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‘A Gymnasium for underused imaginations’

JENI WILLIAMS reviews recent new theatre productions in Wales

As the previous piece in this issue of the *NWR* makes clear, Welsh theatre – in terms of both Welsh companies and Welsh venues – is in crisis. We need to make clear what kind of theatre we want in the Lottery-funded world.

Utilitarian arguments (theatre generates employment/revenue), theatre provides entertainment (passive consumption) so readily dominate the issue. Benedict Nightingale’s recent booklet on *The Future of Theatre* takes an unashamedly idealistic standpoint, summoning up the spectre of an alienated society dominated by sound-bite and image to present a case for ‘a theatre in flight from the lonely pleasures of high-tech, living rooms and desperate for life and contact’. Nightingale’s description of theatre as ‘a gymnasium for underused imaginations’ stresses its active role in teaching us ‘to listen, speak, feel and think less thinly’ – providing a paradigm on which I wish to draw in discussing recent theatre in Wales.

Starting with the English touring companies, Forkbeard Fantasy provided the most bizarre imaginative ‘gymnasium’ of the lot. *The Barbers of Surreal* (April 25) develops their fascination with time and space through the video loop, the reflections and inversions suggested by the mirror, and set the whole in a setting of continual transformation. The plot is a peculiar take on the relation of science to fantasy: three men run a barber’s shop where genetic developments have revolutionised the images they are able to create, simultaneously producing ‘things’ that escape into the street outside. The whole play is concerned with entrapment, experiment and escape. A large video screen masquerades as a window onto the world outside the play; when actors leave the stage they reappear on the screen looking back into ‘the room’ they have just left. Three actors take all parts, transforming themselves into a bewildering range of different characters while the video screen keeps running previous incarnations. We see an old woman in a flouncy Victorian dress bedecked with blue ribbons chasing something/someone down a country lane only to be left behind when he/she/it escapes by bus. Only later we recognise her as Alice locked out of Wonderland and grown old and the fugitive as a giant white rabbit released from an experimental station with an attitude and addiction to cigarettes.

Packed with wonderful and multiple cross references to children's stories – particularly Alice – it is perfectly logical that the barber's mirror should be a magical looking glass stolen by the genetic engineers from the disused children's museum next door. 'Alice' sneakily manages to get back into the magic mirror and becomes young again. The central figure (father of one, brother of the other) is called Salvador – presumably in homage to Dali. Lighting and set strange and imaginative, the whole play is a mixture of erudition and mayhem, discussions of Miro and Bosch side by side with surreal hairstyles and 'crocodiles' of children on the street 'outside'. Underneath the bewitching glitter glitters a critique of the dowdiness of a world without wonder. I bought the T-shirt!

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