

Little Ladies and Little Gentlemen: Ankara Festival 24-29 April 2010

The context for this well organised and popular event, which coincides with the annual Children's Day, is important for a visitor from Western Europe to understand. Turkey is not really like most Western European countries today even if in the big cities there are superficial resemblances. If you were a regular traveller behind the old Iron Curtain then Turkey, a bastion of NATO during the confrontation with the USSR, looks familiar. The architecture, repertoire and organisation of state theatres, for example, are very similar, East and West. You quickly realise also that what you are seeing are the trappings of 'modernism' as understood in the 1920's.

Every large building in the Turkish capital, Ankara, was draped with a national flag and often a huge picture of one of the founders of the modern Turkish state, grey pictures of men in the strangely dated wing collars and suits favoured by Lloyd George or Stanley Baldwin. These pictures can be five or six stories high.

In both Turkey and Russia today we see the results of a continuing struggle since the 1920's between Western style modernism and ideas about democracy and older concepts of national identity and obedience to spiritual authority. The latter is visibly evident in perhaps 30 per cent of women who wear the long coat and headscarf which passes for traditional Muslim dress in Turkey. Vast areas of modern high-rise flats around Ankara or Istanbul house millions of people for whom society is in transition. Theatre is offered as a point of stability in a changing world.

State Theatre

The festival is organised by the centrally controlled DT, the State Theatre, which has a vast production village outside Ankara and branches in a dozen cities. It has taken place for the last six years to follow the huge annual Children's Day parade with floats and youth groups which brings traffic to a halt for some hours in the city centre. The focus of the festival organisation is on getting huge numbers of school parties into the many theatre spaces across the city, some of them implanted in new and far flung parts of the city of 3 million people, in areas both rich and very poor.

Wizard of Oz: Zorlu Theatre, Istanbul

Istanbul is the business and cultural capital of Turkey, where a degree of artistic freedom is tolerated and small theatre companies can flourish or at least exist in safety. Sponsored by a business, this independent company's *Wizard of Oz* follows the prevailing Central European model of shows, in which recorded music and song and dance numbers are staging posts along the storytelling road. Naturally the format is heavily influenced by the original film version of the 1940's.

The six actors were good, well trained and capable of personifying the characters as directed. Given the style adopted they did it well. Costumes were well executed but the set design was at times extremely poor, particularly a cardboard cut-out of the Wizard himself which seemed to have been an afterthought knocked up by the actors. By contrast the tin-man and scarecrow – an excellent fluid dancer – were well costumed.

The text was explanatory in the conventional children's theatre manner, telling us in literal terms what should be evident from the action. As a result, the actors had little scope to work to extend the emotional palette except for the moment of revelation that the fearsome wizard is in fact a man with a loud-hailer. This moment of anti-theatre did not last as the 'Wizard' shortly brought on some inelegant props to give the tin man his clockwork heart, the scarecrow a book and the lion a medal for bravery.

Best Effect: the silk cloth blown by a fan to represent a fast flowing river. Most bizarre idea: the electronically activated dog which mechanically wagged its tail or raised a paw when prodded.

Verdict: A capable team locked in an inflexible style and genre.

Sunday audience tolerant and pleased to be out with middle-class parents – all probably civil servants as no headscarves were being worn. Relaxed atmosphere.

Pinokyo: DT Ankara

This is a State Theatre production by an Italian director. With a cast of 20 it needed a larger stage. Unfortunately it was presented on a tiny stage at the end of a long, flat and narrow auditorium. This is an endemic problem for DT Ankara as productions are constantly moved between stages of different sizes.

The acting style was relaxed to the point of slackness. The direction lacked focus and the performers did their best to communicate but without many tools or structures to help them. While the basic set looked very good – a log cabin effect with many hidden doors and windows in an apparently unbroken surface - the key props were weak and the costumes had no coherence or inherent interest for the audience.

The very first scene in which Gepetto creates Pinocchio was thrown away. A poorly made tree stump on wheels is tapped a couple of times and then revolves to reveal an actor with a small wooden nose sitting inside. The sound of the tapping was hollow making it obvious it was a prop. As Gepetto makes a few more symbolic taps Pinocchio smacks him on the back – naturally provoking laughter. But from then on there was very little invention and absolutely no attempt to create a magical and mysterious presence. A chase started immediately.

Without knowing the text, it is hard to determine what the audience was being told, but the appearance of a soldier – a key authority figure in Turkey – and eight young actors in dungarees who dashed about creating the sea, moving props, changing the set and representing fellow pupils – suggested a contemporary social and perhaps political context for the story. Younger children who are offered a traditional or very well known story are simply confused by adult references in character and costume.

The production lacked any clear style or discipline. All the actors showed performing ability almost deliberately suppressed in the search for informality at odds with the original story and theatrical history.

Little Pirate: DT Van

Unfortunately the formula upon which this show is based is flawed in several ways. First it attempts to mimic the perception and behaviour of a demanding and petulant child aged 6 or 7.

The actress overacts childish behaviour in a manner neither interesting for children nor easily achieved, especially if the other elements in the production are equally misguided. For example, all the actors shout their text loudly from the beginning. The effect is to create maximum noise aiming to elicit shrieks from the audience. Further, the shows content is no more than the reproduction of a child playing informally, without a storyline or structure.

It is often the case that an inexperienced director will conceive a show for children set in a context, such as a circus, for which the actors lack the skills to realise effects satisfactory to the audience. Three male supporting actors are required to perform first as puppets and later as pirates, climbing ropes and stage fighting. None of this work was fully achieved, both because the actors lacked the acrobatic skills needed and the things they had to climb were badly designed and installed. A second female actor appears briefly in the role of a fish wearing a huge and colourful head.

A further mistake is to seek to engage children by including or referring to contemporary cultural phenomena, such as TV programmes, pop music or in this case cartoon films. These date very quickly and the theatre company simply highlights the superiority of the recorded or electronic media. The back wall of the stage formed of elastic slats, making it possible to pass through, is used as a projection screen for TV cartoon films. At one point therefore they use the device of the child entering the film – although the actress on stage did not look like the one in the film to me! When the tv remote control fails, the child is obliged to play with her three puppets – three full sized men - which she has earlier mistreated and abandoned with some violence.

Extreme noise and crude shouting, loud music and stamping feet characterise this production.

The Rooster: DT Izmir

Although dramaturgically weak being built from repetitive short scenes interspersed with dances, the overall impression is positive. The show has a clear purpose and content, familiar to UK audiences from the annual pantomime, in which a determined individual must unite the people in opposition to a tyrannous and greedy overlord.

The format is of a group of players enacting the story of a rooster who bravely confronts injustice. Actors sit watching scenes they are not performing and two musicians underscore the action and play for dances.

The folk theatre style costumes are well made but there is no depth to the acting. The actors at first appeared to be quite unfocussed but warmed up later. The repertoire of dance steps is limited to what an average person might be able to do at a party.

For the first time I was able to watch a show almost too big for the venue. Whereas most shows are being presented in large, cinema-like auditoria with raised stage, the small studio for the Rooster was ideal for a young audience, well raked down to a playing area without barrier between actor and audience. However, the style of the show did not invite a closer engagement but remained at a distance.

Diary of a Butterfly: DT Sivas

Well executed black light evocation of a tropical forest with huge butterflies. The structure of the show was more suited to engagement of children. Scenes between humans in full light alternated with black light sequences which were well choreographed and often inventive.

Music was from a single guitar playing Latin jazz music with full warm chords to evoke Amazonian richness. Many large butterflies and insects flit about among the trees. This effect is at times inventive and well sustained. The child first hunts butterflies with a big net, gets one and then reads about their complex life cycle. Her mother tries to persuade her to become a fan of nature but she insists on chasing the biggest, most colourful butterfly. The forest reacts by entangling her, insects bite her and she fails to catch her prey. In a dream sequence we see her being chased herself by the Little Butterfly.

Sadly, although the execution and manipulation was mostly careful and deft, the production was marred by crude dance numbers and very bad singing, made worse by badly balanced radio microphones the actors seem to rely on. One badly directed and ill disciplined dance number featured red flowers mobbing a blue flower.

There was some good interaction between mother and daughter in the bedroom scenes but the Little Butterfly flapped her arms unconvincingly and did no more than emit peals of inane giggling to indicate her joy of living.

Because black light – ultra violet – can only be on or off, there were sharp breaks when the action moved from forest to bedroom or objects were reset. During these musical breaks the audience chattered, presumably discussing what they had seen. This is not a bad thing at all and some companies, like Grips in West Berlin, have always offered audiences space for discussion and reflection in their theatre of empowerment.

Once again, a production was conceived with some professional skill but marred by the presence of actors who would not commit to the discipline required to make the event a full success.

Big Foot: DT Trabzon

Set in a naturalistic, fully detailed box set representing a middle class, western-style children's bedroom, brother and sister are alone in the house and cannot sleep. They decide to get up and the boy shows his sister a spell he has found to raise a spirit of chaos and rebellion into their room. A large adult female, representing a hooligan teenager in a pastiche of extreme modern clothing bursts through the French window and sets about destroying the very orderly room. She exhibits crude behaviour, including repeated and overt farting, belching and spitting half eaten food everywhere. In the end the whole room is covered in sweet wrappers and scattered toys and furniture. The children – and the audience – are thoroughly disgusted. At last brother and sister resort to tricking a friend into calling the demon away to her house.

This is blatant propaganda in favour of obedience to parental – and wider social and political control and discipline. The offensive nature of the behaviour is so exaggerated as to both disgust and be unbelievable at the same time. It is quite likely to backfire but will mostly be forgotten.

Turkey is a country in which it is a crime to insult the military and writers have been prosecuted under the strict code which punishes any challenge to national ideology. The country has been riven by conflict in recent years. Every major building, including theatres, has security scanners at the entrance to guard against bomb attacks. National identity and respect for authority are live issues here, despite the apparent calm of leafy streets, open air cafes, bars named after

Newcastle Quayside or Irish pubs, and foreign brands such as MacDonaldis, Marks and Spencer and Mango.

I wanna grow up: DT Ankara

Why the title of this facsimile of a British traditional pantomime has an American English title is key to understanding the policy behind DT's attitude to plays for children. The show has many influences from the US musical theatre tradition, but was lightweight in story and presentational substance. It has a modest backdrop and a low budget set, vaguely 18th century court costumes from the wardrobe and stage pictures from the amateur handbook – mostly a flat line of characters across the stage.

A king and queen decide to send their son, played by an actress in trousers, to the forest to learn what work is about from a forester. Since Turkey is a 21st century secular republic with many problems of national identity and a vast, mainly young population, such a fantasy story must be a denial of reality. Like the British pantomime, designed for a poor working class audience as an annual treat, a bit of glamour in a drab and grey world, this show hardly makes sense in a world of computer games and mobile phones, facebook and twitter. Turkey has multichannel tv with films, soaps, celebrity culture and shopping channels like everywhere else.

It can only be that DT believes that children today are not only stupid but easy to force into becoming a compliant adult population, accepting what is offered and allowed. A telling detail in this otherwise featureless production was the infantile King, dressed as an 18th Century picture book King, playing obsessively with a hand-held game device. The Prince is told to grow out of such childishness. In the second half which I could not bear to stay for, the Prince en travesti probably joins the army or rescues a maiden from bearded bandits.

The Chronicles of Narnia: DT Ankara

This is a huge, full-blown musical with 40 performers, a seven piece band on stage, and lifts that go up and down repeatedly bringing groups of characters or a staircase in or out of focus. It was lightweight and determinedly comic, although the middle-aged small actress playing the young child Lucy did a better job with the small voice and bouncy running than any of her colleagues in the other seven similarly cast shows in the festival programme.

The show was clearly presented for the opportunity to create effects rather than to present a rich story with many philosophical, religious and political layers of ideas. As a struggle between good and evil, death and resurrection its imagery has many Christian motifs. The gentle lion Aslan is however a perfect fantasy representation of the man who will save the world – like the men in the huge pictures draped on all public buildings in Turkey, the founders of the revolution.

Turkey's State Theatre offers children a fantasy world which seems to be that of the Victorian and Edwardian English pantomime. The age of the internet and the challenge of Muslim fundamentalism are simply absent. As for Turkey's complex present and future relationship with Europe – not in front of the children please! And although millions of children live today in high rise flats in a fast changing world, the State Theatre presents home as a thatched cottage in never-never land.

International Programme

The Russian Theatre of Tatarstan actually comes from the great city Kazan in the region to which Stalin forcibly moved a large part of the ethnic Tatar or Turkic population of Crimea. It is a standard, good quality company in a long tradition of repertoire theatre in Russia. Their version of Pinocchio is slick but tight, full of small cameos allowing good actors to shine. While it is very close in style and approach to the work by DT companies, it is simply better done in all departments. While work for children is only a small part of the repertoire this show had a degree of discipline, clarity and commitment to the audience frequently lacking in the work of DT companies.

I only saw one of some dozen smaller shows from France, Italy, Spain and other Western European countries as I wanted to focus on the shows from Turkey itself. For the most part these seem to have been chosen for entertainment, variety theatre approaches, without words or serious content. The Russian mime show was a ragbag of sometimes hilarious and surreal numbers more suited to an end of the pier audience in the 1950's than today's young people.

The team of organisers are volunteers from the acting company, literary and other departments of DT, a group of determined enthusiasts keen to find appropriate alternatives to the present repertoire.

The hosting of the small group of overseas guests, Paul Harman and Clare Slater (NT Literary Department), Etoundi Zeyang (Cameroun Festival), Aglaia Pusch (Padeia Brazil) and of the performers was exemplary and most generous.

My last minute offer of a presentation on UK TYA was enthusiastically accepted and meticulously arranged at three days notice. About 30 people came.

Learning from Others

DT has a way of doing theatre for children and it will be hard to change. Of course children like stories and stories do not have to be about everyday reality to be attractive, interesting, relevant or instructive.

Many of us in the UK are still heavily committed to instrumental uses of theatre and are perhaps overconfident in our ability to influence the future attitudes and behaviour of children who see our shows. We have developed a successful small-scale model of touring theatre suitable for performance in schools. Our colleagues in Turkey are starting in a different place – a well resourced state theatre system which provides some plays for children within a large but conservative repertoire. A small-scale model of delivery may well not be the best for them in the short term. Indeed their AD is keen to find more large scale shows to add to his repertoire. *Lion King* and *Warhorse* are likely candidates and suggestions from our producers on the medium and larger scale would be welcome.

Given the resources available, there could be valuable opportunities for UK directors and writers able to produce work on a larger stage. Only by meeting to share and exchange ideas, will we know what may benefit both parties.

Paul Harman

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