

THEATRE Accomplishes to la



Michael Coveney has a rare treat as the LOST RUSSIAN SURREALIST Daniil Kharms is resurrected by the Theatre de Complicite

You see the ballet of a recalcitrant corpse stuffed in a suitcase, a man admiring the lower thighs of his underwear-free lover before Big Brother bangs on the door (too knockers, but knockers), people collapsing in bread queues, the ecstasy in what Auden termed the good onset of 'a satisfactory dump', and a theory of laughter tested on a live audience.

The actors and musicians of Theatre de Complicite never fail to amaze and delight. Their new co-production with the Royal National Theatre, *Out of a House Walked a Man...*, musical scenes from the writings of Daniil Kharms (1905-1942), not only introduces a major European absurdist as interesting as Bruno Schulz (their source for *Street of Crocodiles*), it also extends their range of integrated music and movement theatre with a score by Gerard McBurney (brother of the show's director, Simon McBurney) which fulfils his ambition to create a musical dream that Kharms and Shostakovich might have made together.

Kharms, an olfactory surrealist who admired Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear, was starving, persecuted and unpublished for his entire life before dying in a prison hospital. You have only to read the slightest extracts about the juices of a sensual woman, or the men with no hair, and no name, or the pensioners plummeting from windows ('out of excessive curiosity') to see why he was extinguished by Stalin.

Complicite resurrect him in spirit, and in person: two performers play Kharms as a terrible double act heading for Leningrad in 1939 'to get a refusal of payment for everything I've ever written'. He is invaded by the subjects of his own little stories while he struggles to write more than one line.

The opening sequence of an uninterrupted two-hour performance sets up the world of absurdity and menace: a vaudeville tragedy in which a seducer's plea for 'just one thrust' is scuppered by the inexplicable loss of his penis; an elision of film and stage reality in images of gymnastic regimentation; a Swiflian campaign to kill children (more irritating than corpses) with tetanus injections. Thereafter, the show coalesces in a brilliant and hypnotic staging of Kharms's longest (30 pages) piece, *The Old Woman*.

The two Kharmses (one of them is the 'involved' author, Toby Sedgwick his reflective doppelgänger) discover a dead woman (Kathryn Hunter) in their room and

attempt to dispose of her in a suitcase. The story is inspired by both Pushkin's *The Queen of Spades* and Dostoevsky's crime and Punishment (as in Yuri Lyubimov's stage version of the second novel, Complicite make much of a single, mobile door). But its thriving paranoia and delicious black humour are all its own, and the company make them all their own, too. A rare alternative Christmas treat, I'd say.

Richard Nelson is an American dramatist who has been made to feel at home in the London theatre, specifically the Royal Shakespeare Company. *New England*, a slightly old-fashioned conversational family drama, is the sixth of his plays to be presented by the RSC, and one of the best. Nelson's habitation in this 'special relationship' is so complete that he can now write about a Connecticut weekend gathering of English people who at first seem to be Americans played by English actors not bothering with accents. And he kick-starts the action with a gunshot suicide exactly similar in placement, and shock value, to that in such markedly 'English' pieces as Christopher Hampton's *The Philanthropist* and David Hare's *Wetherby*.

Nelson's one 'foreigner' is a French woman, Sophie (Aimee Courbier), who reads her child a Roald Dahl story by long-distance telephone. Sophie's husband, Paul (Duncan Bell), is a Hollywood script reader, one of the dead man's three children. And the 'outsider' who arrives for a quiet country weekend, Tom Berry (Mick Ford), is a drama teacher whose pupils are 'unfunny, thick-skinned Americans'. The play is as much about the domestic tensions precipitated by old Harry's death as the corruption of America as witnessed by a gang of squabbling intruders incapable of viewing themselves with irony. The sharp writing, punctuated with morose extracts from Frank Bridge's second string quartet, makes for an evening of distinctive tone and pleasure.

Nelson's satirical purchase on his own nationality was the driving spirit behind *Some Americans Abroad* (1988), a splendid attack on American academics and 'culture-seekers' and *Two Shakespearean Actors* (1990), a meditation on 'great' acting and transatlantic rivalry. In *New England* he modulates into softer, subtler dramaturgy, manipulating his characters with considerable skill while allowing them a sufficiency of jagged edges and reaching a satisfying, macabre climax on the day of the funeral.

Angela Thorne as the bereaved lover and harassed hostess leads a fine RSC cast including a topknotish David Burke as twin brothers, Selina Cadell and Diana Handcastle as the confined sisters, one anxious to keep things going, the other convinced she is responsible for the tragedy. Peter Gill's assured and beautifully orchestrated production, with a spacious, open-plan design by Hayden Griffin and superb lighting by Andy Phillips, places the audience on four sides at one of the best new plays of the year.

Jenny McLeod's *Raising Fires* won last year's LWT Plays on Stage award, presumably for its ambitious scale and faint similarity to Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*. In spite of

Michael Coveney On Out Of A House & New England

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