

Fantazja

ANNA KARASIŃSKA

Empowering the audience



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With no special lighting, set or sound, and with just one prop: a plastic yogurt-pot, six motley actors, who hardly utter a word and mainly just stand around in T shirts and slacks, regale us with a cast of what seems like 30 characters and keep us in their thrall for a whole hour. How come?

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The answer is: it's all our imagination; but of course we have a little help from Anna Karasińska and her troupe.

With Fantazja, Karasińsk's aim is to woo us, the audience, into tapping our own inner creative resources. Using her voice as something akin to guided autosuggestion, we piece together the play, in real time, along with her and her six performers. With surprisingly little effort, our minds soak up Karasińsk's live voice-off: dead-pan instructions to the actors to portray, individually and by turn, an assortment of unlikely characters such as: "the woman who could feel no emotion at her mother's funeral", or: "the man who packs raisins for you in a far off land" or indeed: "the woman who hugs trees to calm down after work".

Some of the instructions are set prior to the performance, others are more arbitrary, decided by the disembodied Karasińsk according to how she gauges our mood. The actors obey, but mostly their response is limited to a concentrated, restrained inflection of emotion in their faces. These minimalistic but real-life-like reactions often trigger immediate recall within us and parallel, personal narratives and associations begin to unravel in our minds. From the familiar: "the man who is ashamed to dance on music he likes" or "the person who doesn't have a TV and therefore feels better than everyone', to the farfetched: "the man who killed his friend with a base-ball bat".

Yet all the characters become plausible players to our inner, nonlinear plot. The understated irony with which the actors follow the directives, staying themselves but playing the game wholeheartedly, is beguiling and the effect is somehow similar to being read a good book whilst watching close-ups of the actors playing in a soundless film adaptation of the story.

Fantazja, created in 2017, and indeed Karasińsk's other work for the stage, could be aligned with a movement gaining prominence in her native Poland termed as "auto-theatre", It implies performers speak in their own name rather than in that of the character. The mode emerged somewhat in defiance of the omnipotence of traditionally performed text-based theatre in Eastern Europe.

Karasińsk claims that the two-way communication between the players and the audience is paramount in her theatre research and an essential tool, having commandeered their attention by drawing them into the theatre, to empower audiences to think "out-side-the-box", not just about theatre but about society as a whole.

This theory is surely borne out; there is plenty of fodder for reflection about the wider world, but the more political references are meshed to a delightfully astute defining of human nature perceived via the minutiae of our everyday acts. Through the actors, we detest, love and laugh at ourselves simultaneously, and that in itself, come to think of it, is not a bad recipe for social healing at all.