

## Song of the Goat *Macbeth*

I doubt you will ever have seen a *Macbeth* like this at Stratford. After all, Teatr Piesn Kozla (Song of the Goat Theatre) from Wroclaw, Poland, tend to sing rather than speak their performances, in 'the tradition of Grotowski and Gardzienice' as was explained (even if such a stated formula needs much closer scrutiny). And work-in-progress showings, as the evening eventually came to be described in later publicity, don't occur very often in such a high profile showcase place for productions. To make the developmental nature clear, therefore, director Grzegorz Bral punctuated the performance extracts with explanations of the processes we were 'witnessing', unpicking the work before the actors then tried to put it back together. This wasn't, then, your usual Swan Theatre fare. But this contribution to the Royal Shakespeare Company's Complete Works Festival, the only one from Poland in this global smorgasbord of 17 international companies, was a welcome intervention and at times a quite compelling exploration of acting and directing, and to a lesser extent, the text.

Piesn Kozla has become renowned in the UK - since Edinburgh success in 2004 with *Chronicles - a Lamentation* that was also presented in The Pit at the Barbican in 2005, and with its pioneering MA run with Manchester Metropolitan University, but taught largely in Wroclaw. A more secure financial footing, resulting partly from such endorsements that an invitation like this brings at home, meant that the core of Polish actors had been augmented by new members and a chorus of singers from Siberia. The Irkutsk Authentic Music Ensemble have collected traditional music from villagers scattered after their valleys were drowned by a dam-building project. Though their presence in the group needs to become much more embedded and worked out, they added their very full voices to the Russian polyphonic folk songs that accompanied moments plucked from the play and presented in a seemingly random order. They at times offered little more than just a vocal backdrop, and sadly this role was assigned far too often to the many women in the group, but their authoritative voices sustained those of the much less experienced actors, some drawn from the MA program. A work-in-progress indeed and an intriguing cultural fusion.

The structural randomness is not really an issue - at least not yet: and especially not once Bral had acknowledged and thereby partly assuaged any audience desire for or expectation of structure. This was very early days in what will be a long process as Bral reminded us, of up to 2 years – a premiere on April 19th 2008 is announced in the programme. He freely admitted how privileged his group are in this. But such layered complex work *does* need time, which by Polish standards is still not so unusual, thankfully. For example, Gardzienice, whom Bral worked with in the late 80s and early 90s with Anna Zubrzycki, lead actress and co-founder of Piesn Kozla, have created just 6 performances in the 30 years of their existence. But before we all begin a bitter comparison of British and Polish conditions for the theatre, one has to remember that performances are just part of the many activities that both companies lead - which also include extensive pedagogic and training programmes - as well as the fact that these groups make very complex devised pieces. Perhaps our British companies might also achieve such performance density under such conditions, but we certainly can't compare, and it is rarely productive to do so. But one thing is certain, as many British people have recently learnt after EU expansion: Poles certainly know how to work.

It would be invidious to critically review something presented as an early sharing of process, framed as a tentative laboratory exploration. But as well as seeing their training, one could already detect their aesthetic inclinations and trajectories, and start to imagine how the piece might later appear. *Chronicles'* photographic publicity used the striking whirling image of three bare-chested men vaulting over a table in close succession which in reality was done with extraordinary lightness, precision and strength. Here on the Thursday evening (for the presentation altered over its four nights) mats were bought out for a similar display of acrobatic prowess, for the scene where Macduff learns of the slaughter of his wife and

children, and turns his desire for revenge into more considered revenge. At first the actors spoke as and after they rolled, weaving and punctuating their texts around and with this physical dance. There was an interesting inversion of what might be considered the more typical pattern of movement linked to Macduff's angry reaction, as the actor came to stillness on hearing the blood-curdling news. On first impression, this seemed to make little stage sense, the scene also diluted by the male actors flinging themselves around. Yet the work of tighter directorial selection and montaging is still far off. And further doubts were allayed by Welsh actor Ian Morgan's touching sung duet that became the motor for Macduff's resolve. {SEE PHOTO} After the whirling acrobatics, then the still reflection, the simplicity and honesty of this quiet and understated Russian song showed what can be achieved by letting voice and sound simply describe and enact emotional arcs. While the power of the choral, sometimes dissonant, Slavic voices was at times overwhelming if not inspiring for its technique, the quieter moments such as this and the 'Crown' section which opened and closed the evening, offered much richer more complex potential. Here one had to strain to pick out haunting gentle modulations of high-pitched vibratory keening (though again withheld rather than expressed) against a high background drone. This provided a sonic base for Macbeth's tortured questioning and doubts, almost giving external expression or perhaps counterpoint (for such ambiguity is often fundamental to such work, or at least is inevitable at this stage of the process) to his inner writhing. As he described how life is 'full of sound and fury signifying nothing', so we heard and felt sound, felt his fury. But what such sound signifies in this *theatrum mundi* is still to be determined. And the programme and verbal interpolations also offered few clues.

Performing at The Swan with its apparently welcoming shape but formidable cultural baggage must have been hard for many of the performers, for some of whom this was their theatrical debut. It also made us acutely attentive to those sections of the play that were spoken. The audience here is used to listening to text rather than song, and in this the company admittedly have a long way still to go. Morgan explained to me afterwards how the space had been miked up to boost the voice, for it is built for and suits the delivery of text and thus lacks the resonance needed for singing. There were moments such as the Macduff scene where action and text began to be integrated, and there was a similarly simple but effective exploration of subtext and movement as Macbeth and Lady Macbeth questioned Banquo before he goes out riding, all the while smiling to gloss over their murderous intentions. Banquo's slow synchronised pacing back and forth in between the two plotters added tension in its enactment of his already determined, already trapped, destiny. This led into his gentle 'trotting' around the stage (such movement is only ever suggestive rather than mimetic in this work) to be then pursued by his murderer who slaughters him with an almost martial sequence of moves. But how they link these three modes - of text spoken in English (for there was no Polish at all), finely tuned movement and Russian choral songs - is a crucial issue for the company to tackle through their ongoing rehearsals. Some of the speaking became ponderous, at times overemoted, and, at the other extreme, almost hysterical and forced. One can see this tendency in the programme cover photograph. {SEE PHOTO} But as Bral explained, such Polish companies are working within a physical rather than textual tradition, where they usually sing or intone rather than speak, and dealing with the richness of the spoken text is something they have to face and develop with *Macbeth*. One can see how this festival could create a useful space for beginning collaborative dialogue and learning rather than just an international showcase. Or at least so I hope.

This was not the first time Bral and Zubrzycki had been invited to Stratford to present aspects of their working method. On Katie Mitchell's invitation, they amongst other members of Gardzienice had participated in a two week workshop for RSC actors in 1992 at The Other Place. This was, though, a closed session, although it had a brief final more public meeting at which I spoke to introduce broader aspects of the company's practice. So began a short period of collaborative ventures, which included amongst other activities, Howard Brenton writing text for Gardzienice's performance *Metamorphoses*, a text which still stands. Of

course such Polish encounters had happened even before, most notably with Peter Brook's invitation to Jerzy Grotowski and his key actor Ryszard Cieslak to work with actors for a fortnight during the development of *US* nearly thirty years ago. In such rare moments two national and theatrical cultures have collided, with little room for compromise or negotiation in such intense sessions. Artistic director of Kneehigh, Emma Rice, also worked briefly with Gardzienice at the same time as Bral and Zubrzycki, and just after Mitchell had been there. Kneehigh divided critics with their *Cymbeline* in this same RSC festival, but they (like Mitchell) continue to explore longer term attempts to synthesise physical and textual approaches, to determine a different place for text amongst the multiple potential languages of performance. Contact with Gardzienice in the late 80s/early 90s spawned an extensive investigation by Mitchell with myself and later Rice as Movement Directors introducing such ensemble and physical training techniques into British rehearsal systems, through Mitchell's Classics on a Shoestring and subsequently in productions with national institutions like the RSC and NT.

In this current project, Piesn Kozla are taking such interchanges a step further, partly with their international casting. More precisely, they are reversing such investigations as they apply their well established training and aesthetic techniques to Shakespeare's text. But in our age of ubiquitous performance, this is now not closed but happens under the direct gaze of Stratford's faithfuls and with the full support (and scrutiny) of the British home of Shakespearean performance. How successfully they combine the two aspects in the long run is very much still to be seen, but we were asked to imagine; and broadly the project was very well received. It is heartening to read and hear of the time and dedication they will give to this work in our time-starved theatre culture. But whether the premiere will take place in this same venue, the Swan, as Bral very much hopes, remains to be seen. Perhaps the inclusive ambitions of the Complete Works Festival have actually changed audience perceptions and Stratford theatre culture. Who knows?

One can't help but question such attempts as this festival to embrace cultural diversity. I hope that its underlying impulse and effect is one of enrichment for British and world theatre. If the RSC wanted to buy into a Polish tradition of extraordinary physical and vocal theatre, they certainly got what they wanted, even if the troupe is in fact international and predominantly more British than Polish in its make-up. But it was pleasing to be in the familiar surroundings of the Swan with its full and eager audience, and feel them struggling conceptually to locate and explain such work and such ethics. Inevitably this presentation plays to a certain exoticism, but as John Russell Brown reminds us in his *New Sites for Shakespeare* (Routledge, 1999), other cultures (largely Asian in his book) can often find more vital connections to the metaphysical aspects and the formal hierarchies of Shakespeare's texts which we in our largely secular society and with our anti-establishment impulses (at least in theatre and academic communities) struggle to portray. To some extent this is also true of other eastern theatres such as Poland's, even if the east in this example is much closer to home than that which Russell Brown presented.

It was prudent therefore that textual purists and narrative lovers were warned by Bral at the start of the evening of what lay ahead. No-one left at this point, though a tiny minority did not stay much longer. For the non-purists or at least those more open-minded, the display of 'coordination', as Bral describes their training methodology, was remarkable - actors such as some of those on stage here represent the best in the world in terms of physical techniques. But more questions inevitably turn on what this so far very successful but still very green director will do dramaturgically with the text. The programme note offers little more than ambiguities, perhapses and buts, teasing questions - and just a brief articulation of how healing and theatre can be conjoined, referring as exemplar to the proximity of doctor Asklepios's temple to the theatre in ancient Epidaurus. Can such training and directing approaches refind this ancient conjunction today, continuing an artistic trajectory from Craig through Copeau up to Gardzienice? And can we still turn to the east for such efficacy, even if

the east is now part of Europe rather than a more remote Asia?

Although gauging any healing potential of the theatre event is perhaps well beyond us, the singing created a very strong mood and sensations, reminding us postmodern cynics of the power of words and song, of magic spells and verse's charms. Here as audience we could hear the great potential of such work sonically to affect the spectator. Brai explained that the company is researching practically the idea that theatre grew from funeral rites, that theatre is an intertixtual place where one can mediate between the living and the dead. Piesn Kozla are not alone in this very established quest in Polish theatre: with roots in Polish 19th century Romanticism, when the country was 'killed' by the Partitions, and whose dramatic texts were thus almost 'hymns' lamenting this loss of nationhood. Before they found their own space in a (non-consecrated) church in Wroclaw, Piesn Kozla worked under the auspices of what is now (since January 2007) the Grotowski Institute in Poland. The institute's director Jaroslaw Fret works with his own company - also very much from this Gardzienice line - Theatre Zar, named after a Georgian funeral rite. All souls night (Halloween) is still a major holiday/holy day (a connection of which Grotowski reminded us in the 1970s) in Poland. Just as rituals enable us to pass through transitional moments in life, through rites of passage, both groups seem to be asking if we might refind theatre's efficacy in our utilitarian culture through the collective power of song and singing. Might we, and not without irony, rediscover our dead theatre's power to affect by somehow mourning (its death)? And might we then pass through this mourning to celebrate, through the theatre? As others in Poland, Piesn Kozla hope so.

It's an admirable aim, in these beleaguered times. It is also one we need to hear delivered from such a stage at the geographical heart of Britain and from the centre of our theatre establishment. Out of drowned villages, young Siberian artists had plucked vibrant songs of life. I don't want to stretch the metaphor too far. We will see. But til then....'Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow, creeps in this petty pace....'