

In Hell with Jesus / Top 40

IVO DIMCHEV

A whole barrel of barbed skits and sketches



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‘Sucker, sucker, sucker’, ‘I’m so full of desire, my g-spot is on fire’ ‘I’ll build a wall between your heart and mine and I’ll break it’: just some snippets of the many musical interludes Ivo Dimchev sings during ‘In Hell With Jesus/Top 40’, his all singin’ all dancin’ queer cabaret-cum- quiz show.

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The ever outrageous, unendingly fearless and blissfully hilarious queer Bulgarian singer-song writer, choreographer and notorious provocateur was back in Brussels for one night only at Les Halles de Schaerbeek. Performing just three days after Trump’s inauguration, even down to Dimchev’s little white toupée, he seemed to be cocking a desperately needed snook in the aftermath of all that Trumpism.

‘In Hell With Jesus/Top 40’ is a meta mash-up between an audition for a musical still seeking its dramaturgy as well as its funding, and a quiz show in which we the audience must provide much more than the answers to the questions.

The ‘auditions’ are being held on the musical’s set: a gay bar of course, complete with smoke machine, strip lighting and two quivering dildos destined to accessorize several of the numbers. Dimchev is seated on a leatherette office chair with his bejazzled keyboard on his lap. He explains the musical’s plot to Maria, the first auditionee for the female lead, Molly, whose boyfriend gets shot in the head. But this convoluted murder mix-up is clearly just a pretext for Dimchev to roll out a whole barrel of barbed skits and sketches: a fandango of his favourite anthems — power, corruption, capitalism in culture, all heavily laced with lewd alludes to all sorts of sex and smattered with bitingly funny asides to the audience (think a mix of Graham Norton and Dame Edna Everage for those who know the timeless TV hosts) and his own, heartrendingly beautiful singing of his home-crafted, philosophic, comic-erotic ballads.

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“Who would you rather sleep with, the Dalai Lama or Putin?”, “Where would you rather come, in the mouth or in the arse?” He asks the audience and his two auditionees (Maria has been joined by Steven) to have a show of hands in a succession of subverso-absurd pollster questions. We’re all in stitches. But the participation doesn’t stop there, when he takes the mike to sing, he asks for

backing help. Volunteers are enticed on stage to either feign suffocation on the floor, take selfies, or sweep the stage whilst shouting, out-of-tempo mind: ‘respect art, respect art’. Dimchev sings with his wonderfully searing, Anohniesque wide vocal range, interspersed with rants: ‘louder, louder’, to the writhing or sweeping participants. Each is rewarded with the show-to-be’s already manufactured merchandising: a tote-bag or a book of his own songs. Other requests for support bring greater ‘rewards’. One improvised act involves two members of the audience stripping naked and simulating sex, albeit mainly behind a whoosh of smoke as Dimchev regularly activates the smoke dispenser from behind his cheap chair. Here he offers 250-euro cash each. Everything as always is very naughty, sometimes downright puerile, but never off target. He makes a point of translating the rhythmic back beat to one of his songs, the repetition of cock cock cock, and pussy pussy pussy, into both of Brussels’ official languages. The tears of laughter sting.I didn’t get to take home a tote-bag but instead a huge sense of jubilation that this artfully clever, multi-talented artist is still doing his thing, and moreover, in the beleaguered USA where he’s now based. I belly laughed more than when I listen to Bishop Mariann Budde’s plea to Donald Trump but both experiences left me clutching fast to a flicker of relief and vindication, perhaps we are not all totally ready, as Dimchev might put it, to be ‘f***ed in the arse’ quite yet.