

Can You Hear Me In Almada?

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This year the Almada Festival celebrated its silver jubilee, the latest instalment in an inspiring story of growth from small beginnings to serious stature. Its founder, Joaquim Benite, came to Almada in 1978 with his then amateur theatre company and has stayed to see it become a professional troupe, now housed in a fine new theatre that opened in 2005. When the festival started in 1984, it was a homely affair, but it has since grown into Portugal's most important international theatre event, visited by major companies from Europe and beyond. It has spilled over into Lisbon, which faces Almada across the Tagus, and several of this year's events took place in one or other of the magnificent historic playhouses that are part of that city's heritage. In spite of this expansion, the festival remains very much a homely, family affair, overseen by Benite's small but dedicated theatre staff. This year's programme was led by the Berliner Ensemble, performing Peter Zadek's version of *Peer Gynt* – the one which caused such shenanigans at the Europe Prize ceremony last year. But the charm of Almada lies in its variations of scale and setting, so that in parallel with the Berliners in Almada you had the choice of two shows in Lisbon, a newly devised Portuguese work in the modern Maria Matos theatre or a stunning Italian solo piece in the beautifully restored São Luiz, while on other evenings you might take in French classics, Mozambican dance or Brecht songs.

Puppet

Although the new Municipal Theatre, which can seat around 400, is now the heart of the festival (the Berliners were a great hit there), of equal importance is the thousand-seater open air auditorium which is set up annually in the yard of the adjoining school. Here I saw my first show this year, a puppet version of Swift's *Gulliver* performed by Jaime Lorca's company from Santiago in Chile. This was in fact a return visit, for Lorca's show had won the audience's heart and been declared best production of the 2007 festival. It's not hard to see why: Lorca's *Gulliver* is a scene-sweeping clown who falls through a hole in the stage and finds himself among the people of what is literally the puppet state of Lilliput. The set is a versatile metal structure reminiscent of the frame for Robert Lepage's *Elsinore*, which rises and falls to allow *Gulliver* and his puppet hosts to move fluently between scenes and scales. The whole story is told by two actors and two manipulators, yet it segues rapidly and confidently from the epic to the personal: *Gulliver's* flirtation with the Queen of Lilliput, growing into a love doomed to remain unfulfilled, is deliciously and unexpectedly sexy, while a concluding tap number for the life-sized *Gulliver*, his puppet sidekick and a Brobdingnagian giant whose feet are all we can see, is both hilarious and touching.

Gulliver was a strongly visual show that can succeed anywhere. This was not the case for the clever Spanish clowns of PAI, from Zaragoza, whose *En La Lingua Floja* (*In a Soft Language*) was the other production I caught in the schoolyard. The two performers are an unfeasibly lanky mute accordionist and a manically verbose juggler-clown, and their setting, an abandoned circus, the pretext for a series of intriguing tales of its troupe's long-gone members. If you have no Spanish, the word-games of Osvaldo Felipe can pall after the first hour, but you have to admire the assonant, alliterative poetic magic he can create while simultaneously telling a story and juggling half a dozen balls in the air.

At events like this, language can be a snare: the festival programme told us that in Ana Mendes' play *O Lago* 'Decadent prostitutes die around a lake; in the farm, a sick couple eat their

grapes'. The actual cast sheet for the play, however, told us of a play very close to Pinter's *The Lover*, where a couple invent games to spice up their failing marriage. Having watched the couple without this hint and waited in vain for the flogging of dead whores, I finally read the second description, which made more sense of a well-acted, but very wordy play. By coincidence, an ex-whore was indeed the central and only character in Antonio Tarantino's *Stabat Mater*, another play where the text (in this case translated from the Italian) is all-important. Here, however, it was at least easy to recognise the power and commitment that won Maria João Luis a Best Actress award from the Portuguese critics. The Chat!Foin company came from Paris with a small scale puppet show which had also won an award there, that for Young Talent. They had a curious choice of subject, part of an autobiography by a Yorkshire miner, John Dennis. Set just before the valiant but disastrous miners' strike that was quelled by Maggie Thatcher, it told (through a narrator) the story of three lads up to mischief. The sequel, dealing with the strike itself, should be a lot stronger – and I would hope that it will be told with less narration and more puppet action. Another curious choice was made by the noted Cuban company Teatro D'Dos, who presented Abelardo Estorino's 1997 play *La Casa Vieja* (*The Old House*), about three siblings facing the death of a demanding father. The stylised formality of their acting on a set composed of three chairs and a coffee set was admirable, but as dated as the play itself.

Devout

Stylisation was far more appropriate to a remarkable piece devised, directed and led by the talented Spaniard Ana Zamora. With the help of an equally talented musician, Alicia Lazaro, she has edited a series of early religious performance texts and songs into *Misterio del Cristo de los Gascones* (*Mystery of the Gascon Christ*), which takes as its starting point the existence of a life-sized, articulated medieval figure of Christ in a church near Segovia, in Spain. This is not a museum reconstruction, but a devout and moving play for today, performed with a starkly beautiful simplicity and revolving around a coyly blinking copy of this puppet, hymned by singer-musicians and moved by silent manipulators while Ms Zamora, as the Virgin Mary, relates his life and passion and leads us through a candlelit ritual which reaches out from its medieval origins to a sharp confrontation with our modern age of religious uncertainty.

French companies brought two early masterpieces to Almada. I missed Robert Cantarella's production (seen last year in Avignon) of the 1573 *Hippolyte*, written by Robert Garnier a century before Racine's *Phèdre* treated the same subject, but took great pleasure in Alain Ollivier's revival of Corneille's *Le Cid*, originally presented during his direction of the Théâtre Gérard Philippe in St Denis and seen here as part of a highly successful tour in the ideal setting of Lisbon's National Theatre. Apart from Daniel Jeanneteau's concrete façade of a set, which seemed somewhat out of sympathy, the rest of this gimmick-free production was played determinedly in period, from Florence Saudane's elegant costumes to the whole company's careful attention to the rhetoric of the text. Just occasionally, an actor would break free of its formal confines to shout an emphasis or cry their pain, but the overall containment of the production produced an unexpected excitement as its doomed lovers, Rodrigo and Ximene, did verbal – and by implication physical – battle: in one scene where their passion almost escaped the bounds of French classical convention, the atmosphere they created by the slightest touch of hand on arm, head on shoulder was absolutely electric.