

Warlikowski's "Warsaw Cabaret": Transmissions from the End of the World

The premiere performance of "Warsaw Cabaret" at Nowy Teatr. Krzysztof Warlikowski shows his sense of humour with a play that we thought would be a warning against the brutal new wave.

The most famous scene in Bob Fosse's "Cabaret" starring Liza Minelli? A boy crisply singing an innocent song as others gradually join in and transform it into a show of Nazi strength – "Tomorrow belongs to me."

In the Oscar-winning musical, a couple of decadent Anglo-Saxons watches the rise of Nazism from their vantage point inside night-time lounges and champagne-soaked soirees. Warlikowski's latest play from Warsaw in 2013 transports us back to Berlin of the 1930s; to a revue cabaret. The spectacular venue is a haven for those yearning to lose themselves in intensity and not think about the threat approaching to the tune of a military march. Could this be a warning against the resurgence of totalitarianism and the end of liberal democracy?

The official premiere of "Warsaw Cabaret" is slated for 3 July at the Open'er Music Festival in Gdynia. Next, the show will head to Avignon, to Europe's foremost theatre festival. But lucky viewers got a chance to see the play during a pre-premiere performance at the new home of Nowy Teatr – a former garbage truck garage in Mokotów transformed into a fascinatingly-raw performance space.

Nazism and golden confetti

The original 26 May premiere was pushed back because of an injury suffered by actress Magdalena Cielecka, who plays Sally Bowles, a girl who comes to Berlin in search of showbiz success. Having her arm in a sling did not hinder Cielecka from turning into a volcano of rock n' roll energy on stage this Sunday. Warlikowski takes an ironic but also sincere approach to the cabaret and the audience answers the musical numbers with rousing applause. Golden confetti rains down from the rafters and the stars of Nowy Teatr seem to be having a blast playing the blasé showgirls and their dance partners.

Rumblings in the press suggesting that Warlikowski's new production is a commentary on the growing wave of extreme far-right aggression in Poland turned out to be overstated. Sure, in "Warsaw Cabaret" we can easily discern themes foretelling of the rise of Nazism from the original "Cabaret". This time it is Redbad Klijnstra and Stanisława Celińska that play the tragic couple – a Jewish German and a Frenchwoman torn apart by Nazism. However, the play's first act, set in Berlin, centres on Andrzej Chyra's character, the English writer Chris, who becomes embroiled in a complicated relationship with Sally while searching for inspiration in Berlin. In this matter he is doomed to failure. Unable to find love, cut off from the world, he is left on the stage alone.

A whole life without an orgasm

Even fewer political references await audiences in the second act, which was inspired by another film – John Cameron Mitchell's "Shortbus" from 2006. The title relates to the name of a club where a group of modern-day New Yorkers struggle with various intimate troubles, most notably problems with sex. The host is Justin Vivian Bond, a transsexual singer and performer. Warlikowski's show has Jacek Poniedziałek giving a bravura performance as Justin. But the word "shortbus" also carries

another connotation. It refers to the bus on which mentally handicapped children travel to school. It is a derogatory term, much like “nuthouse” for a psychiatric hospital. Again, it is all about ill-adjusted and overly-sensitive individuals lost in the modern world.

Is Warlikowski heralding the end of the liberal world as we know it? Even if that is true, that world matters to him very little. He prefers to focus on loneliness, fears and sexual neuroses. The New York part’s best scenes are the ones concerning strictly problems in the bedroom. Maja Ostaszewska plays a sex therapist who has never experienced an orgasm. To talk about sex uninhibitedly, without vulgarity or semi-pornographic clichés – in Polish culture this is truly an accomplishment.

Bourgeois melancholy

An ironic look at sex plus confetti and humour. It turns out that Warlikowski is great at playing the role of bourgeois artist. Bourgeois in the best sense of the word, like the comedies of Woody Allen being described as bourgeois. Meanwhile, the actors of Nowy Teatr have no trouble capturing the audience and skilfully delivering the director’s newfound sense of humour.

Less effective is when the play’s creators get carried away with allusions to the contemporary world. One such instance is the pair of hooded chavs spewing vulgar, homophobic epithets. The same goes for Claude Bardouil’s choreographic depiction of the attack on the World Trade Center set to music from a Radiohead album. This is a kind of theatre inside theatre. Club-goers, splayed out on sofas and toking on grass, are looking at something that surely reflects the end of civilisation as we know it. Full-on decadence. The West falls; a transmission from the end of the world.

In one of his recent films, Lars von Trier inflated modern-day melancholy to apocalyptic proportions. It is somewhat of a shame that Warlikowski doesn’t allow himself a similar radicalism. The director, though he wants to talk about the world through the mental state of the characters, fails to explore it in any depth, as if not believing that it is enough to convincingly talk about the “here and now.”

Meanwhile, his examination on the current social moods and states of mind seem to fall short. Where is the threat coming from? Why are the hooded youths shouting about fags while jets crash into skyscrapers. Warlikowski’s jittery characters do not know the answers. This does not invalidate their fear but – though we enjoy ourselves thoroughly – when the golden confetti falls and the guitar riffs resound there is a sense of emptiness and ambivalence. That and the pulsating music of Paweł Mykietyn.

Witold Mrozek, *Gazeta Wyborcza*