

JOHN FREEDMAN

in Tallinn, Estonia

*Midwinter Night's Dream* was the title of a brief, but impressive festival celebrating the New Year and New Millennium in the astonishingly beautiful medieval city of Tallinn, Estonia. It was hosted by the city's most challenging playhouse, the Tallinn City Theatre, and featured guests from Poland (Beckett's *Endgame*, Wilam Horzyca Theatre of Torun), Austria (Berger's *Trummer Girls*, Theatre Brett of Vienna), Lithuania (Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, Kaunas Youth Chamber Theatre), Hungary (Rossini's *La Cenerentola*, Hungarian Chamber Opera of Budapest), Russia (Daniil Gink's adaptation of Dostoevsky, *K.I. From 'Crime'*, Young Spectator Theatre of Moscow) and other countries.

The Tallinn City Theatre, under the guidance of artistic director Elmo Nüganen since 1992, has gained a reputation as one of the most interesting venues in East Europe. Its eight small to medium-sized stages, including an outdoor amphitheatre, are spread over territory belonging to three main buildings originally constructed in the 15th to 18th centuries and exquisitely restored over the last 20 years. The festival opened in the theatre's ultra-modern upstairs space, the so-called 'Heaven Stage', with a performance of Nüganen's production of *Hamlet*.

Nüganen clearly sought to demonstrate the extraordinary technical capabilities of this space which was renovated and reopened for the 1999 premiere of *Hamlet*. He deftly made use of several platforms existing at various heights above the stage (some of them mobile); of laser-type lighting effects; and of machinery that can deliver objects (such as Ophelia's casket) from the 'heavens' and later 'bury' the entire stage, including the dead bodies of Hamlet and Laertes, in a shimmering shroud. Aime Unt designed the elongated performance space to split the audience into two opposing camps, with a long banquet table separating them. Large empty spaces at either end of the room could be used as mirrored throne rooms (Claudius vs. the actors).

Nüganen's achievement was to use the impressively equipped space in a way that brought to the fore the human element of Shakespeare's tragedy. Even with modern technology influencing almost every scene, this show belonged to the excellent cast and the recognizable people they played. Nüganen shifted the play's thrust with simple innovations. For example, during Hamlet's 'poor Yorick' speech, it was Horatio (Andres Raag) who held the skull as Hamlet (Marko Matvere) looked on. In this and similar moments, the director implied that the events and experiences of the play were not unique to one or two crucial figures but were common to, and shared by, all.

Matvere played Hamlet as a young man with a quick mind but, perhaps, lacking intellectual prowess. There was something

personal and perplexing about the confusion that wracked him. He was intense, but not obsessed; outraged but seemingly not prepared to take drastic action. The union of Claudius (Peeter Tammearu) and Gertrude (Anne Reemann) was not one of power or even love, but of irrepressible sexual energy. Both seemed almost embarrassed by their physical attraction to one another but were powerless to behave properly in public. This often made them attractively comical as they pawed each other and embraced brazenly at the most inappropriate moments.

Küllü Teetamm's Ophelia was a revelation, dressed by costume designer Martin Laubre as a medieval beauty. In her joyous, fragile innocence, this Ophelia had much in common with Juliet and, to an extent, her equally chaste brother Laertes (Indrek Sammül) was something of her Romeo. Teetamm exemplified this production's finest qualities - its deeply touching appeal to the simplest and most eternal human qualities.

The Theatre tri-buhne of Stuttgart, Germany, performed Edith Koerber's production of *Das Fraüulein Pollinger*, Traugott Kishchke's adaptation of a play by Odon von Horvath. It effectively combines bitter social and political satire with the freewheeling atmosphere of cabaret entertainment. Miss Pollinger (Gunda Schanderer) is a poor young woman who moves from exploitative man to exploitative man as she increasingly finds she can only survive by prostituting herself. Ironically, perhaps, the first man who beds her does so out of affection, but when her neighbour explains she can do the same thing for remuneration, she is quickly hooked. Perhaps the strongest moments of the show involve her encounter with Harry Priegler (Wilhelm Schneck), an arrogant, if maddeningly charming, young man with fascist tendencies who believes he is owed sex for letting her ride in his car. Miss Pollinger can't win for losing, for no matter what she does, her low social standing forces her into the hands of unscrupulous men who only wish to use her as a sexual commodity.

The episodic performance takes place on various small stages scattered among tables set up for the audience and is linked by beer hall numbers sung by all the cast members. The highlight of designer Csorsz Khell's set was the realistic front half of Harry's hot rod hanging at precarious angle above one end of the stage.

The show offers two endings - a sad, honest one showing Miss Pollinger abandoned by all, and a 'hurriedly improvised' and decidedly sarcastic finale to satisfy potentially disgruntled spectators. In this version Miss Pollinger marries the man who loves her although an actor proudly declares his satisfaction that the show has made a political point while entertaining its audience.

The Latvian National Theatre of Riga performed Alexander Vampilov's *The Elder Son* as directed by Regnars Vaivars. It is a small, intimate work that occasionally risks imploding in its quiet, low-key manner. A trick opening the second act of a man blowing a soap bubble and then injecting cigarette

smoke into it which is then freed and dissipates when the bubble bursts, was an effective theatrical feat as well as a nice metaphor for love's ethereal quality. However, more often this show hugged so closely to the text that it had trouble building its own personality. The all-grey set by Anita Znutina is a clever, if drab, depiction of two neighbouring apartments that actually share the same doors and floorspace.

Vampilov's somewhat sinister comedy involves the shyster Busygin (Andris Keils) working his way into the trust of a forlorn family by claiming to be the father's long-lost illegitimate son. The father (Uldis Dumpis) buys the story as much because he is flattered by the memory of an old girlfriend as because of anything else. His son Vasenka (Marcis Manjakovs) never seems to question the appearance of a new brother while the old man's daughter Nina (Daiga Kazosina) may end up falling in love with him as she kicks out her positive-minded but boring fiancé. Busygin, who played his prank for a lark, might or might not be changed by the experience of rejuvenating the life of an old man and finding possible love with his daughter - even after the truth comes out.

Vaivars wisely avoids any such clear-cut moral lessons in his production's denouement, instead leaving us doubtful of what the future might bring.

ON IN TALLINN:

*Alarm!* by Frayn, Old Town Studio; *Arcadia* by Stoppard, Tallinn City Theatre; *The Bridge* by Jaan Tatte, Tallinn City Theatre; *Brother Enrico and his Bishop* by Jaan Kross, Estonian Drama Theatre; *Clavigo* by Goethe, Tallinn City Theatre; *Crime and Punishment* by Nüganen after Dostoevsky, Tallinn City Theatre; *The Cripple of Inishmaan* by McDonagh, Tallinn City Theatre; *Crossing With Main Road* by Jaan Tatte, Tallinn City Theatre; *Days of the Parrots* by Andrus Kivirahk, Estonian Drama Theatre; *Don Juan* by Moliere, Estonian Drama Theatre; *Educating Rita* by Russell, Old Town Studio; *Hamlet*, Tallinn City Theatre; *The Homecoming* by Pinter, Tallinn City Theatre; *It Runs in the Family* by Cooney, Estonian Drama Theatre; *Life Is A Dream* by Calderon, Estonian Drama Theatre; *Memories of I Don't Know What* by Jaan Kruusvall, Estonian Drama Theatre; *The One and Eternal Life* by Jaanus Rohumaa and Mari Tuuling, Tallinn City Theatre; *Pianola or the Mechanical Piano* by Mikhailov and Adabashyan after Chekhov, Tallinn City Theatre; *Popi and Huhuu* by Friedebert Tuglas, Estonian Drama Theatre; *A A Raod to the Closet* by Mihkel Ulman, Estonian Drama Theatre; *A Snake's Path on the Rock* by Torgny Lindgren, Estonian Drama Theatre; *The Sunshine Boys* by Simon, Old Town Studio; *Two Into One* by Cooney, Estonian Drama Theatre; *When I Was Dying* by Nadezhda Ptushkina, Estonian Russian Drama Theatre; *When We Were Selling Walnuts...* by Madis Koiv, Estonian Drama Theatre.