

Edinburgh International Festival 2017 – REVIEW – Rhinceros****



Long before pernicious ‘post-truth/alternative fact’ doggerel insinuated itself within the lexicon of Trump-speak, Ionesco’s sobering voice, though often gagged by Romanian state censorship, had raged against the iniquitous corruption of language.

Shouting out loud against many contemporary intellectual deaf ears that the Communist Emperor wore no clothes; that the malevolent, merde dumping elephant in the room needed confronting – Ionesco decided instead to let rampant lose his own ‘crash’ of allegorical rhinceroses. Beckett, Pinter and Stoppard in the UK, let alone fellow European provocateurs, caught a whiff of this alt.naughty enfant-terrible rascality and ran with it.

‘Rhinosceritis’ was Ionesco’s pejorative for those who were willing and/or naively seduced by the chopped-logic and empty rhetoric of Communist double-speak.

Zinnie Harris’s bombast, kick-ass broadside cannonade of robust vernacular and cheeky EIF self-referencing new translation sets events in a thoroughly modern context. Albeit in a idealised fin-de-siècle fantasy Franco/Turkish provincial town: absurd is as absurd does.

In one appendix to *The Devils Of London*, Aldous Huxley refers to the oxymoronic phenomenon of mob rule, together with mass hysteria, as ‘herd poison’.

It is our reluctant anti-hero, pissoir-artiste, Berenger

(Robert Jack) who ultimately prevails, defying the prowling monsters of supine surrender to escape from the 'labyrinth of ennui'.

That his Everyman journey into the heart of darkness is bookended by a liberal head-splattering of seagull mayonnaise seems eminently apposite for this outrageous, absurdist satire on political, philosophical and moral ambivalence allowed evil agency. Do we trust what each of them experience second hand, an actual rhino is never seen?

Though, composer, sound design and on-stage musician, Oguz Kaplangi, ensures that a Jurassic Park T Rex-like growling presence stalks the auditorium with 'sensaround' rut-grunting menace.

Whilst the Logicians quibble over facile syllogisms as to how many legs a cat really has, Housewife (Esin Harvey) witnesses her besuited, indisputably two-legged cat being decapitated by a rogue rhino. Things can only get splatter.

They have a mock-moggie funeral – surely someone is taking the puss here. The cat has got their tongues-tied. Soon enough, cat-gut will be twisted in to a garrotte – symbolically speaking, but then abstraction and surreality run with feral licence tonight. Confusion is about to make his masterpiece. The absurd is about to become dangerous theatre.

Turkish ambience and a tradition costumed waiter reference the collaboration this production shares with DOT Theatre, Turkey and Director, Murat Daltaban. Inferences of the febrile political situation there are as teasing as they are potent.

The descent in to chaos legitimises the rule of the ridiculous as each character is subsumed in to the collective psychosis. The bathtub metamorphosis of Steven McNicoll's Sean is viscerally comic at first but rapidly its dehumanising subjugation to the primal is a watershed event. He smears himself in translucent potter's slip, a viscous masque macabre

bathed in lurid purple light that becomes a Francis Bacon screaming Pope tableau of spectral intensity.

The equivocating, ludicrously trans-gender tartaned Botard (Sally Reid) denies all then appropriates the coming of the rhinos for her own counter-revolutionary agenda – where none had existed in the first place.

Designer, Tom Piper`s modular set allows dimensional transitions that increasingly compress movement. Refuge from the carnage outside forces the remaining characters to seek safety in the higher stage void. The aptly named Dolard is the fence-sitting appeaser, the dumb waiter at the Feast of Fools as Berenger`s will begins to crack. The trembling answered telephone cackles with rhino roar, scanned radio bands brings the same.

Even Ece Dizdar`s Papatya`s beauty and reproductive potential cannot save her. It is Berenger`s climatic and stage spectacular catharsis that triumphs but at what cost and what lessons learned.

There is a need to know where you are before being led by this Carry On Bedlam into the Hades of hysteria. The proffered hand of friendship maybe because they are coming to take you away. The absurd is ridiculed, the ludicrous laid bare.

This machete head-massage of imploding incredulity beggars the question – Who is in charge, who makes and breaks the rules, whom, the foolish leaders or the following fools? A compelling, premier tour d`farce. Nothing is more absurd than believing that nothing ever happens to you. Until that is, you discover you are not quite yourself today.

Maddeningly compulsive – brings new meaning to the concept of asylum seeking.

