

THEATRE REVIEW / Polish troupe uses traditions of the European circus to create magical theatrical evening in which mankind is presented as a clutch of exotic show horses

Funny, heartbreaking fantasia

BY RAY CONLOGUE
Theatre critic

IF you want to see some pure magic in the theatre, try *Dazzle* at the World Stage.

This 80-minute fantasia by Polish director Janusz Wisniewski presents mankind as a clutch of exotic show horses, trotting around a ring under the care of a grinning and cruel ringmaster. The actors of Janusz Wisniewski's troupe borrow from the old European circus tradition to give the "animals" an amazing variety of hunches, stoops, costumes and fixed facial expressions. They say very little, although they sing from time to time. But the story of who's in charge, who's in love, who's beautiful and who's not, and who's not going to make it through to the end is very clear and eloquent, very funny and heart-

It is enacted in a small, closed box of a set, dramatically lit from below to heighten the grotesquerie of the faces. An electrifying musical score by Jerzy Satanowski (think of a circus calliope as orchestrated by a half-mad Beethoven) sets the horses in motion, trotting around the ring. There are two tall, sexy women in black tights and tuxedo jackets, with show-ring cockades attached to their top hats, cantering together in an invisible harness; there is a young blonde man in a white double-breasted trenchcoat, an expression of incandescent innocence on his face; there is a fiendish dwarf with skin like burnt leather and a whip in one hand.

There is Death, white of face, eyes like black pits, with a smile as wide as a grave, trotting along with the others and enjoying herself enormously. There is an extraordinarily tall, hunched-over man whose face is a woeful mask that does not flicker throughout the evening. There is a vain woman, dressed in white with satin flounces on her dress that dance like butterflies when she arches her neck and picks up her pace: she often turns her face to the audience, her bright and animated eyes drinking in admiration and approval. There is another woman in coarse robes and great pain: her hands clutch at the air.

Any of these, taken by itself, would seem ludicrous and artificial, a cartoon of an emotion or a type. But when they are set in motion by the music, and the motion is run in a groove as tyrannical as the circle of a merry-go-round, they take on the strange, jerky life of a series of images flipping past in a nickleodeon, a kind of primitive cinema.

There is also a medieval feeling to the spectacle. These images are brutal, stark and daubed-on, recalling the nightmare visions of Brueghel or the imagery of demons in altar triptychs.



Janusz Wisniewski troupe: the spectacle has a medieval feeling with brutal and stark images.

Dazzle

Directed by Janusz Wisniewski

Starring Wieslaw Komasa and Maria Maj

There is a narrator, who the director in his notes identifies as *The Donkey*. This actor, Andrzej Saar, is a masterful clown. He wears a dusty white overcoat and a distracted mad-scientist expression on his face, and he combs his hair with ritual intensity, each stroke of the brush eliciting a grunt, each grunt a musical tone precisely higher and louder than the one before it. He talks more than anyone else, and here the unfortunate failure of *Harborfront* (as usual) to interest itself in providing the audience with a translation is most keenly felt. The notes tell us that there is a

kind of narrative, organized according to the seasons. The early part of the show is a formal promenade, very graceful and proud, corresponding to springtime. Summer, the season of horse races, picks up the pace and introduces a note of fear and panic.

But the symbolism is not as predictable as this would suggest. The figure of Death is more active in spring than any other time, and the arrival of winter suggests not the end of life but further travel elsewhere.

The director's notes, while helpful, are also irritatingly vague and lyrical in the European style. They inform us that there is "minimal text, no translation necessary."

But if the text is there, it must be there for a reason. And if it is min-

imal — it consists of a few ritualized words and sentences, much repeated — surely it would be easy to translate. I would have given much to know what those few words meant, the clues they would provide to the tone and attitude of these tormented creatures.

But apart from the fact that this unnecessarily deprives the audience of meaning — *cavalier* in every sense of the word — the show still stands as the most beautiful and wrenching thing that I have seen in this busy spring season of theatre. The discipline of the actors, their ability to adopt and hold a mask, to complete every gesture and intention with the panache of a painter, is what theatre in the best sense can be.