

An Orgasmic Blow to the System

With “Warsaw Cabaret,” Krzysztof Warlikowski asks us to take a look at contemporary Warsaw through a dual looking glass: reflected as Weimar Germany in the days leading up to Hitler’s rise to power (as portrayed in Christopher Isherwood’s “Goodbye to Berlin” and Bob Fosse’s “Cabaret”), and as the patriotically-charged, post-9/11 New York City that was the setting for the sexual orgies of John Cameron Mitchell’s film “Shortbus.” The play’s programme introduces audiences to Wilhelm Reich’s 1942 essay titled “The Function of the Orgasm,” in which sexual inhibition and an inability to reach orgasm among Germans are linked to the birth of fascism. On the stage we see cabaret stars, writers, Jews, unhappy spouses, gays and transsexuals tormentedly seeking happiness and freedom, symbolized by the orgasm.

Standing in their way is an oppressive system and a lack of tolerance towards others – those nearby and those within – along with a multitude of internal barriers. In the play’s second act, a performative interpretation of the attack on the World Trade Center set to music from Radiohead’s album “Kid A,” is capped off with a scene of recovery and renewal: the characters smoke grass, dance and take turns getting into a coffin which they later hurl towards the audience. Catastrophes (including Smoleńsk) can offer us a chance to cleanse and renew ourselves.

The five-hour play has some magnificent, comical scenes but also a surprising abundance of bland ones. Magdalena Cielecka is terrific in the role of the unpredictable Sally Bowles as she sings, darts and lunges in towering high heels alongside a wonderfully dancing and singing Redbad Klijnstra (as the German Jew Pepe) and the always excellent Maja Ostaszewska (playing a therapist who is learning to have an orgasm). But it is hard to watch for the hundredth time as Warlikowski rehashes the intimacy between Cielecka and Chyra (attraction-repulsion, the actress’ childlessness, gasp!) or the age and posture of Stanisława Celińska (once again in a dressing gown). The final question asked by Jacek Poniedziałek, playing transsexual artist Justin Vivian Bond, towards the spectators about the quality of their sex lives is followed by an assurance that the play’s creators will continue to ask the question until they are locked up. In light of the Nowy Teatr cast’s celebrity status, the play’s exaggerated form and the fact that this is a big multinational coproduction, the statement sounds a bit on the hysterical side. Or does it?

Aneta Kyzioł, *Polityka*