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THEATRE FROM THE THERESIENSTADT GHETTO –

February 7, 2015



Seventy years after the liberation of Auschwitz, lecturer and author Dr. Lisa Peschel and the University of York presented a series of theatrical works that had been written in the Theresienstadt Ghetto in Czechoslovakia. Working with UCL, Peschel has now brought the piece to the Bloomsbury Theatre, along with her book containing all the scripts she has discovered during her research with Theresienstadt Ghetto survivors.

The First Act is made up of nine performances from Cabaret acts. Almost exclusively comedic, the uplifting material becomes very moving when you think about the context it was originally written and received in. Obviously a few jokes are lost in the time difference, but there are several moments that are laugh out loud funny. Tim Frith's recital of the poem *The Cvok,* a word that translated means 'loon', sees him bound across the stage like a cartoon character. It's impossible not to smile at his wonderful eccentricity, and yet if you listen to why he's a 'cvok', it's rather heartbreaking. The actors are students from UCL and King's College London, and this certainly makes you think about how young the playwrights and actors were in the Ghetto. Peschel explains that one particularly dark play was written by a young boy; one of many in the Ghetto who never had the opportunity to express their talent publicly.

The Smoke of Home after the intermission is an incredibly emotional piece of theatre. Performed mostly by drama students from the University of York, the play is an allegory of the Terezin prisoners's desire to go back to their former lives, set during the 30 years war. Although it was written in the Ghetto, the show was never performed. The play's implication that the Terezin prisoners had no home to go back to would have been devastating for the prisoners in Theresienstadt. Jason Ryall's anguish as the soldier Waldau is extremely distressing. His cabin fever explodes into a manic frenzy that's unbearable to watch unfold. Playwrights Zdenëk Eliáš and Jirka Stein's words are painful enough for a modern audience, let alone for people who are having to survive on hope.

When you read about the subject that is being discussed, it's easy to think you're going to need to bring hundreds tissues and leave sobbing, but more than anything you'll walk out impressed by the resilience and talent of the prisoners in the Theresiendstadt Ghetto. Peschel writes that it shows "their commitment to continue to live as human beings in a dehumanizing environment", and that is without doubt the overriding feeling you'll take away with you. People can be extraordinary.

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Reviewed on 07/02/15

By Joanna Trainor
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Ran until 8th February 2015
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Bloomsbury Theatre Joanna Trainor

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