

Krokus festival

Hasselt, Belgium. 21-24 February 2009

Paul Harman and Shona Powell were there ...

See a dozen shows in four days, wait three days more and write down what you can remember with clarity or pleasure. That is my usual way of coping with a festival. As well as the shows, there will be new people to meet, new approaches and opinions to weigh up, assessments to make and conclusions to draw. I treat travel to an unfamiliar country, a new town, the artistic impressions and the welcome I get from the people as a package.

Flat, drizzly, grey Belgium, where the crocuses are barely peeking out is nonetheless buzzing with energy in February. This is Flanders, up near the borders with Holland and Germany, neat and tidy, where drivers of the free local bus service, waiters, and people at the railway station speak four languages as a matter of course, the local technical college labels its buildings in English and the huge 1970's arts centre is full of lively kids eager to watch dance companies from seven countries. Staff at all levels were open and friendly and the *Cultuurcentrum* is obviously a place enthusiastically used by a lot of appreciative citizens.

Europe believes in festivals as the main drivers of artistic innovation and public promotion. At Tanzhaus in Düsseldorf, Dschungel in Vienna and now Krokus in Hasselt, the small international network of regular Dance Festivals for Young Audiences is perhaps where theatre was twenty years ago. The number of dedicated companies is small across Europe, making it essential to come together to watch, talk and develop a sense of solidarity. The day of reflection led by the Flemish Theatre Institute attracted over 60 makers and presenters and was conducted entirely in fluent English. All the issues were familiar to the visitors from the UK, Paul Harman and Shona Powell of Lakeside Arts Centre, Nottingham.

Jack Timmermans, director of De Stilte (Silence) from Breda in Holland, flew in from Vienna where Szene Bunte Waehne dance festival was running the same week. He came to dance after training as an actor and over fifteen years has built a company which gives 200 shows a year. Of course, to deliver a repertoire of several shows in those numbers, there has to be double and triple casting and a lot of travel. De Stilte has only just achieved regular state funding – which means salary costs have to double! Timmermans wants the best dancers with the highest level of technique – and Dutch dancers are falling behind, despite the long standing renown of their academies. His delightfully energetic and entertaining production is based on themes and characters from *Alice in Wonderland*. It is a full stage piece using a tall screen on wheels with doors of various sizes which can provide many different shapes and angles, and receive shadow and video projections. It has two Polish, an Italian and a Swiss dancer. This worries the company a bit because a central plank of their relationship with schools is an interactive workshop process, difficult to deliver if you don't speak Dutch well.

All the shows had faults of excess – too many ideas, too much technology, too long. But all were presented to a high standard and created with care and passion. Dance is an expensive medium, creation and rehearsal take a long time. The commitment of resources is critical.

TPO from Italy are visual artists first and foremost, creating interactive performances with video projection onto the whole floor and side screens of a small arena with traverse seating and a U-shaped projection area. *Farfalle* is a quite literal account of the life cycle of a butterfly. Two female dancers set up the movement ideas for each stage – eggs, larvae, caterpillar, butterfly – and then invite selected children to respond to the projected images which move when stepped upon. The design is bold and colourful, and the concept is like dancing in a huge, responsive picture book. For me, the dancers did not have room enough to develop a presentation and the children had too little time to catch on to each new movement idea before the show moved on.

Dschungelwien from Austria were an international hit with *Surprise*, a delightful exploration of relationships with a lot of white wheelbarrows and water. The Boy, Girl and Musician team from Surprise now attack the theme of puberty and pent up energy in *Secret Worlds (Geheime Welten)*. 12 square tables make a platform, a four storey building, dens, cages and a tower. They run, chase, hide, cross-dress in grown-up clothes and shoes, pick their noses and pull out new and frightening hair from navels and armpits. The loudly amplified live music provides a pounding energy sometimes matched by explosive bursts of dance, which needs nearly all the space available on the vast opera house stage, with the audience of 120 sat on four sides. If there is a downside to this stunning display of skill and celebratory exuberance, it is the constant reconfiguration of the tables which have to be securely locked together when stacked four high! At 75 minutes it is too long, as the company have created more and more ideas in the process of developing and playing the show and are not yet ready to 'kill their darlings' as Timmermans put it.

My favourite show was *In the Shadows of Trees (A l'ombre des arbres)* by Félicette Chazerand, a French choreographer working in the French part of Belgium, Wallonie. The show explores the nature of trees in all their aspects, which the dancers reflect in extended and rich choreography. It was a more satisfying experience than most of the other shows for me because each idea was fully developed, the dancers had a full clear stage on which to perform and the use of lighting and projection technology was simple but elegant. In the final shadow theatre dance sequence, the white backcloth becomes a canvas on which we see the video projection of a tree being painted in black ink wash.

There was a very funny sketch *keeping busy keeping still* by a young Flemish ensemble in which three dancers explore balance and weight and the effects of toppling over and into each other, producing hilarious chains of reactions. A simple idea, very well performed. Other experiments commissioned by the organiser of Krokus Festival, Gerhard Verfaillie, were interesting if unfinished and bode well for the gradual development of an appropriate dance repertoire for young audiences in Flanders.

The most adventurous piece of all required a train trip to Antwerp and a tram ride out to a retail park where *keski.e.space* (click for link) were rehearsing *Supermarket Shopping* in a branch of Carrefour. Good crisp dance by Dutch choreographer Alexandra Meijer in solos, duets, trios and quartets explore the things people do in supermarkets. This show has been hugely successful and can accommodate parties of 60 children twice a day. The fruit and vegetables, sweets, crisps and freezers and the passing real shoppers provide a varied backdrop for the dance, which is light-hearted, attractive but precise. The company travel with their own souped-up trolleys and baskets but each shop demands its own sequence and selection of locations.

ASSITEJ should provide a continuing framework for the inter-national exchange which this growing branch of theatre for young audiences needs for healthy development. It is already evident that those companies which travel most, like Dschungel, De Stilte, TPO, and the other visual theatre company of Tiago Guedes from Portugal, have the greatest confidence, an accomplished style with an emphasis on strong technique. Less successful were two companies from France which showed evidence of being rather inward looking and fixed in their approach. None of the companies lacked commitment and the variety of style meant every taste was catered for.

The next Krokus Dans Festival will be in 2010.

Hasselt: Belgium: 21-24 February 2009: www.krokusfestival.be

Paul Harman

Other TYA dance festivals in Europe:

Szene Bunte Waehne, Vienna: www.sbw.at

Takeoff Tanzhaus nrw, Düsseldorf: www.tanzhausnrw.de



Picture Postcard Flanders - Grote Markt Antwerp

The shows were very varied in their approach and divide into three main 'schools'. The Dutch and Flemish are more interested in narrative; the Germans and Austrians favour physical shock and awe, the French, Italians and Portuguese love images, atmosphere and exploration of ideas.



Hasselt doesn't like blank walls ...
... but they do like straight lines



[Click to download a 5 minute video of Secret Worlds](#)

A l'ombre des arbres
Compagnie Félicette Chazerand



Dancing in the foyer as the audience leave ... Hasselt

Dancing in the supermarket ... Carrefour Antwerp

