

# Stage 26 September 2011 – Nitra - where's that?

Festivals divide easily into two groups – those that rely on a paying audience and those that don't. In money-conscious Britain, we are used to the first kind, but there is a valuable place for the second: many European countries are much more accustomed to that approach than one that relies more on box office for its success.

Take the one that I'm enjoying at the moment, the international theatre festival in Nitra, Slovakia. It's been through an alarming series of political ups and downs over its twenty year history, but this year has the full support of the Slovak Ministry of Culture, plus the accolade of a three year grant from the EU, which has this year added Nitra to its programme of support alongside the cream of European festivals, such as Avignon or the Holland Festival.

The Ministry of Culture blows hot and cold. Nitra when it started was the voice of cultural opposition to what became the strongly nationalist government of Vladimir Meciar when Slovakia parted company with the Czech Republic in 1993, and towards the end of Meciar's reign it lost its state funding entirely. Even last year, in the face of the general economic crisis, the festival had a big cut in its state grant and had to reduce from its usual six days to four. Now, for the twentieth edition, the Ministry has come up with a substantial subsidy, plus the promise of three-year funding for the future. Since such a grant can represent up to a third of all Slovakia's theatre budget, the country's theatre community can be excused its ambivalent attitude to the festival.

But there can be no doubt that Nitra is good for the country's standing in the wider cultural world. Its clever choice of foreign groups and directors is often ahead of the trend, with the result that many festival organisers and critics from outside the country now make the pilgrimage to this small university town. The ten foreign productions on view this year include work by top European directors who might be considered Nitra discoveries, such as Poland's Grzegorz Jarzyna or Lithuania's Oskaras Korsunovas, alongside visits from big names such as the Russian Kama Ginkas, Hungary's controversial director of its National Theatre, Robert Alföldi and the Belgian Jan Lauwers with his Needcompany. Our own Tim Etchells has a Forced Entertainment show on display, their graphic novel cum radio play, Void Story. There is also a judicious selection of Slovak productions, which will over time produce export possibilities for the country's own theatre. Nitra's own theatre company has had the neat idea of importing my favourite Hungarian director, Zoltan Balasz, to stage Arnold Wesker's *The Kitchen*, and this has been selected to play to the festival audience.

But is that audience a local one? By the time the foreign visitors and local sponsors have been given their allocation of freebies, barely a third of the festival's tickets can go on public sale. And there is no special reason for the good burghers of Nitra to pay scarce Euros to exercise their curiosity on what may be a seriously avant-garde work in a foreign language. But there are no empty seats at the Nitra festival, thanks to its policy of inviting student volunteers to help out, with the promise of free admittance to festival shows as their reward. The result is that nearly every year the festival can report attendances of over 100%, as the aisles of its venues fill with eager students waiting to invade any empty seats.

Perhaps more important for the locals is the free accompanying programme of exhibitions, films, music and street theatre, which enlivens the town throughout these six days. Though peripheral to Nitra's main purpose as a world-class theatre showcase, they create the atmosphere of all-comers' enjoyment that helps make it thrive. Not box-office dependent, then, but a success on several levels.