

# A Breathtaking Experience

By HELEN SHAW

There's always a lot of fuss over theater's "point." Seminars on its entertainment value vie with lectures on its ability to embody democratic dialogue. The agitprop enthusiasts want it to change your vote; the postmodernists want it to change your mind.

## PASSING AWAY

*La MaMa Experimental Theater Club*

The Polish director Leszek Madzik makes all those lofty goals seem like so much chicken feed. In "Odchodzi (Passing Away)," a show just in from Poland, Mr. Madzik turns a theatrical event into meditation, transcendence, and, finally, psychic medicine for the bereaved. Judging by the stunned silence that greeted it, it was the first time an audience had ever held its breath for 45 minutes straight.

A wordless, timeless, nearly bottomless piece of theater, "Passing Away" gathers its inspiration from Tadeusz Rozewicz's award-winning memoir-collage "Mother Departs." After his mother's death, Mr. Rozewicz, one of Poland's foremost poets, assembled a kind of written shrine — a book of photos, his mother's writings, and the writings of her sons.

Mr. Rozewicz is known for his retirement from life: Silence and introspection stamp his oeuvre. It is appropriate, then, that Mr. Madzik, whose own work has avoided spoken language for decades, translates the book into a series of haunting images. Accompanied by live vocals from Urszula Dudziak, Mr. Madzik's creation could just as easily be called an art installation, or an illustrated musical performance.

After walking into the unrecognizable La MaMa annex, audience members sit on bleachers, staring vainly into blackness as lights shine brightly into their eyes. Once the house lights dim, two huge walls close shut like a gate in front of them, accompanied by the distant sounds of drums and a strange soughing cry. In the gloom, the wall seems to be made out of stone — though it rustles strangely — and then it comes alive with legs and hands that seem to be struggling to get out.

Once the doors open again, a picture appears in the middle distance: a

woman, dressed in antique black lace collar, sitting in a box. Her image hovers in the air, and then pivots strangely, like a reflection in a mirror when the mirror is being turned away. After she lies down, the wide platform bearing her glides backward into the further dark. It passes over other bodies, featureless but somehow floating like boats on the dark floor. Again, light only just skims these surfaces, and several times the imagination fills in shapes that simply are not present.

The platform that has recently vanished reappears, this time with a massive black wall on it. A man, nearly invisible but for his bare feet, slowly pushes

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the wall in a circle — for the rest of the evening the slow swing of the wall and the platform's silent surging back and forth will move like a breathing bellows through the show. On its first pass, the wall seems solid, but as it wheels around again, we see the mother figure again, standing inside the wall. Mother and son appear in several of these wall tableaux, always still, though occasionally interrupted by a little sprinkling of lights.

The tidal movements of the stage lull and disorient in the same way long periods underwater can make the mind begin to dissociate. The filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky accomplishes similar sensations in his film "Stalker," and Romeo Castellucci also works in a dream vocabulary, deploying images like messages from the deep in his theater projects. But Mr. Madzik, unlike the other two, doesn't use his access to the subconscious to frighten. He creates a convincing synthesis of peace and death. It's emotionally overwhelming, but it's a comfort as well.

Mr. Madzik's company, Scena Plastyczna KUL, will be at La MaMa until March 5. For \$20, New Yorkers can hardly come by a better experience in a theater, or, for that matter, cheaper therapy.

Until March 5 (74A E. 4th Street, 212-476-7710).

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