

Time for the Apocalypse

“Warsaw Cabaret” is worth seeking out because it’s Krzysztof Warlikowski’s best production in years Jacek Wakar, Polish Radio

Why seek out? Well, because as of right now, there has only been one official performance of “Warsaw Cabaret” in its entirety. The earliest we can expect to see the play is in July at the Open’er festival in Gdynia, where Nowy Teatr successfully staged Kushner’s “Angels in America” last year. Next, the play will travel to Avignon as Warlikowski has been a highly anticipated guest there for years. Finally, late September will see the play return to Warsaw. There is plenty to look forward to. Actually, the only full performance so far nearly didn’t happen. When Magdalena Cielecka broke her arm, the initial plan was to perform only the play’s second act.

“Warsaw Cabaret” seemingly consists of two distinct plays set in Berlin and New York, respectively. In theory these parts could be performed independently of each other but they would be a merely theatrical prosthetics that way. The Berlin part is reflected in the New York story and vice versa. Fortunately, Cielecka decided to take the stage with her arm in a cast and delivered a bravura performance.

The often breathtaking and at times coquettish “Warsaw Cabaret” seems to be a play at the extremes of Krzysztof Warlikowski’s output. His previous effort, “African Tales by Shakespeare” left us wanting more. It contained traces of great theatre and offered evidence of the director’s exceptional imagination. However, it was marred by its increasingly unbearable contemplation of melancholy and of wallowing in one’s own existence where every element is already known and familiar. Warlikowski’s work lost its freshness somewhere along the way and it seemed that the constantly repeated formula had become exhausted in front of our eyes. It is also possible that we were spoiled by the artist’s greatest successes like “Krum” or “Angels in America.” The fact remains that “African Tales” was usually better received abroad than in Poland. Be that as it may, “Warsaw Cabaret” lives up to expectations that Warlikowski would somehow “air out” his work, close the previous chapter and open a new one, and stir up the dust that had settled some time ago. All the more so because this will be the first production to be performed regularly at Nowy Teatr’s new home on Madalińskiego street in Warsaw. All in all, this makes for an ideal occasion for Nowy Teatr to define itself.

The situation harkens back to 2009, when “(A)pollonia,” Warlikowski’s first production under his own company, was taking shape. Then too, the director understandably felt pressure to define himself, and the product was a work that was powerful but with an overly clear and populist theme. Luckily, it is different with “Warsaw Cabaret” because the new play abandons the declarative forcefulness that so strongly characterised “(A)pollonia.” It is brought to us by an artist who turned fifty-one years old on the day of the first official performance and, seeming confident of his directorial decisions, doesn’t feel the need to prove anything to anyone. Most importantly, though, being aware of his status, he can look at himself from a few steps back. And Warlikowski – for the first time since, what seems to me like, ages – rises to the occasion. This is both the biggest surprise and the greatest relief with “Warsaw Cabaret.” If anyone needs to, they should pinch themselves, because, yes, this play is exceptionally funny for the most part. What’s more, it rarely evokes laughter which is disinterested and which is not marked by a sense of fear or despair. In the cabaret sequences and in the bravura roles of Magdalena Cielecka and Maja Ostaszewska we feel a lightness that has been absent from Warlikowski’s work for a long time. “Warsaw Cabaret” is Warlikowski’s variation on the subject of the cabaret – though, of course, skewed, mocking and intentionally mangled. The Nowy Teatr ensemble does a great job with the leg kick scenes and gives us a taste of what is in store right off the bat. Needless to say, the actors of Nowy Teatr have terrific voices and playing with the convention of a light-hearted showcase seemingly affords them a chance to catch their breath. Cielecka and

Stanisława Celińska both have solo numbers in which they show off their humour, energy and class. Soon enough the tune infects the audience and they're humming right along. Once again Warlikowski proves to be a very effective director. He invites us to join in the fun only to ruin the mood. I can already picture the enthralled audiences in Avignon.

The first act takes place in 1930s Berlin, with the rise of fascism palpable in the air. The main basis for this part of the play was "I Am a Camera" by John van Druten – an adaptation of Christopher Isherwood's "Goodbye to Berlin," which also inspired Bob Fosse's film "Cabaret." Once again we encounter Sally Bowles, an actress searching for her place in the show business world (with an exceptional, stage-shaking performance by Cielecka) who shatters the status quo with her unceremonious demeanour. By today's standards, Sally is a liberated woman but deeply disillusioned. Led along by her lover and mentor (Andrzej Chyra) she sees more than everyone else and harbours no illusions. The Germans are having fun but their dance is a ghastly one. Its rhythm gives rise to a race of super-humans who only acknowledge Germanic lineage. How lashing sounds Ewa Dałkowska's monologue on Wagner's superiority to other composers! We easily detect the speech's camouflaged meanings. The Berlin part belongs to Cielecka and Chyra, who were much overdue for such fantastic roles from Warlikowski. They perform powerfully and freely, just like all of the cast, in fact. Nowy Teatr has always had a wonderful cast but "Warsaw Cabaret" – perhaps on account of the shift in convention – sets the bar at an all-time high. This is now acting on a European level, nobly attuned to the other actors and to the script's intentions. It seems effortless and, consequently, very communicative. Sensing oppression in the air, Warlikowski takes a stand against exclusion. While the Berlin part shines the spotlight on society, the New York act focuses on the individual. The two halves are linked by a sense of the demise of the old world and the anticipation of the threat that the new one brings. All of this perfectly applies to Warsaw and the city emerges as the play's clandestine main character.

In the New York part, based chiefly on John Cameron Mitchell's film "Shortbus" (which caused an uproar in its day – some hailed it as a masterpiece while others condemned it as pretentious art-porn) the sounds of jetliners crashing into the World Trade Center still linger in the air. But Warlikowski intentionally tightens the focus and finds the ruins among the people of the metropolis. He concentrates on their sexuality and emphasises the fact that today there are no classifications. The master of ceremonies in these fragments is Jacek Poniedziałek as Justin Vivian Bond, a transsexual singer, actress and writer. Their statements seem rather obvious but are buoyed by the sense of humour of Warlikowski and Maja Ostaszewska, playing a psychotherapist and sexologist who has never had an orgasm. In Ostaszewska's character we see her finding common ground with her previous roles in Warlikowski's productions, this time ironically pooling all of the neuroses her characters regularly have. That, in fact, is a trait of this production. The director readily references himself in the play, though not in earnest and from a distance. The son of Stanisława Celińska, for example, is not played by Jacek Poniedziałek but Redbad Klijnstra. Each of them reflect a different tone in their stories centred on the game of domination. Unfortunately, New York comes up short compared to Berlin. This is in part because midway through we have Małgorzata Hajewska-Krzysztofik (though the excellent actress gives it her all) and Claude Bardouil, music by Radiohead, and a repeat of "Nancy. Interview," where Bardouil plays opposite Magdalena Poptawska. The huge sequence, part spoken and part danced, contributes nothing while effectively breaking the tension. At times, the literary montage assembled by Warlikowski disappoints as well. It also seems that the actors' energy is needlessly consumed by banalities and pretentiousness. Equally irritating is the manifesto delivered by Jacek Poniedziałek, in which he portrays Nowy Teatr as a group of excluded artists. Seeing as this was, let's admit it, not a low-budget production by any stretch, the declaration sounds unbearably contrived. There is absolutely no reason to feel sorry for Warlikowski and his team.