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NEBBIA BRINGS THE TNM TO THE BRINK OF THE SUBLIME

By STÉPHANE BAILLARGEON

What a tragedy! What a tragedy it would have been if the Théâtre du Nouveau Monde, along with Montréal and the rest of the country, had missed out on the incredible honour and infinite joy of experiencing *Nebbia*, the newest co-production of Cirque Éloize and Teatro Sunil, which premiered on Thursday. In recent weeks, supporters of international cultural exchange have been mounting their case against the federal government's move to axe the meagre grant program (\$4.7 million) for touring shows, a program that has been teetering on the edge of extinction for several years, waiting for the final nail to be driven. There goes another one, and it's a big one.

Here we see, in its purest form, the most eloquent reason for supporting international productions and inter-cultural opportunities. *Nebbia* is a Swiss-Québec co-production that brings together acrobats from South America, musicians from Europe, and circus performers from Montréal to create a phantasmagoria directed by an Italian-Swiss clown assisted by a group of artists from the Magdalen Islands. *Nebbia* represents one of the greatest triumphs that this circus reviewer has ever seen presented on our soil.

Is this a circus, or is it performance art? This groundbreaking show wipes away the boundaries between disciplines as circus arts infuse theatre, music, and song with their wonderfully evocative techniques. What's more, every element

of the production, from the magnificent costumes to the exquisite casting to the iridescent lighting, is intricately and seamlessly entwined, giving this dazzling spectacle a fantastical quality. In essence, this is simply an all-out show, a delicate work of art that doubles as delightful entertainment, with a bewitching hint of the sublime.

The story is very basic. A group of wacky villagers guide us through scenes and encounters in the fog (*nebbia* means fog in Italian) under the watchful eye of Gonzalo Munoz Ferrer, the intimidating Master of Ceremonies. In the midst of this nebulous haze, the impossible becomes possible. A melodious angel watches over the stage from the moment the curtain goes up. Chinese plates dance atop a bamboo forest. A rubber man folds himself like a napkin. A madman reaches to the sky, trying to take hold of the moon or the Sun, or so it seems.

To our pure delight, a series of captivating scenes roll in one after another. The incredibly rich experience oscillates between comedy and tragedy, between laughter and tears, culminating in the final sensation, which comforts like a soothing embrace. This moment of artistic consolation reminds us of the reason why, on this same evening, only a few kilometres away at Espace Go, another of the city's theatres, the character of Winnie, a post-apocalyptic victim in Beckett's *Oh les beaux jours* (*Happy Days*), as superbly played by

Andrée Lachapelle, regrets saying goodbye to this world of pain and this life of joy.

In his role as Director of *Nebbia*, Daniele Finzi Pasca performs his grandest and most impressive juggling act to date with the trusted components of his poetic creativity, interweaving graceful departures and subversive asides, often with a playful wink of the eye, in the mischievous and impertinent tradition of *commedia dell'arte*. He challenges the audience with subtle, erudite visual references. The disturbing knife juggling act, in which the performer balances on a butcher's block before an audience of pig carcasses, is reminiscent of Francis Bacon. Picasso's pink and blue periods are evoked through fluctuations between melancholy and elation, between existential angst and clownish glee. And of course, Chagall puts in an appearance in this universe, as elegantly dressed women dance on the heads of their strong, handsome lovers as they are lifted to the sky.

The tentative delight that is *Nebbia* arrives among us well polished following close to fifty performances in Europe. Additional dates have already been announced for this show, which was made possible through public funding, and which is sure to enjoy tremendous success during its upcoming world tour.

nebbia

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