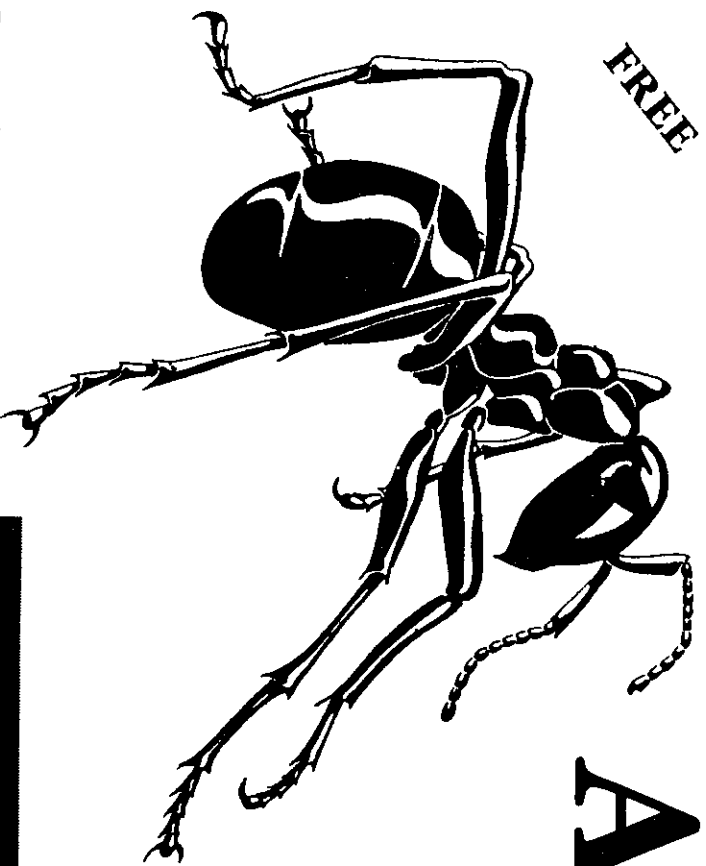


FREE



ANT NEWS 28

APRIL 1990

Registered by Australia Post as a publication:
Category B Pub. No. VBH 4498
Australian Nouveau Theatre Newsletter

ANT PROGRAMME 1990



THE IMAGINARY INVALID

Universal Theatre
January 19 — February 11
Adelaide Festival of the Arts
March 5-17



THE EMIGRANTS

by Slawomir Mrozek
directed by Jean-Pierre Mignon
dramaturg Suzanne Chaundy
set and costumes by Tomek Koman
music by Sam Mallet
lighting and stage management by Greg
Dziarnutis
performed by Jacek Koman and Alex
Mengler

Anthill Theatre
OPENS APRIL 11



Anthill/Next Wave
Playreadings Season
Anthill Theatre

April 20, 23, 27, 30
(see inside for further details)



WAITING FOR GODOT

by Samuel Beckett
directed by Jean-Pierre Mignon
performed by Jacek Koman, Alex
Mengler, Ian Scott, Ross Williams
Russell St. Theatre

OPENS JUNE 30



PEER GYNT

by Henrik Ibsen
translated by May-Britt Akerhold
directed by Jean-Pierre Mignon
venue to be announced

OPENS NOVEMBER 14



N.B. All audience members of **THE
EMIGRANTS** are entitled to see
WAITING FOR GODOT at the
Melbourne Theatre Company for
Anthill prices.



AUSTRALIAN NOUVEAU THEATRE
ANTHILL THEATRE
199 Napier Street,
South Melbourne, 3205
BOOKINGS AND INFORMATION
699-3253

Shall I ever be free from the exaggerated claims of History? Shall I ever get beyond what I have been so far, a sort of slave to it? To some extent it depends on me, because in some measure it is a matter of attitude. I have been not only enslaved by the monster but also fascinated by it. You can get high on anything, so you can on that kind of dope too.

MROZEK

by Christina Zaklukewicz with
extracts from 'Autobiography',
by Slawomir Mrozek, 1988.

This year in Cracow on June 15th. The International Mrozek Festival will begin. It will end with a party on June 29th — Mrozek's sixtieth birthday. The Festival was inaugurated by 'The Old Theatre in Cracow, who were then joined by The Jagiellonian University and The College of Theatre Arts. It is taking place under the auspices of the Ministry for the Arts in Warsaw, and support is also coming from the French and Italian Institutes, and the Soviet and American Embassies. The University will prepare an international conference on Mrozek's literary works; the College has invited drama schools from all over the world to present productions of Mrozek's plays. Audiences will also be able to enjoy viewing films based on Mrozek's scripts, and there will be an exhibit of set designs for his plays. An authoritative bibliography of all Mrozek plays ever staged, is being prepared. Finally, the Festival will culminate with the birthday party, an event which will be celebrated by the whole town.

I was born on the twenty-ninth of June 1930. My birth is one of those facts that I have to believe in. Personally I have not the slightest memory of it. If there is some life or anything of the kind after death, then similarly, I think, I shall not remember the act of dying. Thus of two basic facts of our being — or not being — we cannot really be sure...

The uncertainty, the ambiguity, started right from the beginning and has followed me ever since. Maybe that is why I long to make things clear. The more I muddled through life, and the more confusion I created or was forced into, the more I disliked it, that is, the more I disliked myself and the more I desired clarity.

Joseph Opalski, the literary director of the Old Theatre and the head organizer of the festival says: "Two years ago I made an offer to organize the festival. Mrozek accepted, and since that time we have been in contact; he provides current information, gives advice... he is very impressed by the whole thing [...] The festival should make us understand how much of Mrozek we have in us... We shall see how "The Emigrants" or "Tango" sounds to us today. We have significant questions to ask and we hope they will be put forward in a light and amusing form [...] He treats the whole thing with an excellent sense of humour — he has already agreed to ride around the main square in Cracow on a rocking horse..."

Who is Slawomir Mrozek?

Could my life story be interesting for someone who has never even heard of my existence? I have not shot elephants in Kenya or elsewhere, never worked for any secret service, nor been a lover of John Kennedy, there is nothing of the sort to be revealed. I have not committed a nice murder, nor do I have any particular perversion that might excite the general public, not even one personal secret of the kind which if told could compensate somehow for the lack of adventurous deeds to recount. I lived through the Second World War, the German occupation of Poland, the Stalinist and post Stalinist eras, but I lived it as millions of people did, a common story.



Also my immigration to the West, now twenty-five years old, can hardly be considered something special. Then what?

He was born in a small town in the district of Cracow. He studied first at the Faculty of Engineering, and then at the Academy of Fine Arts. From 1950 to 1954 he worked as a journalist in Cracow.

Luckily for me I did not do anything too nasty during my brief stint of totalitarian enthusiasm. My activities were limited to publishing articles in the local paper about the glories of J. Stalin and the beauties of collectivisation, communism promoted me to journalist. I say luckily, as I could easily have harmed people in some more direct manner which would have left me for life with unremitting remorse.

For some time he was involved in experimental student theatre in Gdansk. He is a critic, satirical cartoonist, short story writer and a playwright.

So if I am going to try telling my life, it is only because I hope to discover some pattern in it, some shape, logic, and sense. I prefer to resist the idea that it has been nothing but a heap of junk. Only that kind of hope can incite me to begin the task. As to the general reader — I can only trust that he will follow.

Mrozek made his literary debut in the late fifties. In 1957, he published a collection of short stories entitled "The Elephant". It is a razor-sharp satire on totalitarian practices, but Mrozek is not an embittered critic. He sees totalitarian ideology as the pinnacle of absurdity and therefore far more comic than tragic. In these stories we see The Terror suddenly transformed by a superb sense of humour. The crowning irony is that the Polish State Cultural Review awarded "The Elephant" the annual literary prize.

My stint in journalism, idiotic as it was, nevertheless gave me access to writing/publishing. When saying goodbye forever to ideologies, I discovered the possibilities of writing on my own, from myself, the most private enterprise that can be. The circumstances were favorable for debiants, the country was starved for anything that was fresh and true. After the deforestation so thoroughly practiced by communism in its prime, every single plant sprouting here and there was welcome.

He also directed his satirical stories and plays against the Romantic myths and conventions which permeate the Polish national tradition and individual value systems. Like many contemporary Polish writers, he experimented with forms, taking elements from various literary traditions, national stereotypes, popular culture and personal experiences, blending them together to convey the totality of cultural existence. In this, he was a continuator of the avant-garde, anti-Romantic approach, but what is unique about Mrozek's work is the mixture of the literary and profane wrought at a popular level. He plays with contemporary consciousness and makes it accessible to all.

To this day, more than thirty years later, some quotations from these stories are remembered by people of my generation, that is, by those with whom I was young together and with whom I shared the joy and energy of suddenly, unexpectedly recaptured youth. Some of those quotations became proverbial, they were used by people who did not know and did not care who the author was — proof of how much I was in consonance with my fellow Poles at that time.

His first play, "The Police", published in 1958, is a comedy about a policeman who is concerned that the existence of his beloved "police state" is threatened by the limitless loyalty of its citizens, and he decides to act as a revolutionary to set all the right gears in motion again. Here the romantic cliché of the individual sacrificing himself for higher causes is turned on its head.

Ah, that revolutionary youth of mine! Communism was forced on Poland, imposed by military might on those very people in whose name, on whose behalf, according to those desire it claimed to be there. It was an invasion, not the revolution. But I chose to believe the lie because its timing was perfect for me. At the age of twenty I was waiting for any ideological proposition however stupid or crazy, provided it was revolutionary. All because I was ripe for my own personal revolt.

In "On the Open Sea" (1963), one of three passengers on a shipwreck is democratically elected to become a meal for the other two, a fate he happily accepts.

Continued page 2



Of course nobody is excused for being a fool, even at the age of twenty. Being a sucker is not a valid excuse for me. This is a matter of pride. If I am excused on that ground then it means humiliation for me. There is a tendency to excuse fools just because they are fools — alright, but then the humiliation calls for the revenge. Even a fool has the right to dislike those who look advantage of his stupidity. The fact that I was not the only one who was duped, far from it, does not mean anything to me. My accounts are always personal.

In "Tango" (1965), which established Mrozek as one of the leading European dramatists, we see a generational gap in reverse, the disharmony of the old and new values, as the younger generation tries to establish order amidst the rebellious antics of their grandparents. Here, again, Mrozek employs a technique much appreciated by his audiences. He starts with a situation from everyday life and proceeds logically to fully absurd ends.

In February 1968, we moved to Paris. If I wanted revolution I was well served, two months later the famous events of May 1968 broke out. I was looking only for my own private revolution and I landed in the centre of the collective one. I was not young enough anymore to project my personal problems onto the outer background in order to satisfy my private needs and wants by joining any political faith or mass movement. I had already had my lesson in that heady but abusive and finally ineffective attempt to save my soul by saving the world.

Mrozek's early plays could be categorized within the realms of the Theatre of the Absurd, and made his plays popular abroad. The breakdown of cultural patterns, satirical comments on the conflict between the new and the old, the sense of isolation and illusion conveyed in the almost cabaret humour, are all elements reminiscent of the absurdist, yet according to Martin Esslin, ("Eastern Absurdist: Sławomir Mrozek," 1969), Mrozek differs from them. In Western Europe they dramatized man's sense of isolation in a society which continues to produce goods despite the collapse of all sense of purpose. Mrozek's early work concentrated on the shallowness and idiotic contradictions found in the newly introduced "social rationalism".

If I am harsh on myself it is not because I am a masochist or because of any guilt feeling, I am a rather guilt-resistant type. It is only for the sake of lucidity. I let myself be cheated and that is all. I want to be clear about it. I thought I was joining the revolution while I joined the most rigid and oppressive establishment ever. My feeling of having been cheated is the private reason for my dislike, to put it mildly, of communism and the like ever since. This is not to say that I would otherwise have liked it — that is, if I did not have that private reason. But what is private, the essential, is always the strongest of all reasons.



Daddy, what is freedom?

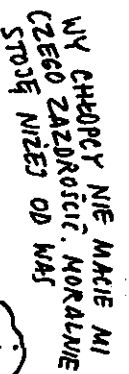
In 1963, Mrozek left Poland and went to live in Italy, and then France.

Haggling with the Polish authorities took the next five years. My point was to establish a precedent: the case of a Polish writer living abroad by his own means, beyond the control of the Polish state. To the Western reader it seems as banal

as free elections, freedom of speech and association, separation of the legislative and executive powers, the limits of what the police can do. He takes all that for granted and does not even give a thought to such trivia. The Irish government does not care if any Irish writer prefers to live in Paris or any other place of his choice, but in Polish terms twenty-five years ago the case was unheard of. Our passports of course were valid for only a short time, and the Italian visas could not be extended beyond their date of expiration. The endless visits to the Polish consulate in Rome and to the Italian prefectura in Genoa made me feel what all foreigners of uncertain legal status feel (a considerable part of the world population by now).

Living in the West, his emphasis shifted from concern about humans caught in a totalitarian system to man's inhumanity to man, and humankind's common heritage, which he found neglected in Western society.

I crossed not just the border but the mystic line separating two totally different civilizations. The people who live on the Eastern side are painfully aware of the difference, while the Westerners are not. By the way it would be interesting to know why people who have access to all possible information are so ignorant about some basic distinctions, while people who are kept in ignorance are not.



He decided that the audience of the serenities wanted something different from satire and parody: "It somehow seems to me that nowadays people want to hear serious comments about significant matters." (from the "Little Letter" on his play "Slaughterhouse", 1973).

Mrozek talks seriously in "The Ambassador" (1981), "The Contract" (1986), and most significantly "The Emigrants" (1974).

As the title indicates, the play is about two men who are living outside their homeland. One is an intellectual who has read Hegel and Schopenhauer, speaks foreign languages and intends to write. He has left his country for ideological reasons. He manages to get money from God-knows-where, and can afford luxuries like cigarettes, cognac and magazines. The other is an unskilled worker who works hard, doesn't read anything and is not very articulate. He left his home for a very unsophisticated reason: money. The text has a very simple structure: two men, one room, and a lot of words. Probably this is why it is so difficult to mount successfully. Two such men, sharing close quarters, inevitably leads to comic effects. It is very tempting to read the play as a parody of stereotypes — an intellectual and a boor, representatives of two social classes, particularly if we believe that Mrozek never takes anything seriously. But, this is also a very cruel play, not only because two people in a forced situation torment each other, but because it offers a merciless analysis of human creatures. We witness a psychological battle between them which leads to the destruction of the protective mechanisms and self-images of the characters. Is the play an existential drama, or just a comedy which uses parody and wit to comment on some ridiculous situation?

After fifteen years of exile, first self-imposed then enforced, I made my first visit to Poland. I was already a French citizen at that time. I experienced the shock of schizophrenia, I found that my personality was split into two even parts: one the native, the other a stranger in my own country. It was the result of leading one life too many. Waking up in the morning, half hearing through the open window the voices of children playing a couple of blocks away, I could understand without thinking about it what they were saying. I was again in full and natural communication with the environment... On the other hand I was a foreigner. Fifteen years lived out of the country had done their job. Even though I sojourned physically in Poland, mentally I was on both sides of the frontier at the same time. Not the frontier fixed by guards and customs, but a subtle line dividing experiences and minds. Staying with my people, and apparently one with them, I felt like a cheater. I understood that once you go away there is no real return. This is true for any situation of the kind.



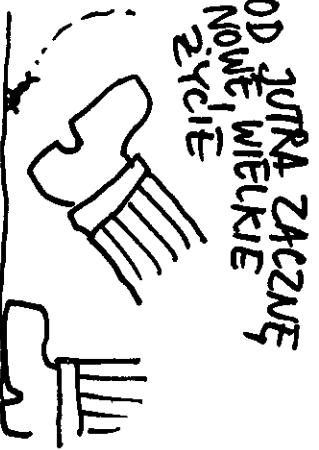
Have we met before? In society.

In Mrozek's plays, we find different relations: man and society, man and metaphysical events, man and politics. In his early plays ("The Police", "The Turkey", "On The Open Sea"), it is not people but ideas, philosophical systems and conventions which walk on stage. He builds up models which are metaphorical and calculated. But since "The Emigrants", the material he uses comes from painfully experienced reality. The relationship is man to man, and the essence is fear and despair. Yet we can laugh during the performance — Mrozek uses comedy to make the audience feel secure.

In 1980, the play "On Foot" appeared and it is regarded as the most successful piece of Mrozek's recent period. Here he blends historical reality i.e. war, and various literary models.

Till the age of nine I accepted the order I was born into, its values, modes, codes, and manners as natural and universal. Then something happened that went far beyond what was needed to shake up my childish Weltanschauung. It was like using a megaton bomb to impress a fly. It was the war.

My early cosmos collapsed, disintegrated, and disappeared in some abyss of which I had never known before and which I have never forgotten since. I know it is always there, ready to grip down whatever we have and whatever we are. I do not mean just the war, I mean the ontological abyss. A nice expression, is it not? It sounds superbly scientific but no definition can truly describe it. That abyssal something is without dimensions and has no name.



Tomorrow my new life begins.

The play presents a group of displaced and disoriented characters who, after the war ends, are waiting nowhere for the train to take them somewhere — the train which, probably, will never come. The characters: Market Woman, Teacher Lady, Girl, Father, Son, are named according to their social status. Throughout the play, the eccentric intellectual Superstus appears as a detached commentator. While the characters passively wait for the train, they enjoy a crude celebration of freedom from all systems, patterns and structures, accompanied by the intellectual's ironic remarks which reflect an avant-garde, catastrophic view of reality. Again, Mrozek challenges social habits, and morals, intellectual norms, abuses conservatism, and the perception of ordinary people and their insignificant lives.

I have mentioned already that at the beginning of the screenies I established a vision of myself — nobody can live without casting himself in some character of his own invention — as an adventurous loner. I tried to live up to it. But with the passing years a contradiction arose between the very notion of adventure and its reputable practice. There is no adventure without the feeling of something always fresh and new, of something exceptional. But how can "always" be reconciled with "exceptional"? The stage was set, my costumes appropriate, but opening night was already far behind, the public weary of the repeat performance. The adventure began to sour.

Mrozek challenges theatre, too. He often comments on it, and acting, and directing. In one of his "Little Letters", he asks: Why is the theatre today neglecting its most natural sphere — the relationship between man and man? ... To take up this relationship means employing a bit of moral philosophy and principles. But these are not trendy nowadays. We dismiss them ironically, unless they are wrapped in political or psychological abstractions... I've participated in theatrical productions in different countries. I've had classes in drama schools. Everywhere I've found the same: actors can jump, speak in high or low voices, they understand the text, particularly the social aspects — or they pretend they do — and with delight they analyze the psychology of the characters. But they suffer from an astonishing decline of psychoanalytical imagination when it comes to understanding their own and their partners' situations on stage."

A couple of years ago, Mrozek was invited to deliver a speech at the Strindberg-O'Neill Symposium in Stockholm. He was asked to talk about "The Theatre and Reality". One of the questions he put was "why do people need theatre, assuming that they do?" Here is a brief summary of his lecture: As an entertainment, the theatre long ago failed when confronted with film, television, and recently, video. So it is not entertainment that we must expect from theatre. We need theatre to confront reality. The stage is defined and organized, unlike reality which is disorganized and unlimited, thus giving us a sense of helplessness and confusion. When we enter the theatre, we feel we face something clearly separated from reality, not as chaotic as reality, and we experience some sort of relief. Theatre offers us a retreat from the nonsense of reality.

The stage is defined by space and time. Whatever happens on stage has a beginning and an end; we always know how the action will end on stage — if we stay to the end of the play. In reality, actions are unpredictable. Action on stage, then, gives us some metaphysical consolation. In reality we miss sense and order, and we accuse our existence of being only a dream of a madman. But everyday and all the time we "write" our own "scenarios", which are usually bad, stupid and clumsy. Then we go to the theatre where the performance has sense and organization and we think "if it is possible on stage, it must be possible in the universe." If theatre wants to depict the disintegration of reality, it must itself be highly organized and logical to have any effect on the audience.

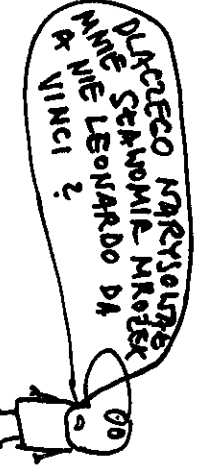
I am tempted to believe that I am beginning to understand how to solve the conflict between order and adventure. Please mark the prudence of this assertion. It is so measured, so full of reservation, that it is hardly an assertion at all, rather a hint and a hope, though not just wishful thinking. If I am ever sure that I have succeeded, it will be the high point of my life, the meeting of two parallel lines. A not entirely hopeless task, given the mathematical reassurance that they cross one another somewhere in infinity. How do I figure to do it, what is my trick? I think that any explanation, even if it were possible, would not be of any value to anybody. This is an existential, not intellectual thing, and being such it is ultimately personal. The individual makes it and it makes the individual, it cannot be shared. Everyone gets it or not in his own way, living his own life. There is no trick to be revealed and used by others, precisely because there has never been a trick to learn from the outside.

A few months ago, Mrozek left Paris where he had lived for twenty-two years, and moved to Mexico.

Just one bit of information, my second wife is Mexican. Thanks to her I am beginning to have insights into that dimension of humanity which is beyond my European, Christian heritage. I am beginning to understand that our European values, modes, and codes (I used those terms before in speaking about the restricted field of my early environment in childhood) are not necessarily all that being in Europe is about. Nor are they the only possible achievement, way, and approach. Thus the scope of my experience seems to be enlarging.

He has promised to arrive at the Festival in Cracow ... in sombrero and spurs.

To reconcile order and adventure at last, to get some freedom from History, if that will ever be feasible for me — I can ask for no more.



Why was I drawn by Sławomir Mrozek and not Leonardo da Vinci?

IT WON'T BE ON THE MOON

An Interview with Jean-Pierre Mignon

by Anne C. Murch

I pounce on Jean-Pierre Mignon during a break in the rehearsal for *The Emigrants*: "Waiting for Godot comes next, doesn't it?" He finds it "quite an effort" to switch over like this as he tends to "forget everything else when in rehearsal for a production", but he does so with resigned good grace. ANT is to produce Beckett's classic as guest company for the MTC, with Mignon directing and Alex Menglet, Jack Koman, Ross Williams and Ian Scott in the cast. Whilst it will be Mignon's first mis-en-scene of the play, he has long been associated with Beckett's work. As a new arrival in Australia he directed *Embers*, *Krapp's Last Tape* and *Nor I* in Melbourne in 1980, later touring the three plays in Victorian country centres (how did the latter take to such radical fare, one wonders?)

The 1989 ANT season concluded on another Beckett play, *Happy Days*, the title an ironic antiphrasis at a time when the funding crisis in the performing arts made the headlines. (It doesn't any longer, but has surely not been forgotten?)

Mignon recalls being involved with the play as an actor in France in 1971 in the part of Lucky. Then the actor impersonating Estragon had an accident. With only three days' notice Mignon had to take over the part for a season in Germany: "I never considered myself a very good actor, but those are my best memories of acting. I felt totally connected with what I was doing, felt for once that I was hitting something real!"

We get into the vexing question of the eternal triangle: playwright, director, text. The question is particularly pertinent in the case of Beckett who in his later years tried his hand at directing his own plays. Does Mignon feel that, given Beckett's stature and authority, this may inhibit directors in their own renderings; does it inhibit him? It does not, but it could be "a bit of a worry", he concedes. A writer may not be aware of the potential of what he's writing. He may "follow a narrow credo in adapting what he's done on paper to the stage". The author's presence at rehearsals generally turns out to be a director's nightmare anyway. Mignon compares the passage from page to stage to a bouncing match. Though respect for the text must be paramount, performance "bounces off the playwright's words, they are furthered by the director, who is himself furthered by actors and designers". A bouncing match, it is perhaps no coincidence that the team often plays volleyball or even table-tennis when warming up...

I mention Beckett's tribulations with Kenneth Tynan, "so as not to be consistently unhelpful", as Beckett put it, he agreed to provide a short piece, *Breath*, to precede *Oh Calcutta* (of all things!) on the stage. He did it as a favour to Tynan and on the understanding that it would be used anonymously and the stage directions honoured, neither of which Tynan kept to. To Beckett's direction "Faint light, a stage littered with miscellaneous rubbish" Tynan added "including naked bodies". Beckett was appalled. Mignon, sympathising, assures me that he adhered scrupulously to the stage directions in his own production of *Breath* at La Mama (1980).

And what does he think of the skirmish over *Godot* in Holland? In 1989 Beckett refused permission for an all-woman production in Amsterdam; the company concerned disregarded the author's veto and went ahead; as a result Beckett decided to withhold authorisation for any production of any of his plays in the whole of the Netherlands (1). Mignon declares himself puzzled. He can see no reason "within the parameters of the play" why a cast of four women could not do it justice. His own "gut reaction" would be to go ahead regardless. As he went ahead staging the

radio play *Embers* even though Beckett was against its being staged. As he used Julie Forsyth to impersonate a boy in *Kids Stuff* in spite of the strong reservations of the author, Raymond Cousse, ("he was scandalised").

It is not unusual for a writer or playwright's work to undergo a re-appraisal after his death. I suggest that in Beckett's case we might find the "Irishness" underlined at the expense of the universality. Mignon, whose first acquaintance with the dramatic works was in French anyway, comes down on the side of the universality; his interest in theatre is along such lines anyway, and it is also the philosophy of the company in general terms.

When I ask him whether he will be aiming at anything in particular in his own *Godot*, he balks at the question and laughs: "What do you mean? ... Is it going to be set on the moon, or ... ?" I persevere: "Well, yes, for instance, is it going to be set on the moon?" Mignon laughs. Serious-ly: "No, it'll be set along a country road with a tree and will deal with the characters Beckett stipulates." Perhaps the question is wrong: like asking a painter how he'll use his palette in his next picture? I try again. How does he see the relationship between Vladimir and Estragon, how do they play off each other? That's better. "I think that, underlying it, is the relationship of the white clown and the red clown, an extreme extrapolation of the Commedia dell'arte basically. That, in my opinion, is the first layer. By this I do not mean that that'll be the performing style. It may not show at all as far as the audience is concerned, but it'll be our starting point in the rehearsal process."

Next the question of timing comes up. Beckett's stage directions stipulate numerous pauses. "That's all very well, but what's a pause? A tenth of a second is a pause. All is in the mood and atmosphere so that you can adapt your timing to what you want. That is surely what Beckett intended when he did not give a special value to the pauses." And he rejects the notion that the production of the San Quentin company that visited Australia a few years ago under the catchword of "Beckett directs Beckett" constitutes a blueprint to be adhered to.

Mignon's thoughts return to *The Emigrants* in which the same two "clowns" (Menglet and Koman) play opposite parts as it were. "I find that fascinating. It is a wonderful exercise for a director, dealing with the negative before coping with the positive." (Mignon's metaphor is visual here, I should say, and refers to photography or film.) Menglet and Koman, coming from Eastern Europe, have never been involved in a production of Beckett who, up to recently, was branded as a member of the decadent bourgeoisie and not performed. The position is different for the other two actors, who are Australian. Ross Williams was involved in the part of Vladimir at the Victorian College of the Arts. Ian Scott once did a stage adaptation of *Mercier and Camier* at La Mama.

The ANT production of *Waiting for Godot* will run from 30 June, with previews starting on 28 June, at the Russell Street Theatre — "An awkward space, a difficult theatre", Mignon muses, but even so, "the theatricality of Beckett should be well accepted within that space, it should work."

Time is up. Back to rehearsal. Mignon, in parting, "J'espere que le nai pas dit trop de conneries"; (2) There is something at once disarming and inspiring about this lack of pretentiousness. Perhaps it comes, in our unreal world of wholesale masquerade, from being in touch with "something real". The monstrosity of overt show business, that is.

(1) *Week End Guardian*, 8-9 April '89.
(2) I hope I didn't say too many stupid things.

THEATERFRAU

An Interview with Renate Klett

by Evi Geiger

Asked how she would describe herself, Renate Klett offers a number of theatrical professions, not any one of them appealing to satisfy her entirely. It is well into our conversation that the word "theaterfrau" (theatre woman) slips in — spontaneously and very much to the point.

Renate Klett has over the last 20 years, worked in and around the theatre, as dramaturg, assistant director, critic, festival director. I went to see her in Melbourne to ask her about the German theatre scene, about the role of women in it, above all, about the *Theater der Welt Festival*, with which she has been associated since its inception in 1981. She however had come to Australia to get away from all that, from theatre and culture. The irony of her "escape" did not elude her: Australia being, in German eyes, still cast as the last frontier — the outbreak providing the backdrop against which the fantasy of "me and my car" may be enacted. And yet, for Renate Klett, it was the surprise encounter with Anhill's production *Kids' Stuff* at the Edinburgh Festival and the realisation that things of interest were happening down under that brought her here. Her determination to stay clear of civilisation was already yielding to the pull of the Adelaide Festival, (which she did in fact attend as *Theater Heute's* reviewer).

Renate Klett looks and clearly is a very resolute person, "battle-scarred" feminist, passionate traveller, tireless in her worldwide pursuit of plays and productions — no less than 1000 over the last two years in preparation for the 1989 *Theater der Welt* in Hamburg.

Determination and staying power were qualities indispensable for any young woman aspiring to a place in the West German theatre world during the early '70s, when Renate Klett began her career. The all-rounder approach to theatre, which she now values as having given her rare insights and perspectives, had not been her first choice entirely. After a brief spell studying drama, Renate Klett set out to become a director — a difficult undertaking at best, precarious to the extreme in West Germany where there is no provision for training, no prescribed route leading to the director's chair. Periods of unpaid sitting-in on productions may lead to an assistant directorship followed by a contract, which includes the prospect of directing a number of plays. It was at this crucial third stage of "Eigentreffe" that Renate Klett found herself butting against the sexism, endemic during that period in West German theatre. With some glee, Klett tells the story of how Peter Paltsch, then the chief of Frankfurt Theatre, one of the most progressive and innovative theatres in West Germany during the 60s and '70s told her that, being a woman, she would not stand a chance. The injustice so enraged Renate Klett, that her resignation was handed in and the train to Paris boarded that very day.

Travelling, gathering familiarity and expertise, as well as writing for the prestigious theatre journal *Theater Heute*, Renate Klett made her name as an expert on international theatre. Thus she was the natural choice when after a most successful season of *Theater des Nations*, in West Germany, in 1979, it was decided to create the *Theater der Welt Festival* to tour German cities.

It took place for the first time in Cologne in 1981. Renate Klett selected the programme for that and for two of the three subsequent events. Curiously enough, West Germany which abounds in municipal theatres, music and opera festivals and which is very open to international theatre had up to then lacked a big international theatre festival. *Theater der Welt*, like *Theatre des Nations*, a biennial event under the umbrella of the International Theatre Institute, was to fill that gap.

While the looseness of its organisational structure makes for great flexibility, not to say unpredictability, Renate Klett has been able to assign to it the function she sees for theatre festivals today: less celebrity, less ceremonial, but innovative and challenging. In the context of West German theatre of the eighties, this has meant questioning the dominant paradigm of withdrawal and introspection: "... Chekhov is

in, Brecht is out, look at Botho Strauss and even Peter Handke, their descent into naval gazing..." The crisis of West German theatre, evident in articles and discussions which fill the culture and literature pages of the big dailies and theatre journals such as *Theater Heute* bear testimony to the fact that the rich German theatres — too rich some might say — are not just mirroring, but suffering from, a malaise brought on by a dearth of causes and concerns. Thus Renate Klett looks to wherever she expects things to be happening, to Soviet theatre, to Hungary and for some time now, to Australia.

Her policy has been to invite companies which might elsewhere be seen as on the fringe to the main Festival, making space for shock and surprise even frustrating expectations as in the case of Anhill's *Kids' Stuff*, which, though a huge success with the Hamburg festival audiences last year, did not fail to disappoint those who had come to see the Australian clichés reinforced. While she bows to the need to include the big crowd-pulling names in her festival programmes, Renate Klett had much rather look for quality from the mainstream.

Audience responses have rewarded her and she is quick to reject the notion that the present theatre crisis, most acute in the case of Frankfurt, (where Gunther Rühle, after years of frustration and pleading has just resigned his post as artistic director) could be blamed on audiences. The public is there, all you need is good theatre. In contrast to Australian critics, who on the whole she finds supportive, Renate Klett points an accusing finger at their West German colleagues, who delight chiefly in savage "Verzisse": Are they not all too readily ignoring the basic symbiotic relationship between theatre and critics?

Returning to the subject of women in West German theatre, Renate Klett describes their emergence as perhaps the most striking feature of the last two decades. There are now more women assistant directors than men, but also numerous directors. (Andrea Breth, to name but one of the young directors, is excellent and much talked about.) On the other hand, the tendency to blame the occasional failure on the wrong sex of the director cannot be overlooked. Of the many women authors now evident on West German stages, the names of the Austrian Elfriede Jelinek — "her plays are fascinating but almost impossible to stage" — and that of the young "lyric" Frederike Roth, spring to mind. I failed to ask Klett the perhaps obvious question as to whether she would make a connection between the trend towards introspection, which she mentioned earlier on, and the co-incidental (?) emergence of women. Maybe her own forthcoming staging of *Hedda Gabler* will be informative in that respect.

Postscript from the editors

When her travels in Australia and the South Pacific are over, Renate Klett will return to Germany to pursue her original ambition: to be a director. After the initial obstructions she encountered in the field, she now finds all doors open to her. After years of nurturing the theatre arts in offices, backstage, and in writing, she has earned herself a position of great respect at home and abroad. The major theatre companies in Germany requested that her directorial debut be with them; the most admired actresses were eager to be her Hedda Gabler. Very wisely, she has resisted the temptation of the biggest and best. She has chosen a small company to work with, and a little known actress whom she believes can do the part justice. As she has observed in her years of viewing world theatre, small is more often beautiful, and certainly, in her case, the reduced focus and pressure will be more conducive to creative endeavours. With all the expertise and dedication she offers as a "theaterfrau" of the highest order, audiences will no doubt be privileged to watch a true craftswoman at work.

FESTIVAL EUMINATIONS

Handspan Women Alone

What Do They Call Me

Plunge

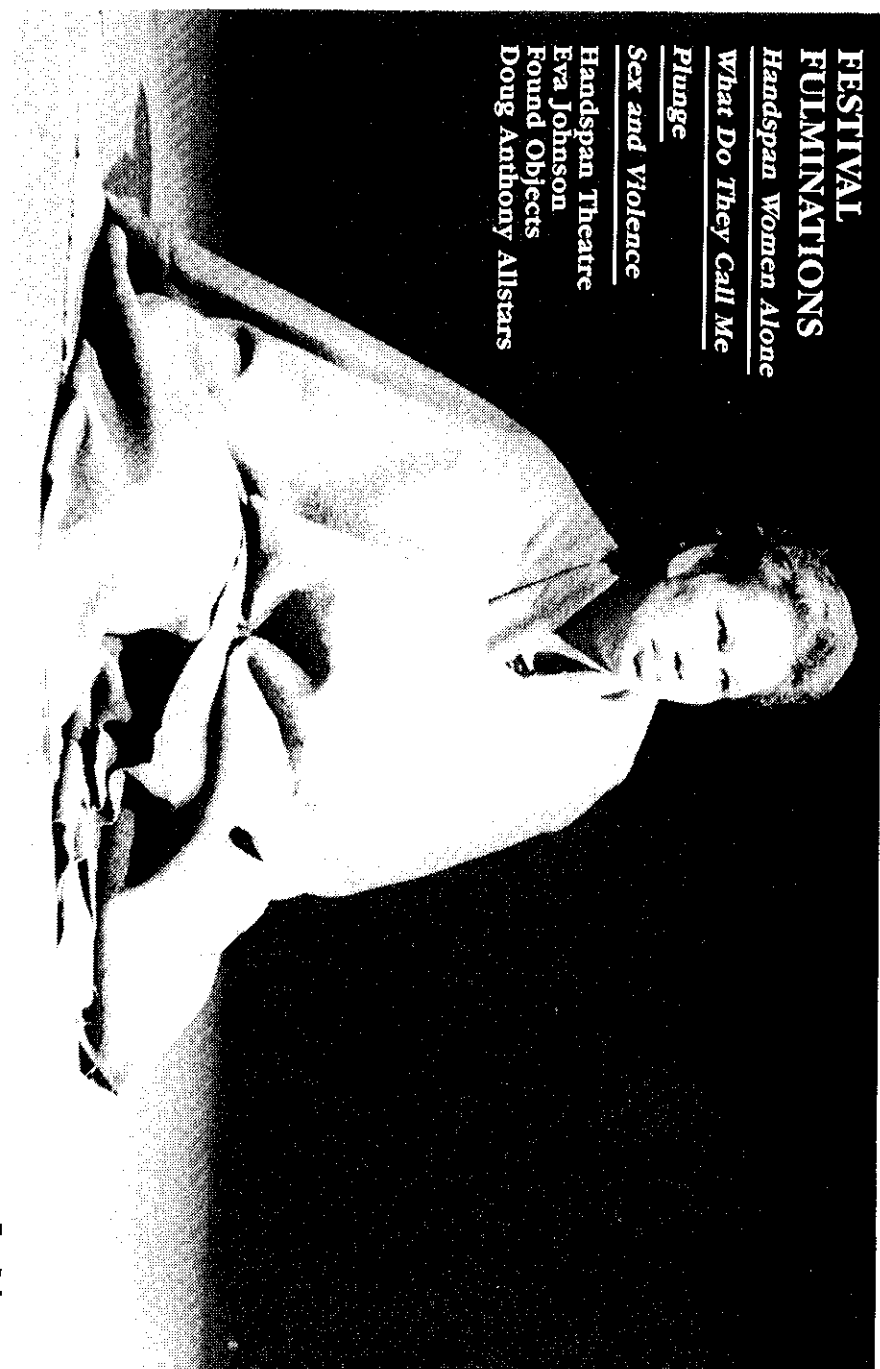
Sex and Violence

Handspan Theatre

Eva Johnson

Found Objects

Doug Anthony Allstars



Virginia Fraser



Virginia Fraser

THEATRE FROM THE FRINGE OF 1

The Lion Theatre Living Arts Centre, home of the 1990 Adelaide Festival Fringe, is ambivalently central and marginal in a geographic sense to the more sedate venues of the mainstream Festival. West of the Festival Centre at the less genteel end of North Terrace, the rambling and decrepit old factory houses numerous small playing spaces and is a biphilous powerhouse of noise and networking far into the night. While patrons of some mainstream events must trek in their best frocks to relatively remote suburban theatres for their shows, the Fringe has it all together: a concentrated generator of ideas in collision. The supposedly affronting and groovy French circus, Archazos panned in the *Advertiser* and thus obliged to extend its season, is fittingly sited in the Wayville Showgrounds next to the animated dinosaur display and forms a satellite to the North Terrace carnival.

These were the two pulsating energy points on the grid map of the Festival. Not that the brilliant Georgian Film Actors Studio, the magical *Cinderella* by the Lyon Opera Ballet, or the eccentric Belgian Theatre Mandragore (who enacted their idea of a 1920s expressionistic movie and appear to have re-invented melodramatic acting) failed to illuminate the mainstream events with performances of outstanding physicality and visual flair. It's just that one looks to the Fringe for the local and contemporary, and hopes to find there the jagged edge, the thrust of the novel and maybe painful, aggressive and difficult material, or for the poetry achieved by economy and dedication to a more inward vision.

The comedy shows I saw were both long on aggression — as subject matter and as performance motor — were presented by trios of young men, and had the implicit theme, to be reductive, of being young and male. The three performers of Found Objects' show *Plunge*, Colin Lane, Scott Casley and Frank Wood reached back to their not-so-distant pasts as young adolescents;

a time of messing about, playing dare, gangling up on the weakest in triangular fashion, combining in shifting patterns of friendship, dominance, dependence and nascent responsibility. The central situation of the show is of three kids mucking around on the beach in an endless holiday time, serving as a vehicle for a loosely-connected series of musical and mime sketches ranging in tone from the satiric to the surreal.

As usual, some unfortunate is hauled up from the audience, this time to be made over into 'Granny' and become the focus of a witty song ending. 'My Granny is a Grey Power Activist'. The space is used dangerously and inventively when the boys clamber over the balconies in a mime of getting cut off by the tide on a cliff: their extravagant panic ('Mum!') and the prompt resurgence of pragmatism is both funny and keenly observed. The trio are close enough to their material — middle-Australian suburban family life — to capture its exact nuances while miming comedy from the idiotcies and rituals. The act is warm without sentimentality, inclusive of the audience, and, oddly for such a spontaneously performed show, well-written in a literary way. While not indulgent to the sharp edges of egotism, exploitation and competition incidental to male bonding, it renders a persuasively recognizable image of the volatile magic of those transitional zones between childhood and adulthood, sea and land, drawing on the audience's shared experience of these lost worlds to colour out the performers' invention.

Audience members picked on by the Doug Anthony Allstars need expect little indulgence. Well, after all what did we come for? The Allstars aren't slow to point out to dissenters that we all know what we're in it for, and they intend dishing it out: some poor turkey has his shirt ripped off and used as a facecloth. Their act draws

on the guilty thrills of the scapegoat ritual: thank God they didn't grab me! now I can enjoy vicariously the aggression and anarchy funnelled onto some other victim. The Allstars work off sexuality, fear, hype and aggro — and everyone loves it. Richard tutors the audience to chant the paranoid schizophrenics' war cry 'We're the best! No we're not!' as our team captain 'volunteers' to race theirs to swill a glass of beer. As first prize, she can slap Paul. Not like that — harder! Paul finally gets dealt a convincing,ly painful smack. 'You're dead, bitch', he mutters vengefully through what seems a genuinely swollen face. Richard has enlisted our complicity in channelling some of Paul's aggro back at him, and stands by smirking like a choirboy. We yell in delight, demanding three encores and getting two.

Having seen the Allstars only on *The Big Gig* I was fascinated to see their act live. It is considerably more demotic in speech register than the telecast acts — one wonders how they managed to rein in their vocabulary in the studio. No holds are barred here, though. The other difference is the repositioning of Richard within the dynamics of the group. His schtick hitherto has been playing the New Sensitive Male of ambiguous sexuality, getting the girls on-side as against the manic maleness of Paul and Tim. In 'Sex and Violence' Richard is on the attack, projecting danger and unpredictability — no safe receptacle here for whimsical audience sympathy. 'Shut your fucking face! he yells at Tim. 'This is not my fucking face! retorts Tim with dignity. 'THIS is my fucking face', whereupon it contorts into an extravagant mask of anti-mated lechery. Taboos are pushed against and exploded, as in the aspirant Member for Kooyong's celebrated gross-out baby-kissing parody, or his opportunistic pre-election 'confession' of a wild affair with a Kooyong pensioner. Scratch the Allstars' act, as with Found Objects, and one finds an ambivalent love-hate relationship with

Granny. Is this the compulsive motor which drives them to searing fears of energy; to affront a concept of suburban feminine niceness and blandness? Or is it to exorcise and obliterate once and for all the spectre of a Canberra childhood? With both acts, safety is to be found in numbers. Funny thing about scapegoating, I muse as the ear-punishing howls of an aroused audience finally subside, fresh blood must always be demanded; each man kills the thing he loves, over and over ... and I sound like a right wanker and Paul is now wearing dreadlocks and looks rather cute.

The women of Handspan Theatre present images of femaleness in their *Women Alone* show. We could be in a totally other world — perhaps we are. Physically and wit are now used inclusively, allusively, pushing at the edges of the unsaid and unsayable in visual imagery rich with promise rather than threat. Annie Wylie performs a post-romantic version of Red Riding Hood using an apple for the heroine and a banana for the Wolf — but now she survives the supposedly traumatic encounter with Granny and goes on her way wiser and undamaged.

In *The Therapist* Kay Bowman uses herself as part of an animated Magritte painting, unlocking doors and drawers, exploring further into her body/being to uncover its fears and treasures. 'There can be no ultimate disclosure, just an unfolding series of transformations as the journey into femaleness and selfhood progresses. *Moments* uses tiny Bunraku puppets on a table top to image life's beginnings, adulthood and pathetic end — pathos, poetry and comedy beautifully encapsulated in a miniature masterpiece. Michelle Spooner's *The Immaculate Conception* uses puppets, objects and mime to tell the story of an egg.



Found Objects:

Colin Lane, Scott Casley, Frank Wood.

Luzio Grassi



Virginia Fraser

Eva Johnson