REVIEWS

Theatre in the Theresienstadt Ghetto

February 8, 2015 7:00 am / by Keno Katsuda



In a production dissimilar to anything you're likely to see this year, Keno Katsuda finds out how comedy can grow from the most unexpected of places

During World War II, prisoners in the Jewish ghetto at Terezin (in German, Theresienstadt) often lived under very harsh conditions. Though suffering from daily tragedies, they managed to find refuge in their artistic ventures, particularly in the theatre. UCL and the University of York collaborated to present the two different forms of theatre created — both the unexpected comedy, and the unsurprising tragedy. They thereby introduced their audience to a sampling of some of the touching creative genius that emerged in the face of the Holocaust.

The first half of the production consisted of sections from the cabarets of the Terezin ghetto, performed by UCL students. The seven actors were all highly involved and enthusiastic in their performances. However, I felt that they did not fully understand the tone of the humour involved with the screwball comedic styles of cabaret plays. As a result, the strength of the cabarets could have been bolstered by allowing for the actors to take themselves less seriously, allowing for the goofiness of the lighthearted text to truly shine.

Tim Frith was a standout, however, as he generated laughs from the audience with his ability to charm his way through scenes. I particularly enjoyed his performance in the short play "The Insult (But Unintended)", in which he played a comically confused defendant against the judge (Charlotte Nohavicka, an actress with a lovely soprano).

The second half, produced by the students of the University of York, took a much darker tone. The one act, "The Smoke of Home", told the story of four prisoners and the discussions they had late at night of their hopes and dreams of returning home. I had a very difficult time attempting to single out any particular performance in the second half; all four actors excelled in their own performances of very different characters. I did, though, particularly enjoy Josh Welch's performance as Father Anselm, a priest whose values of his faith are tested against his own desires. Welch brilliantly portrayed a man so committed to God that he became blinded to his flaws.

Overall, Theatre in the Theresienstadt Ghetto provided a thoroughly satisfying production. The diversity of the performances allowed for the audience to empathise with the various aspects of the Jewish experience. Rather than simply seeing victims of the Holocaust as nothing more than tragedies, the audience was allowed a glimpse into the varied set of experiences that allowed for them to become survivors through their art.

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Get your tickets for the final performance – at 3pm on Sunday 8 February in the Bloomsbury – of Theatre in the Theresienstadt Ghetto here.

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