

MARCO CALVANI: All the world's a stage

Kate Lamb, Contributor, Ubud | Life | Fri, November 06 2009, 11:22 AM

Scenes of pathological brutality, sexual abuse and defecation all point to a clockwork-orangesque fascination with the scatological and ultraviolent, but Italian playwright Marco Calvani insists his work is not intended to shock.



Courtesy of Anna Leitenstorfer

"We should use the theater to experience real life," says Calvani, "If we experience in theater what it means and feels like to commit an act of extreme violence then hopefully we will feel a level of repulsion that will stop us from taking to the streets and doing it."

The illustrious 28-year-old recently visited Indonesia as part of the Ubud Writer's and Reader's festival, courtesy of Jakarta's Italian Institute of Culture, where he directed Indonesian and Australian actors in a performance of his play, *The City Beneath*.

The play consists of just three acts and four characters, but it is a microcosm of the most pressing issues of our time. Inspired by the Parisian riots in 2005 and similar undercurrents of racial tension in Italy, Calvani's play delves into the manifestation of discrimination.

The City Beneath blurs the distinction between reality and the absurd, forcing the audience to question why such prejudices exist. Calvani says he deliberately made the setting and characters in his play anonymous — hence the names Boy, Man, Girl, Woman, Soldier and scenes Cellar, Apartment and Shop — in order to make the questions his play raises universally applicable.

But throwing a young Muslim suicide bomber into the works is an overtly controversial statement about a "universally applicable" Islam.

Calvani, however, does not believe the representation of Islam in his play equates the religion with fundamentalism. "I was capturing from reality what is really happening and trying to understand what makes people in the West create their own prejudices. Understanding doesn't mean justifying."

He is also quick to point to the contrasting symbols of Islam and violence in the play — a gentle elderly man who perseveres calmly against a barrage of racial slurs, and a brutal Italian soldier drunk on power — that show his message is not a simple one-dimensional critique of religious fundamentalism.

And it is not all doom and gloom: "In my plays, for every moment of violence there is a moment to breathe, a moment of hope and life." The final scene of the play is an apocalyptic moment of suicide, birth and musical madness.

Calvani began reading the Koran after September 2001 to try and answer some of the questions the mass media failed to ask and the excerpts of the Koran in the play were specifically selected from his readings.

"I used Islam to make a comment about racism and the rise of fascism. Terrorism can only arise from a context of violence. If you think about Italy and the play, I think the play could be a hypothetical apocalyptic future of Italy — because we are going there — and probably it could be an apocalyptic version of every country, because the seeds of this are everywhere. I can see them," he says.

While discussing the notorious Berlusconi empire and current attitudes in his homeland, Calvani alludes to the worrying trend of young people — aged between 16 and 18 — joining groups that are organized by the Italian government to attack homosexuals, migrants and gypsies.

"People pretend nothing is wrong," he says of the modern indifference to such persecution (also his favorite line from the play), but for Calvani this simply isn't good enough.

"I can't ignore violence," he says.

And it seems he is never short of material.

Calvani shot to fame after the release of *Le Mani Forti* (Strong Hands) in 2005, a play loosely based on a story about a young boy and his girlfriend who murdered his mother and little brother in North Italy in 2001.

The play divided the nation into those against, and those for Marco Calvani. It was mess says Calvani, who received a barrage of hate mail. But the play was a success and received acclaim in theaters in Spain, Holland, France and Switzerland and has been translated into more than five languages.

Calvani is an endearing mix of humility, passion and determination. He was orphaned in a small town near Florence at age 15, and originally started out as an actor before finding his real passion in writing and directing.

He recounts stories of his theatrical childhood tendencies, of having no idea how to cook when his parents passed away — putting cubes of salt into salads rather than pasta — and knocked on the door of a famous Roman theater director for two years until she finally agreed to meet him. They are now working on a play together.

"I knew that I could be someone that lived on the street with drugs. When I say I don't have anything to lose it is because I know what losing means. Sometimes I ask myself — I am fighting for a play. Am I mad? But this is what I want to do."

His latest play, *Penelope* in Groznyj, a rewriting of the Homeric myth in Chechnya today, will debut in Berlin in December 2009. In 2010, a play about a dysfunctional family, which he wrote when he was 23, will debut on stages in Spain.

It may seem as though playwrights are a dying breed in a world dominated by mass media and the Internet, but Calvani eloquently insists that theatre still has life.

"People don't know that the theater in its death could discover once again its primitive reason to exist. Its death could become its reason to survive if artists use it as microscope of their age and create with it a personal reaction. The more theater retains this the more it can become immortal."

Encore.

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