

Friday, June 10, 2011

Golden Section



American theatre doesn't really *do* "raw" anymore. In fact I can't think of a professional show I've seen in the last oh, five years or so that dared to flaunt its vulnerability, much less its rough, warts-and-all humanity. Or one that risked looking long and hard at the dark places within us without the props of adolescent bravado or alienated chic (or, in fact, cultural or literal amplification of any kind).

But somehow the Poles have clung to that defiant ideal, long after the American theatre has

forgotten all about Grotowski, artistic community, and (eek!) *poverty*. Which made the brief appearance by Teatr Zar at the Charlestown Working Theater last week bizarrely refreshing, even though the performance was entirely absorbed in the question of suicide.

No, this was not *The Drowsy Chaperone*. (It was a far more fascinating show than that was!) And it wasn't exactly depressing, either - in part because it wasn't simply about suicide, not *exactly*; it was instead about pulling *back* from suicide, about going up to the edge but not over, about that Beckettian decision to soldier on despite everything. (Not for nothing did the title of the piece refer to a difficult birth against the odds.)

Of course that's still enough to scare off the SpeakEasy crowd, but I was surprised to find the Zarists (sorry) playing to a full, appreciative house in Charlestown -

despite the threats of oncoming tornadoes and power outages. Those adventurous souls got to ponder a form of theatre unlike that being seen on any other stage in this city right now: Teatr Zar is poised somewhere between dance, musical performance, and religious ritual. There's no text *per se*, just movement and song - although there's plenty of drama, and a disturbing level of physical risk: the "show" opened with the Zarists smashing up glass in the dark, and they carried on their performance barefoot despite the presence of a thin river of glittering pain bisecting their tight little stage (above left).

Said performance was seemingly designed to directly translate the emotional and spiritual into the physical, in a manner which elided clear explication. (Indeed, the "poetic" text provided in the program I think was something of a mistake.) Two women (Ditte Berkeley and Emma Bonnici) and one man (Martej Matejka) were generally center stage, struggling against each other with a force utterly unlike the practiced mime of stage combat. All were clearly trained in movement, yet somehow their actions felt unskilled, awkward (they often fell to the floor with a wince-worthy crash). Grace was what they sought (they sometimes climbed atop each other to get closer to heaven), yet that was precisely what always eluded them; clearly they didn't know how to live, neither with each other nor with themselves. I couldn't say that the piece built to a "conclusion" - it felt more like a single moment repeated in several variations - but it certainly conveyed the throes of emotional desperation with intense clarity.

This was largely due to the piece's musical dimension: its archetypal "characters" suffered (almost always) in silence, yet a startling score gave them voice - in a set of wailing, polyphonic "songs" drawn from Corsican musical traditions, played by a tight instrumental ensemble and led with frightening abandon by vocalist/cellist Nini Julia Bang. The piece is worthwhile in musical terms alone, frankly - although the music is exquisitely integrated with the physical performance; there seems to be no separation between "musician" and "actor" here.

The Charlestown Working Theater has been lucky of late in its visiting artists (I believe this weekend they're hosting yet another foreign visitor, Yaroslava Pulinovich's *The Natasha Plays*), and as a result, buzz has been building around this gritty, daring little space. So let's hope the CWT can expand its offerings as they rise in popularity (local donors, take note). *Caesarean Section* is actually only one part of a triptych of work from Teatr Zar; it would be wonderful if Boston audiences someday might be able to see this compelling piece in its entirety.

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