

Can You Hear Me In Slovakia?

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The Nitra International Theatre Festival is twenty this year, a landmark acknowledged by a large grant from Slovakia's Ministry of Culture and a new three-year subsidy from the European Union that puts it up with Avignon, Brussels and Amsterdam as one of the EU's major festivals - not bad going for a six-day event, in a small university town, that has frequently crossed swords with the Slovak authorities in its short existence. This year's generous funding brought ten visiting companies and four local productions to top a bill that also included films, conferences and street theatre in six packed days.

Mercilessly Skewered

The opening production was by Grzegorz Jarzyna, truly a Nitra discovery: his debut hit, a rollicking version of Witkiewicz's *Tropical Madness*, was seen there in 1997. *No Matter How Hard We Tried* is a piece by Dorota Maslowska, a highly individual young voice in Polish theatre whose *A Couple of Poor, Polish-Speaking Romanians* was seen at Soho in 2008. The new work is a hugely funny, at times deeply touching study that for once gives an articulate and witty voice to the urban underclass. A schoolgirl lives with her mother and grandmother in a grotty Warsaw flat, visited from time to time by an unfeasibly fat neighbour. Their three generations of deprivation are pictured not in the standard language of despair but in a hilarious inversion that extols all that they have not got - the consumer society and its global suppliers are mercilessly skewered. Their non-life is set beside the fortunes of a non-film not being made in the apartment. Jarzyna has applied the lightest of directorial touches to Maslowska's bitter, hilarious inventions, with a joyous result. While squarely landing its punches on its Polish targets, the play speaks to us all as powerful proof of the adage that the best 'universal' theatre is always that with strong local roots. Another Nitra favourite, Lithuania's Oskaras Korsunovas, made less of an impact with his stripped down version of Gorki's *Lower Depths*. The play's characters gather round a table to tell their stories - and tell them well, ably demonstrating the great sense of a confident company at work that Korsunovas produces. Yet for all its strong, usually drink-induced moments we are left with Gorki-lite, not helped by a final fade-out to the accompaniment of a series of snatches borrowed from Shakespeare. Neighbouring Czech theatre was represented by a little gem from Prague's Theatre of Comedy, with director David Jarab adapting a memoir of a lesser-known literary figure from Kafka's Prague, *Weissenstein*. Hydrocephalic, a natural outsider, the title character is played by three actors who reflect different aspects of his personality, while two actresses represent the almost accidental victims of his main characteristic, a chronic indecision. The play's short scenes are broken by a third actress singing cabaret songs as a sour commentary on the proceedings.

Shambolically Constructed

Belgium's Jan Lauwers has achieved an international reputation with his Needcompany, most recently with a trilogy of dance-based stories of which the last, *The Deer House*, came to Nitra. On the evidence of this, it's hard to see what all the fuss is about. We start with a group of dancers joshing about, their preparations interrupted by the news that the brother of one of them, a news photographer, has been shot in Kosovo. From this real event the company have cooked up a not very tasty stew of attempts at storytelling, punctuated by some not very distinguished dance and a great deal of self-indulgent waffle about 'important issues', human and theatrical. It adds up to nothing more than a vivid demonstration of what can go wrong when a group of performers (even if presided over majestically by leading Belgian actress Viviane de Muynck) are left to construct their own show. Forced Entertainment visited with one of their shorter shows, *Void Story*, in which four Ents regulars sit in semi-darkness behind microphones to create a radio play, a shambolically constructed

horror fantasy illustrated on screen by some fairly ropey graphics. It's typical of Tim Etchells' quarter century of work with the company in its deliberate amateurism, quirky humour and refusal to follow convention. Sometimes those characteristics combine to make magnificent and memorable theatrical occasions, but this little squib was hardly one of them, merely a fair reflection of its title.

Rustic Realism

Robert Alföldi is the director of Hungary's National Theatre. Like Nick Hytner he is gay and Jewish, but unlike Hytner his position is constantly under threat from Hungary's extreme right, anti-gay, anti-semitic government, which has attempted (with alarming success) to assert almost totalitarian control over the country's media and cultural institutions - on the day of Alföldi's arrival in Nitra they announced the withdrawal of all funding for the country's independent theatre groups. Alföldi's response is a meticulous, superbly played revival of Martin Sperr's 1965 *Hunting Scenes from Lower Bavaria*, an ominous study of small-town bigotry. The audience sits on sacks in the centre of a large room (it was originally staged in the National's Budapest rehearsal space) while the action, the harshest of rustic realism, goes on around them. While all too relevant as a political statement, this also theatre of the highest order. Another major European director, Moscow's Kama Ginkas, made his Nitra debut with a different but equally powerful view of our inbuilt fear of the outsider. His conflation *Medea*, *Medea* made use of versions of the myth from both Jean Anouilh and Seneca, with a garnish of poetry from Josef Brodsky. Ginkas' very modern *Medea* is a refugee mother living in conditions no better than Dorota Maslowska's family - water flows constantly from a broken tap on to the stage. But she is also a serial killer, and her almost bipolar confrontations with the burnt out politician Creon and her partner in crime, her world-weary lost soul of a husband, Jason, make a provocative point about personal and civic responsibility. *Small Narration* was the all too apt title of another Polish contribution, a monotone lantern lecture from Woytek Ziemilski in which he tried to come to terms with his grandfather's exposure as a police informer. It came in complete contrast to the festival's final foreign show, from the Théâtre des Lucioles in Rennes. The French company took on Argentinian Rafael Spregelburg's sprawling and almost unperformable science fiction epic, *Paranoia*, and won. Always visually absorbing in its mix of film and live performance, it could be forgiven for perhaps not completely mining the rich seam of scientific and philosophical speculation beneath its author's manic vision.

Bad Taste

Nitra's four selections from local companies were mostly disappointing to the outside viewer. A bad-taste 'remake' from the Chamber Theatre in Martin of a classic peasant comedy, *Kubo*, left a very bad taste in spite of its Slovak audience's adoring, hysterical reaction, while the town's youth theatre succeeded in making a royal mess of Terry Johnson's adaptation of *The Graduate*, helped magnificently by an obtrusive and quite unworkable set consisting of a three-tier cotton-wool wedding cake. *Buggers and Suckers*, from the Bratislava fringe group Skrat, proved less unpleasant than its title (which might translate slightly less offensively and more accurately as *Screw or Be Screwed*), but offered little more than a few improvisations on office politics. The one Slovak show to register at all positively was by a visiting Hungarian director, Zoltan Balasz, who got some good ensemble work out of Nitra's Andrea Bagar company in his in-the-round production of Arnold Wesker's *The Kitchen*. There's just room for a special mention of the festival's one children's show, the charming *Little Swan Lake*, performed with skill and gusto by the puppeteers of the Naïve Theatre, from Liberec in the Czech Republic.