

Mephisto: A challenging and provocative journey

Review by Daniel Dercksen (July 9, 2010)

Discerning theatergoers who are looking for drama with bite will devour *Mephisto*, a challenging and provocative journey into the political arena of Germany circa 1925, where the idealistic members of a radical theatregroup became pawns of the Nazi propaganda machine.

It is an ambitious project that successfully launches The Mechanicals 2010 season, clearly defining the mission of 'Lunatic Fringe' - "a term used to characterise members of a usually political or social movement espousing extreme, eccentric, or fanatical views."

Mephisto offers all this and more with flair and bravura, featuring a headstrong ensemble of 19 (some doubling in two or three different roles).

Ariane Mnouchkine's theatrical adaptation of the 1936 novel *Mephisto* (by Klaus Mann), regarded as "one of the modern classics on artistic integrity and political commitment", perfectly captures the essence of an oppressed society flirting with decadence; in need to find their own identity, they have to weigh the consequences of artistic expression and freedom of speech.

It is an extremely difficult play to pull off. Director Christopher Weare, who always takes a challenging step forward with each production he stages, makes no exception with this bold undertaking, realising the full dramatic potential of the play with the support of an excellent artistic team and talented pool of actors.

The imaginative fervor of the realisation is equally unconventional in both its approach and delivery and supports Mnouchkine's characteristic theatrical tradition of breaking the conventional approach to theatre.

UCT's Arena Theatre is transformed into a space that unites the action of the drama and the imagination of the audience. From the moment you enter the theatre and are greeted by German music played on an upright piano and flashing searchlights, the atmosphere is electric, crackling with tension.

Weare's direction affords the audience a wonderful opportunity to eavesdrop on most of the action and become a part of the intimate world of the characters. In contrast to the characters in the play who battle to secure their point of view, the audience is free to experience the play from different points of views. There is also a fantastic shift of points of view during the production that continuously alters the reality of the audiences' perception.

In a filmic style, the action within the Hamburg Theatre, the revolutionary Peppermill Theatre, Thomas Bruckner's House, and a railway bridge, perfectly flow into each other, turning the action into a symphony of movement.

Mephisto definitely deserves a second viewing, if only to watch the interaction and reaction between the ensemble during the run of the play.

If there's one aspect that contributes to the overall success of any play, it's surely the tiniest detail and action within the main plot that sparks the electricity.

There is a connection between the ensemble that allows their respective characters to blossom and have a wonderful life during the course of the drama.

Watching actors transcend into a fictional reality of the drama is an exhilarating experience on its own. Equally, the satirical spoofs that intersperse the main action and ridicules the political and social climate, is an absolute delight and hilarious, allowing the actors to break out of the realism and into an abstract surrealism, adding comic relief.

Although the subject matter of *Mephisto* is tainted with political ideologies, xenophobia and racial discrimination, and laced with heated sexuality, it is the vivid characters that give the play its vibrant life-force.

Of the ensemble, Adrian Collins shines as an actor who "sells his soul to the devilish Nazi party"; Tinarie van Wyk Loots is delicious as a wicket temptress, particularly in her sensual scenes with Deborah Vierya; Scott Sparrow delivers another great performance in the double role of Klaus Mann and Sebastien Bruckner (his drunken outpour during the dinner scene is delightful); Mark Elderin impresses as Mr. Knurr and the one and only Emily Child sparkles as Myriam Horowitz.

It is equally pleasant to watch Guy De Lancey crawl under the skin of an eccentric playwright; Willem

van der Walt deserves mention as Otto Ulrich; Kate Liquorish makes a stately Theresa von Herzfeld, and Luke Ellenbogen impresses as the stage director of the Hamburg Theatre.

With Weare firmly in the director's seat and well supported by his technical team, particularly Daniel Galloway's lighting design, the actors have a marvelous platform to showcase their talent.

Take advantage of this rare opportunity to see a fully fledged staging of *Mephisto*. It will allow you to see theatre that is unconventional and will definitely influence the way you regard theatre.