

Play Reviews

FAUST, Part 1. By Johann Wolfgang Goethe. Kammerspiele, Munich, 1991; Deutsches Theater, 1991.

One of the most popular productions at the Munich Kammerspiele in the current repertory is *Faust*, Part I. This is a long evening in the theatre: beginning at 6PM it runs until about 8:30 when there is a half hour pause, then it resumes and concludes about 11:00. Nevertheless, the houses are sold out, and there are few, if any, empty seats after the intermission. The response is very lively and vital throughout--there is considerable laughter, some gasps of shock, and intense attention. The highly successful production is visually unconventional, but very true to the text.

The costumes and settings by Jürgen Rose gave a harsh, startling quality to the production. The acid yellow of the box-like set, and yellow and red make-up on the actors' faces and bodies conveyed the quality of the Expressionist paintings of "The Blue Rider" group in Munich. (There are many of these paintings in the museums in the city.) A black and white photograph could not begin to convey the dynamic visual quality of the production.

The prologue with the director, the poet, and the clown was set up like a puppet show, with the upper half of the actors' bodies seen above a red velvet curtain with a red curtain above, as if to hide the puppeteer. As it began the director tried to bring some life into the poet and the clown who were draped over the curtain like puppets without strings. At the end of this scene billows of red fabric framing the stage pulled up and out, making a canopy frame of purplish blue with faint silver stars and planets. A black curtain rose to reveal a satirical picture of heaven (greeted by laughter and applause). In a setting like a box draped with heavy black curtains God sprawled on a sofa asleep, and behind him three foolish looking saints with great white wings and gold suspenders snored and dozed. There were generally three levels for acting: the auditorium floor directly in front of the stage, the stage level, and the top of the box. In this scene, Mephistopheles suddenly appeared directly in front of the stage; quite a dramatic figure, all in black. His tight-fitting bodysuit glittered like snakeskin. Open at the chest, it had feathers around the neck, a beautiful set of black wings, and a long tail

he often carried in his hand. His make-up included small horns, and a sort of fur on the sides of his face. After setting up the wager with God, he was brusquely excluded by the swift descent of the curtain. He leaped up on the stage only to find it empty. Enraged by God's treatment, he tore all the black curtains down to reveal yellow walls which provided the background for the rest of the play.

The magical visual effects and tricks performed by Mephistopheles and others were stunning. When Faust first called on the spirits, the back wall was suddenly ripped open to reveal a ten foot high head with smoke and fire coming from his furious face. The setting for the witch's kitchen was a genuine nightmare: hideous birds and dead chickens hung from the ceiling and in the corner about ten yellow ape-like heads seeming to grow out of a yellow heap of trash sluggishly watched the action. The ape servants skittered about the stage, their yellow jumpsuits split to reveal their bare bums, and they writhed in sexual agony when the back wall magically revealed a nude Helen who moved alluringly toward Faust. The witch was lowered onto the stage, she and Mephistopheles pranced about the stage in a comic dance, and then the apes set up a table with ten glasses. She swiftly poured the clear water from the first one into the next turning it red, then the next clear again, and so on until the last glass turned an alarming black color. One ape taped a circle about the aged, grey Faust, who dubiously drank the brew. For a moment nothing happened, then he writhed and shrieked and fell on the floor, the circle flamed about him, and suddenly he leaped up a young, blonde, blue-eyed handsome man.

Of course the designer made much of the magical effects in the Auerbach's cellar scene. The curtain raised to reveal four drunken men, their hair disheveled, their faces red, and their pants a little short, revealing red legs above the socks. They sat in frozen positions around a table with a yellow cloth and yellow bottles, glasses, and bowls. The whole effect was like an Expressionist painting satirizing bourgeois society. When Mephistopheles offered them wine of choice, he bored holes in the table top, and caused different colored wines to gush forth, running over the stage floor as the men filled their glasses and drank. As one lay on the floor with the wine pouring down on his face, Mephistopheles gestured with his cane and the punch bowl burst into flame. The scene ended in drunken *melée*, with the men pushing over the table, pulling out knives and cutting each other up, blood pouring over them. The scene was grotesquely comic and the line "Was that your nose?" got a big laugh.

The second half of the play was dominated visually by an enormous Madonna figure almost reaching the ceiling. It stood at the end of Margaret's tiny bed initially, but was moved about the stage during the rest of the play. As in the scene in which God and the saints were parodied, so the Madonna, standing with open arms, had a sour, ugly face, and was costumed in harsh colors. In the funeral scene the Madonna was up center, the two coffins in

front, with Margaret in between and the neighbors whispering at the sides. They were all in black, but the faces were starkly colored. The priest mumbled, the whispers grew louder, and the scene ended with a slow motion effect as if a wind were blowing everything away, the malicious neighbors pulling off their mourning clothes, and the Madonna hovering malevolently. The back wall was hauled up to an erratic angle, blood running down and onto the stage.

The Madonna could move into different positions, and was large enough for persons to hide behind or under. At one point, quite shockingly, a smirking Mephistopheles emerged from under her skirts. When Faust attempted to rescue Margaret from her jail cell, the Madonna was at the head of the bed on an otherwise empty stage backed by the glaring yellow walls. Standing on the top of the stage box, Faust lowered a ladder, descended and played the scene of anguish with the deranged Margaret. He begged her to escape but she ran to the bed and prayed to the virgin, and Mephistopheles urged Faust to come up the ladder before it was too late. In desperation Faust pleaded, but as the ladder moved upward, he grabbed it with one arm, and was pulled to the upper level--once again a puppet figure to the fiendish Mephistopheles. As he rose, he still held out his arm to Margaret, but she looked only at the Madonna who opened her arms. Here, it seemed, was comfort, but as the Madonna moved toward Margaret, it was to smother her in a hateful embrace: Margaret struggled, and finally fell back dead.

The director, Dieter Dorn, is also the director of the Munich Kammerspiele. The staging throughout was innovative and consistent. The treatment of the crowds was particularly effective. In the early scene in the city the action was broken up into many short fragments. The characters were dressed in brightly colored folk costumes from the turn of the century. Brilliant light snapped on revealing the characters frozen in a pose, as in old lithographs or caricatures. The characters came to life, spoke a few lines and moved about, and the lights went out, only to come on again after a moment, revealing a new pose. This was a very exciting scene, emphasizing an ironic view of the society--gossipy, narrow-minded, and foolish.

The staging with these characters was also effective in the scene in which Margaret's brother was killed. Mephistopheles opened a stage trap, took out a harp and began to sing. Tiny, high windows in the yellow walls opened and the neighbors with highly colored faces, and wearing hats, stuck their heads and arms out. When Faust killed the brother, there was a great deal of shouting, but the neighbors stayed frozen in position and did nothing.

A live orchestra performed a mixture of jazz and classical music during the scene changes and throughout much of the play. In the Walpurgis Night episode the scenery was changed by men partially clad in women's underwear, barely seen in a flickering light, while wild music underscored the perverse and demonic activity on all three acting levels. Here Faust revealed the appetitive side of his nature, pursuing with lustful joy a sexy young witch. His horror was

shared by the audience which gasped aloud as she suddenly revealed a large mouse crawling out of her mouth!

In the scene in which Faust seemingly held Mephistopheles prisoner in the house because of a cross on the floor, he called the singers to croon Faust to sleep. Ten yellow heads burst through the back wall. After their song, Mephistopheles poured his venom forth on the sleeping Faust, saying, "You are not the man who can hold the devil prisoner!" He flung open his frock coat, revealing a nearly nude body beneath it. Lunging at the cross on the floor, he seemed to have an orgasm, and rubbed semen on the cross, at which point a rat ran out onto the stage and started to sniff it. This was a truly shocking scene, skillfully performed.

The acting of the cast of about forty people was superb throughout. Many of the actors played several roles, and were continually changing make-up and costumes throughout the twenty-seven scenes. The play was demanding for all the actors, but naturally, most of all for Faust and Mephistopheles.

As Faust, Helmut Greim fully explored all the aspects of the character, and successfully conveyed his angst as well as his exuberance. Completely successful in suggesting crankiness and age with little make-up in the first part of the play, he was then wonderfully dynamic as the rejuvenated Faust, leaping off the stage to accost Margaret when he first saw her, and revelling in his love for her. In the jail scene, his anguish was so profound and intense that there was not a sound to be heard from the audience--the engagement was complete.

The balance between Faust and Mephistopheles was perfect--neither carried the play as in the famous Gründgens production. Instead there was a fine ensemble feeling. As Mephistopheles, Hans-Peter Hallwachs was a fascinating mixture of charm, urbanity, and venom. With each appearance he had a new elegant costume, and was debonair and witty. A gold crown glittering from his back teeth gave a nice touch to his seductive smiles. The audience responded with laughter at many points, and this enhanced the horror of the character: he was so attractive and yet he was truly a fiend. Throughout the play his charm seemed merely a mask to cover a depth of bitterness and impatience. At the end of the first half, he was left alone on stage, and impatiently gestured to the audience to leave. As nobody moved, he contemptuously mimed a person smoking a cigarette, a woman powdering her face, and a man relieving himself.

As Margaret, Sunyi Melles entranced the audience. She was innocent and lovely, but never bland. She seemed very young and fetching in the early scenes, and introduced a surprising amount of comedy. She revealed a range of emotions throughout the play and was extremely moving in the final scene of madness. Her anguish was painful to watch, but she never went to excess vocally. For example, in the scene where she found her dying brother, her scream was understated rather than excessive. Unusually tall and very blonde,

she made a striking figure, simply dressed in a black dirndl type of dress with girlish red shoes.

The performance in Munich was so exciting, that I felt very fortunate to be able to see the play again when it was presented in the Deutsches Theater in Berlin. At both performances the audience was fully involved in the production. After the final moment, with Faust sitting alone on top of the stage and Margaret fallen back on the bed with the Madonna hunched over her, there was complete silence for nearly a minute before the audience burst into applause and cheers which continued for many curtain calls.

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Albee Directs Beckett: *Ohio Impromptu* and *Krapp's Last Tape*. The Alley Theatre. Houston Texas. February 20, 1991.

Samuel Beckett's plays are alive and pulsing on the Alley Arena Stage. At the hand of Director Edward Albee, both the curtain raiser, *Ohio Impromptu*, and *Krapp's Last Tape* take heart and fight back at anyone who thinks monologue must be static. Albee gives the first of Beckett's plays the aura of a Liszt tone-poem, its cadences metaphysical and intriguing; the second he molds more concretely and farcically. In each, a state of ordered tension ensues from light, sound and rhythm as Beckett's heroes endure their hellish hours.

In attendance at the performances were two critics of national stature, Ruby Cohn, author of *Beckett: The Comic Gamut* and other books on Beckett, and Mel Gussow, long-time reviewer of Beckett plays, author of "Albee: Odd Man In On Broadway" in the 1960's, and currently drama critic for the *New York Times*.

Heeding Beckett's permission to an earlier director to "improve upon" one script's staging so long as he take care to "keep it cool," director Albee opts to prolong the eerie aura of *Ohio Impromptu* by running its text three times before ultimately touching its ending. The result remains true to Beckett and a decided boon to audiences seeking his "profounds of mind."

If some fear the Nobel winner's fare is humourless, the Alley's evening with Beckett may change their thinking. Critics like Ruby Cohn have said that to run the gamut of the playwright's melancholy without diluting his comedy challenges a director. Cohn has called Beckett's typical heroes "hell-roasting," but Albee finds their humor, having a feel for the type. Both Albee and Beckett have often given stages to archetypal souls who exist with little and less.

Ohio Impromptu's hell-roasted are Reader and Listener, played alternately at the Alley by Charles Sanders and Lou Ferguson. As the lights

rise, the two seem sculpted in a space of stark simplicity whose radiance attests to Albee's fabled visual faculty. Seated at a long slab of a table bathed in warm pink and violet glow, Sanders, as Reader, slowly turns the pages of a thin, dark volume, his soft gestures spellbinding the viewers. White-wigged and black-coated, Reader is absorbed in a typical Beckett occupation, the re-drawing of a life. He recites a tale of one who now lives with little love, little urge, less fire. As he reads, the music of his language reaches us through tone-color in voiced consonant-continuants and rounded vowel-against-vowel. Listener, in size, stoop, and aspect a mirror image of Reader, repeatedly stays the speaker's word-flow with a hard, dry rap at the table to force his re-reading of painfully crucial phrases.

In this production, the two actors repeat the text, exchanging roles, then ultimately interchanging their pronouncement of Beckett's sad phrases. The theater audience, hearing the talk through Sanders and Ferguson's sonorous voices, soon feels that these two read their own grim story.

Beckett buffs know their dramatist's counsel to settle for his lines' surface meaning, not dig for symbols. Nonetheless, shades of Dante's *Divina Comedia*, mainstay of Beckett's life-long reading, seem buried in his bereaved protagonist's tale of a "shade" who approaches one midnight to guide and comfort him. The ghostly figure comes from "one with dear name and dear face," as Virgil's shade came from Dante's Beatrice to guide him through his tormented journey. Hypnotically, Sanders and Ferguson reveal how *Ohio Impromptu's* soul returns time and again to read aloud from his worn volume to sustain his aggrieved charge.

With Albee's care for Beckett's slow flow of language, the mystic shade lingers like Virgil, though this guide too lacks authority to go full journey with his charge. Still, since Beckett lets comforter and comforted sit stone-like at the tale's last telling, the imagery lulls us into hoping the shade mercifully shares this bereaved's last journey.

In the Alley's second Beckett offering, *Krapp's Last Tape*, Albee's work with "wearish" Krapp's ghastly grinning is superb, and Edward Seamon is appropriately doddering and drunken. His direction by Albee, discernibly indiscernible above the play's atmosphere, takes us briskly through Beckett's primary action--a human being's eavesdropping on himself, in this play on an old recorded tape. On stage, stumbling amid set designer Jay Michael Jagim's dust and debris of Krapp's life, Seamon's nostalgic character plans a rendezvous with his past and present that ultimately gives us his voices across a span of thirty years.

Seamon is adept at manipulating tricky controls of the old reel-to-reel recorder on which Krapp must appear to wind and rewind his tapes. The actor convincingly relaxes when Krapp noisily uncorks and imbibes from an off-stage cache. Krapp intends to preserve his present reflections on his last tape, but instead slips into reverie and listens to his past. Thus most of his thoughts

come to us in his younger voice with lustier throbbing than now as a lame, enfeebled Krapp speaks into his machine.

Seamon handles Beckett's humor well, poker-faced at his younger voice's comment that he wants none of his best years back, "Not with the fire in me now." Krapp's loneliness, his anguish, his ridiculous recital of his bowel impairment, and his stubborn endurance are absurd, yet too familiar to each of us to be discounted.

In each play, Beckett seeks simple results in explicit, easily perceived language, with what critics have seen as penetrating ramifications for our lives and his own. Well-tended by director and cast, Beckett's cheerless phrases like ". . . nothing is left to tell" disturb us in the final moments of *Ohio Impromptu*, while yearning words like "Be again, be again" sear us at the close of *Krapp's Last Tape*. Albee's painstaking care of Beckett's language and intent shows his fine discernment of the script's needs and its rewards for the Alley audience.

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