

The world stage

The San Francisco International Arts Festival's globo-theatrical must-sees

By Robert Avila

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Recently I was lucky enough to land at an international theater festival in Wroclaw, Poland, jostling elbows with a transnational mix of theater folk on the occasion of the 13th annual European Theatre Prize, this year awarded to the great Polish director Krystian Lupa. It was an eye-opening glimpse at some awesome theatrical muscle rarely if ever seen in the Bay Area, or even the United States. Globally-renowned powerhouses like Italy's Pippo Delbono and Belgium's Guy Cassiers were there with some extraordinary work, not to mention that of Lupa, whose utterly brilliant and plotless eight-hour fantasia on Andy Warhol's *Factory*, *Factory 2*, proved an absolute highlight of my theatergoing career thus far.

While dreaming of the day *Factory 2* takes its local bow, I can only appreciate all the more what places like UC Berkeley's Zellerbach Hall or San Francisco's Yerba Buena Center for the Arts do in bringing us news of the theatrical world — or news of the world, theatrically. Another local presenter of exceptional international work has been the San Francisco International Arts Festival, whose sixth season begins this week. SFIAF and executive director Andrew Wood have increasingly made world theater a vital part of the fest's eclectic performance mix. This year is no exception, with three must-sees in the lineup.



Cho-In Theatre holds on

First, South Korea's Cho-In Theatre makes its U.S. debut with *The Angel and the Woodcutter*, an original physical theater piece relating the Korean folk tale in a wordless, poetical drama as uncompromising as it is unexpected. Then, Russia's famed, immensely creative performance ensemble, the Akhe Group — proponents of what they call "Russian Engineering Theatre" and favorites at SFIAF in 2005, where they presented *White Cabin* — return with the U.S. premiere of *Gobo.Digital Glossary*, a wild and captivating conglomeration of video projections, animation, ambient music, lasers, clowning, and trompe l'oeil.

Also receiving its Bay Area premiere is *Beyond the Mirror*, an unprecedented collaboration between New York's Bond Street Theatre and Afghanistan's Exile Theatre. The description of this first American-Afghani theatrical outing might ring a bell: *Mirror* had been slated to open Brava's theatrical season in fall 2008, when the U.S. government's inexplicable delays in processing visas for the Afghan performers forced its last-minute cancellation. That disappointment will happily be rectified by SFIAF when *Mirror* opens at Cowell Theater. (A second San Francisco appearance follows as part of foolsFURY's Fury Factory festival in June.)

The two companies began crafting the play after meeting by chance in 2002 among the refugee camps outside Peshawar in northern Pakistan, where the activist, physical-theater-based Bond Street went after 9/11 to develop links to the Afghan people and work with a German NGO building schools in the devastated country. Exile, meanwhile, had formed as a group of refugee playwrights, actors, and other performance professionals committed to keeping Afghan arts alive and reflecting the concerns of the Afghani population living as second-class citizens in Pakistan.

Never more timely, the play ranges over the last three decades of Afghanistan's history, using an expressive mélange of theatrical forms and techniques — including oral history, mythology, live music, traditional dance, drama, acrobatics, puppetry, and film — to tell a story of war and hope at the cusp of yet another turbulent chapter in the country's unfolding story. Notably, the eight-member half-American, half-Afghani cast includes Afghanistan's most famous actress, Anisa Wahab, who grew up in happier times on camera as a child star and has continued to act despite its still dangerous

implications for women.

Communicating partly with some mutual English, and largely in terms of both distinct and shared physical vocabularies, the artists developed what became *Mirror* in a nonlinear, highly abstract way, according to Bond Street artistic director Joanna Sherman, who codirected it with Exile's Mahmoud Shah Salimi. That in no way diminishes its rootedness or poignancy.

"We went around the countryside and interviewed different people, and videotaped them as they would allow," Sherman explained by phone from New York. "Our challenge was to portray these terrible stories in a way that was not gruesome or impossible to watch. We used our physical techniques in a way that it would be watchable and compelling but not exactly 'realistic.'"

Since *Mirror's* premiere at the second Kabul Theatre Festival in 2005, much has happened in the U.S. and Afghanistan, prompting a small but significant revision, a new final scene, according to Sherman. "We do leave on a thought of hope," she stressed. "But [we're] doing some interviewing again and getting some additional video. We'll see what happens."

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