

## NB TYA FESTIVAL: PARNU, ESTONIA: 18-23 OCTOBER 2008

*Each year the Nordic Baltic Festival is held in Estonia, Latvia or Lithuania, whose turn it will be in 2009. In 2008 there were TYA shows from Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Norway, Russia, Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania.*

The Baltic countries have been important trading partners with the UK for a thousand years. The Vikings created trade routes from the Black Sea to Ireland through the rivers of Russia, Poland and Lithuania, across a huge land mass full of valuable timber, furs, fish – and slaves. Later business competition and religious wars brought German, Swedish and Russian bishops, kings and bankers to dominate the smaller local peoples. Only today are Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania really free to spread their cultural wings, to develop their identity as dreamers, actors, thinkers and entertainers. Naturally the new global enemies of mass produced tv, american movies and British playwrights are dragons to be fought or avoided.

**NB Festival** is heavily supported by the new regional powers, Denmark and Sweden, but Russia is jealously watchful – after all, half the population of Estonia is Russian by culture and often quite recent origin. Minority politics in Estonia and Latvia are a minefield.

Paul Harman and Jeremy Turner, representing the UK, almost count as neutrals. Well led, deep and open discussions of the shows, the key feature of each day, revealed the great cultural differences between anarchist Danes, moralistic and didactic Russians, idealistic Swedes and politically correct Brits.

Kim Woo Ok, the Korean festival organiser and ASSITEJ EC veteran, was there to buy shows. His judgements are brutally simple - will it work for my audiences? Yes or no? Leading Russian playwright Michael Bartenev, and the former ASSITEJ President Adolf Shapiro, have a more complex task. They flew in from Moscow to support the minority Russian language presence at NB festival. All the main discussion here is in English or Estonian, despite the fact that over half the population of Estonia is actually Russian by origin and culture. Adolph and Michael are world class artists. At the NB festival they represent the Elephant in the Room nobody mentions. Or should that be a Bear. (Apparently brown bears are so common in Estonia they are on the menu in the best restaurants. )

Undoubtedly the most powerful and accomplished performances by far were by **VAT Theater** of Estonia, **Pilkentafel** of Germany and **Batida** of Denmark, and **Open Circle** from Lithuania.

### TOP SHOWS

**VAT Teater** is outstanding for its commitment to high energy physical productions – often versions of existing texts or stories. Three years ago I saw VAT's version of ***Kalevipoeg***, the Estonian national epic. Their show about Lindbergh's Atlantic crossing put them on the international circuit a decade ago. Moliere's ***Misanthrope*** had only its third outing at NB to a packed and respectful house. The translation into Estonian is considered excellent by native speakers – for a foreigner, the muscular delivery of the language matched the extreme physicality. VAT's trademark contortions are most evident in the supporting characters, those bizarre relatives who populate the fringes of Moliere's stories.

The design concept is a blackboard – floors and walls start plain black and the actors use white chalk draw the set in outline and with labels – fireplace, washbasin, towel, hat-stand. To open the show a hand appears to draw a door. Upon entering, a character will draw his hat or coat on the hat-stand and on leaving crosses it out. A poker, for example, is drawn and crossed out repeatedly as it travels around the stage. The manner of drawing naturally follows the rhythm and energy of the moment. This strangely suits the period formality of relationships in the play.

At times, as at the final showdown between the Misanthrope and his beloved, an acrobatic dance routine accompanies the argument, even more accentuating, and providing the subtext to, the formal structure of the text. If such performances fail sometimes to touch an audience, they remain memorable for their commitment and care. For an older young audience, VAT's **Misanthrope** is an admirable challenge. It is clearly unexportable, except within the framework of an international theatre festival, like Edinburgh or Zurich.

**Pilkentafel** are a free company with their own small house in Flensburg on the Danish border. They are dedicated to exploring the frontiers of theatre for young audiences. Their improvisation with paper at *Takeoff Festival 1995* outraged most UK professionals at the time. Elisabeth Bode does not care however. In 2008 her version of the text of Kafka's **Metamorphosis** is at once literary, biographical, psychological, physical and imagistic. The audience are seated within an enclosure formed of plain office doors. When some doors open they simply reveal an image of Kafka's parents and sister. It is not an exit. Other doors have small hatches through which the actors can speak. At one point ping pong balls cascade over the walls. The two actors, one of whom plays the cello exquisitely, deliver the text as storytellers both inside with us and outside the walls. Only in one small section does the actor actually physicalize the Metamorphosis, hanging spread-eagled against the top of the wall like the beetle Gregor has become. In another disturbing image linking the process of writing with the image of the beetle, pages of the text are slowly picked up and drawn outside by long thin sticks.

The German language of Kafka is complex and convoluted and brilliantly delivered by the actors, using a full range of expressive tones while preserving the elegant structure of the sentences. Quite impossible to enjoy fully if you are not fluent in German but an exciting and challenging festival performance where our aim is to celebrate new approaches and areas of content.

**Batida** are a collective in the manner of Footsbarn, Kneehigh and Odin, touring the world with shows that work in many ways for many kinds of audience. **María Bonita** is their tribute to the struggling masses in Latin America, based on a paradoxical true story of a woman who ran away with a famous bandit to avoid living as a poverty stricken child bearing slave like her peers. So the show is driven by the company's trademark street band music. It successively pokes fun at do-gooders, romantics and followers of revolutionaries – the company is anarchist in its politics and Danish in its love of irony. Music, big puppets, carnival costumes, a full size cactus and a real fire on stage make for a strong show if you know what they are talking about. Playing in Danish with English subtitles did not help the ten year olds in Estonia but again politically aware 16 year olds would be interested.

**Batida's** other show which naturally closed the NB Festival is **Grand Finale**, in which an ageing street band comes to play for a wedding for which the bride does not show up. So they play their repertoire and suffer under their dictatorial conductor, the overweight piano

player dies, two of the band are married to fulfil the contract for the gig and a rousing drum finale send everyone away happy.

**Open Circle** from Lithuania area remarkable collective of young actors, now in their fourth year of creating stories from their own lives, presented in an informal staging and in improvisational style. I had seen the show in Alnwick at the Rural Touring Companies 2008 *Pride of Place Festival* and noticed that – perhaps inevitably after four years of being played, the show had settled to a relatively stable sequence of intense, tiny moments from the real life of each actor in turn. The idea had started as a way of getting actors in drama school to be open and honest in their communication with an audience. The actors sit in a circle with the audience behind them in a couple of rows. Almost as in a Quaker meeting, it seems that the action begins when one of the actors is moved to tell about a memorable moment in their childhood. Each actor designates others to play parts in the story.

There is a developing dramaturgy, stories become more complex and more intimate as the show progresses. There are stories of young lover's betrayal, rape and violation. The director, Giniotis, wants his actors to become more independent of writers and directors, to believe that they are themselves interesting subjects for drama. The result is a group of composed and self aware, self confident and open performers.

In the context of the traditional, authoritarian, hierarchical Russian theatre – which dominates this part of the world – **Open Circle** is a truly revolutionary development. It is echoed in the struggle of several other independent producers and groups to make a space for themselves outside the conservative, state theatre system.

## RUSSIANS LATE ARRIVING

Shows by Russian speaking companies were generally less ambitious and weaker in performance. They are taking the challenge well but something in the social structure and power relationships within the Russian companies inhibits development and the ability learn from outside influences. This has been a common theme in my three week voyage from one end of Eastern Europe to the other, from Romania, through Croatia to Estonia. Established institutions cannot learn and independent artists are unsupported by any significant infrastructure.

Is the UK so different? How easy is it to get public funding for a long term development of competence in making theatre for children? In the countries I have visited, only in Estonia is there a common agreement that a new kind of theatre – and theatre organisation – is needed. The festival programme has therefore included a wide range of approaches and experiments to stimulate discussion and debate. There have been quite contrasting dance based shows, different approaches to the use of puppets and objects in others, a classic Moliere text performed in an extreme physical style, shows using live and recorded music as a principal element and more abstract shows than traditional tales. There has not been a single naturalistic show on a contemporary social theme related to young people.

## YOUNG CLASS IN RIGA

But that is precisely what I saw in Riga on my way to catch a plane home. Lauris Gundars teaches playwriting at the Cultural Academy and brought his wife and two young sons to the NB festival. He directs for one of the many independent new Latvian companies, without a big house to fill every day, actors and technicians to pay every week and solely concerned with the art – and business – of staying alive!

Lauris tipped **Class**, a pop musical written by an 18 year old with a cast of 12 young music and drama students stiffened by a couple of established young leads and five professional opera singers playing the grownups. The story is a classic Soviet style plot: low class boy (possibly Russian) is an outcast – possibly because he has been unfairly accused of beating up girl's brother. Girl naturally falls for victim of bullying, is torn in her loyalties and they sing many heart-wrenching ballads across the stage to each other. The show stopper is a number in which the teachers remember how much they were like today's kids and go mad in a rock and roll frenzy to the cheers and delight of the audience of 300 12 to 14's. In the end of course it all turns out to have been a mistake, the bad kids apologise and love wins out.

Excellently staged with the kind of relaxed choreography you yearn for in Youth Theatre shows – movement any kid can do in patterns that allow for the maximum variation of individual delivery but are still pleasing. A positive theatre experience which I saw in a grandiose theatre and cultural centre dating to Stalin's time in the 1940's or 50's, soaring classical columns, stained glass, enormous chandeliers and uplifting motifs. It is now the run down home of the Russian language theatre in Riga and an obvious embarrassment to all but it served this show well. **Class** is far too expensive to tour, the story is too soft for tough multiracial places like London or Paris, but as an experience for kids in a small country, with a language nobody else knows, it had scale and confidence. And it was made for no-one else but them by people who care.

My visit to the **State Puppet Theatre** in Riga the same evening reinforced the point about culture for young audiences everywhere I have been, from Bucharest to Croatia, Estonia and Latvia. It matters a lot on one level but is still neglected in practice. Theatre tradition is closely associated with national pride. The training of performers is wide ranging and thorough so actors can sing, dance and fight much better than their UK peers. They are also more likely to work continuously, playing and rehearsing a large repertoire of shows and so their level of competence is very high. If the concepts are mistaken, the texts are outmoded or the direction is slack, good actors will always look poor. The puppet show was a fussy story about animals delivered by three perfectly competent performers trapped in a production which did not trust the audience to be more than passive recipients. The director and designer had conspired to inflict the maximum of puppet twiddling, gauze wafting, constant movement and continuous bad synthesized music on an audience of two year olds and parents. The tickets cost the equivalent of £20 or more in our terms so the audience was pretty upmarket.

All is not well in the State theatre sector in Eastern Europe. History and tradition bear heavily on willingness to innovate – in the puppet museum the most interesting puppets came from several decades ago. The ethos is still that of the 1930's or earlier – we can progress to a perfect world if we all pretend hard enough. Younger artists know better, but are hard-pressed to beat global entertainment giants for the leisure dollar, pound or rouble. The UK's more open funding structure may be better placed to support innovation, but the standards of performance will always be limited in the UK by the lack of deep and ruthless training and the conditions for continuous artistic growth and development. We need to think about this more – just what the well-funded festivals in Romania, Croatia and Estonia have encouraged their local artists to do in the last three weeks.

PAUL HARMAN: OCTOBER 2008