

**Performance**

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**Beckett's Last Works Theatre in Poland**

**Tim Brennan Voice and Shadow Dance and Language**

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# Reviews

Reviews are arranged geographically, by the venue at which the performance, exhibition, event or installation being reviewed took place: firstly London; then other towns and cities in the United Kingdom, in alphabetical order; and lastly towns and cities in other countries.

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## LONDON

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### Scena Plastyczna

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Herbarium; Moisture

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ICA

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*Reviewed by Paul Allain*

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The small Polish city of Lublin, situated about 100 miles south-east of Warsaw, boasts no less than five experimental theatre groups, of which three in the course of last year toured Britain. First came the Gardzienice Theatre Association (reviewed in *Performance* No 58), and last, appearing at the Bloomsbury Theatre in November, the Chilowa Group. In between, with performances in Glasgow, London and Cardiff, we saw Visual Stage (Scena Plastyczna) of the Catholic University of Lublin, bearing the stamp of its dynamic director, Leszek Madzik, a worthy successor of the likes of Kantor, Szajna and Grotowski.

Madzik's 'philosophical theatre' was exhibited in two pieces — *Herbarium* and *Moisture* — performed, over two days, at the ICA in October. Both are quite short (the first lasting little more than half an hour), yet intense enough to satisfy. They form part of a repertoire of altogether twelve pieces which have made the rounds at many festivals — from Berlin to Monaco — during the nineteen years of the group's existence. All present an amalgam of striking images and music, without words or any narrative. Madzik's quest for a

universal theatre language, speaking to the unconscious, is both eminently exportable and enduring. His performers and technicians, recruited from Lublin University, are changed every three years. The creative drive and input, however, are his alone.

The result is far from bland, indeed little short of electrifying. Lighting is minimal, but highly revealing in what it illuminates. In *Moisture*, we see a huddled figure swinging from a trapeze, with water dripping from it onto the black plastic floor, and with the whole silhouetted by a distant backlight — a tragic picture in miniature, recalling the vagueness of remembered dreams. *Herbarium* is pitched at a similar level.

Madzik's work has strengthened and deepened with experience, as well as with a growing awareness of international movements — always, however, from a characteristically Polish perspective. His outsize marionettes are gentler than those of Bread and Puppet. His music draws on models as diverse as Peruvian folk and synthesiser groups like Kraftwerk. But all these influences, including that of Robert Wilson, are controlled by a personal vision represented by figures of death, femininity, eroticism and desire, the last shown most effectively in the opening sequence of *Herbarium*. Here a man in white suit swings on a rope inside a white boxroom lit by a stroboscope,

with two women also dressed in white walking underneath. The mythological, sculptural effect of such a tableau is heightened by the addition of music.

Madzik makes full use of the space at his disposal. Thus, entering to watch *Herbarium*, the audience sees stage-hands informally chatting in the stage area, which seems empty apart from a few ladders placed along the side walls. Immediately, after a brief blackout, the man is swinging in a white room created by means of fabric curtains. This in turn, after a second blackout, dissolves into a corridor running the whole length of the theatre, along which three giant female puppets walk slowly. Such complex scene changes are conjured up to great dramatic effect. The final scene, showing rag dolls dropping from the ceiling to the accompaniment of punctuated music, is a grim epitaph on Auschwitz.

Madzik's preoccupation with death and destruction — he wants to 'show life from the perspective of death' — springs from his country's tragic and turbulent history. Yet his theatre is by no means depressing. Rather, it has the aura of a religious Mass, comforting in its repetitive ritual, lacking only the presence of a deity. Though no project is ever scripted in advance — he carries the whole in his head — everything is informed by great dramatic force and seriousness.

By contrast with this technical brilliance, the Gardzienice ensemble from the same city

forswears all technology and cultivates the physical instead. Polish theatre, which astonished the world in the '60s and '70s, thus has lost none of its ability to surprise. The question is whether it will thrive and develop with equal vigour under Poland's new — more liberal but also more parsimonious — political régime.

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#### People Show No. 95

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#### The Big Sweep

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#### Hampstead Theatre

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Reviewed by David Hughes

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One of the truisms of theatre — well, one of Peter Brook's anyway — is that each performance is a clean slate. When the curtain comes down it wipes the slate, creates a *tabula rasa*. One of the joys of theatre, though, is that after-images remain in the mind's eye long after the stage lights fade. Some of the images that stay with me are those created over the last two decades by the People Show: Mark Long's ranting tirades and suits stiffened with white paint, or his sidling along a dark corridor doing buskers' tricks with cigarettes; Victorian women beating bunches of flowers with umbrellas; Dawn suspended from block and tackle high above a parking lot, or just standing still on stage; George Khan blowing his tenor sax, never looking comfortable; or Emile flying through a window with a mad Camembert on his shoulder. And perhaps the most resilient

memories are of atmospheres, created with minimal means as if by magic.

The People Show Cabaret has been on the road for some years in the absence of full stage shows, but at the Hampstead Theatre the oldest and newest members came together for No. 95. And this time with a title to go with the number: *The Big Sweep*, a pun which finally admits what has often been there informing their work, the cinema.

Puns, indeed, abound. The 'sweep' of the title becomes the sweeper/vacuum cleaner, or 'hoover' in the elegant passes of the dance with hoovers; the main character is based on J. Edgar Hoover; and the entrails of the president are extracted through his mouth by the application of a hoover nozzle.

As ever, the work is highly allusive and densely striated: Chandleresque private eye movie rubs shoulders with the 'movie about Hollywood movie', Hitchcock rubs shoulders with the low budget musical, James Bond with *film noir*, and the whole is processed through the tale of F. Bradley Inkerman's obsession with collecting grisly bits of body. He already has Martin Luther King's 'mojo', Rosa Luxemburg's breasts and Che Geuvara's bottom — objects connected, we are led to suppose, by the CIA's involvement in the lives or deaths of those characters. CIA and FBI seem to be interchangeable, as do all the other sets of initials that proliferate throughout the show.