Review: Drums In The Night

As Brecht’s early drama is brought to life in the Friargate Theatre, Daniel Bowen reviews York Settlement Players’ insightful performance

Friday 1 May 2015

Venue: Friargate Theatre

★★★★☆

Brecht has a huge presence in contemporary theatre and director Claire Morley has taken a risk in staging the early and rarely performed Drums in the Night. The risk bears fruit though: this performance, while slightly unpolished, is high quality drama with the team bringing new life to a all-but-forgotten work. I am really glad I had the chance to see it.

Unlike his later work, the play is neither distanced historically or geographically from Brecht’s own world. The story focuses on returning soldier Andreas Kragler (George Stagnell) who discovers that his fiancée Anna (Emma Dubruel) has assumed his death and made commitments to another man. More widely, it explores the difficulty post-war German soldiers faced reintegrating into their society, tensions that lead to the Spartacus Uprising in 1919. To confront the distance between us and the historical moment, the set design team present an abstract set of newspaper-covered props on a black backdrop. The only realism in the set is the authentic bottles of wine and kirsch, which emphasise trope of alcohol in the drama.

Stagnell has also been put in make-up to distort his face (he looks like Frankenstein) and this, with his costume, make him appear unworldly, out of place, or like a ghost. Any sense of ‘reality’ we have is made uncertain; the production is not just giving us insight to a historical moment but presenting a story in the
parable nature we associate so often with Brecht.

The standout performance for me was Ian Giles as Karl Balicke. His character dominated the stage for the whole of the first act, which was appropriate as he played a domineering patriarch figure. He put on a slightly monotone yet effectively abrasive voice as well as good energy into the role, which put our focus on him from the outset. The other actors in the piece all shone at different moments; another performance highlight was when Friedrich Murk (James Witchwood), playing drunk, almost fell onto us (I moved out of the way). Sonia Di Lorenzo, who played both the Maid and Marie, changed her voice dramatically between parts and channelled the anger we were feeling as an audience when the cast verbally attacked Kragler (the effective climax of the first act). A forgivable drawback of the production was the doubling of parts; whilst understandably necessary, it was sometimes hard to disassociate characters from an actor when you could see their faces so clearly (the theatre space is fairly small). Beryl Nairn communicated a very different character with her body language when she played ‘Augusta’ but her ‘Man 2’ was reminiscent of her ‘Amelie’ and the distinction between these two characters was confusing. I wasn’t too sure what the ‘Man 1’/‘Man 2’ scene added to the play.

The language of the play is beautiful and intelligent, even in translation, and the production really drew our attention to this. The red imagery, simultaneously representing communism and passion, is brought out by gradual repositioning that displayed red surfaces on props that initially appeared white (the table and chairs). A red lampshade cast a ‘red moon’ on the set towards the end. You can feel a young but talented dramatist finding his feet whilst you watch this production and it is brought to us by people with a real reverence for the text. I’m sure this won’t be the last thing I see by the York Settlement Players.