

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,

including the USA and the UK, still see PQ as a chance to show their designers' best work of the last four years, though both of these countries tried to follow a theme, Britain with references to their own successful *Transformation and Revelation* exhibition, the States with a grungy, dimly lit garage setting and some pious references to 9/11 and Katrina. Others have taken up the installation challenge, showcasing the work of one scenographer, or even simply putting an idea into effect that may have nothing to do with an actual performance. In a welcome development, several countries made actual performance part of their exhibit.

The international jury looked both ways. The winner of the Golden Triga for best exhibit was Brazil, whose stand had a strong personality of its own as an installation but also managed to show very effectively many of the country's most interesting recent performances, including one which also took the medal for Best Production, a piece by Teatro da Vertigem staged on Sao Paulo's heavily polluted Tiete river, seen from a barge. The jury's comment that the audience was 'totally immersed' turned out, mercifully, to be a figure of speech.

Best Stage Design went to the two contrasting scenographers featured in the Croatian exhibit, a couple of darkened rooms showing quite lengthy videos. One, the collective Numen, had taken up the challenge of providing interchangeable settings for three shows (*Dido and Aeneas*, Camus's *The Plague*, and *Death in Venice*) playing simultaneously in contiguous spaces. Since these were being seen by three separate audiences, one wonders whether this was anything more than an act of scenographic bravado. It certainly convinced the jury, who gave the Croats an additional gold medal for Best Use of Theatre Technology.

The award for best curatorial concept went to the Hungarian stand, another elaborate joke to follow 2007, when visitors were photographed, rubber-stamped, and led through an awesome series of checks before emerging from a non-existent exhibit. This time the stand was dedicated to a non-existent designer, whose career as described in the very funny accompanying leaflet ticks all the most pretentious boxes of pseudo-scenography. Visitors had to put on leaky plastic overshoes to enter and stand in a shallow pool to watch a spoof interview with 'Mihaly W. Bodza', projected on the ceiling.

Racing round over a hundred hugely varied exhibits and evaluating them was quite a feat on the part of the jury, and is one of the problems that still beset PQ. Some stands contain a great deal of work and impart a great deal of information – the expensive exhibit from cash-strapped Portugal had an explanatory book almost as large as the

whole PQ catalogue. Other countries made their point more concisely, as did Cuba with just three elegant set models. All deserve to be studied at length, but there is always the pressure to move on to the next display. So that one-note stands like that of Hungary, or the gorgeous, all-white Icelandic room in which a white-clad actress could be observed contemplating suicide, are likely to have greater impact from minimal content – witness the Georgian stand, on which Robert Sturua's house designer put up a few trees in homage to the country's greatest poet.

Everywhere form was struggling with content. Turkey had a great solution to describe a project which had been taken across Europe on a train, playing at stops along the way: they set up a whole carriage of the Orient Express, with scenes from the project playing on the 'windows'. Outside the main venues, a mass of activities included a number of established names working with students. Heiner Goebbels's group produced a series of scenes inspired by T. S. Eliot (whose *Four Quartets* produced the PQ motto – 'at the still point of the turning world') which showed a quirky originality but collapsed artistically when the youngsters were required to act. Roma Patel's team came up with a quite stunning installation in a church crypt, evoking a Czech fairy tale with minimal resources.

Over in St Anne's Church, the architecture display induced a discipline among its exhibitors by limiting them to the space of a single table. The many ingenious responses to this challenge made great impact, with Britain showing the evolution of Tyrone Guthrie's beloved thrust stage from Edinburgh's Assembly Hall to the new Royal Shakespeare in Stratford through a series of beautiful models set in the table's surface. France, who as a result of internal quarrels didn't have a stage design exhibit, used a table which was a fine example of metalcraft in itself to show four different approaches to found spaces. Spain set up their work-in-progress photos on a couple of post-card racks. The Mexican table, showing how some old government buildings had been reclaimed, and the Greek display of two versatile new theatres, caught the eye of the jury for a joint gold medal.

In another converted church you could follow the life and work of one single Czech designer, Milon Kalis, lovingly put together over a number of rooms, showing family photographs and letters as well as numerous costume sketches, set models, and production photographs to give a complete account of a creative career tragically cut short by mental illness. It went quite against the new spirit of PQ, yet was one of the most satisfying experiences of my stay.