

Haunted by humanity's highs and lows

EDINBURGH THEATRE

Rufé

THE HUB

THERE was a delay to the doors opening for this piece about Dutch citizens who joined the SS during the Second World War, and a long queue formed for admission. A wag standing beside me joked that it was like lining up for admission to the gas chambers, inane demonstration how easy we find it to trivialise and forget the horror of the Holocaust.

This sober, striking and disconcertingly beautiful piece forces us to confront afresh the fact that ordinary, apparently decent people were complicit in Nazism, and to reconsider the banality of evil.

Back in the 1960s, two Dutch artists, Armando and Hans Sluetehaar, interviewed some of their compatriots who had joined the SS, and published their answers as a series of monologues. Two of these are now combined with a selection of Schubert's unaccompanied part songs performed by the Collegium Vocale Gent, a 12-strong male choir. The effect is to remind us yet again of the exquisite heights, and the disgusting depths, of which humanity is capable.

The audience sits on a couple of hundred wooden chairs scattered over the floor of the hall. The two actors and the choir are seated on them, too, and simply get to their feet or, in the case of the singers, stand on their chairs, to deliver the monologues and songs.

Listening to Schubert's beautiful lieder about love and wine, the beauties of the countryside and the blessing of rest ("Ruhe" in German), we seem to be enfolded in an aural comfort blanket of sublime, civilised delight.

But between the songs we hear the words of the volunteers, a woman who joined up as a teenager and served in an SS hospital, and a farmer who fought in some of the SS's most brutal military campaigns.

Unusually for a foreign production, both the actors have taken the trouble to

learn their parts in English.

I don't know if the original interviewees were excessively soft with their subjects, but there is almost no sense of regret or guilt on the part of the two speakers. Indeed, both regard their time in the SS as the highlight of their lives.

The now middle-aged woman, played with a brilliant illusion of spontaneity by Carly Wijs, describes her girlish excitement about seeing Himmler and Hitler in the flesh as if they were members of her favourite boy band.

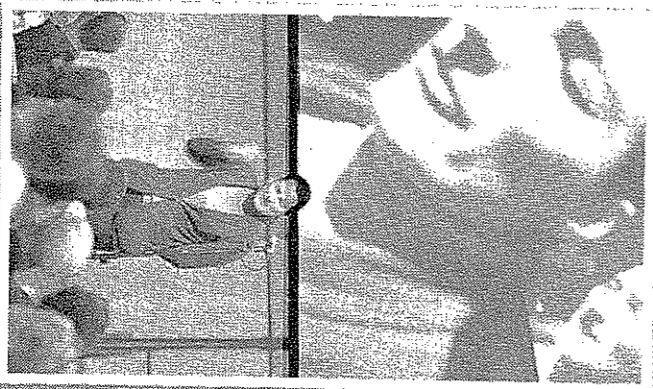
The farmer, meanwhile, played by Dirk Rootboom as a bullet-headed brute with a creepy smile and an ingratiating manner, revels in his memories of the camaraderie of the SS and vicious hand-to-hand conflict. If he had the strength, he insists, he would do it all over again.

Only at the very end is the final solution mentioned. "I'm a man of too little importance to judge that," says the farmer. "It took place far away from our lines."

My only complaint is that hearing from only two former SS members seems an inadequate sample of evidence.

Nevertheless the show, conceived and directed by Josse De Pauw, is one of the most original, haunting and troubling productions I have encountered in 20 years of Edinburgh Festival visits.

Charles Spencer



No guilt: Rufé explores the role of Dutch SS volunteers

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WANNABURGER

Ruhe Review

Written by Caroline Whitlam



A powerful piece of theatre telling the stories of volunteer members of the SS. Ruhe has all the more impact because of the very banality of its verbatim accounts. Intwoven with the music of Schubert performed by the Collegium Vocale Gent, two actors recite monologues taken from Armando and Hans

Steuler's controversial 1960s interviews with real-life Dutch former Nazis. The audience is seated in a roughly circular jumble of seats, and from their midst come the actors' voices, as they stand, walk between chairs and unapologetically tell their stories. It's a startling reminder that Fascism was not a huge and faceless monster, but a movement made up of individuals who believed in a cause and didn't always know the full story. Those individuals could have been any one of us.

These are everyday people, a farmer who sees high unemployment in his native country and thinks that the Germans must be doing something right, and the daughter of a Dutch naval officer who is convinced by her family's secret allegiance to the National Socialist Party. The farmer joins the army, the daughter is delighted by the chance to work at a military hospital in Germany. She speaks bright-eyed of the time that Himmler spent there towards the end of the war, and cries when she tells of hearing about Hitler's death. While the farmer speaks eloquently of the brutality and horrors of war, the most affecting moment is when he tells how he didn't at first believe the news of the Holocaust when the truth came out after the war. He's tried to convince himself that the leaders knew what they were doing, but he doesn't seem able to trust his own words.

Performed in English, Dutch actors Carly Wils and Dirk Rooftoof give brave and honest performances, constantly making eye contact with members of the audience, always trying to convince. Rooftoof in particular is excellent, confronting individuals, arguing his case, reacting to his audience continually. Despite this, the music of Schubert by no means takes second place, and his rarely-performed partworks are given fresh and beautiful voice by the all-male choir, who also sit amongst the audience.

In a time when many of us in Europe are still struggling to honestly confront the past, this is an important and moving reminder that all of us are human, and all of us are capable of making terrible errors of judgement when convinced by a cause.

★★★★★

Ruhe
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REVIEWS
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DEVIL'S SHIP

The Hub, Edinburgh

Run ended

RUHE

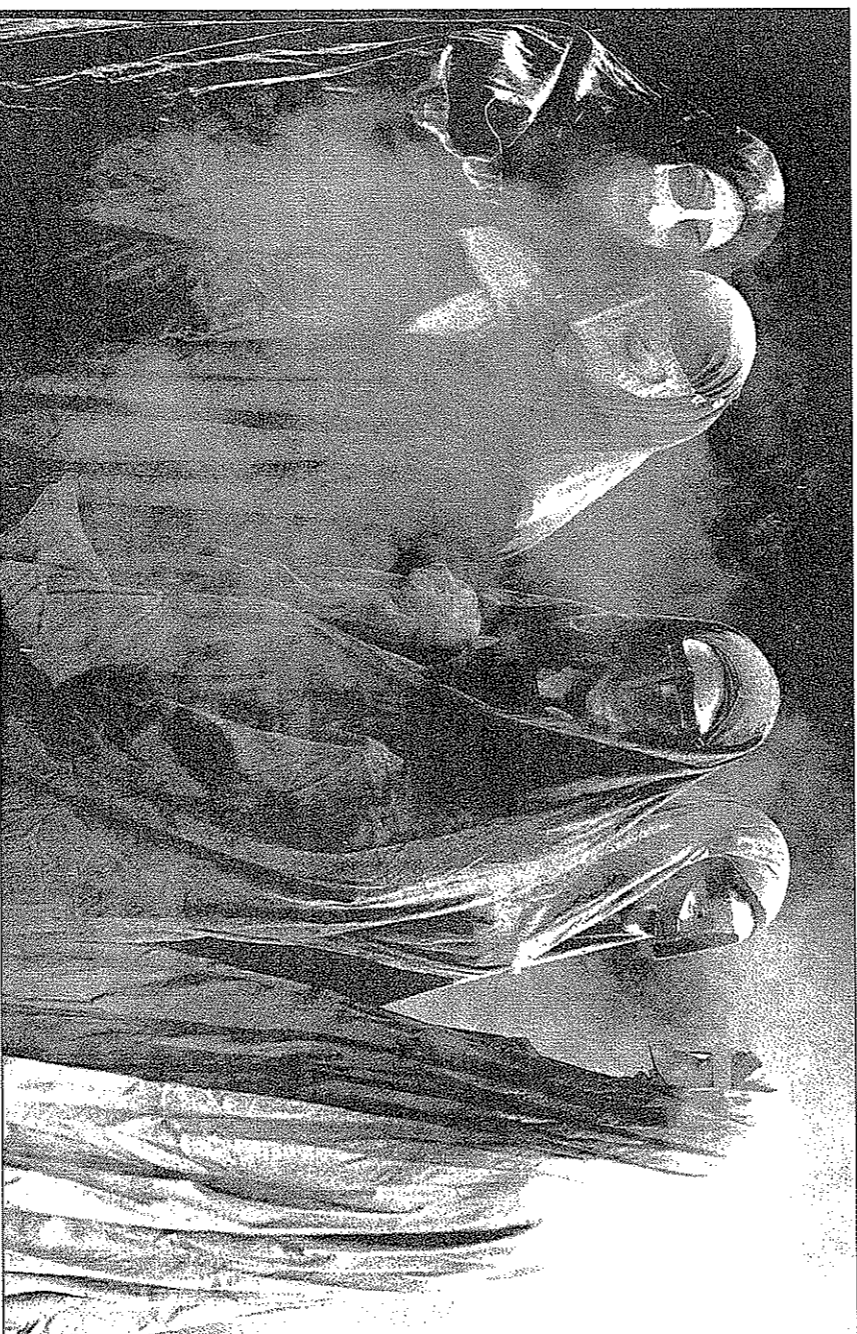
The Hub, Edinburgh

Run ended

ONE of the most intriguing strands in this year's Edinburgh International Festival programme has been the taste it has offered of the theatre culture of Iran. Following Abbas Kiarostami's fascinating film installation *Looking At Tazieh*, the Festival presented *Devil's Ship* by Tehran-based writer-director Atilla Pessyari.

The play untolds elements of the story of five women who are living on an abandoned island. Much of their talk is of Ismael (son to one of the women, husband to another) and of the rumours of his death. The timeless atmosphere generated by the set and costumes is punctured by such symbols of modernity as an iPod and a radio. A figure emerges and submerges in the sand (Ismael himself, perhaps?). The women discuss the possibility of returning to the mainland; one woman attempts to end the aversion to reading of another; the commitment of Ismael's wife to her husband is called into question.

To the Western theatre-goer, the play, which includes variably effective projected film, might be read as a series of metaphors for the experiences of women in Iran today. In theatrical terms, however, despite fine



Devil's Ship is the tale of five women living a mysterious existence on an abandoned island

Photograph: Ali Tabrizi

performances, this often elliptical piece fails to achieve the profound resonances that are so often achieved by Iranian cinema.

If Pessyari's production doesn't quite succeed in combining artistic forms, *Ruhe* (German for "Peace"), by the extraordinary Flemish dramatist Josse De Pauw, brings theatre and song together in the most powerful, moving and disconcerting ways. The presentation includes a series of beautiful songs by Schubert and a piece by young Flemish composer Annelies Van Parys (sung by splendid singers who wear informal day wear as they stand

'A reminder that fascism isn't a sub-human aberration'

on chairs in the midst of the audience). The songs are juxtaposed with the testimony of two former members of the SS, taken from the controversial Dutch book *De SS-ers* (published in 1967). The self-justifying comments of the unrepentant Nazis are presented, in

English, by superb actors Carly Wijs and Dirk Rooffhooft. The performances, full of nervous verbal slips and direct appeals to understanding, are deeply engaging and frighteningly human; a timely reminder that fascism is not a sub-human aberration, but a constant social presence. The contrast between the speakers' startlingly straightforward recollections of Nazism and the invigoratingly gorgeous music transcends all platitudes about the banality of evil, and takes the brutally political subject matter brilliantly into the realm of art.

Gergiev's greatest hits

The Russian conductor wasn't resting on his laurels at Edinburgh, as a string of fine performances proved, says PAUL DRIVER

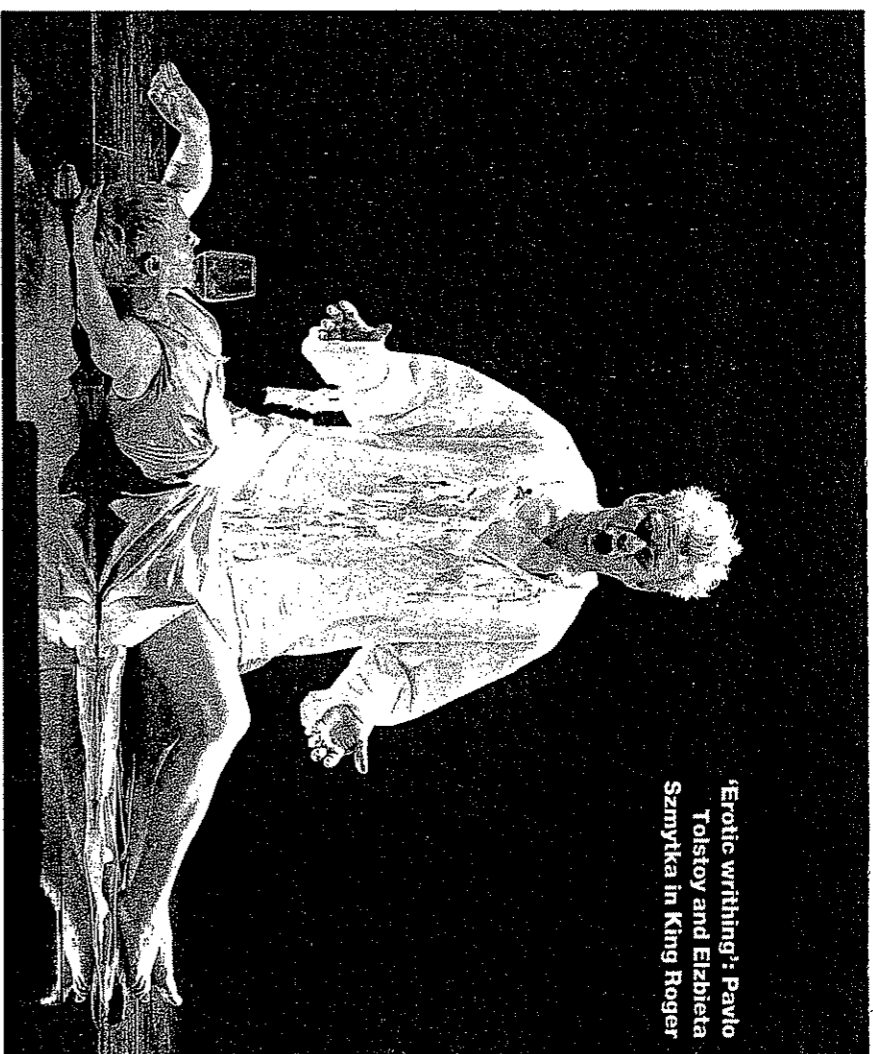
The Edinburgh International Festival closes with the annual fireworks concert tonight, an event whose cheerful populism is the opposite pole to an admirable internationalism that mounts plays in Polish, Arabic, Bosnian and Farsi, operas in Polish and Russian. The latter were brought from St Petersburg by the Mariinsky Opera and Orchestra and its unstoppable director, Valery Gergiev.

Before then I caught a work intermediate between genres and languages. **Ruhe** (Rest), presented by Antwerp's Muziektheater Transparant with Collegium Vocale Gent, could be seen either as a play (in English) with music (sung in German) or a concert with surprising interventions by actors. The audience were part of the show, admitted to the Hub space only at the last minute. A concert-arrangement of 200 different chairs was the *mise en scène*, and on 12 of these Collegium men stood and sang Schubert part

songs, very euphoniouly. This is music traditionally left to amateurs, and it was a shock to discover how rapidly felicitous Schubert's writing is. A greater one was when the actress Carly Wjys stood on a chair to deliver a chatty monologue in which her Dutch character justifies collaborating with the Nazis. More part songs, then the thug-like Dirk Kooftoof did the same, with much haranguing of the audience, constrained by politeness to go along with him, or at least not be hostile.

The texts are from interviews with unrepentant ex-SS members collected by the Dutch artists Hans Slettenaar and Armando. The director Josse De Pauw rounds off his show with Annelies Van Parys's Liget-ish, chromatically sinking

Ruhe, a part song using words from one of Schubert's, as if to cap romantic innocence with modernist queasiness. De Pauw seems to be saying we must all share responsibility for the characters' ethical choices: they were "ordinary people" like us. But it was impossible



Ferotic writhing? Pawlo Tolstoy and Elzbieta Szymka in King Roger

not to feel he also held Schubert responsible. It is evidently no longer enough to blame Wagner for Nazism; any Austro-German composer will do. One wonders which unsuspecting composer of today will be called to account for atrocities committed 100 years from now.

What Gergiev's theatre offered was more conservative if rather more explosive. Having conducted a Prokofiev symphony-cycle with the London Symphony Orchestra earlier in the festival, he undertook a concert performance of Act III of the same composer's **Semyon Kotko** with Rachmaninov's **Aleko** at Usher Hall: a staging of Szymanowski's **King Roger** at the Festival Theatre; and the British premiere there of Rodion Shchedrin's 2002 "opera for the concert stage",

The Enchanted Wanderer. During this re-creative frenzy (absolutely habitual for him) he was doubtless exercised by political notions in his native Osssetia.

The festival's theme this year is, uncannily, the shifting of political boundaries, and this explains the unusual conjunction of Rachmaninov's student one-act about those non-respecters of borders, **gypsies**, and the isolated act (of five) from Prokofiev's 1940 Soviet opera about German and Cossack resistances to Bolshevik rule in the Ukraine of 1918. The first, based on a poem by Pushkin, was a simple entertainment: a tale of bloody revenge exacted on his wife and her gypsy lover by the tormented, eponymous baritone — the strapping-voiced Evgeny Nikitin — and a reminiscence of Puccini's vengeful one-act **Il Tabarro**, recently heard at the

Proms. Rachmaninov's score has nothing like the sly seductiveness of Puccini's, though it is similarly preoccupied with creating atmosphere, and Gergiev splendidly brought out the orchestral colours — haunting flutes in the opening gypsy chorus, Glinka-esque string wildness for the men's dance, a disconsolate horn for the tragic finale. The singers fell effortlessly into moody poses and gave their all with mighty Russian readiness.

Semyon Kotko was a vivid contrast: a cast of 20, a rapid, quasi-cinematic unfolding, furiously inventive orchestration, and a steady rise in tension to the overwhelming close. It did not matter

4 The closing sunburst of Szymanowski's King Roger was a scenic and musical epiphany

that we were plunged in *medias res*. The depiction of love and terror in wartime is fiercely delineated, and so much drama is packed into this act that I shudder to contemplate the force of the whole opera. Though Prokofiev is intent on keeping things moving, he gives impassioned monologues both to the demobbed soldier

village girl Lyubka (Irina Loskutova), whose grief for her hanged lover takes the form of a savagely insistent six-note figure. The thrilling inevitability with which this returns at the end to dominate the tutti is the kind of play that makes the art of opera special.

Gergiev barely had time to sleep before impelling us through another tempestuous operatic

experience, Szymanowski's lush, ecstatic, powerfully condensed treatment of Euripides' **Bacchae** story. Mariusz Treliński's production added a silent preamble in which we were faced by rows of empty chairs, and I had a bad memory of Ruhe. They are gradually occupied by worshippers in a cathedral, and the music begins. It is a brilliantly original score, for all that it actively evokes Debussy, and one would be sufficiently transported if one sat with eyes shut.

Boris Kudlicka's sets were ravishing but apt to confuse: the Greek amphitheatre of Act III was a ghostly hospital ward. Andrzej Dobber as Roger was impressive, the tenor Pawla Tolstoy, a dazzling white-clad shepherd/Dionysus, even more so. Elzbieta Szymka as Queen Roxana had much erotic writhing to do. The closing sunburst, when Roger defiantly overcomes temptation, to stay within the threatened boundaries of the rational, was a scenic and musical epiphany.

Next evening, the very day on which Russia tried to redraw the boundaries of Georgia (whose State Ballet appeared in the festival's first week), there was Gergiev with an unashamedly nationalist Russian opera. Shchedrin's adaptation of a Leskov novella, a 110-minute medley of folk tales in which three soloists took multiple roles. The lack of surtitles, not to mention an interval, left me feeling somewhat stupefied, as did the stylistic conglomerate of Shostakovich, balalaika music and the Carl Orff of the dreaded **Carmina Burana**. □

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365: One Night to Learn a Lifetime

Class Enemy

Ruhle



The most hotly anticipated theatre event of the Edinburgh Festival has ended up being the most disappointing. **365: One Night to Learn a Lifetime** had everything going for it. It's written by the brilliant David Harrower (*Blackbird*, *Knives in Hens*), directed by Vicky Featherstone, who is passionately committed to new writing, and co-produced by the National Theatre of Scotland, which, in its short lifespan, has forged a strong voice in British theatre with dynamic hits such as *Black Watch* and *The Wolves in the Walls*. But all this, plus a terrific cast of young actors, adds up to a play that is less than the sum of its parts.

It's about what happens to young people in care when at the age of 16 they are kicked out of institutions and set up in 'practice flats'. On the vast, sepulchral stage of the Playhouse, stripped to the dock, the kids ricochet around looking suitably lost. Isolated front doors or sections of flapjack-style kitchens extend from the flies then zip off again, giving an extra twist to the idea of temporary accommodation.

Characters swirl on and off so quickly at first that they seem as generalised and characterless as *Coriolanus*. McGuinness's set. Eventually though,

some become more fleshed-out. There's J (Ashley Smith) and the mother (Julie Wilson Nimmo), who left her alone for five days when she was four years old. There's the cool, aggressive boy (Owen Whitlaw) and his two girl followers, 'one that every man looks at and one that only I look at'. There's the tall, put-upon boy with no sense of boundaries, and the Chinese illegal immigrant – 'they call me cockle-picker' – and there are many more.

In fact, there are too many more. All we get are fragments of stories. As a result, the play is little more than a series of beginnings, interspersed with some desultory physical theatre. The scene where almost the whole cast mime being physically restrained to a pumping house-music soundtrack is particularly poor. The overall effect is of something half-baked. If *365* has been forced on stage before it's ready then it might still come together. But only with ruthless reworking.

THEATRE CHOICE

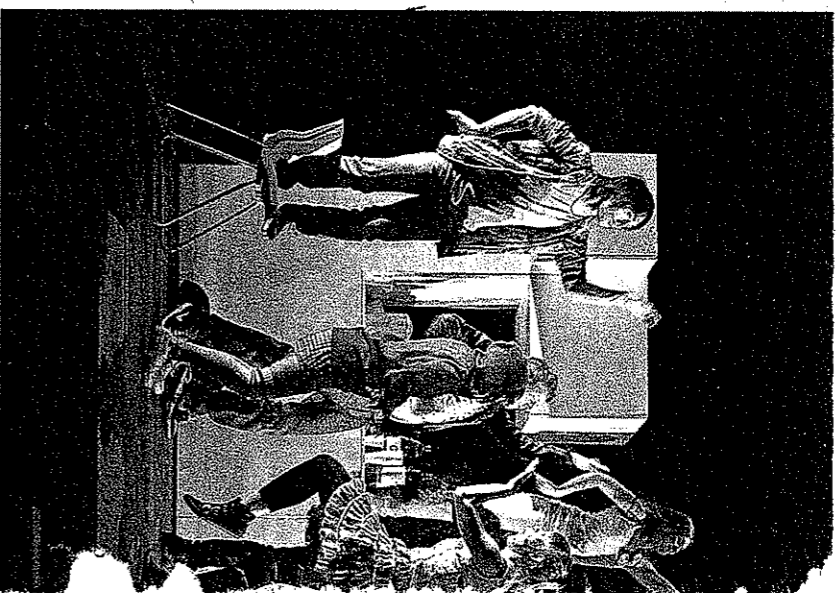
Timon of Athens Shakespeare's Globe, London SE1 (020 7401 9919) to 3 October. Director Lucy Bailey takes on one of Shakespeare's most obscure plays, about sycophancy and fair-weather friends. Simon Paisley Day plays the	luciless Timon, and the staging features bungee-jumping feathered folk.
Joan Rivers Leicester Square Theatre, London WC2 (0844 847 2475) to 18 Sep. The US comedy diva's new show moves from Edinburgh to London.	

Desultory and half-baked National Theatre of Scotland's new '365'

But in spite of that, and some moving moments, overall this production feels as interminable as triple Geography on a Wednesday afternoon.

Having the actors perform among the audience has become a cliché of modern theatre, but in **Ruhle** ('Rest') from the Dutch company Muziektheater Transparant, the device is central to the power of the piece. The audience enters a room where chairs are gathered haphazardly. Standing on 12 of them, the men of the Collegium Vocale Gent sing Schubert parsons. As we take our places, the eye tends to wander between those of us seated and the equally ordinary blokes in jeans and T-shirts blending their voices in harmony.

Just as easily as something of beauty can emerge from among us, so can something horrific. A woman in the audience (Carly Wyls) begins to sing along, then starts to tell how, as a young Dutch woman, she joined the SS. As she explains in a friendly voice that she was in charge of medical records at an SS hospital, we are forced to realise that she did not start out a monster, nor does she sound like one now, except every now and then, in her pride at remembering Hitler's visit to the hospital, or her 'mistfulness when she says, 'In a way it was good to experience all that', as if the character-building experience she's referring to is, say, white-water rafting, not being a Nazi.



TEENS ILL-SERVED BY THE STATE IS ALSO the theme of **Class Enemy**, Nigel Williams's 1978 play, adapted by the Bosnian theatre

company East West and set in post-war Sarajevo. It's performed in Bosnian, which is fine, but only if the surtitles keep pace with the dialogue onstage, which they often didn't the night I was there.

The stage is a classroom inhabited by children ripe for the Bosnian equivalent of an Asbo. Their teachers have abandoned them. You'd think the kids would be out of the classroom in a second, roaming the streets and peddling drugs, but they are hungry for education. In the absence of any coming from above, they take turns at giving lessons in life to each other. One lectures on gardening, a metaphor for how hard it is to preserve anything beautiful in a world scarred by poverty and the Balkan war. Another gives a lesson in racism: 'It's all the Serbs' fault'. A final lesson in

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ARTS/THEATRE

A second collaborator (Dirk Roothoof) roams between chairs, eyeballing the audience and talking about the injustices of the period before the war, and how he joined the SS to fight for a better life for all of us'. His monologue shows the slip from ordinary to fascist, by way of idealist, more glaringly. He starts out on roughly the same level of offensive as radio pundit Jon Gaunt, moves on to describing the carnage of war as 'absolutely normal', and ends by explaining that he's not anti-Semitic but he does believe in segregation.

These are both true testimonies, taken from a book produced in the 1960s by artist Armando and Hans Slettenhaar and adapted and directed here by Josse de Pauw. In between the monologues the music takes on an increasingly sinister sense, as the singers mellifluously sing on, ignoring what is being said among them. The audience is also, of course, silent. At the end, Schubert's *Ruhe, schlösst* (reinterpreted by modern composer Amelies van Parys into a chilling lament. A restrained yet gripping piece of theatre.

'365' starts previews at the Lyric Hammersmith, London W6 (0871 221 1722) on 8 September and opens on 11 September.

Tim Walker is away



self-defence escalates into a gunfight, culminating in the children aiming at the audience. It looks less like a powerful symbol of their anger than a crude bit of agitprop.

The actors put their backs into it, leaping around the stage in their hoodies and punctuating self-education with lots of desk-banging, spitting, simulated sex and some rap. 'A boy' bumble bee gets a prickie; Sees a girl and gives her a quickie...

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Ruhe at the Edinburgh International Festival

Muziektheater Transparant and the Collegium Vocale Gent

The Hub, Edinburgh, 30 August 2008



Ruhe, presented by **Muziektheater Transparant**, makes us feel uncomfortable.

As two Dutch citizens recount their lives as members of the SS during the Second World War, we are exposed to the notion that these volunteers were not single-minded fascists but were, in fact, ordinary citizens.

Designed to engage the audience as participants in the developments on the stage, the work began whilst the audience were being seated. As the twelve singers of the **Collegium Vocale Gent** performed the first of ten songs by Schubert, they stood on chairs in two informal circles within the arena of the audience. The actors also sat within this set (comprising of over 200 chairs, some more stable than others), in plain clothes, observing the gestures of each other, as if this was also new to them.

I was sandwiched within the two circles of singers, between a resonant bass and a tenor, which presented an interesting and rather special way to experience a consort of male singers. The sprinkling of harmonies around the audience provided a refreshing break from the traditional block setting of choirs and the *a cappella* Collegium Vocale Gent sang beautifully and poignantly. Occasional wavering of intonation at the ends of phrases did not detract from the well-paced tempos, magical ensemble and rich doubling of parts whose vocal range spanned from bass to counter-tenor.

Unlike the use of music in many theatre productions (for relaxing or for relief between scenes), the Schubert songs here were very much a part of the performance. Its beauty was designed to contrast with the difficult and frank monologues, but I felt rather, these two art forms were not integrated and remained separate entities throughout the performance: at most they provided a moment for reflection. Only at the close of the work in the final piece by contemporary composer **Anneliese Van Parys** - atonal harmonies on a single line of text 'Rest, greatest blessing, as a grave reposes among flowers' - did I feel a definite connection between the monologues and the music.

Of the two actors, **Carly Wigs**' performance was the most convincing; she took us back to 1934, describing her involvement as a nurse who treated war-injured amputees. Her sympathetic account revealed how an ordinary citizen with a mixed political and religious background became complicit in war. In contrast, **Dirk Roothoof**'s character was restless and impatient. He played a farmer who reluctantly declared enjoying the camaraderie of war. Although a lively and candid account, the defensive part of his character created an unwanted and hostile ambience.

This was certainly an original show and a successful performance, but, I'm afraid, it was not outstanding.

By **Mary Robb**

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