

NTQ Reports and Announcements

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Meetings in Warsaw

Report on the thirty-second edition of the revived 'Theatre Meetings' in Warsaw, April 2012.

Poland has long been one of the liveliest theatre communities in Europe, having led the way out of conventional productions with the work of Kantor, Grotowski, and Gardzienice, while giving us directors of the stature of Wajda, Lupa, and more recently Jarzyna and Warlikowski. Now there is a new iconoclastic spirit abroad, with yet another generation of directors snapping at the heels of the greats. But for me it is the Polish avant-garde director Pretenszus Krep who still casts a long shadow over the country's theatre today . . .

April 2012 saw the latest edition of the Warsaw Theatre Meetings, now re-established as the country's showcase of the most exciting recent work, and this year augmented with a dance section and a selection of work for children. My first excursion was to a production by Jan Klata, another of the thirty-plus generation, whose epic *Danton Affair I* much admired a year back. This time he brought Bożena Keff's *Piece About Mother and Homeland*, a more contained performance for six blonde-bewigged actors, one of them a man, in black dresses and scarlet high heels.

Hyperactive on a stage occupied otherwise only by a couple of movable wardrobes, they act, sing, shout, dance, and struggle in solos, duets, and chorus to produce a series of mother-daughter vignettes – tender, violent, absurd – rooted in the archetypal Jewish relationship but here extended to a present-day, post-communist, post-Catholic Poland where woman's role is up for redefinition. Some of the most striking scenes express the mother-daughter bond when one of those blonde wigs physically links mother and daughter like an umbilical-cord headpiece. While the presence of a male actor in drag may have been an attempt to extend the play's thrust beyond gender, the very fact of these strong women (and their companion) being directed by a man raised uncomfortable questions about male hegemony.

It was perhaps unfortunate that the show that immediately followed Klata's ninety-minute thriller was the shorter *This is the Chorus Speaking*. For this, chorus master Marta Gornika assembled a 'choir' of a couple of dozen women with no previous experience, and trained them to perform a sixty-minute piece under her guiding, conductor's

hands. The mode is largely choral speaking rather than singing, with the parts (as in the previous piece) divided into solos, duets, ensembles, and full chorus. The women, of all ages, shapes, and sizes but of one high quality, have been exceptionally well drilled in the difficult art of choral speech, and give a fine indication of what a Greek chorus (even if that was all-male) might have sounded like.

They start innocuously enough with cake recipes, moving to a full-out denunciation of woman's subservient lot before finishing sprawled on the stage, each uttering a final word of fulfilment. The show has toured widely to great acclaim, but in its insistence on being no more than a series of recitations seemed weak in comparison with the richer, more theatrical efforts of Klata's company from the Teatr Polski in Wrocław.

There were more feminist undertones in the next show, *Joana the Mad: the Queen*, performed by a group from Kielcach directed by Wiktor Rubin. A Polish critic described it as 'a theoretical essay written with passion on the stage; it can be read as a performative historio-philosophical treatise . . . a philosophical essay devoted to theory of representation, or a feminist herstory project . . . where "herstory" is opposed to the logocentric (and traditionally masculine) "history".' If you like that, as David Mellor says, you'll like this. If your own head is still some distance from your fundament, you may find it less attractive.

It is in fact an appallingly unplayable script which appears to be being performed by actors who have realized this, and decided that the only way to pass a dull evening is to take the mickey out of the text without mercy. Since their means are limited to shouting into microphones, writing on the walls of the set, and wandering aimlessly about it in their underwear, the audience gains little benefit from these efforts. Buried deep in this surreal effluent is the potentially fascinating story of Catherine of Aragon's elder sister, who was the first Queen of what was to become Spain, but spent forty years immured in a convent suffering from alleged mental illness.

Slightly more approachable, but yielding not a jot in its overweening pretentiousness, was *III Furie (Three Furies)*, performed by a company from Legnica under the direction of Marcin Liber. Within a framework loosely taken from Greek tragedy (Apollo is our MC), it looks at the question of Polish war guilt – indeed Polish guilt in general, a topic of great current interest. It starts in the Second World War, when a peasant refuses shelter to a Jewish refugee, who is shot by the Nazis. We follow the blood guilt in Aeschylean manner down the generations to the present as a parade of prostitutes, pimps, child abusers, clerics, and other

popular figures of deprivation cross the stage, accompanied by the occasional cacophonous roarings of a punk band. It would appear that the Church, the state, the Nazis, the peasantry, the middle class, and of course international capitalism are responsible for Poland's present sorry lack of morals – points well worth making. Unfortunately the hard-working company's chosen manner of making them is through the usual German post-dramatic style of unmodulated excess: microphone monologues, tuneless songs, cynical asides to a bemused audience . . . It seemed interminable.

This febrile style, which seems to have taken a dangerous hold on Poland's theatremakers, was also present, but less unpleasant, in another production from Wrocław's Teatr Polski, Paweł Demirski's *Rainbow Stand 2012*, directed by the very promising Monika Strzepka. Because the show opened unusually promptly, my arrival two minutes after curtain up meant I had to sit out its first hundred minutes, which may be a blessing since three and a quarter hours is rather long for a social satire, however winning. The plot centres on a campaign to set aside an area – the Rainbow Stand – from which gays may watch the summer's European Cup finals. The second half at least is energetically acted and very funny, and makes a fine case against discrimination of any kind. It's great to see Poland's theatre tackling hot topical problems (much low-rent housing was demolished to make way for the new Warsaw Stadium) with such vigour.

I have to admit that my two favourite experiences of a rather noisy week were outside the Theatre Meetings. I was able to catch up with Grzegorz Jarzyna's *T.E.O.R.E.M.A.T.*, elegantly adapted from Pasolini's film and already seen at the Barbican, in which a charismatic, Christ-like stranger serially seduces the entire household of a wealthy industrialist (played with distinction by Jan Englert, director of Warsaw's National Theatre). I succumbed completely to Jarzyna's cool eroticism, and stayed in touch with the play's more philosophical post-coital monologues.

Then, in a grungy studio at the top of a suburban office block, I met the fringe group Komuna, who after twenty years of theatrical anarchy have come up with the first piece of successful right-wing political theatre I can recall seeing anywhere in the world. *Sierakowski* is the 'future biography' of a living leftist intellectual, Sławomir Sierakowski, whose theoretical interventions have led to some unlikely representatives of minorities grave and gay being elected recently to Parliament. In a series of beautifully executed and very funny sketches, the company's four actors and two sound artist/musicians take the hare-brained idealism of Sierakowski ruthlessly apart. Their use of low-tech media is particularly engaging – even the surtitles were jokey.

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Quadrennial in Prague

Report on the Prague Quadrennial, 2011.

For ten hectic days at the end of June 2011, Prague's usual crowd of tourists, stag parties, and hen-nighters was augmented by almost as large a mob of scenographers, designers and design students, performance artists, and theatre architects, all gathered for the twelfth PQ. Its full title is now the 'Prague Quadrennial of Performance Design and Space', reflecting a major change in emphasis: the all-new PQ places much more importance on the way in which theatre has in recent years moved out of its conventional auditoria into found spaces, factories, galleries, and streets, where the work performed has expanded far beyond the classic text-based canon.

The change was in part dictated by the unfortunate chance that saw PQ's traditional venue, the city's art deco Industrial Palace, suffer a catastrophic fire in 2008. It gave the organizers the opportunity to have a fundamental rethink about where PQ might go in future, a rethink which took the form of wide-ranging consultation with largely avant-garde thinkers and practitioners. So PQ 2011 gained an Artistic Director, Soudja Lotker, who had decided that scenography is 'a discipline existing in between the visual and the performing arts' and is determined to bridge that gap.

One beneficial result is that the event has spread all over Prague. The main international competitive exhibition, in which some sixty countries showed their wares, was housed in the National Gallery, together with more than forty national student stands and a basement display of Extreme Costume. Thirty countries contributed to the Architecture section, also competitive, in the cultural centre which has been developed in the historic St Anne's Church, while all over town street theatre, installations, workshops, talks, and exhibitions kept popping up almost overnight. The most impressive sign of the new regime was a collection of thirty large white cubes, forming a performance maze in the piazzetta of the National Theatre, where the passing public could interact with the work of designers, choreographers, artists, musicians, and other occupants of the far frontiers of performing art. Next door, in the National Theatre studio that now houses the black light *Laterna Magika*, the lighting and sound designers were holding court.

The international exhibits retain their importance, even if they veer uncomfortably between installation and retrospective. Many countries,