

ARTzine

De-Constructing Bruckner . . .

HAMLETMACHINE

(* Highly Recommended)

by Heiner Müller

Castillo Theatre Presentation, October 4 - November 10

The average music student has a tough time telling one symphony by Anton Bruckner from another, they all nine sound so very alike on the surface. Bruckner's basic spiritual message never faltered; it seems he fought the same battle over and over again, more elaborately and in more depth, until by the end of his life the struggle had gotten so huge he had not the strength to finish.

Likewise, to the average American audience member the plays of Heiner Müller bear the unmistakable stamp of political theatre and all seem pretty much alike after a distance. Like Bruckner, Heiner Müller is wrestling with demons,- A political bio-chemist, he applies layers of analytical dye even as he strips away layers of hypocrisy added by so-called civilization.

In *Hamletmachine*, the characters from a fiction appear from coffins or step out of a cabaret show to tell us in song and multi-phasic story, about the 'real' world. We begin with a macabre troop of theatrical denizens listening to an unusually non-violent and lyrical Waldstein Sonata (played by Cynthia Carpathios). They assume various roles to ultimately convince us that "something is rotten in the age of hope." Social illness was conveyed even through the simple yet evocative lighting design by Susan Hamburger, who dared to mix mint-green and peach in her ruthless pursuit of disturbing ambience.

A provocative image is developed early in the work - that of the Womb as Snakepit. (I was reminded of Brutus' speech considering Caesar as a Serpent's Egg). The female body in fact recurs as analogy for many things, prompting the cast - in one Ophelia dominated section - to urge us to "Sew her up!" For her part, Ophelia as-

ures us "Yesterday I stopped killing myself."

Ophelia motifs return as we build to the finale. In some of the most powerful imagery in the play, she appears in a wheelchair, being wrapped in long white shrouds by the chanting cast as she recites her litany of rejection. This was heart-rending verbal *and* visual poetry, made convincing by Gabrielle Kurlander's delivery and the interpolation of a rap-video by Nekaybaw "Browneyes" Brown on similar themes - the knockout punch after the previous setup.

Dave DeChristopher gave a shatteringly straightforward reading of the other powerful poem in the work "I am not Hamlet" (I am the Typewriter... etc.) It was a tour-de-force of understatement, showing how great direction and great material can push an actor to go beyond himself. Castillo's Artistic Director Fred Newman directed, as well as provided the music and lyrics for the interpolated songs. It was suitably hard to tell where Müller left off and Newman begins, Newman has so totally absorbed the idiom and the message. Muller invites us after all to deconstruct his words and use them, and that is precisely what this production did.

David Truskinoff provided a mixture of electronic and live music, aided by the clarinet of Jeremy Black - who played the primary Hamlet character - and a stunning sound design by Michael Klein (not easy to do in what is essentially a musical). The interpolated video segments, one of them a historical collage which was an artwork in its own right, was by Joseph Spirito.

In cabaret fashion, a narrator/emcee set the chapters for us. Roger Grunwald started as a "traditional" European cabaret host, but then deconstructs himself

(I almost said degenerates) through a bewildering array of personas, to finally finish as a blithering asylum inmate; this was tremendous control of a through-developed character.

An afterthought: Together with a Bulgarian house guest, I was analyzing the assembly instructions for a Boda plunger-type coffee pot. These were in English, French, and German. The English was lucid and accurate. The French remarkably elegant at making the transition from disassembly to re-assembly - suggesting blithely that you "proceed backwards through the previous instructions." Ah, but the German... With great precision it led us through disassembly; however it collapsed into long and wordy dithering at the complexity of *re*-construction.

How very like the Germans, we decided. So good at analysis and structuring in order to get at the root of things. At "deconstruction." But to rebuild exactly the way it was? Why would you want to do that? This utterly foreign concept boggled the language. Heiner Müller is himself a master at de-construction - at showing us how things truly *are* at base, and how they got that way. But then he leaves us with the shattered remains. It takes the keen artistic eye of a visionary like Castillo's Newman to make painful, horrifying sense out of it all.

Heiner Müller's own Brucknerian struggle ended after at long last achieving a pinnacle of recognition; he died almost immediately after being handed the directorship of Brecht's Berliner Ensemble, of which he was a member for thirty years.

— Louis Lopardi