

New experience for theatre troupe

PEAK reaches mixed results on Polish trip

By FOSTER FREED

P.E.A.K., York University's graduate theatre programme, has returned to the York campus after a month long tour of Poland. The trip, which lasted from October 15 to November 13 and included over a dozen performances in five different Polish cities, was a consummate learning opportunity for the company. In the words of P.E.A.K. programme director John Juliani, "it was a very dense experience that we'll be digesting for several months."

INVITATION BY DIRECTOR

The opportunity to take the trip arose during the summer when the company was visited on the West Coast by Boguslaw Litwiniec, director of Poland's International Student Festival of Open Theatre, who invited the group on the basis of three days' observation. Held every two years since 1967 in the Polish city of Wroclaw (pronounced Vratslav), the festival provides a forum for student and experimental theatre companies from around the world. The invitation included a tour of Poland, which saw the group give performances in Lodz, Krakov, Lublin, and Warsaw.

It was an invitation which, according to Juliani, was ideal for P.E.A.K. Having planned from the outset to bring the company into an 'international context' during this, the second year of its operation, Juliani had preferred the Wroclaw festival over the many other festivals which are held each year throughout Europe. Not only is the Wroclaw festival student-oriented (an important feature for a student group such as P.E.A.K.) but in addition, it is held in an eastern European country, also an important consideration, according to Juliani.

Discussing the trip in a recent interview, he explained that "the lessons to be learned from eastern Europe are great for people from North America." It is close enough to us to make us appreciate on a social, cultural, political, and economic level just what it is that differentiates (if anything) our two cultures. "And yet, Poland has a very active theatrical life. You're not going to eastern Europe just so slum," he said.

Throughout the stay in Poland, it was difficult (and occasionally

impossible) to satisfactorily mediate between theatrical and non-theatrical interests. While the group's ultimate focus was always on theatre (their own performances as well as performances by other theatres), the cumulative effect of a thirty day tour did take its toll. In a country where ordering a meal or taking a bath can provide major challenges for English speaking tourists, this was hardly surprising.

Also to be expected were the more profound (and hence more subtle) kinds of culture shock. Coming from the West, it is all too easy to have one's expectations fulfilled by an initial encounter with life behind the so-called iron curtain. Accordingly, reactions to the Polish life style varied from person to person and it is probably this aspect of the trip that will take the most time for each individual to assess.

LANGUAGE BARRIER

The theatrical aspects of the trip, while no less ambiguous, are perhaps easier to judge. Here, the ambiguity is largely due to the difficulty the group had in getting reactions to their work — and this despite open discussions which were held at the conclusion of each of P.E.A.K.'s performances.

In part, the language barrier was responsible for the problem (with well-meaning translators

shielding the company from the more negative responses), but a good deal of the difficulty stemmed from the rather unusual nature of P.E.A.K.'s work. It was this latter element that was particularly in evidence during the stay at the festival.

"STREAMING"

For better or worse, P.E.A.K. differed from all of the other groups at Wroclaw (a total of 37 companies from Europe, North and South America, Asia, New Zealand and Japan) in that it came to the festival without a prepared show. Using a process of spontaneous creation which they evolved over the summer and which they term "streaming", P.E.A.K. presented fourteen entirely different shows during their Polish stay. Unfortunately, with the exception of a handful of individuals who came to more than one show, the full significance of this spontaneous method of working was rarely conveyed to the Polish audiences. This was particularly true at the festival, where a combination of factors (the pressures of performing in a festival context and the necessary adjustment to the foreign audience were just two) prevented their work from being at its best.

This is not to say that P.E.A.K. made no impact at Wroclaw. But,

tour. For instance, in Lodz they managed to cope (and splendidly) with an audience-packed "theatre" that consisted of three small adjoining rooms. They were especially successful in Krakov, where as an integral part of the performance, the company — performing completely in the nude — transformed an empty space into a fully equipped cinema in the course of an hour.

COMPARISONS

The trip, particularly the stay at the festival, allowed each company member to compare the work with that of their comrades in the experimental field. "It gives you a sense of scope, of comparison", explains Juliani. "Going to Poland is like going to the pinnacle — seeing different theatres and measuring yourself against others. And you can see the value and significance of our kind of work — for surely it was shown to be different than anything else at Wroclaw. In short, we came back with a sense of our own work that no one can take away from us."

Acting students run own show

Every December the students in the theatre department have a unique opportunity to take advantage of the whole department's facilities.

This peaceful student takeover is called Student Project Week, and although faculty are on hand to advise on the projects, this is a week when the students get their chance to participate on both sides of the footlights.

The projects are anywhere from 10 minutes to one-and-a-half hours long, and will not only include established plays but also plays written by some of the students themselves. When the Dead Awaken, by Ibsen, Stately Homes of England, by Noel Coward, Feiffer's People, by Jules Feiffer, and Offending Audience, by Peter Handke will be some of the plays to be put on, starting next Thursday and running through to Saturday. Performances will be held both in Burton and the Atkinson Studio. Admission is free. Check your daily bulletin for times.

Rosenboom's music instrument

David Rosenboom will give a lecture on "A model for detection and analysis processing modalities in the nervous system through an adaptive, interactive, computerized, electronic music instrument" next Wednesday in CLH F at 4 p.m.

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