Three Arts Projects

Murray Bramwell’s Reviews

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3 Dark Tales
Theatre O
Scott Theatre

Kayassine
Les Arts Sauts
Torrens Parade Ground

Hopeless Games
fabrik Potsdam & DO Theatre
Union Hall

Theatre O from the UK is a hypermobile company which uses the signature performance techniques of Ecole Jacques Lecoq in Paris. Their Edinburgh Festival hit, *3 Dark Tales* is one of three international productions being offered in the Adelaide Fringe program by Arts Projects Australia.

Using two heavy costume racks, a wardrobe which passes as an elevator, a lobby, a bedroom and, a wardrobe, plus a range of office chairs and a large assortment of hanging lampshades, Theatre O caper their way through their tales of mystery and imagination.

Mr Tibble, played by Theatre O founder Joseph Alford, is a downtrodden little fellow who is pushed around at the office, and, at home, even more pushed about by his overbearing wife (Catherine Valdes) who glowers at him and berates him in a gobbledy language which is a mix of franglais, spanglish and key words like jaguar and Dr Sav-aage - a reference to their sports car driving neighbour with whom she is having ferocious hanky panky. The meek-mannered Tibble, of course, can only take so much of all this and, with the introduction of a very large and terribly sharp imaginary kitchen knife, the dark tale gesticulates somewhat obviously to its dark conclusion.

*The Unfortunate Predicament of Amelia Sas* (Sarah Coxon) focuses on a young woman across the office from Tibble who has parents from one of the outer rings of Hell. They incessantly talk over and through her and are obsessed with having her married off. They are so self-preoccupied they even fail to notice that she is trying to tell them that she has only half an hour to live. Fortunately Tibble arrives to serenade her in her final minutes, in a scene that makes a fine exercise in slo-mo but seems to go on for the infinity that Amelia is headed towards. The third tale centres on the office boss, Frank, played by Lucien MacDougall with a Rowan Atkinson mandible and an arching eyebrow to match. Frank’s secret is that his family have given him the flick and he goes through the excruciation of loneliness and rejection.

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3 Dark Tales has been praised for its knockabout pace and skilful physicality but the routines are all-too familiar despite their technique, and the endless barrage of mime and voiced sound effects every time a door opens or a seat belt is clicked shut, wears decidedly thin. The stories are unremarkable and surprisingly heartless re-tellings of themes of office drudgery and modern loneliness. Chaplin and Keaton covered this ground well before now and while there is always more to say, Theatre O, for all their confident virtuosity, have not managed to get much beyond cliche.

The first thing to say about Les Arts Sauts is what an extraordinary dome they have. Forty one metres wide, the inflatable white bubble in which they perform has been especially designed by German architect Hans-Walter Muller. Inside its black walls are three arched beams which support the vast rig on which the fourteen aerialists perform. The audience faces upwards, reclining in deck chair-like seats reportedly based on designs of those in the Somerville Auditorium in Perth which the company visited back in 1995.

The show is called Kayassine, Laotian for circus - although Les Arts Sauts have moved a long way from traditional circus conventions. Their trapeze work is not performed to rolling drums and the antics of red-nosed clowns, nor to the elaborately meaningless solemnities that are now the hallmark of Cirque du Soleil. Les Arts Sauts, you could say have risen well above the competition.

A group of musicians- two cellists and a bass player along with two female vocalists with gymnastic voices provide a continuing, soundtrack to the dizzying aerial work. Dressed in scarlet, the singers warble, scat and generally improvise while the bass and cellos set up heavy bowed rhythms. A single female figure begins a series of ever more alarming rotations from a solitary and very high swing, another performs inside a single loop of white fabric. The lighting is sparse and the dome has an murky enormity.

Then, with what sounds like the most unearthly graunching, the entire stage rig is raised more than fifty feet in the air, taking with it all the musicians who continue performing unfazed at being taken, without apparent warning, to nosebleed altitudes.

The aerial display from our horizontal vantage point is as technically precise as it is unnerving. These trapeze routines are anything but. The flips, turns, catches and reversals become increasingly complex and demanding. There are some comic moments high up on the crossbar but the sense is one of pure flight, propelled by daring and an almost dancerly sense of movement. Director Herve Lelardoux and Les Arts Sauts have
taken the thrills of the trapeze swing and placed them into a theatrical canopy that is lighter than air. It is an extraordinary experience.

DO-Theatre from St Petersburg and fabrik from Potsdam, companies formed in the wake of the collapse of the Berlin Wall, have recently joined forces to create dance theatre such as their current touring work, *Hopeless Games*. Drawing from Russian clowning styles, acrobatics, dance and mime, fabrik dancers Sven Till and Wolfgang Hoffman, DO director Evgeny Kozlov, his wife Irina Kozlova and dancer Alexander Bondarev have created a blackly comic glimpse of the ghosts of European history.

A group of transients take over a derelict railway station for a bit of mucking about. Trains pass through but do not stop. The tramps in bowler hats and long coats pass the time with hopeless, perhaps we should say, futile games. Someone takes out a revolver and a macabrely pleasurable game of Russian roulette follows. Restlessly they pick up battered suitcases and stride about, clashing and colliding, ganging up on each other, fooling and menacing each other.

There are many influences from butoh, from silent comedy, white mime and most notably the Absurd theatre of Samuel Beckett. The text here is *Waiting for Godot* - not so much the Godot, as the waiting. The boredom and the random violence is also mixed with lyrical and contemplative moments as the music shifts from cracked pianos, kazoos and strained violins to waltzing accordions and celebratory folk styles.

*Hopeless Games* is a reminder of the misery and anonymous fates of so many Europeans displaced by the turbulence of the 20th century. Crimes and kindnesses go unremarked and the engines of political change roll through regardless. This zany little tableau of energy and sorrow, for all the now familiar commonplaces of its style - the hats and coats and cases of Pina Bausch, the Magritte balloons, the wonky music denoting chaos and discord, the stage fog and endless trains - has a tangible melancholy and weariness which is affecting and provoking. It is theatre of the old world reflecting a new, but not different, order. And, on a warm Adelaide evening, it is a useful reminder that there really are other experiences and destinies beyond our own.