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Variety in Varna

Report on the Varna Summer International Theatre Festival, held in Varna, Bulgaria, 1–12 June 2013.

THEY LIKE to start the summer festival season early in Bulgaria – on 1 June, to be precise. In the Varna Summer Festival, hosted annually in the country's charming third city and Black Sea resort, they have a very welcoming and deservedly well-regarded international theatre programme.

For the 2013 festival, artistic director Tsvetana Maneva and executive director Nikolay Iordanov put together a diverse and well-curated programme which boasted not only work in an impressive array of theatrical forms from a number of countries (ranging from Slovenia, the Netherlands, and the UK, to Bulgaria itself), but also a fine series of international symposia and seminars; indeed, I was in Varna, at the festival's invitation, as a monitor of a young critics' seminar (with participants from nations as varied as China, South Korea, Georgia, and the Czech Republic), organized by the International Association of Theatre Critics.

The cream of the performance programme, by broad acclaim, was the stylish and inventive production of Ostrovsky's *The Storm*, staged by Slovenia's Ljubljana City Theatre. Here I must confess an unconflicted interest. In October 2012, I was a member of the prizegiving jury of Slovenia's largest theatre programme, the Borštnik Theatre Festival in Maribor, which awarded no fewer than nine prizes to this production. Perhaps the primary benefit of such tributes is that they help to bring excellent theatre works to the attention of festivals, theatres, and audiences beyond the shows' countries of origin. There was certainly a sense in Varna that audiences were very glad that the Ljubljana *Storm* had appeared on the festival's radar.

Directed by Jernej Lorenci, this rendering of the decline and implosion of the bourgeois Kabanov family is both timeless (in terms of its reflections on the agonies of desire) and subtly topical (not least in relation to the precarious house of cards that is capitalist prosperity). With a gentle twist on the 'narrative realism' Eric Bentley identified in Brecht,[1] and which continues to enhance many contemporary theatre works, Lorenci combines costumes from both the nine-

Ostrovsky's *The Storm*, staged by Slovenia's Ljubljana City Theatre. Photo: Ljubljana City Theatre.



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teenth and twenty-first centuries with sparsely functional sets and props from both Ostrovsky's day and our own; the languid watching of a television, for instance, far from being a post-modern irritant, is surprisingly in keeping with the parallel, but never quite converging, atmospheres of both play and production.

The accompaniment of the performance by a live chamber orchestra, smartly entitled (as the neon sign above their heads makes clear) 'Ansambel Volga', is a dramaturgical masterstroke. The music is, by turns, dangerously carefree (particularly in the self-satisfied, patriotically Slovenian song sung at the outset of the production) and broodingly premonitory. The theatrical purpose of the ensemble reaches its beautiful height in the play's closing scene, in which the tragic heroine Katerina Kabanova takes her place in the band and plays out her own death.

Having seen this production for the first time in Slovenia itself, where I was obliged to consider it in competition with other Slovenian shows, it was both fascinating and affirming to see it in the context of the international work in Varna. Any doubts I might have had about just how good Lorenci's staging of the play was were entirely dispelled. As so often with fine presentations of classical plays, the ensemble is characterized, paradoxically, by both a general, cohesive excellence and, where required, outstanding individual performances; in particular, much is asked of and given by Primož Pirnat in the role of Katerina's whimsical lover Boris Grigorich, and Matej Puc, as her hapless husband Tihon Ivanich Kabanov.

The collective and individual capacities of the ensemble work in mutually reinforcing harmony with Lorenci's direction. Simultaneously insightful, subtle, and bold, his production carries both a respect for the play's emotional and psychological essence, and a confident and imaginative desire to re-envision the drama for present-day audiences – a combination which is the hallmark of the European theatre *auteur*. Just as Peter Stein reimagines Kleist's *The Broken Jug* or Silviu Purcărete reshapes Goethe's *Faust*, Lorenci remoulds a work by a long dead classical author in such a way that one feels almost as if the director had made the production with the writer by his side.

The Slovenian production was the highlight of the festival's international programme, which ran parallel to a selection of Bulgarian work which included both classical dramas and new theatre writing. An interesting example of the latter was *Medea, My Mother*, written by Ivan Dobchev and Stefan Ivanov, and performed by Sfumato Theatre Laboratory of Sofia. The narratives, for there are many, of the play emanate from within the mind of a comatose protagonist, who lies, close to death, in a hospital bed following a car crash.

A series of garish, often otherworldly, characters appear. Appalling stories of orphaned children – which are, perhaps, buried within the speechless protagonist's childhood – jostle beside ferocious polemic regarding the iniquities of contemporary Bulgarian (and indeed global) society. The effect, although intentionally disjointed, is frustratingly uneven; both the dramatic situation (in which we are inside the mind of the comatose man) and the often deeply affecting, orphan stories are ill-served by the many moments of polemical excess.

A sometimes surreal, sometimes ghostly spectacle, complete with a bleakly engaging master of ceremonies and a strong sense of theatrical history (from Goethe through Shakespeare back to Euripides), the piece sweeps across the stage with epic intent. At its best it seems like a cross between *Angels in America (*Tony Kushner's great play about the outbreak of the AIDS pandemic in the United States) and *The Wonderful World of Dissocia* (Anthony Neilson's *Alice in Wonderland*-style exploration of the mind of a young woman suffering from dissociative disorder). However, at its worst, it feels as if the play has been invaded by megaphone-wielding activists with a series of very direct points to make. It is an uncomfortable and ultimately aesthetically damaging combination.

In addition to the curated work, both Bulgarian and international, in the prestigious main offerings, the festival runs both a showcase programme and what it calls a 'parallel programme': in effect, the festival brings its own fringe programme under its umbrella. An intriguing work in the showcase programme was *Immurement*, by the State Puppet Theatre of Bulgaria's second city, Plovdiv. It is, in fact, a piece of physical and object theatre rather than puppet theatre, and one which was particularly fascinating to those, like myself, in the international audience who have an interest in the strong physical and visual theatre traditions of eastern and central Europe.

The work is based upon the legend that, in order to secure the long life of a newly built bridge, a person must be sacrificed by being laid in the structure's foundations. This promised a seminal, tragic combination of pagan mythology with a macabre human event which is as much emotional and psychological as it is physical. One could imagine the great Grotowskian company, Teatr Pieśń Kozła (Song of the Goat Theatre) from Wrocław in Poland, working with such a story.

According to the narrative of the piece, a man, Manol, immures the woman he loves, Neda, within the foundations of the bridge. Not without good reason did one expect a forty-five-minute performance of immense anguish and emotional resonance. Sadly, director Veselka Kuncheva and choreographer Marieta Golomehova – who are described in the Varna programme as being among 'the new faces of contemporary Bulgarian puppet theatre and its borderline forms' – have created a work which descends into disappoint-

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Medea My Mother, performed by Sfumato Theatre Laboratory of Sofia. Photo: Simon Varsano.

ing, unaffecting kitsch. Using ingenious screening of the stage, often to obscure the performers' faces and much of their bodies from the audience's view, the production pitches its choreographic form some way above its calamitous story. Revelling in the physical dexterity of its performers (whose feet we see splashing about in the river over which the bridge is to be built), its simple stage trickery increasingly resembles a work of light entertainment, somewhere between music hall and a children's show. By the end of the performance, one feels as if *Immurement* has been sold to its audience on an entirely false prospectus.

If the Plovdiv Puppet Theatre's show disappointed, so did *Holy*, the offering from the Sofia Puppet Theatre. A number of guests of the festival who had come from beyond eastern Europe were particularly interested to see this production, such is the reputation of puppet theatre in Bulgaria; indeed, Varna's puppet theatre (which boasts a beautiful museum of theatre puppets) served as the headquarters for the festival. However, Dutch-Brazilian director Duda Paiva contrived to puncture expectations with a piece which is both wearying and self-indulgent.

The show focuses upon the cross-generational tensions within a family as they emerge during the birthday party of an ageing bourgeois woman. There is early promise in the piece's darkly comic puppetry (for example, a butler serving family members a meal consisting of miniature versions of themselves). However, any initial lightness of

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touch is soon discarded as Paiva indulges himself in increasingly laboured point-making and a very didactic use of music. As it grinds through its seventy-five minutes, one begins to experience *Holy* almost as a tortuous lecture in morality, delivered by means of grotesque rubber puppets.

Theatre critics and other theatre professionals from Britain who travel to festivals internationally, and particularly within Europe, find it interesting to note the type of work from the UK which finds its way on to festival programmes. In Varna, the international selection of the main programme (which comprised six shows) included *Void Story* by Sheffield-based company Forced Entertainment, a group famous for their collectively devised work. While this marked the company's Bulgarian debut, it was, nevertheless, typical of their performance schedule that it should include appearances at a venue in continental Europe. A brief look at the company's website in early January 2014 shows that four of their first five engagements in the year were at continental European venues (in Portugal, Austria, Germany, and Switzerland), while the other was in Canada.[2]

As the company's artistic director Tim Etchells once noted to me in conversation,[3] the UK performing arts culture continues to a large degree to prefer to delineate clearly between artistic and theatrical forms. thereby designating Forced Entertainment as 'live artists' or 'performance artists' who should, in Etchells' words, 'play in the corner' in such venues as Tramway in Glasgow, away from the theatrical mainstream. By contrast, Etchells observed, in much of continental Europe his company's work, and the work of broadly similar companies, is considered part of the mainstream theatre. The inclusion of *Void Story* in the international selection of the Varna programme is further evidence that he was correct in his observation.

Void Story is an established work which has been performed many times since its premiere in 2009. An absurdist vision of an urban dystopia, it combines black-and-white storyboards (which are projected on to a large screen) with dialogue and sound effects, both performed live, as if in a live radio drama. By turns grotesque, implausibly cartoonish, frighteningly convincing and bleakly hilarious, the piece stands as testament to Forced Entertainment's inventiveness in theatrical form (insisting upon 'liveness' while working in two forms – namely cartoon storyboards and radio drama – neither of which are essentially live in a twenty-first-century context). It is also exemplary of the company's performative dexterity; two

Void Story, performed by Sheffield-based company Forced Entertainment. Photo: Hugo Glendinning/Tim Etchells.



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performers sitting in front of microphones creating a live 'radio drama' is very distinct, in formal terms, from much of the company's other work, which ranges from organized, often highly physical chaos (*Bloody Mess*, 2004) to lengthy intellectual meandering and (at least, seeming) improvisation (*And on the Thousandth Night*, 2000).

Well received in Varna, *Void Story* added to the sense of the festival as a very serious, professional, internationally outward-looking programme. Combined with an excellent series of symposia and seminars, the Varna Summer International Theatre Festival deserves to be considered as an important opening event of the European summer festival season.

References

1. Eric Bentley, *The Brecht Commentaries* (New York: Grove Press, 1987), p. 60.

2. Forced Entertainment's official website: <www.forcedentertainment.com/page/3020/Tour-Dates>, accessed 5 January 2014.

3. I have been based in Glasgow throughout my twenty years as a professional theatre critic. Due to venues such as Tramway, the Arches and the Centre for Contemporary Arts, and the now defunct festival the National Review of Live Art, the city has been a regular destination for Forced Entertainment. Consequently, I have had many opportunities to experience their work, and numerous opportunities to interview members of the company.

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John Bull, Graham Saunders, and Jacqueline Bolton

Turning the Page

Report on the conference 'Turning the Page: Creating New Writing (1945–2013)', held at the University of Reading, 13–14 September 2013.

This was the last in a series of symposia and conferences for the five-year funded AHRC project 'Giving Voice to the Nation: The Arts Council of Great Britain and the Development of Theatre and Performance in Britain 1945–1995', a collaboration between the University of Reading and the Victoria and Albert Museum, London. One of its three principal strands was to look at the work that the Arts Council undertook in promoting new writing for performance. In this two-day event academics and practitioners gathered both to look at the history of new writing and to examine its current place in the ecology of the British theatre.

Translator and dramaturg Michael Raab together with playwright Simon Stephens opened the conference with a discussion about the relationship between the new writing cultures of Britain and Germany, with Stephens bringing his perspective of having worked in both countries. The first day also saw other specialist panels that included Jenny Stephens, Artistic Director of Bristol Old Vic Theatre School, John Bashford, Vice-Principal and Head of Acting at LAMDA, and Anna Farthing, Research Associate at the Conservatoire for Dance and Drama, who spoke collectively about the approach of their respective institutions as regards bringing writers and their drama students together in collaborative projects. Playwright Fin Kennedy, Jonathan Petherbridge, Creative Director of London Bubble Theatre Company, and Steven Atkinson, Artistic Director of the HighTide Festival, later discussed new writing initiatives, how these initiatives were being threatened by cuts to arts funding, and how these cuts were being resisted.

The second day opened with playwrights Timberlake Wertenbaker and Roy Williams in conversation, followed later by playwright and academic Dan Rebellato and theatre maker Andy Smith, who discussed aspects of his own work as well as his experience of producing new work with his long-term collaborator, Tim Crouch.

Throughout the conference, more than twenty papers were presented by academics. Given the nature of the project, the work and influence of the Arts Council loomed large. Its past was explored in papers by Trevor Griffiths ('Feeding the Dumb Waiter: Aspects of the Funding Regime in the Eighties') and Taryn Storey ('How Many Plays Would Have Remained Unwritten . . .') that both looked at the Arts Council during what has generally been seen as crisis years for drama in the 1980s, when both 'alternative' new writing touring companies including 7:84 England, Joint Stock, Foco Novo, and the Royal Court either lost funding or faced the very real threat of closure.

A number of papers also looked at current arts policy and new writing. These included Vicky Angelaki's 'New Writing, New Provocation: a State of Shared Authorship'; Steve Waters, 'Border Crossings: Some Heretical Thoughts on Plays and Writing'; Joe Mcloughlin's 'Reading the Writing of Arts Council England'; and Jane Woddis's 'Influencing New Writing Policy: Networks of Policy and Practice'. Jacqueline Bolton's 'The Collectively Spent and Used Up Lifetime in the Collectively Breathed Air of That Space' was a critical examination of the British Theatre Consortium's report *Writ Large: New Writing on the English Stage 2003–9*, commissioned for the Arts Council in 2009. For Bolton, the report subscribes to and upholds an ingrained division of 'playwriting' versus 'devising' within English theatre cultures, prioritizing and promoting the tradi-

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