

Muller's 'Hamletmachine'

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The Living Arts

CHRISTCHURCH, NEW ZEALAND.

Inspiring the space

ADRIENNE REWI talks with two innovative German theatre directors about their forthcoming production of 'Hamlet Machine'.

FOR Kurt Bildstein and George Froscher of Germany's Free Theatre Munich, successful theatre is about honesty, quality, and the ability of actors to express their full potential.

Sponsored by the Goethe Institute, Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council, and Christchurch Free Theatre, Bildstein and Froscher are in Christchurch conducting workshops in modern theatre, which will culminate in a production of "Hamlet Machine" at the Great Hall of the Arts Centre.

The pair have had a long career in theatre. They were founding members of Free Theatre Munich, a group established in 1970 "to break away from conventional and cliched theatre".

Even in Germany, where traditional theatre is very popular and heavily subsidised, their new approach gained an immediate following. What began as a teaching facility grew to include a theatre company.

From their first performances of short Brecht plays, they have had enormous success, and the group has travelled extensively throughout Europe, Eastern Europe, and South America. In April this year their Russian tour of "Macbeth" received high critical acclaim.

Shakespeare's works have been a focus for many performances. They say that rather than performing a complete Shakespearean work they concentrate their energies on a selected portion that interests them.

"To perform an entire Shakespearean work is very costly today, so we concentrate our possibilities and explore the work with our own energies, giving maximum effort to the sections we are interested in," says Bildstein.

"It is not so important for us to perform the whole piece. We push ourselves to get quality from what we do.

"Shakespeare has such a power in dealing with the violence of human existence. Like the Greek writers, there is a wonderful relevance in his work today, in the way he deals with political intrigue, social behaviour, male-female relationships and power, hate, and philosophy. And it is interesting to see that we have not really changed as people in over a thousand years."

Heiner Mueller, one of Germany's most important playwrights, has based "Hamlet Machine" on Shakespeare, but Bildstein says the work is not a true adaptation.

"It is his own vision that is a response to both Shakespeare and Greek theatre."

The play deals with the present state of crisis in Europe. Mueller uses Hamlet and Greek references as representative of the crisis.

The original "Hamlet" is re-interpreted, and Ophelia's passive Shakespearean role is represented as an active role as she breaks out of the societal mould that males have given her.

Mueller also analyses contemporary political issues within the play.



Kurt Bildstein: Bringing total commitment to the stage. — Photograph by JULIANNE MYERS-POULSEN

"But he gives no answers, no resolutions," says Bildstein.

"Hamlet Machine" is typical of Free Theatre Munich performances which emphasise set imagery.

Conventional sets are not used, and in every venue they seek to "inspire the space" using available materials. Simple but very strong emotional images are used in conjunction with lighting.

In Christchurch, Bildstein and Froscher are working with 15 students towards a season of "Hamlet Machine" from October 3 to 12.

Their workshop concentrates on the techniques of

modern theatre style that have brought them international acclaim.

"For us it is very important that actors bring total commitment to the stage," says Bildstein.

"There are many young people who want to be actors, but they are imitating cliches. You have to be very honest and not 'flirt around the edges'. As an artist you need force, a power, a conviction.

"A lot of people think acting is an easy life with one hour of rehearsals each day, a ready audience and one-hour performance, and it's all done.

"But you have got to give something. It is not

just a fun social meeting.

"It is a matter of total commitment."

Bildstein says that most people live in a state of mediocrity and often need a push to go beyond that.

In focusing on expressive bodywork and analysing how the body functions and co-ordinates as a whole, the workshop aims to improve an actor's ability to release breath and voice, and to stimulate and improve personal creative possibilities.

"We encourage them to bring their own life and voice and breath to the performance," says Froscher. "But first they have to work hard to discover this within themselves.

"It is something that applies to life in general, too, and we hope to teach young people all around the world how to develop skills that can help them develop their own fullest potential."

The men say that language differences have never hindered communication.

"People have become aware that our European theatre tradition was largely based on verbal communication, but we have sought to introduce spiritual and emotional communication and energy," says Bildstein.

"And even in a small Venezuelan village where people have little, if any, experience of theatre, our performances communicate. We can all understand the language of anatomy.

"And for us it is always a learning experience. We travel a great deal and meet people from many cultures and this will always influence us.

"People everywhere have the same body. We all live and breathe, and have the same desire to perform."

Review

A play for loving or loathing

Hamletmachine resembles Hamlet in that both use English words.

That the piece derives from a core script of about five pages is entirely creditable. It is not conventional theatre.

The audience moves around — is moved — and sometimes has to choose what to look at and listen to at any given moment.

Its appeal is to the senses and emotions rather than to the brain, and much of it is repetitive and irritating — doubtless by design.

On arrival the audience is directed to the Southern Ballet foyer, and thence to the Old Lecture hall. Four young men sit impassively, white faced at the desks while the audience pack into the blackboard area.

Thence to the Great Hall, but not to sit; at least not for long. Every part of the Great Hall is used, even the stained glass window, lit and belonging.

Around them the images play, masked people, lit people, people on frames and on stilts, glowing, double headed, in the gallery, on the floor, in a huge inflated rubber life buoy.

The ensemble are disciplined and dedicated. Their movements are slow, stylised, very European. Exactly what the message is not totally clear.

This is theatre of the gut rather than the cortex. At times it is confrontational at times threatening.

It is never safe, certainly not for the audience

Hamletmachine
by Heiner Muller:
Directed and
designed by
George Froscher
and Kurt Bildstein
for the Free
Theatre, the Great
Hall, Arts Centre,
8pm to 9.25pm.

and doubtless also for the actors. At times it is like taking part in a child's game — with the audience as the toys.

Very different and quite an experience. But is it theatre? Does it matter?

Some will love this, some will loathe it. You pay your money you take your choice. — Barry Grant

Alcohol and mother's milk

BOSTON — Alcohol consumed by a new mother is quickly incorporated into her breast milk, where, contrary to conventional medical wisdom, it can adversely affect the feeding behaviour of the baby, according to new research.

Julie Mennella and Gary Beauchamp of the Monell Chemical Senses Centre in Philadelphia discovered alcohol quickly affects the odour of breast milk and that newborns suck harder while consuming less breast milk if the mother has been drinking the amount of liquor found in only one can of beer.

...with a uniquely New Zealand format, the producer, Mr Simpson, said.

Mr Simpson, head of children's programmes for TV3, said "You and Me" was prompted partly by

...among low-income families on television as the main source of entertainment and informati--

"How's That," and "Beauty and the Beast." The

reviewed approach to investment in cable installation. The general manager Mr Peter Chilton said

Both Mr Simpson and presenter, Pauline Coe worked on "Play School,"

Christchurch

Review

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 4, 1991.

THE PRESS

steps

Keep uncertainty about the country's role.

The pro-Berlin lobby narrowly won a dramatic parliamentary vote in June to move the government to the former capital, which Bonn supporters decried as a symbol of the imperial chauvinism and Nazi terror to be avoided at all costs.

Historian Michael Stuermer saw in the capital city dispute a "desire to maintain the doubtful charm of an era in which the Berlin Wall was still in place, Germany was divided and its weakness ruled out too burdensome demands being made of it."

stirred up a smaller storm by attending the reburial of the Prussian king Frederick the Great, a gesture leftists equated with paying homage to Prussian militarism.

Klaus Hartung, a commentator for the left-wing daily Tageszeitung, found historical debates like these out of touch at a time when Germany faces far more tangible challenges from the unexpected upheavals in eastern Europe.

"The nostalgic western left only discovered after 1989 that the old West Germany was actually its Golden Age," he wrote.

"Federalism, cultured living, ecology, a civilised society, Western values, eternal peace (at least in Central Europe) and of course prosperity — this is what people are yearning for in a country where the greedy, uncultivated and impoverished masses are already arriving from the

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Parliament

PA Wellington
The reports of the Lay Observers and the New Zealand Lotteries Commission for the year ended June 30, 1991, were presented when Parliament resumed at 2pm yesterday.

A report of the Office of the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment on odour nuisance control was tabled.

Ministers answered six questions of the day and 13 questions for oral answer.

An Opposition request for a snap debate on the review of superannuation was turned down.

The reports of the labour and immigration select committees were then tabled and debate resumed on Appropriation Bill (No. 4).

The chairman of committees reported progress on the Bill and the Minister of Justice, Mr Graham, moved the introduction of the Reciprocal Enforcements of Judgments Amendments Bill.

The Bill was referred to the justice and law reform select committee for consideration.

The House then moved back into committee for the committee stages of the New Zealand Tourism Board Bill.

The House moved out of committee and rose shortly after 10.30pm.

Parliament will resume sitting at 2pm on Tuesday.

part to reassure investors

ahead. For example, we, as a small agency, have six brand new names starting for 1992.

"Four of them are bankers or in the money market and they are working on the cyclical theory that now is the time to be joining."

Mr Stace also said many names were rejoining after having resigned in previous years.

"We also have a significant number increasing their premium limits. So while the membership has suffered an overall decline, the actual capacity of

He said a significant development was the appointment of a task force last year by the Ruling Council of Lloyd's to look at every facet of how the society operated. The task force was due to report back in the first half of next year and its findings would be published.

"This place is not going down the tubes," Mr Hill said.

"What is happening is that it is going through a necessary period of change, adjustment and rationalisation."

Looking ahead to the 1989

insurance industry worldwide, and not just Lloyd's, had been hit by an unprecedented catalogue of disasters in the last four years.

These began with the October storms through south-east England in 1987, and included the North Sea Piper Alpha tragedy, the hurricanes Gilbert and Hugo, the Phillips petrochemical plant explosion in Pasadena, the San Francisco earthquake and the grounding of the Exxon Valdez in Alaska.

However, Mr Hill said the security underlying every in-

"And the level of security is the key component that is of concern to regulators, legislators, policy holders, bankers and everyone else."

Lloyd's is the subject of a preliminary investigation by a United States congressional committee.

Inquiries by the permanent sub-committee of the United States Senate are likely to look into allegations that Lloyd's has breached US securities laws, it said yesterday.

“More bemused than shocked.”

by Brett Riley

HAMLETMACHINE, Christchurch Arts Centre.

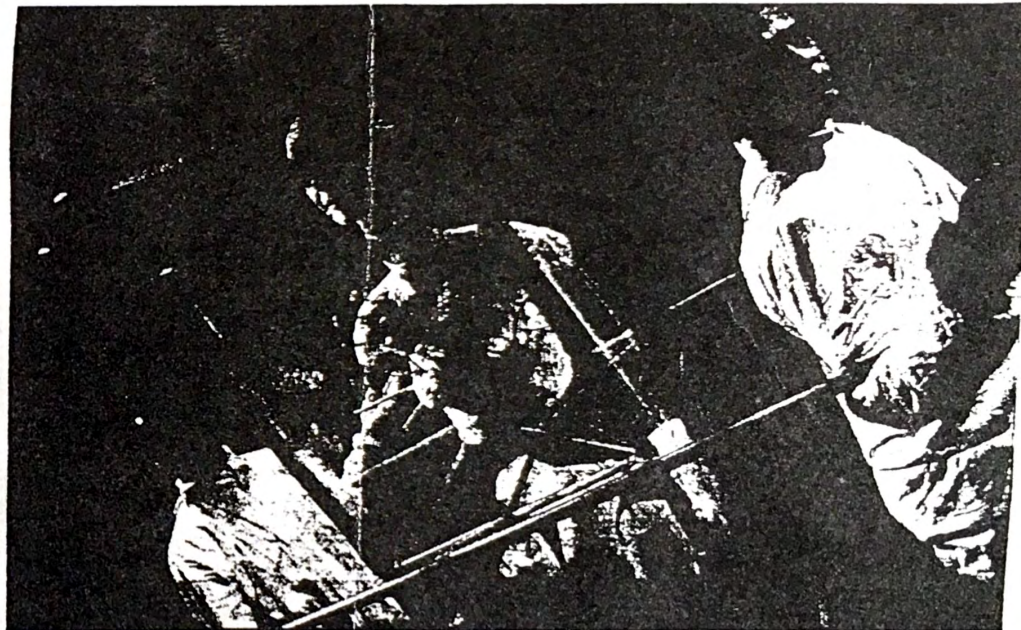
IT WAS EITHER the most exciting and seminal theatre-making to hit New Zealand in years, or it was patronising, pretentious old European intellectual posturing dressed up as the avant-garde. When Heiner Muller's 1977 play *Hamlet-machine* opened in Christchurch in October, it was not only the first production in New Zealand of a play by a 62-year-old (East) German writer who has been called the successor to Bertold Brecht, it was a premeditated assault on the English repertory tradition.

Funded by the Goethe Institute and the QE II Arts Council, top German alternative-theatre directors, George Froscher (founder, in 1970, of Munich's long-lived Free Theatre) and Kurt Bildstein, travelled to

Christchurch at the invitation of University of Canterbury lecturer Peter Falkenberg. Local professional actors, experiencing a theatrical springtime in the city, largely stayed away. University drama students had to fill the gap. No matter, said Froscher, a lot of the pros are coquettes who love themselves and aren't open to new ideas anyway.

The two-month rehearsal of the dense, Brecht-like seven-page text was the key to the Germans' ultimate success. In actor-centred Grotowski fashion, the 15 performers were expected to interpret, explore, internalise the text and use it as a personal springboard. The Germans extracted startling performances from the young actors, especially the leading men. They also created a menacing spectacle of military precision.

The post-war European alternative-theatre tradition of denying every expectation (the audience stood, the venue shifted, there was no make-believe set, no naturalism, no story, but instead an often obscure intellectual polemic endlessly repeated) seemed to leave the audience more bemused than shocked. After 50 years, the conventions of “free” theatre are pretty predictable, even if they've never taken root here. ■



JULIE RILEY

Hamlet-machine: startling performances from young actors.