

Noël au Théâtre 2009



Town Hall on the Grande Place /
Grote Markt built 1401 -1459



Bruxelles, for so we must call it in connection with this annual festival, is home to nearly one million French-speaking Belgians. The 28th **Noël au Théâtre** had 23 shows programmed in six venues across the wider city and suburban communes. It is organised by the Chambre des Théâtres pour l'Enfance et la Jeunesse (www.ctej.be). The core approach of the 60 CTEJ member companies in the 5 million French-speaking community of Wallonie–Bruxelles is that they are artists, the aim is to innovate, develop and strive for perfection in the art of theatre. When a show is ready, it's ready. If not, the audience is part of the process of artistic creation. It is a completely un-commercial approach and free of any hang-up about its role in the education of young people: children have a right and an obligation to access their cultural heritage of professional theatre art and have a responsibility to engage with the arts as part of their role as citizens. If that opens the door to some self-indulgence then the Belgian sense of humour deflates the worst excesses. You are allowed to laugh – a lot!

Banquise (*Packice*) is an eco tale about three penguin musicians exploited by a circus janitor who would be a ringmaster. The show falls into all the traps you could imagine. Bad clowning with brooms, polystyrene covered blocks representing Antarctica, obvious parallels etc etc but perhaps not if you are four. Good classical musicians who had the penguin walks and gestures as clean as their tunes.



After that it was mostly all uphill with a couple of world class shows and excellent skills when the dramaturgy was not quite fully developed.

Between Treetops and Roots (*Entre Cime et Racines*) has a set made of bent twigs and the stump of an oak for a playtable upon which seemingly half a hundred puppets made of twisted tree, gnarled branches, bark, fungi and general forest detritus. (*Carved wood and bricolage with found objects are key features of Belgian art. See pictures.*) The theme is friendship and the atmosphere romantic. Two middle aged ladies play out fantasy stories they remember from childhood when, as children of different heritage, they met in the forest, played together and came to imagine themselves to be dryads. The language is carefully crafted and deliberately clear and slow – 171 languages are spoken in some parts of the city – and the manipulation is perfect. If there were perhaps too many short stories for a grown-up, the smallest in the audience were completely enthralled.



Pulpit in Brussels church ▲



Galafronie have been a world-class company for thirty years. This latest version of ***Chagrin D'Amour*** (*Love Hurts?*) by Jean Debeve is funny, witty, sad, moving, realistic and fantasy escapist. Fanny now moves between her busy Mum's house and her Dad's house, where he is building a difficult relationship with his new 'fiancee'. Fanny has no one to listen to her but her three confidants – Dolly Melba, Teddy Bear and Diary Under the Pillow. Those three bicker about whose job it is to comfort and entertain; they have their own needs after all as Diary fancies Melba and Melba resents Teddy's place in Fanny's affections. The show pulls no punches about the pain of being neglected, curiosity about what Dad is really doing in bed with the Fiancee or Fanny's desire to grow up fast and kill them all. The performances are completely open, uncondescending, direct but unthreatening and the direction is very skilful. And there are lots of songs and laughs. An English translation is on the way.

While I preferred *A L'Ombre des Abres* (See review from *Krokus Festival 2009*), the new dance show *Spirale* by Felicette Shazerand for Parcours has moments of pure joy as the dancers explore in movement the shapes and turns in shells and other objects in Nature. In one sequence, they capture the properties of currents in the air by drawing sheets of very light plastic behind them, inflating them with bodies of swelling and swirling air. It is sophisticated and fully developed yet accessible work for a young audience lacking the dry formalism of much contemporary dance. The loose, flowing acrobatic style makes interesting shapes a child might well want to explore.

Less successful but similar in approach is the dance work of Lieven Bayens for Iota Dance. Since his visits to Takeoff some years ago he has continued to experiment in many forms of dance for the 2 to 5's. This time *Tout Ouïe* is a series of numbers based on mediaeval music and rhythms in which the single dancer performs on stilts for part of the time.

Tof Theatre are masters of surreal puppetry and their show *Premiers pas sur la Dune* is about birth and the bonds between child and mother. We see a beribboned box delivered by a stork from which emerges a naked small boy marionette complete with dangly bits and glasses. His adventures in the new world are filled with images of parent and child – adult and baby birds and even large and small cars. He is dogged everywhere by a plastic duck who has decided he is her mother! The four manipulators create a constantly flowing and changing parade of images. No text but a wealth of meanings. A must for the quality of the performance alone.

No need to dwell on the soppy slapstick show about maladroit lovers beyond the capacity of the performers to realise or Casquette's *Los Yayos*, the excellently performed, wordless dance comedy about an elderly couple for whom ballroom dancing brought and held them together until the end. Finally, a well crafted show about fear of the dark and how leaving the light on prevents you from seeing the stars sent me pleasantly to sleep, although my companion approved its appropriateness for and enjoyment by the many small children in the audience.



Design in Belgian theatre for young audiences is strongly influenced by Art Deco and older craft traditions



Agnès Limbos is the mistress – or perhaps the Grande Dame - of Belgian object theatre and in ***Fragile*** for her company Gare Centrale she demonstrates her commitment to the future of the craft. Agnes has worked for four years with two recent graduates from the conservatoire to help them build a three part show which has all the hallmarks of the deep tradition of Belgian surrealism in the service of serious storytelling. The theme is human relationships and how fragile they are. Part One shows us a small room. A host of everyday objects, flies on the wall and remote controlled cars chase each other across floors and walls, circle around each other and crash into each other. Each tiny scene is a fully fledged story of a brief encounter or even a marriage. At one moment, the sideboard door opens and we see a withdrawn, hooded child peering out into this strange world where everyone else seems to know what they are doing, even if it seems crazy. The balance of threat and release through laughter is carefully maintained. This is highly accomplished work of great quality in a form that demands and deserves close attention. It is theatre as another world in which to journey without preconceptions, open to discovery of anything and everything, to be challenged - and entertained.

There is much more that could be reported about the variability of house management styles in Belgian arts centres – do they know about EU health and safety regulations at all? Don't even think of going anywhere in a wheelchair. The 15 year old TYA Centre La Montagne Magique remains a world leader in building relationships between artists, mediators and young audiences. (www.theatremontagnemagique.be) Publisher Emile Lansman has over one hundred francophone plays for young people (www.lansman.org). The artistic ambition of Belgian companies – in both Flemish and French communities - is a strong and inspiring challenge to the UK's narrative and instrumental traditions.

With good food, beer and chocolate, what more could you ask?

NB The time of year to see even more shows from Wallonie is the third week in August when the companies all showcase their newest work in the small town of Huy.

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