



A Theatre Feast of 77 Dishes: The United Solo Festival

Including 7 from Poland

By Ewa Bronowicz

NEW YORK - The Second Annual United Solo Festival opened on October 29th at Theatre Row in New York City's theatre district on 42nd Street. During a five-week period, the festival presented seventy-seven productions from 11 different countries, including 7 from Poland. There were 29 one-man shows and 48 one-woman shows, ranging from drama, comedy and dance to improv, multimedia and puppetry, with running times between 20-100 minutes. "Through a diverse range of one-person shows, we explore and celebrate the uniqueness of the individual," the organizers announce on the festival's official website. All in all, there were 77 choices, and, at a reasonable \$18 per ticket, the audience was encouraged to be theatre-hungry and feast as much as possible.

One of the most interesting aspects of the festival was exploring the different ways in which one actor on stage can invoke multiple characters. In the Polish play *Hourglass*, a woman first enters the stage dressed in a man's (presumably her former lover's) clothing, which she proceeds to take off in a dance that is both sensual and filled with sorrow. The pants and shirt, then laid out on the floor, personify the lover, whose presence can be felt in the room. In the Argentinean production *Don't Touch Me, Amigo*, Pedro, newly arrived in NYC, at first uses a successful technique of physically switching places on a bench to create the illusion of a dialog at a Starbucks cafe. However, later on in the play, when he speaks to a Puerto Rican, and switches accents to play the other man, it is difficult to distinguish between the two, at least for a non-Hispanic audience like myself to whom Puerto Rican Spanish and Argentinean Spanish accents sound identical. In a play from Florida titled *This Way to the Lobotomy*, the actor changes outfits, with impressive energy and flow, and humorous, sometimes dramatic, gestures, and consequently manages to communicate his multiple identities to the audience. And in *The Lost and Found*, a play that originated in New York, Devin enters *The Lost and Found* searching for his camera. Instead he finds a conflicted criminal, a jazz-loving nerd, an addict in denial and an immigrant father; as Devin touches their objects, he transforms into their respective personas with such power and conviction that when the magic wears off and he returns to being Devin, everyone, including Devin, wonders if they just witnessed fiction or reality.

One of the challenging, and, ultimately, either rewarding or frustrating, aspects of the festival for the audience was to translate the solo storytelling into their respective narratives. In the Polish *Patty Diphusa*, the title heroine invites us on a journey of rape and other sex-

ual encounters with various men. Her stories, fragmented and told with black humor, leave us with a portrait of a woman desperately looking for love through sex. Her narrative, vigorously and beautifully portrayed by Ewa Kasprzyk, is one of a woman who's had her share of disappointments and no longer expects a lot from life, and yet who continues to fantasize about her future. Her narrative, even if incomplete, is appealing because it tells us something universal about the nature of hope, romance, disillusionment, and about being a woman. In another Polish production, *DIVA*, the heroine, played with mastery by Wioleta Komar, escapes a Holocaust death through, in part, singing naked for the Nazi officers. When we meet her, she says she loathes singing—and while she shares with us a number of anecdotes, it is our job to connect them, a task that is both engaging and elusive at times. Her narrative is that of a traumatized opera star who survives the Holocaust and returns to her career, even if she herself, in a revealing interview with a young journalist, questions whether she survived. The narrative is engaging but one walks out from *DIVA* wishing for more details to fully understand it—a hint as to why Norma doesn't stop singing in an effort to forget the past, for example. Similarly, in the Canadian play *OH MY IRMA*, an inquisitive young woman, in her investigation into the death of her mother, tries to seduce her mother's former lover and then commits a crime of her own, in which she, ironically, restages her mother's death, thus killing her mother. However, it is not clear whether this is a reversed Oedipus story or a comedy or errors turned macabre in order to entertain and shock the audience. This said, *DIVA* and *OH MY IRMA*, with their interesting stories that should have been further explored, seem like masters of narratives in comparison with another Canadian play, *Moscow Stations*. Here, Venya's rambling about alcohol, literature and sex as he travels on a train to see his girlfriend gives a promising start but disappoints at the end. The disjointed anecdotes he, randomly, it seems, chooses to share with the audience, scatter around the stage like dust, and disappear as soon as the performance is over. In a much more successful Canadian production titled *Look, What I Don't Understand*, written and performed by Anthony Nikolchev, the narrative switches abruptly between that of a Bulgarian immigrant at a 1960's American immigrant detainment center and a soldier, presumably in WWII, caught between Communist Russia and Nazi Germany, and yet, Mr. Nikolchev acts and transforms with such intensity that the juggled narratives come to represent the fate of people all around the world who fight against political regimes.



From right: Konsul General Ewa Junczyk-Ziomecka, Founder and Artistic Director of United Solo Festival Omar Sangare, actress Ewa Kasprzyk, actress Danusia Trevino, actress Wioleta Komar, actress Sylvia Milo, during an evening event held at the Polish Consulate for the Polish participants of the festival.

Another question that comes to mind in solo performances is whether the actors should try to (and whether they do) connect with the audience more than they otherwise would in a more traditional play where the interaction between several actors can exist on its own, and be complete without the audience. Ms. Komar, the star of *DIVA*, said "There is no theatre, especially monodrama theatre, without an audience," at an event at the Polish Consulate in NYC on October 31st featuring the Polish cast and organizers. The idea of holding the audience's attention, in a time dominated by media and the Internet, can be daunting. In *This Way to the Lobotomy*, in addition to using multimedia and superbly playing different characters, the actor engages the audience—he announces that we would be his only group except for the ritual lobotomy, a process in which feelings and thoughts are replaced with an appetite enhancing chip sponsored by Starbucks, Wendy's and Taco Bell. In other words, he makes us feel special. This is not the case with a New York production titled *on est déshabillé*, in which the actress tries too hard to be funny and loses the ability to be taken seriously by the audience. Similarly, in another New York production titled *Wing-Man*, comedian and clown Mark Gindick seduces the audience of the sold-out show with his physical humor, and yet, when the show is over, we have no more insights into the world of love than we did before, despite the promise in the blurb of the play.

The theatre festival allowed New York theatre goers to sample a variety of solo shows from different countries, and a feast it was. The shows themselves were hit or miss, and worth seeing just to find out which of the two it was. Satisfying, unsatisfying, entertaining, too entertaining, etcetera. The most disappointing play out of the thirteen I saw was *Heavenly Father*, from Poland, which turned out to be not a live performance but a recorded one. Would the idea of

God attending a Parents Anonymous meeting and discussing the problems he encounters when raising his two sons be more appealing if this were a live performance? Possibly, yes. However, given the subject matter, and the lack of a real flesh and bones presence on stage, the show was a fiasco. The strongest performance, also from Poland, was *Patty Diphusa*, written by the internationally known Spanish filmmaker Pedro Almodovar, and performed by the famous (at least in Poland) actress Ewa Kasprzyk. That the show was sold out was no surprise, given the two celebrity names. Are we then, as an audience, predisposed to respond positively to what we know and trust more than to the unfamiliar? Or is it that the established pieces, written by or performed by renowned artists, are bound to include certain features that are marks of genius or experience or exposure or professionalism? Oscar Wilde once said: "I regard the theatre as the greatest of all art forms, the most immediate way in which a human being can share with another the sense of what it is to be a human being." The most successful performances of the United Solo Festival were the ones that shared with us what it is to be a human being with intimacy and strength and passion that blurred the lines between theatre and life.

Beat The Winter Blues With Norman Taylor

TOMS RIVER, NJ—If you're tired of hearing the same holiday songs over and over again, or can't take the cold weather, you can beat the winter blues at the Ocean County Library Toms River Branch's special concert on Monday, December 19 at 7 pm.

Norman Taylor is a powerful musician, armed with his strong guitar picking and resonant voice. His sound is influenced by many genres including country, 1970s rock, soul and gospel music.

The best part of Taylor's performance is how he connects with the audience, explaining the different

IWP Hosts Fourth Annual Kosciuszko Chair Lecture

On Saturday, 12 November 2011, IWP's Kościuszko Chair of Polish Studies hosted the Fourth Annual Kościuszko Chair Lecture.

This year, the event featured the following speakers: Dr. Carolyn Guile, Assistant Professor of Art and Art History at Colgate University; Ms. Terry Tegnazian, President of Aquila Polonica Publishing; Gen. Walter Jajko, USAF Brigadier General (retired), and Professor of Defense Studies at IWP; and Dr. Tomasz Sommer, the co-owner and editor-in-chief of Poland's primary conservative-libertarian weekly, *Najwyższy CZAS!* (High Time!), and Vice-President of the Polish-based think-tank, Instytut Globalizacji (the Globalization Institute).

"According to the Polish Sky and Customs:" Art and Architecture in Early Modern Poland

Prof. Guile's lecture, entitled "According to the Polish Sky and Customs: Art and Architecture in Early Modern Poland," addressed the interrelationship between architecture and culture. The architecture of Central and Eastern Europe, much like its culture and history in general, remains relatively obscure in the U.S. Art historians all too frequently ignore willingly the vast swath of European territory between Germany and Russia, which may be defined as the *Intermarium*, i.e. the "lands between the (Baltic, Black, and Adriatic) seas." Prof. Guile admitted that this often patronizing neglect stimulated her interest in the region. The lecture focused on the northwestern part of the *Intermarium*.

Architecture provides a venue not only to display one's aesthetic tastes but to demonstrate one's cultural identity as well, Prof. Guile explained. During the early modern period (and, indeed, other epochs as well), the Poles provided ample testimony to their continued allegiance to Western Civilization through their architecture. In fact, as Prof. Guile pointed out, the easternmost penetration of Western architectural designs (save for imported ones in St. Petersburg or Moscow following the reign of

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