

Warlikowski and the New Cult of the Orgasm

“Warsaw Cabaret” is a play about limiting and expanding freedom, writes Jacek Cieślak

There is a nearly invisible eye above the Nowy Teatr stage. Perhaps God’s? Undoubtedly that of a street camera. It monitors and snoops. In the first act, it surveys the goings on at the Berlin cabaret from Bob Fosse’s film “Cabaret,” while in the second, it watches over the New York erotic club from John Cameron Mitchell’s risqué film “Shortbus.” The eye tracks and projects the action onto a white tile wall designed by Małgorzata Szczęśniak. The images arrive here, in Warsaw, because Warsaw is what the play is about. Jacek Poniedziałek – playing a drag queen, with a moustache on one side of his face and heavy eye makeup on the other – asserts that Nowy Teatr will always be asking the question of whether Varsovians are happy. And, even more inquisitively, what they are doing in their bedrooms, clubs, sex shops and brothels. After all, that is where you learn what real human nature is.

The show also outlines the greatest moral conflicts in modern-day Poland. Through “Cabaret,” which recalls the rise of fascism, it reveals a fear of intolerance towards minorities and of attempts to control private life. In “Shortbus” we watch people who are not afraid of losing control of themselves as they search for total freedom.

Warlikowski creates an apotheosis of sexuality without limits. This is true especially in the story of Sofia. Maja Ostaszewska delicately parodies the stereotypical therapist: her character is a young, self-assured woman counselling two gay men, James (Piotr Polak) and Jamie (Maciej Stuhr), though she herself has never had an orgasm. Unfettered by a joint and the influence of a free-spirited young woman (Magdalena Popławska) she finally experiences the release.

It is a mystical scene. The crucified, suffering Sofia dreams of copulating with the whole world as Warlikowski elevates sex to religious proportions. James also finds happiness in his new relationship and we see him gliding above the stage in a merman’s tail – the symbol of homosexuality.

This apotheosis of relationships without limits “does not, however, pass the first act’s test of love and loneliness between artists.” Warlikowski feeds on the personal lives of Magdalena Cielecka and Andrzej Chyra, cast as Sally and Brian. Cielecka says bitterly: “it’s not enough to love each other to be able to be together. A bad match or unfaithfulness can poison even the strongest feelings. And even the most passionate kisses or reunions cannot save them.”

Cielecka shows she is a daredevil; a kamikaze. Despite being injured and having her arm in a sling, she plays the role of an actress with baggage; hurt in a tempestuous romance and by unfulfilled dreams of motherhood. Sally stumbles across the stage in a drunken stupor but nothing can knock her off her feet and bring her down from those high heels. Even as she lies in despair on a bathroom floor, like in Treliński’s “Egotists,” she surges back to life. She sings, dances, loves and runs wild.

In Sally we also see a mirror image of Puk from Warlikowski’s “The Tempest.” Puk was younger and he was terrified of failure. Sally demonstrates that it is possible to live life with a smile on your face even when you don’t have it all. What doesn’t kill her makes her stronger.

There is a great scene where Maciej Stuhr presents Cielecka with an Oscar like the one Liza Minelli received for her role as Sally and explains his stage fright by stating it is his first time being the master of ceremonies. Warlikowski has finally staged his coming out and has fully revealed himself as someone with a great sense of humour. Credit also goes to Piotr Gruszczyński and Szczepan Orłowski, who helped Warlikowski adapt the two screenplays.

Also very comical are the ensemble performances in the revue numbers, where the Nowy Teatr cast appear with slicked hair and in heavy lipstick, whirling around the stage, arms intertwined, like showgirls at the Moulin Rouge. Redbad Klijnstra does a fantastic job of parodying an Israeli disco star in his rendition of a Jewish wedding song. Meanwhile, he also plays out the drama of a foreigner in Poland who, wanting to be more Polish than authentic Poles, eventually falls prey to them.

Warlikowski's production is imbued with a new kind of energy by the French dancer Claude Bardouil, who prepared the brilliant choreography to music played live by a very strong quartet. In a duet with Małgorzata Hajewska-Krzysztofik, Bardouil enacts the World Trade Center attacks. He is like Iggy Pop on stage. His body thrusts like a battering ram fighting for its right to live and its space, with no fear of risk or pain. Balancing on one foot, he takes off and glides above the stage in a cloud of smoke to the psychedelic sounds of music from Radiohead's "Kid A" album. His half-naked body covered in stardust faces the test of death. Getting into and then out of a casket, Bardouil demonstrates the ferocity, anger and determination that times of catastrophe demand from us.

The five-hour-long performance could be a bit shorter, especially for the coy, flirtatious sequences in which the characters fall to the ground in laughter as they smoke grass or have sex. The singularity of the subject matter can become tiresome occasionally and the pantomime unfolding in the background can take away from what should be at the centre of attention. It looks as if sex elevated to the altar – like any other religion – is condemned to a crisis of faith. The play is unable to reproduce the effect of a five-hour-long orgasm, though it certainly does have a few climaxes.