

SLOVAKIA

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No Matter How Hard We Tried, by young Polish writer Dorota Maslowska, which opened the week-long Davadelna Nitra Festival in Slovakia directed by Grzegorz Jarzyna for TR Warszawa. Photo: Ken Reynolds.

Kama Ginkas's production of Medea with Yekaterina Karpushkin in the the title-role on show at the Nitra Festival from the Moscow Young Spectator Theatre. Photo: Ken Reynolds.

The international theatre festival known as Divadelna Nitra celebrated its 20th anniversary this year in Nitra, Slovakia, in the waning days of September. Festival director and founder Darina Karova put together a well-considered and eclectic program that showcased Central European theatre in a context that included artists from further East and West. Here are a few of the shows that caught especially my attention.

The week-long event opened with *No Matter How Hard We Tried* by Dorota Maslowska, the *enfant terrible* of Polish letters. After writing a best-selling novel at the age of 19, she quickly became one of the hottest playwrights in Europe. *No Matter How Hard*, directed by Grzegorz Jarzyna for TR Warszawa, was evidence that this is no fluke. The piece is a trenchant, funny and highly literate look at the way that contemporary Polish society is struggling to survive amidst obvious and obscure influences attacking it from the West and its own past. The story is clever – and cleverly told – as we follow a family, its friends and the pop culture it consumes, until the final moments when we realise that none of this actually exists – the girl telling the tale died when a bomb destroyed her home during World War II.

The production by Jarzyna, one of Poland's most stylish and inventive directors, is sleek, hip and entirely to-the-point. Costumes and the colour scheme are eccentric and beautiful in a brash kind of way. Jarzyna uses shadows and animation projected on three panels embracing the stage which give everything a sense of unreality and humour – actors interact with animated objects, while real objects are replaced

by animated drawings of them. This was a powerful beginning to the festival, providing one of the enduring highlights on the first night.

Sheffield's Forced Entertainment represented Great Britain with Tim Etchell's production of *Void Story*. Funny and gloomy, this performance piece – if I may describe it as that – teeters on the edge of a genre going beyond theatre. Although theatre is what you make it, and so theatre this is. On an enormous screen we watched an oddly and pleasantly naïve couple working their way through a post-Apocalyptic world peopled with bandits, shysters and assassins lurking in the shadows of urban ruins and guerilla warfare. The video images of the couple's scrapes and miraculous escapes were created out of still photography collages. The actors sat on stage in front of computers and provided live voiceovers for the video characters and for sound effects. Their virtuosity at times was breathtaking and the effect of the live voices was always engaging. Overall I found *Void Story* more amusing and admirable than compelling, despite the serious topic it took on.

I was of two minds about the Vilnius City Theatre's production of Maxim Gorky's *The Lower Depths*, directed by Oskaras Korsunovas. I admit immediately to my own longstanding prejudice against Gorky. I find his plays lacking or overdone – always in the wrong places for the wrong reasons. On the other hand, Korsunovas's actors were in fine form for this reinterpretation of the play about a bunch of lowlifes, drunks, thugs and spiritually damaged has-beens. Korsunovas sat his actors in a single row at a long table facing the audience. Was this a reference to Leonardo Da Vinci's *The Last Supper*, or an attempt to imitate a press conference that quickly gets out of hand?

A ticker running across the back wall continually repeated many of the most famous and pompous of the play's phrases. A small screen at stage left endlessly showed postcard images of idyllic beaches and landscapes that created a clumsy, but pointed, counterpoint to the drunken conversations occurring at the table. The actors occasionally stepped out from behind the table and engaged audience members in drinking bouts (judging by spectators' reactions, the vodka was real), and when people refused to participate an actor tossed handfuls of crushed crackers at them. Impressed by the conception and execution of this piece, I remained indifferent to much of what it had to say. In fairness, allow me to report one exchange I had about this show: Kama Ginkas, the great Russian director, about whom more in a moment, told





me that this was one of the best productions he has seen in recent years. Chalk my indifference up to my prejudice and/or my ignorance.

The Deer House by Jan Lauwers's Needcompany of Brussels is a production, on the other hand, I will not forget. I still do not know exactly what I think of it, although I will say this – it moved me to tears many times in the course of the performance. Ostensibly the tale is about the tragic loss suffered by one of the women in the troupe – her brother, a press photographer, was killed during the war in Kosovo. The aftermath to that event is spun into a large tale about a refuge in the woods where a family has come to avoid the excesses of the modern world. Part dreamland, part utopia, part lie and part mistake, this is the setting for more deaths, resurrections, violent conflicts and peacemaking among the members of the family – and, thus, for the troupe of actors. Half dance, half dramatic acting, *The Deer House* often gets bogged down in repetition, oversimplification and superficiality. Early on, especially, I responded with irritation and negation to what I considered borderline amateurish dramaturgy. Then I would suddenly find myself gripped emotionally by tales of deadly family feuds, of a sister's loss, of the attempts of the dead to console the living. By the end of the performance I was again reduced to tears and all of my issues with the production – none of which I had forgotten – seemed pointless and petty. I have concluded that *The Deer House* is an example of the magic theatre can work. No matter what your intellectual opinion may be, the visceral experience is what lasts and has meaning.

Kama Ginkas brought to Nitra his production

of *Medea* for the Moscow Young Spectator Theatre. It is primarily based on the text by Jean Anouilh, with quotes from the writings of Seneca and the poetry of Joseph Brodsky. I have written about this work previously in these pages, but consider it necessary to add a few words here. This was unequivocally one of the festival highlights from Moscow, performing before a packed house that offered a hearty standing ovation at show's end. Ginkas here succeeded in doing what, for all intents and purposes, should be impossible. His *Medea*, while remaining human and accessible at all times, emerges as a symbol for Time or even Life. As performed by Yekaterina Karpushkina, *Medea* is that force which will do what it will, no matter what friends, husbands or even kings would desire. Time and Life both rampage through an individual's life, wreaking havoc, giving rise to love, sin and violence. Ginkas's production is powerful and beautiful in the way that any force of nature is, regardless of how destructive it may be.

The SkRAT Theatre of Bratislava is highly regarded in Slovakia for the experimental work it has done over the decades. Its *Buggers and Suckers* is a company-created work that tells the humorous and melancholy side of modern life by way of hapless, alienated people working in an office. Scenes are menacing (job applicants are threatened with death when they reveal that they do not have business cards), sad (a man tries to break with a girlfriend who insists on agreeing with everything he says), absurd (two women fight over a man who has died of a cocaine overdose in a toilet stall), or all of these together (a man wants to commit suicide and bequeath his guts to dogs for

food). In all cases they have a humorous ring. Director Dusan Vicen gives the production a barebones, black-and-white visual look; action takes place in various cubicles around the stage – café tables, water closets and office desks all look pretty much the same. I found some of the texts to be clever and entertaining, although I thought that more attention to production values could have significantly improved the show's impact.

Jozef Holly's *Kubo* is a classic Slovak comedy about parents seeking to marry off their daughter at a profit. Dodo Gombar, staging it as *Kubo (remake)* for the Martin Chamber Theatre of Slovakia, went to great lengths to yank the old chestnut into the modern world. Giving it a strong expressionist bent with over-the-top acting, extravagant costumes and wacky mise-en-scenes, Gombar and his company seemed to mock the play until the narrative broke down and the actors began bickering among themselves about how best to stage it. From that point on there were two parallel narratives taking place – one of Holly's classic, the other of a group of acting students who come close to sabotaging their first substantive work with their master teachers. It is worth pointing out that many foreign guests in the hall did not recognise the games this show was playing, and they came away underwhelmed by the experience. (This was, to its detriment, the only festival production not accompanied by surtitles in English.) More telling, however, were the local Slovak spectators who responded with constant bursts of howling laughter throughout the entire evening.

This was an interesting, lively piece that clearly connected with its intended audience.