



An eye-opener . . . Josef Houben and Kathryn Hunter in *Out Of A House Walked A Man* PHOTOGRAPH: FRANK MARTIN

MICHAEL BILLINGTON on the technical audacity of *Complicité*

No Cité limits

THEATRE de *Complicité* have a great talent for rediscovery: in *The Street of Crocodiles*, they wove magical theatre out of the stories of Bruno Schulz. But in *Out Of A House Walked A Man* at the Lyttelton, they have set themselves an even harder task: finding a coherent structure in the fragments and prose miniatures of the Russian absurdist, Daniil Kharmis (1905-42). What you get is a show whose technical audacity often outstrips its elliptical content. In a sense, it is a Catch-22 situation. You need to know something about Kharmis fully to appreciate the show. But for most people seeing the show will precede reading the excellent programme or buying Kharmis's incidences in the bookshop. Briefly, he was a St Petersburg eccentric — a mixture of Tristan Tzara and Lewis Carroll — who wrote poems, sketches, prose

vignettes and who in 1927 helped form *The Association for Real Art*. In the Stalinist era, he and his friends were arrested for writing socially irrelevant "trans-sense" poetry. On release Kharmis concentrated on children's literature but was re-arrested in 1941 and died a year later in the psychiatric wing of a prison hospital. The conflict between artistic experiment and state orthodoxy was the theme of *Dusty Hughes's Futurists* at the National in 1986. But where that contextualised a whole movement, *Complicité's* show concentrates purely on re-creating Kharmis's work. We see, for instance, a "tragic vaudeville" in which a seducer unaccountably loses his penis. We get a chilling Kafkaesque sketch in which a furtive lecher and his accomplice are arrested by a man in a black coat. But the bulk of the two-

hour evening consists of a staging of Kharmis's longest tale, *The Old Woman*, in which the writer seeks to dispose of a putrefying corpse occupying his flat. This shows *Complicité* at their most inventive. They bring out the echoes of Dostoevsky and Pushkin as the penurious hero frenziedly cries: "My life has ended with this old crow." At the same time, there is a wild Ionesco absurdity about the attempt to stuff the recalcitrant corpse — the astonishing rubber-limbed Kathryn Hunter — into a suitcase. And the subsequent train journey, in which the suitcase is stolen while the hero is on the toilet, is marvellously evoked through swaying movement and the scuffing of the surface of a guitar. Technically, the show is highly sophisticated. Director Simon McBurney deploys the 12-strong cast with great fluidity to conjure up everything from bread queues to

apartment-block voyeurs. Gerard McBurney's score, for eight on-stage musicians, consciously echoes Shostakovich, with whom Kharmis may have considered working. And Tim Hatley's solid-seeming set finally dissolves into a cascade of fluttering paper as if in protest against the suppression, until recent times, of Kharmis's work. But, in the end, the evening raises as many problems as it solves. Does what Neil Cornwell calls the "skeletal terseness" of Kharmis's prose gain or lose by being expansively theatricalised? And although the scarecrow-like writer-hero and his alter ego are on stage throughout, don't we need biographical data to make sense of his work? Why also is there no reference to the fellow-experimenters who worked and suffered with him? What you get is an intriguing Kharmis kaleidoscopic celebration of the persecuted lone visionary. What you don't get — as in *Hughes's Futurists* or *Powall's Master Class* — is any real reflection on the role of the artist in an oppressive society. For that reason the show remains an elliptical spectacle.

At the Lyttelton (071-928 2252)

Billington On Out Of A House

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