

# The Belgrade

## Regional theatre in bloom



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**T**he demands of regional theatre are difficult to balance. On one hand, there is the clear need to produce original, groundbreaking work in order to ensure its visibility amongst the competition, while on the other there is the undeniable tendency for audiences to favour well-known or well-publicised productions with which they are already familiar with. Hamish Glen, Artistic Director for Coventry's Belgrade Theatre, explains: "What I've tried to do is find a voice for the Belgrade Theatre that is distinct from the classicism of the Royal Shakespeare Company and the Birmingham Repertory Theatre. It might be an overstatement, but I do think there's a

danger of all theatres in the country having the same productions. The range of work that's available is flattening out, and so I'm trying to find a distinct and exciting voice for the Belgrade. What I've gone is for bold, radical and startling produced work that you won't get elsewhere. It's high-risk, but it should get some attention."

Last year the Belgrade Theatre closed to undergo an 18-month renovation project, funded by the Heritage Lottery, which sees the Coventry landmark extended to include an entirely new, fully flexible auditorium space. The process has not been without its pressure for Hamish: "I think that there are very strong relationships between local



theatres and the communities they inhabit: there's lot of expectation in the city."

In 2000, the Boyden Report highlighted the plight of regional theatre; according to the report, 30 out of 50 regional theatres ended the year in deficit. It was a time of transition: the centralisation of the London-based Arts Council England was coming to an end, and more funding was being allocated to regional arts boards. This generated a windfall for regional theatre prompting "more ambitious programming and bigger audiences" (*Guardian*, 6 September 2004).

Upon its reopening in September, the Belgrade featured a season of exciting productions, most of which are well-known

components of the European canon, but relatively obscure in the UK. The first of these, directed by Glen, was Berthold Brecht's comedy *Mr Puntilla and his Man Matti*, in a new version by Peter Arnott. "I honestly think *Mr Puntilla and his Man Matti* is one of the great plays of the European canon," enthuses Glen. "Puntilla is a great comic character, but he's rarely seen on the British stage."

Also showing this season is Ferdinand Breckner's play, *Pains of Youth*, directed by Gadi Roll, who was appointed as Associate Director at the Belgrade in April 2006. Roll explains: "The play features medical students contemplating whether to join

human society or to commit suicide. I think that question is true at any period of time. Though the play was written in 1926 it feels as though it was written today, or tomorrow."

Also upcoming is Ödön von Horváth's *Don Juan Comes Back from the War*, in which a war-wounded Don Juan decides to search for the one true love whom he abandoned years ago. Roll, who will direct, discusses the play: "On the way he faces endless recriminations from these women he's known; he's the opposite of the mythical Don Juan, a Don Juan for our times."

Also to be featured is the British premiere of *Monged*, which follows three young people on a night out in Dublin during which they get, appropriately, completely monged. Hamish explains: "Just as *Youth* touches on the number of young people questioning whether they want to join human society or escape it by taking their own lives, *Monged* reflects another part of the zeitgeist: the drink-and-drugged-fuelled weekend. All of our plays, I hope, reflect contemporary concerns without being specific and didactic."

Brecht himself opined, "Education is the noblest role we have found for the theatre". Yet this educational role has to be carefully balanced with theatre's additional role as a source of entertainment, if it is not to become overly inclined to didacticism. "What is entertainment, and for whom?" Gadi asks. "When we go to an art gallery are we entertained or only intellectually stimulated? *Don Juan*, for example, is heavy, but it is a platform for very entertaining, highly visual theatrical event."

Such considerations aside, there remains the necessity for regional theatre to make itself known in a climate that overwhelmingly favours well-publicised London productions. It is, for the most part, in a much stronger position to do this since the Boyden report, a situation the Belgrade seeks to capitalise upon. "I think in a way the Belgrade has for some time sort of been invisible," Hamish says. "I hope we can stand up and take our place as one of the great producing houses in the country, that's the aspiration. We're returning to the original dynamism and excitement of the Belgrade. Our goal is to capture the imagination of new and young audiences, in the end, we want them all to come and have a great night in the theatre."

The Belgrade Theatre reopened in September 2007. *Don Juan Comes Back from the War* will run on the main stage from 5 — 17 November. *Monged* will run in B2 from 10 November — 1 December. For more information contact the box office on 024 7655 3055 or visit: [www.belgrade.co.uk](http://www.belgrade.co.uk).

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