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Festival De Théâtre Des Amériques: Montréal, 22 May - 8 June 2003

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quite so chauvinistic, nor so sure of themselves. The Thalia Helmer was positively sympathetic. The Noras did not leave at the end. Susanne Wolff—who played Nora in the Thalia production—ended the play out on the terrace of her penthouse apartment, smoking a cigarette and not moving. Kimmig's ending seemed to highlight the question: what happens now that Nora has left (read: broken with) Helmer. Anne Tismer's Nora emptied a clip from a Glock 9 into her highly unsympathetic husband; she ended the play sitting on the back steps, just sitting.

The modern questioning of the text was quite interesting, particularly in the more differentiated Thalia production. Strong actresses played both Noras. For me, each production made inexcusably sloppy or silly decisions that made me question what they were doing at the festival, and what better productions had not been invited instead. The Thalia's Nora and Helmer seemed to have interesting nuances, but the production's Christine wandered across the set like a zombie—presumably, as several German critics said, to show the ravages of capitalism on the psyche of the worker. Similarly, Rank expressed his love for Nora by putting her hand down his pants—implying that he has been abusing her since childhood? The Schaubühne couple lived in a two-story, gorgeously appointed luxury apartment—a wonderful architectural set by Jan Pabbelbaum, but one that proclaimed that this family has already made it. They are not waiting for his first paycheck as Bank director; they have got plenty of money from somewhere, which rather lowered the stakes of Krogstad's blackmail plot.

The German critics seemed either to praise these interpretations or to ignore them. I guess us Americans just ask for too much silly old consistency, but I have never felt so out-of-step with fellow spectators before. Other spectators loved or hated different productions; several critics loathed Kriegenburg's *Oresteia*, for example. We seemed to share a common feeling that this year's selections were a little tentative, a little off—especially given the jury's clear position last year. Three productions from Hamburg and three from Zurich seem a bit excessive. Castorf is my favorite director, but even I wonder whose work I might have seen in place of one of his productions. What we do not know is whether such choices came about because of jury weakness or because the jury had a weak season to choose from. Perhaps next year will tell.

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FESTIVAL DE THÉÂTRE DES AMÉRIQUES. Montréal. 22 May–8 June 2003.

The biannual Festival de Théâtre des Amériques in Montréal, presented in alternating years with the more focused event Théâtre du Monde, is one of the few North American providers of a world-class program of international performances—surpassing anything in the United States outside of New York City. Founded and led by Marie-Hélène Falcon, the festival is the only venue in North America for many companies. The festival is a showcase for contemporary *Québécois* theatre as well as for foreign companies, with an emphasis on francophone and Latin American theatre in particular.

The festival main program consisted this year of seventeen performances, eight Canadian (in both French and English) and nine foreign. In addition, a half-dozen new French Canadian productions were featured in a parallel series entitled “Nouvelles Scènes.” The directors featured in the main program included the Québec-based Robert Lepage (with a new version of his early work, *Dragon Trilogy*); the German Frank Castorf (*The Injured and the Insulted*, based on Dostoevsky, performed by the Volksbühne am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz, Berlin); the Flemish Josse de Pauw (with an original work he also wrote entitled *Übung*, performed by Het Net, Bruges); and the Polish Krzysztof Warlikowski (performing Sarah Kane's *Cleansed*, a co-production of companies in Warsaw, Poznań, Wrocław, and Berlin). The international program also included productions from the U.K., Spain, Colombia, Bolivia, and Argentina. U.S. companies were conspicuous by their absence from the 2003 festival program.

The productions from Latin America included an all-male staging of Shakespeare's *Richard III* by Mapa Teatro of Bogotá, Columbia, and a remarkable new Argentinean play *Ojos de ciervo rumanos* (*The Eyes of a Romanian Stag*), written and directed by Beatriz Catani. Catani's production was outwardly spare and unadorned, free of any self-conscious directorial flourishes. The play was nevertheless distinguished by the unpretentious directness and conviction of its excellent cast and the poetic density of Catani's text. The play seamlessly blends an unsentimental realism with bold metaphor, political allegory, and a deep mythic structure. It plays like a hybrid of Lorca with the sensibility of Borges and Márquez. An aging widower and struggling gardener raises his daughter in seclusion, her feet literally planted in a pot as if a young sapling being nurtured for his orange grove;

yet, she never comes to fruition as either woman or tree, unable to menstruate or suckle. Her father feeds her with his own blood, which is revealed to be orange juice. She is visited, and courted, by a naïvely vigorous young man who never arrives without a rolling stereo console and a collection of aging LPs. He turns out to be her long-lost brother, separated from the family when their mother, a Romanian singer, was mysteriously killed. The records he brings include songs sung by their dead mother. The characters are all survivors of some catastrophe, at once familial and cosmic. They endure and age, but do not thrive. They love each other, have no one but each other, but cannot overcome the barrenness both within and around them. The characters' warmth and humanity, their combination of sweetness and deep sorrow, are always set against a mysteriously unforgiving fate. In the play's closing moments, the daughter bares her breasts to nurse both her father and her brother—an image of mutual need and vulnerability, as well as of the family becoming a snake swallowing its own tail. The play evokes at times the mythic figures of Dionysos and Semele, at others Orestes and Electra, suggesting a symbolic fable of the larger despair of contemporary Argentina. The intelligence and sincerity of its perform-

ance allowed *Ojos de ciervo rumanos* to become a powerfully soulful *cri de coeur*. Paula Ituriza as the long-suffering daughter gave one of the most memorable performances of the festival.

The title of the Flemish *Übung* roughly translates as "practice" or "exercise." Josse de Pauw's brilliantly conceived and executed production uses a double cast of adults and children to tell its nominally banal story of upper-middle-class ennui and the casual marital infidelities it breeds in the course of a boozy dinner party at a couple's posh country house. The adult cast, led by de Pauw himself, only appears in a film of the story that is projected (with English subtitles) behind the cast of children. As the film begins, the adult characters are all checking in with their various children and babysitters via cell phones, conceptually setting the stage for the young actors' appearance on stage. The soundtrack of the adult characters' voices fades in and out, replaced by the synchronized voices of the children who watch and speak the lines in character as if dubbing the film in post-production. The children fully invest in the delivery of the lines of the adult characters, and begin to change into costumes resembling those on screen. The effect is initially curious and amusing, but becomes more



Het Met of Bruges' production of Josse de Pauw's *Übung*, directed by the author. Monument-National, Salle Ludger-Duvernay, Festival Théâtre des Amériques, Montréal. Photo: Phile Deprez.

and more troubling as the action of the film becomes more sexually charged and the adult characters' language more obscene and abusive. The blunt Strindbergian melodrama of the film takes on unexpected new levels of complexity and nuance through the presence of the children as the witnesses and living conduit to the virtual world of the adults. How effectively the young ensemble, both as children and as actors, have learned to play their roles as adults proves as fascinating as it is unsettling to watch.

Krzysztof Warlikowski's production of Sarah Kane's *Cleansed* (*Oczyszczeni*) arrived in Montréal after a stormy debut in Poland in 2002 and an enthusiastic critical reception abroad. In Poland, the critical consensus is now that the production represents a new artistic landmark and benchmark. While *Cleansed* continues to gather acclaim on international tour, both Warlikowski and Teatr Rozmaitości, the company that serves as his artistic base in Warsaw, have become lightning rods for Poland's cultural conservatives, prompting the recent loss of the company's primary subsidy from the city's municipal government. The critical success of *Cleansed* in France resulted in a commission for Warlikowski to do a new production of Ansky's *The Dybbuk* for the abortive 2003 Avignon Festival (which was subsequently cancelled due to a strike by theatre unions)—the first such invitation ever granted to a Polish director. *Cleansed* is now scheduled for performance at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in December, 2004.

Cleansed is Kane's greatest play, and Warlikowski's production perhaps the best proof to date of her ultimate significance as a contemporary playwright. Warlikowski adds the character of a "singer" to the cast as the symbolic stand-in for the deceased playwright in the form of the Austrian actress Renate Jett, who both witnesses the action of the play and ironically annotates it with songs. Jett creates the weirdly appropriate effect of a punk Marlene Dietrich. Designer Małgorzata Szcześniak sets the action in a vast tiled shower room, with a row of working showerheads filling the backstage wall. A hanging punching bag completes the otherwise bare stage. The atmosphere is that of a sterile clinic discretely run as a combination of laboratory and prison torture chamber by a man named Tinker. Tinker is Kane's perverse Prospero, and the clinic his island and private theatre. Warlikowski's Tinker (Mariusz Bonaszewski) looks the part of mild-mannered, middle-aged, tweedy English professor. Tinker's sadistic psychic manipulations and physical tortures of the other characters are in the service of a disarmingly simple experiment: to prove or disprove the objective existence of love.

Tinker is actually seeking to induce the capacity to love in himself via the voyeuristic observation of the sufferings and exaltations of others. The extremity of his emotional alienation is the point of the play no less than the sensational betrayals and sufferings that he incites for others.

Tinker stands as the tacit ethical proxy for both Kane as playwright and any director such as Warlikowski that picks up her play. What justifies putting characters, actors, and audiences through such spiritual and physical trials? The heightened violence of Kane's highly subjective theatrical imagination here perhaps finds its objective correlative in the violence of Polish historical memory and the theatre tradition that has struggled to process it. The apparent sensationalism of her writing looks quite different from the cultural perspective of Warsaw, where modern historical/political reality has at times surpassed the theatrical excesses of the *grand guignol*. None of the so-called brutalism of Kane's work, for example, surpasses the earlier images of violence and mutilation contained in the work of the Polish Holocaust survivor Józef Szajna, whose theatrical work was performed for years in Warsaw's landmark Palace of Culture.

The treatment of sexuality in Kane's work is where it most challenges and stretches Polish theatre practice. The production employs full frontal male and female nudity while deftly stylizing the acts of both sex and violence portrayed. Gender confusion abounds, both in terms of cross-dressing and the climactic surgical transformation of the character of Grace (Małgorzata Hajewska-Krzysztofik) into the transexual image of her dead brother Graham (Redbad Klynstra). In one of the play's blackest ironies, Tinker ultimately discovers his capacity to love with a lap dancer from a peep show that he compulsively visits. Stanisława Celińska, a featured performer in virtually all of Warlikowski's productions to date, plays the lap dancer with fierce bravura. A blond film and stage starlet in her youth, Celińska in middle age is aggressively unglamorous, both defiantly fleshy and able to suggest the inner and outer ravages of time and hard living. Celińska at first performs her character as if mechanically repeating a loop in a soft porn video to composer Paweł Mykietyn's appropriately cheesy synthesizer score, only tentatively to drop her guard when Tinker makes clear his wish to converse with her. In the play's penultimate scene, she bares her vast, sagging bosom for a startlingly tender and delicate love scene with the suddenly shy and boyish Tinker. The agonies and deaths of the play's other five characters are all somehow in the service of this end. Significantly, Tinker's psycho-spiritual regen-

eration is largely inspired by the endurance of love in a gay male couple (Jacek Poniedziałek and Thomas Schweiberer) in spite of his most brutal manipulations and abuse.

Warlikowski's approach is demanding both personally and artistically on his superb cast, but has also clearly drawn forth their full commitment to the material. In perhaps the production's most significant and striking moment, the entire cast simply stops at one point and gazes for several minutes in silence at the audience as both actors and the characters they play. The effect is at once utterly engaging and deeply unsettling: our own position as either voyeurs or witnesses to the action becomes part of the play, as does the absolute claiming of ownership of and responsibility for the project by the ensemble.

Warlikowski and his company's unabashed embrace of Kane's writing has turned them into cultural symbols and targets beyond the politics of the theatre world and its critics and backers. Warlikowski's *Cleansed* exists at the crossroads of the cultural politics of Poland's entry into NATO and the EU. The production is both praised and condemned in Poland as a theatrical Trojan horse for unfamiliar and uncomfortable aspects of Western European culture and values. It also stands as a superb example of how and why Poland and other post-Soviet countries can make an essential and unprecedented contribution to the culture of the West. As demonstrated by Warlikowski's production, Sarah Kane needs the artistic resources of the Polish theatre at least as much as the Polish theatre needs Sarah Kane.

The centerpiece of the Montréal program, however, appropriately remained the revival of Robert Lepage and Ex Machina's six-hour epic *Dragon Trilogy*, first performed in full at the Festival de Théâtre des Amériques in 1987. Along with later works such as *The Seven Streams of the River Ota* (completed in 1996), this early epic by the forty-five-year-old Québécois director/designer/playwright reaffirms his status as the most prodigious theatrical talent of his generation in Europe or North America. Lepage and his ensemble produce the results of a Tony Kushner and a Robert Wilson in one company. The epic form of *Dragon Trilogy* follows the fates of two working-class sisters from Québec City. The play begins as a powerful social melodrama about the ethnic tensions bred when Chinese immigrants begin to settle in the city around World War I. What follows is a sprawling yet lucid reflection on the dawn of a new kind of multicultural world, on the tragic ironies of World War II, and the stubborn persistence of a sense of fate and wonder in the lives of its contemporary

characters in the midst of an increasingly secular and confusing world. The new version even contains a stunningly concise theatrical image of the attacks on the World Trade Center. Lepage's eloquent weaving of a polyglot text combining French, English, Chinese, and Japanese in performance alone is a remarkable feat. The size and character of the audience for his work in Montréal confirmed his success as both a cosmopolitan headliner on the international festival circuit and as a creator of a popular indigenous Québécois theatre. As contemporary popular theatre, as an example of formal innovation and finely crafted acting, and as a wellspring of significant new playwriting via a process of collective creation, Lepage and his company Ex Machina have surpassed the work of Ariane Mnouchkine's Théâtre du Soleil as the leading theatrical company of the francophone world—and done so on Mnouchkine's own artistic terms. The journey to Québec would be fully justified for this experience alone.

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AVIGNON THEATRE FESTIVAL STRIKE. Avignon, France. 8–10 July 2003.

The fifty-seventh Avignon Festival was killed off by a combination of employer greed, union brinksmanship, procedural bad faith, and governmental bad timing. Ariane Mnouchkine's latest production with the Théâtre du Soleil, *The Last Caravanserai (Odyssey)*, did not play, nor did any of the other thirty-five productions invited from France, Poland, Italy, and Belgium. Months of rehearsal and preparation were lost; France's summer theatrical showplace did not happen for the first time in its history. The Aix-en-Provence Lyric Art Festival was another victim.

Since 1968, French performing artists have benefited from a special category of unemployment compensation. As "intermittent show workers," they have been able to collect forty percent of their normal salaries while unemployed, searching for gigs, or simply rehearsing. The system worked as an indirect subsidy for the entire performing arts community. When the Théâtre du Soleil closed a show, the company would go in together the next day and file for unemployment compensation—which they would receive for a year or until their next show opened, whichever came first.

Like many good things, the system was prone to abuse: the number of intermittent show workers