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SUNDAY 5 AUGUST 2012

TEXT SIZE

Seven faces of St Petersburg with visual flair Mephisto Waltz Mr Carmen Hangman Petya and the Wolf Circus in Hand Time for Fun Settimana



Mary Brennan
 Dance critic

It is the most welcome of invasions, this many-faceted Russian season which takes over the main space at Assembly Roxy for most of the day and lays claim to the upstairs studio in the morning.

Seven shows, each with a different insight into aspects of our humanity, but all with accents of a visual flair that recollect the resourceful creative community of St Petersburg past and present.

With the stage stripped of draperies, and the church-architecture visible, Anton Adasinsky and his Derevo company deliver the UK premiere of Mephisto Waltz. This isn't so much a dance with the devil, even if we have come to crave Adasinsky in gleeful-evil mode: this is more a stunning exorcism of inner demons and a battle with external forces that together hinder his longing for tranquillity. He, meanwhile, is the virtuoso shape-shifter at the centre of a pell-mell journey through a grotesquerie of pipe-dreams and harsh realities.

Heady, springtime optimism gives way to a mayhem of madness, aggression, loneliness, where a swift-moving quartet of black figures are the helping hands or abusive tormentors as Adasinsky morphs from youth to age, from vulnerable outcast to rampaging megalomaniac, plunging into seethingly dark humour and gentle whimsy in the quirk of a gesture. Occasional props, fragments of costuming – with mood-hinting lighting and music – sketch in a framework, but it is the intensity of Adasinsky's performance and the detailed nuancing of facial expressions and body language that cries out so harrowingly for a refuge at the still centre of our hectically turning world. That he finds his peace in the guise of a scarecrow – cruciform arms outstretched, in an image that melds nature and spirituality – ends Mephisto Waltz on a heartwarmingly joyful note.

Mr Carmen, a two-hander from Akhe, takes the familiar Merimee narrative of ill-fated love, jealousy and death and, with deviously engineered low-tech effects and some blissfully deadpan performances, fashions a tragic conflict of opposites that increasingly mirrors the power-play within obsessive passion. Two black-clad men, one impressively bearded and in a skirt, the other with his face painted half-black, half-white, enter into a point-scoring duel where the names Jose and Carmen will be defiantly written and triumphantly erased in flurries of cunning gamesmanship. Smoke and mirrors aren't even the half of what Maksim Isaev and Pavel Semchenko bring into play. The sheer craft that underpins the visual gags, or threads together the symbolism of red roses, red wine, playing cards, cigars and knives – all key motifs in the story – is an Akhe hallmark, and a thing of beauty and wonderment.

Games are at the heart of Do Theatre's Hangman which, if anything, is more mordantly apposite now than it was when it hit the Fringe in 2007. Justice, it seems, is at the whim of whoever wields the rubber stamp. Newspapers can trip or trap individuals who apparently step out of line. Your bosom buddy can turn on you, turn you in – but guess what? In this game you might turn the tables on him or her. In the midst of all this breakneck uncertainty, one thing stays sure and totally to be relied on: that is the consummate finesse that Evgeny Kozlov and Do Theatre bring to the staging, the movement, the pace and precision the show demands.

On paper, Theatre La Pushkin's Peter and the Wolf is a show for children. Which it is, and a captivating version of Prokofiev's musical tale it is too. But adults with an eye to the virtues of Russian clown-work, and a happy appreciation of what two really gifted performers can achieve with the minimum of props, allied to a wealth of imagination and physical panache ... you get my drift. Oleg Zhukovsky and Andrey Rubtsov play all the characters in a production that looks hand-knitted: the proscenium arch is paper, bits of wool do duty as mustaches or tails and twigs do more than double duty simply because this duo have the wit and movement ability to make you see what isn't always there. There's a lovely coda that forwards to the future

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– when Peter has become a ... no, go and see for yourselves.

Don't hang back from either of the two crowd-pleasing shows by Hand Made Theatre. Circus in Hand, which is for tinies, is clever trickery with bits of stretchy cloth while Time for Fun is, literally, handmade. Ten pairs of clever hands whisk into words, shapes, people, all with such well-drilled dexterity you can't see the joins.

Settimana, with solo movement by Lidia Kopina and free-form sax/vocals from Veronika Berashevich was a show I wanted to like more. Kopina's bendy body is a splendid tool for showing recognisable states from baby steps, to militant struttings, to sultry seductress and second child-hood bewilderment. But the episodes felt like graduation exercises, and the music veered towards abrasively high-pitched yowings. It became harder and harder to connect with anything beyond noticing the moments of expertise while longing to see the humanity behind the ciphers.

All shows at Assembly Roxy until August 27 (not 13 or 20).



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