

Edinburgh Fringe 2011

Terein: Children of the Holocaust

Genre: Drama



Venue: TheSpaces on the Mile

Low Down

An account of two days in the lives of six children in a cell at Terezin, Hitler's propaganda Jewish town. Preparations for a concert of Verdi's Requiem are taking place and all the while "transport 6429" loads thousands of Jews destined for extermination camps.

Review

Hitler had built a city for the Jews 30 miles south of Prague, so the world was told, and that was Theresienstadt concentration camp. At one time in its history it had been a holiday resort reserved for the upper echelons of Czech society, but now it is one cog in the wheel of the Nazi final solution.

Based upon real events, the play came into being 40 years ago when the writer, Anna Smulowitz (herself a daughter of two Auschwitz survivors), found a real letter from a child who was interned which read "If you should find this letter, tell someone. We want to go home. Please remember us." The concert of Verdi's Requiem that takes place as the backdrop of the play was organised by Adolf Eichmann, one of the major architects of the holocaust, as a propaganda exercise for a film to show just how well the Jews were being treated by the German state. A special route was designated through the town for the Red Cross to follow; shops were filled with food and goods for the special day, the likes of which had not been seen since the town became a concentration camp. Enough Jewish musicians for two symphony orchestras were transported in for this event, and the very next day they were on trains destined for the extermination camps.

The play is introduced and concluded in voice-over to by a real Terezin and Auswitze survivor Zdenka Erlich, now 90 years old,

one of only 150 of 16,000 children to enter Terezin and live to tell the tale.

Such a real living historical setting for the play must bring a lot of responsibility and one which the young cast seem to have wholly recognised and brought to their roles all their humanity. The play is set in just one cell and chronicles the lives of the six children and how they cope with it. The bully of the piece acts as a spy for her captor, the presence that we never see, we only hear her terrifying voice call out the numbers of the inmates. The bully, desperate to mark herself out and survive the war, claims that her father is not Jewish and justifies her behaviour towards the other children in a desperate attempt to survive. The bully was so good that I was shocked at the way she physically knocked down and pushed the others around, particularly a young member of the cast who could not have been more than six years old. There is also a love interest in the play in the play between Molly,

who tries to protect and shield the other children, and a boy whose father is drafted in to play in the orchestra. The children indulge in artwork and play, all the time knowing their fate, and yet hoping miraculously to avoid it.

Of course we can argue that the subject matter of the play commands a special kind of 'reverence' and that we will be led somehow to a special kind of appreciation that demands we gloss over any glaring faults in script, direction and performance. However, this view seems to me absurd and it is the mirror image of the attitude it is trying to counteract via its own feigned objectivity, an objectivity which effectively says "I'm not going to engage with this piece of theatre as a protest against the fact that other, equally appalling, atrocities are being overlooked." I don't see any shows in the Edinburgh Fringe this year dealing with the Armenian and Bosnian atrocities, I assume because no one who has a connection to these events is creatively involved in the act a remembrance AND bringing their efforts to Edinburgh, although please correct me if I am wrong.

This was a great play, and it was beautifully acted with real conviction. In fact I would go as far as to say you will have trouble finding such conviction in the Fringe this year. I was moved and my whole body reacted to the plight of the characters on stage. I felt the longing, I felt the anger, I felt the injustice, I felt the hatred, I felt the tears. I was cleared of all artifice and felt as the 10 year old child audience member did who is quoted in the promotional booklet that was handed to me after the play:

"I don't know how to explain my anger. I took the play as if it was real. I feel really bad for the kids that had to go through concentration camp and I hope it never happens again." Brianna, age 10.

This is a five star show because it is superbly conceived, superbly acted by children who put many a fringe veteran to shame, despite being Americans with no direct experience of the holocaust. For a deeply moving piece of theatre this Fringe look no further.

Reviewed by Darran Laine 13th August, 2011

Website :

Anna Smulowitz Productions

