

Celebrating the Art of Theatre in Heidelberg

Festival review: *International Hot Shorts – Short Play Festival*, organized by the Schauspielgruppe des Anglistischen Seminars, e.V. in partnership with the UNESCO City of Literature Heidelberg, 2-9 July 2016

I may be accused of being highly subjective when saying that one immediately falls in love with the splendid city of Heidelberg, but it is a risk I am willing to take. The city's famous landmark – the romantic ruined castle that safeguards it from the hilltop –, its impressive architecture, the Bohemian streets, squares, cafés and restaurants, the abundance of cultural events, its prestigious university and the effervescent student life are all more than sufficient reasons for travelers to, at least once in their lifetime, visit the German town on the banks of the river Neckar.

If these aren't enough reasons to pay Heidelberg a visit, then perhaps the prospect of attending a theatre festival will convince our readers. The first international edition of the *Hot Shorts – Short Play Festival* (the first two national editions were in 2011 and 2013), organized by the Schauspielgruppe des Anglistischen Seminars, e.V. in partnership with the UNESCO City of Literature Heidelberg, festival producer: Kirsten Hertel, took place at the Theatre im Romanischen Keller (Theatre from the Roman Cellar), 2-9 July 2016. For an entire week, *Hot Shorts* theatre festival showcased, on the stage of the Roman Cellar, twenty-three new plays written, directed and performed by students and young professionals from Dublin, Dunedin, Iowa City, Norwich and, of course, Heidelberg, all of them part of the International UNESCO Creative Cities network.

Organized into four groups – each group consisting of around five or six short plays and each of them presented three times throughout the festival week –, *Hot Shorts* managed to become a theatrical event able to delight audiences young and old with dramatic works conceived entirely by the participants, from writing the plays, to directing the performances and, in some cases, even acting in them. Drama and comedy, one-person shows or group productions, laughter, tears, social introspection and absurd touches, all beautifully blended in a festival meant to celebrate theatrical creativity and which would undoubtedly make even the most demanding of theatre

critics smile with hope. For what the festival presented is nothing more, nothing less than a splendid and more than necessary proof that the art of theatre is and will continue to be a relevant platform for young generations to explore the world around them.

The first group, consisting of six plays – *Good Fiona, Bad Fiona* (playwright: Tracy Martin, director: Laura Hopp, performers: Laura Hopp, Lena Hahner, Pia Seebacher), *Close Stranger* (written and performed by Kiri Bell), *A Workman's Tools* (written by Shane O'Reilley, directed by Simone Hebel, performers: Jan Enss, Eric Herbst, Inna Pech, Jonas Hock), *The Forgotten One* (playwright: Jacinta Sheerin, director: Jeff Silence, performers: Laurence Williams, Luis Friedrich, Josie Kerstan), *Goggles* (written, directed and performed by Josie Dale-Jones and Gemma Barnett) – brought forth serious overtones, poignantly tackling such sensitive issues like reconnecting with an estranged parent (*Close Stranger* from Dunedin, New Zealand, Kiri Bell's beautifully written and performed "Theatre of the Real" one-woman show), the complexity of interpersonal relationships beyond gender, race or age (Josie Dale-Jones and Gemma Barnett's funny, playful, yet profoundly honest play *Goggles*), bringing to light forgotten moments of (his)story (*The Forgotten One*), or the inner workings of the human mind in the individual's relationship with himself/herself (*Good Fiona, Bad Fiona*), or with his/her social role, especially when, as shown by *A Workman's Tools*, it only takes a brief second for it to dramatically change.



Fig. 1. Kiri Bell's *Close Stranger*

The second group – *Dance Fever* (written by Giulia Zips, directed by Lukas Lau and Jeannette Jansen, performers: Andrea Greupner and Jannik Buhr), *What a mother!* (written by Anuschka Hopp, directed by Thilo Hatscher, performers: Janina Arndt, Sabine Jack), *Terrible Light* (playwright: Sam Collier, director: Franziska Kirchholtes, performers: Dennis Massmann, Hanna Green), *A Glance Behind the Façade* (author: Melanie Leyrer, director: Annemieke Drummen, performers: Apoorva Lakshminarayana, Markus Lotzenburger), *Life's Crossroads* (written by Ithana Schnapp, directed by Antoine Verleih, performers: Hanile Engelbrecht and Sarah Süß), *Coat Hanger Dialogues* (written by Franziska Kirchholtes, directed by Lukas Lau, performers: Andrea Greupner, Mo Armin) – presented on stage both, in a realistic manner, real-life issues like understanding the efforts necessary to overcome first impressions (*A Glance Behind the Façade*), or the complexities of the men-women relationships (*Coat Hanger Dialogues* and *Terrible Light*), and, in more absurd, sometimes humorous, touches, equally interesting subjects like the opportunity to meet your younger self on a train platform (*Life's Crossroads*), the impossibility to control your body's reactions (*Dance Fever*), or the refusal to acknowledge your problems and the refuge in an alternative reality (*What a mother!*).



Fig. 2. Mo Armin and Andrea Greupner in *Coat Hanger Dialogues*

Group 3 – *The Jump* (written and directed Ann-Kathrin Mannherz, performers: Lea Deinhardt and Moritz Spielberger), *Plane Talk* (written by Pia Schlotthauer, directed by Isabelle Illig, performers: Jannik Buhr, Hanlie Engelbrecht), *We Eat Meat* (written and directed by Alex David, performers: Laurence Williams, Sarah Süß), *The Coyote Stratagem* (written by Lupe Flores, directed by Lea Deinhardt, performers: Moritz Spielberger, Viola von Boehn), *Pork Pies* (written and directed by Charlotte Caspers, performers: Ayse Eser, Laurence Williams, Hanlie Engelbrecht), *The Last Tape* (written and directed by Kirsten Hertel, performers: Nawel Herbrechter and Michael Shiels) – proved to be a well-balanced selection of dramas centering on couple life (*The Coyote Stratagem*, and, to a lesser extent, *The Jump*), on “love, marriage, regrets and memory” (*The Last Tape*), or on important life lessons (*Plane Talk*), and bewitching comedies, like the beautifully written and performed *We Eat Meat*, about a vegetarian cannibal’s struggle with social acceptance from peers, or the black comedy *Pork Pies*, about the deceiving nature of appearances.



Fig. 3. Laurence Williams and Sarah Süß in *We Eat Meat*

The last group – *Ella* (written by Laura Hopp, directed by Maximillian Kleist and Katrin Lang, performers: David Winter, Esther Megbel), *The Department of Abaddon* (written and directed by Jeff Silence, performers: Laurence Williams, Luis Friedrich, Vanessa Bomert), *Awakening* (written and performed by Selyn Beyhan, performers: Amelie Morweiser, Anouchka Meliková, Luis Friedrich), *Socialpaths* (written by Alysha Oravetz, director: Antoine Verleih, performers: Jonas Hock, Josie Kerstan), *Stew* (written and directed by Katrin Pfänder, performers: Hannah Pusching, Lila Miran, Ranja Ambruster, Saher, Maqsood), *Cooper & Jones* (written by Martin Weiffenbach, directed by Matthew Niebes, performers: Sinem Eroglu, Verena Turco, Petra Schwab) – successfully continued the theatrical introspections into the complexity of social roles (*Stew*), individual struggles (*Cooper & Jones*), interpersonal relations (*Ella*, *Awakening*), the human mind (*Socialpaths*), or on a humorously absurd descent into the underworld (*The Department of Abaddon*).



Fig. 4. Amelie Morweiser, Anouchka Melikova, Luis Friedrich in *Awakening*

I have begun this review by “denouncing” my subjective perspective and I would like to end it in the same note. What I experienced during the seven days of the *Hot Shorts – International Short Play Festival* transcends the

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petty flaws of some of the short plays or the stage management “glitches” of some of the productions (inevitable in any large-scale event that celebrates the diversity of artistic voices), and that is why I have chosen to completely ignore them. What the festival successfully managed to bring forth, and this is undoubtedly the merit of Kirsten Hertel and the festival’s production team, is a strong sense of collaboration and friendship between artists (some experienced, others at their first encounter with the theatre stage), with the shared goal of making their voices heard. It is an admirable educational and artistic project, at the same time nurturing and celebrating playwrights, directors and actors, and I truly hope it will benefit from many, ever-growing, future editions.

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