions between film (Niall Black) and live action, with Jack Thompson's lighting an essential component. Personal lives are painfully revealed, and behind it all we sense the uncertainty, the self-questioning, that must govern the all-too-short life of the professional dancer.

The final performance of the festival was *Douar*, a lively demonstration of hip-hop and breakdancing from Accrorap, a group of Algerian *émigrés* based in Besancon. These street kids are young men now, but they retain that divided desire to be part of the pack yet respected within it that powers any schoolyard gang. Apart from a final, surprising salute to the memory of Yasser Arafat, theirs was an exuberantly mindless barrier-crossing salute to the sheer power of movement which in so many different ways characterized this edition of BITEF.

Alongside the official programme, this year's festival offered workshops, colloquia, and a showcase programme intended to give some of the flavour of what is going on in Serbian theatre today. To judge from some of the shows, young Serbs have the same obsession with the mysteries and possibilities of sex as young people anywhere else, expressed in plays as tentative and incomplete as many actual first experiences of it. There were competent presentations of two American works, Woody Allen's *Death* and Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, besides a well-staged local attempt to examine the life and songs of Billie Holiday.

I was glad to revisit Alex Chisholm's production of Ugliesa Saitinac's *Huddersfield*, this time with surtitles, which enabled me to confirm that it is a very strong, if hardly groundbreaking treatment of the disillusion of the thirty-something generation. And one production on this fringe was almost worthy of promotion to the main programme: the experienced Romanian director Gabor Tompa had worked with a young group of Hungarian-speaking actors from Novi Sad to produce *Medea's Circles*, a reworking of Euripides which stripped away the text without losing any of the power of the original, expressing tragedy directly through its ancient cries of woe combined with sure-footed movement from protagonists and chorus who remained, circling, on stage throughout.

This year's Mira Trailovic Prize for the best production in the festival was divided equally between Heiner Goebbels's Eraritjaritjaka *and Alvis Hermanis's* Long Life. *The Jury's Special Prize went to Lloyd Newson and DV8 for* Just for Show.

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Dolan Cummings

Round-Table Rumbles at the National

I ORIGINALLY developed 'Round-Table Rumbles' for the Institute of Ideas in partnership with the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, and they have run at the festival every year since 2001 – with the exception of 2005, when we took the format to the National Theatre in London. The idea was to create a forum within which theatre groups could get together to discuss their work with critics and each other in a lively and informal but more structured environment than is found in the various festival bars.

The basic format is a panel of speakers discussing a selection of shows on a different theme each night with an audience of theatre practitioners and enthusiasts. A typical panel will include two or three critics, a writer, director, or other representative from two or three shows, and perhaps a journalist or expert on the evening's theme – these have included war and terror, madness, masculinity in crisis, friendship, and so on – while all the groups whose shows are being discussed are encouraged to join the audience and take part in the discussion. The Rumbles thus combine critical assessment of particular shows with more general discussion of broad intellectual themes, and consequently the focus is on new writing or new interpretations of older work in the context of changing circumstances.

While there is nothing quite like the Edinburgh Fringe, we wanted in bringing the format to London to take advantage of the obvious wealth of new theatre, and perhaps as a first step in developing a regular festival-like forum for the city's theatre milieu. Associate director Tom Morris and events manager Angus MacKechnie at the National Theatre invited us to do a run of four Rumbles as part of their summer season in 2005.

The theme of the first evening on Friday 24 June was one we had never taken on explicitly in Edinburgh, but which goes to the heart of what

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the Rumbles are about: critics and criticism. The panel included Lee Simpson of Improbable Theatre, whose *Theatre of Blood*, running at the National at the time, was the launchpad for the discussion. The play is an adaptation of the 1973 horror film, in which an old-fashioned actor-producer takes gory revenge on the critics who have plagued his career.

Theatre of Blood obviously portrays critics and practitioners as antagonists, and certainly this possibility was recognized by all the panellists. Nonetheless, critics unsurprisingly feel there is more to what they do than lambasting poor actors. Ian Shuttleworth of the *Financial Times* and *Theatre Record* (and an Edinburgh Rumbles veteran) described as very rare the realization that a production had no redeeming features at all, and was thus, as he put it, exaggerating his Northern Irish accent, 'a legitimate target'. For the most part, critics try to be more constructive.

Asked to defend harsher reviews, though, the critics pointed out that they have a responsibility to readers to be totally honest. In part, this is because those readers may spend money based on their recommendations, but it was also noted that the need to sell newspapers means reviews may sometimes be more 'colourful' than might be strictly necessary.

Theatre of Blood also points to another dimension in the debate, when the outrageously hammy Edward Lionheart rails against the institutionalization of theatre in the hands of Oxbridge-educated directors with highfalutin ideas, as opposed to old-fashioned entertainers such as himself, who have learned to appeal directly to audiences by offering up sex and violence. ('What has theatre, or sex, or death, or dreams, or pain, or love ever had to do with "quality" or "relevance" or "excellence"?', as he puts it.) Critics are presented very much as representatives of this putative 'directorial turn', who fundamentally miss the point when they judge theatre by their own bloodless intellectual standards.

Actor and author Michael Simkins seemed to be getting at something similar when he pointed out that critics write in a language that is alien to his mother, who likes the sorts of things they despise. 'Michael's mum' then became a focus of discussion. Assuming that we recognize this language gap as a problem, should critics seek to educate audiences, or be content with the humbler role of reflecting popular taste? The consensus for something like the former is difficult to articulate in an avowedly anti-elitist age, but the latter implies a submission to consumerism with which few critics, or other theatre people, are entirely comfortable.

A similar question came up at the next Rumble on 'Identity in Crisis' on 1 July. In fact the original title had been 'National Identity in Crisis', but this was changed to avoid any confusion with the state of the National Theatre; nonetheless, associate director Tom Morris suggested that crisis might be a rather appropriate state for an institution charged with reflecting the multifarious diversity of the nation; so the question was whether theatre merely reflected identity, national or otherwise, or had some role in shaping it, again along more or less national or cosmopolitan lines.

Jatinder Verma of Tara Arts described the role of theatre as making connections rather than defining identities, drawing on his own current project, a production of *The Merchant of Venice* set in sixteenth-century India. Indeed, Shakespeare is central to the discussion, as his work can be seen either as something that defines British or English culture or as an expression of something more universal. Munira Mirza, a researcher at the University of Kent, argued that the current focus in cultural policy on diversity meant that young people from ethnic minorities were deprived of the universal in favour of art thought to be 'relevant' to their culture.

The third Rumble on 8 July came the night after the London bombings, and so the theme of 'Political Theatre' had special relevance: two of the panellists had been unable to see Robin Soans's *Talking to Terrorists* at the Royal Court as planned because the previous night's performance had been cancelled. This was the latest in a series of verbatim plays, seen by many as the most vital and political current in contemporary theatre, but others have cast doubt on whether such work is properly theatrical at all. Indeed, it is sometimes unclear whether such political theatre should be judged for its political or dramatic merits. While those who had seen *Talking to Terrorists* praised the play itself, there was also concern that an aura of worthiness might put certain work beyond criticism.

The panel included critic Aleks Sierz and Justin Butcher, author of the acclaimed 'Dubya Trilogy' of plays satirizing the war on terror, and there was some question of whether theatre in this vein was in fact preaching to the choir, resting on the left-liberal assumptions of theatre audiences. Nonetheless, it was agreed that, as National Theatre director Nicholas Hytner had argued after the *Behzti* affair, theatre has a special contribution to make to political debate, providing a public forum within which controversial and potentially explosive issues can be explored in a contained, fictional form. It was Patrick Alley of the NGO Global Witness (who had advised David Farr on his script for *The UN Inspector*), who suggested that as well as dealing with obvious topics like war, political theatre had to turn its attention to the big contemporary issues of sex and God.

The final Rumble on 15 July certainly touched on the former, with its theme of 'Relationships under Strain'. Rebecca Lenkiewicz talked about her play *Shoreditch Madonna* at the Soho Theatre,

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which is set among the young singles of the London art scene. Among other things, the play shows how a sort of bohemian lifestyle has become mainstream in certain sections of society, with no expectation of marriage or even long-term relationships. Lenkiewicz is neither judgemental nor celebratory about this, but simply explores what this means for her characters through the unfolding of their bittersweet liaisons.

Freelance critic Matt Warman, who had taken part in an Edinburgh Rumble on 'Dysfunctional Families' a couple of years before, made the point that drama requires unhappiness in some sense, and if there are few plays about happy families or hunky-dory relationships, that tells us as much about theatre itself as it does about our lives. The panel also included Robert Whelan of the think-tank Civitas, who was interested in how the demise of shared values affected theatre, perhaps rendering something like farce, which depends on the possibility of outrage, redundant.

Clearly none of the Rumbles was conclusive on its theme, but all demonstrated the possibility of engaging with theatre on an intellectual level with which *Theatre of Blood*'s Edward Lionheart would surely disapprove. There is a danger of course of attributing to plays themes their authors would not recognize, but the stubbornly theatrical nature of theatre is actually a great asset to broader discussion. Precisely because playwrights, directors, and performers are focusing on producing art rather than debating the issues of the day, they often pose things in ways that have not occurred to seasoned political or academic commentators.

Meanwhile, by discussing their work in terms of the outside world, theatre practitioners can look afresh at what they are doing. The thematic approach takes some of the heat out of criticism, by making the discussion about the theme rather than the work as such. This is not to avoid artistic judgements altogether, but simply to open up the discussion by adding a further dimension. Even less successful plays can be intellectually illuminating, and sometimes in ways that shed light on where the work is going wrong.

The Round-Table Rumbles point to the possibility of a richer public engagement with theatre, and this has implications for criticism and writing about theatre more generally. While the first discussion in the National Theatre series opened up the question of what we mean by theatre criticism, the other three all touched on issues to which theatre has much to contribute in a public conversation, reinforcing the case for criticism that goes beyond the consumer-guide approach to engage more thoughtfully with new theatre, not as a thing apart but as a vital aspect of public culture.

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