

Butoh, and beyond

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San Francisco International Arts Festival: theater highlights



Nawar Bulbul (top) and Ramez Alaswad perform in the U.S. premiere of Al-Khareef Theatre Troupe's *The Solitary*

I was just in Baltimore for a conference on the New Drama movement in Russia — not so much a movement, as it turns out, as a new and diverse post-Soviet generation of theater artists carrying forward, reassessing and reinventing the form. The work on display over an eventful weekend was quite varied and, on the whole, an intriguing sampling of the restive theatrical activity being generated under the New Drama label. The take-home point: Russia is a hotbed of serious work to which attention should be paid.

The folks behind the San Francisco International Arts Festival don't need to be told such things, much to the benefit of Bay Area audiences. They comb the globe for exciting developments in the arts and bring them to our doorstep each year. Indeed, when I last spoke to Andrew Wood, the festival's executive director, he had just returned from Russia and Poland, where he was scoping out next year's potentials among some of the most innovative theater-makers anywhere. But the beauty of SFIAF, whose seventh annual program opens May 19 and runs through the end of the month, is its commitment to bringing together local as well as international artists and companies under one broad, synergistic umbrella.

Among the tempting theatrical programs in 2010's multidisciplinary lineup are two very different, envelope-pushing physical theater companies that nonetheless share a common Butoh

influence: Russia's Derevo and San Francisco's inkBoat. Derevo's artistic director Anton Adasinskiy predates the new generation of Russian theater makers I was learning about in Baltimore. He founded his company (whose Russian name means "tree") in 1988, three years before the Soviet Union imploded. Now based in Dresden, Derevo enjoys a worldwide rep for innovative and devilishly clever work. Indeed, it's been maybe the most buzzed-about theater ticket for weeks. The company's 2009 piece, *Harlekin*, receives its U.S. premiere at SFIAF.

Pair this with local Butoh-fusion heroes inkBoat and that company's SFIAF offering, the world premiere of *The Crazy Cloud Collection* — itself an international collaboration featuring choreography by Japanese Butoh master Ko Murobushi and inkBoat's founder Shinichi Iova-Koga — which channels one of Zen Buddhism's more eccentric figures, the 15th-century monk Ikkyu, also known as Crazy Cloud.

A rare glimpse of contemporary life and politics in the Middle East comes with the Syrian company Al Khareef Theatre Troupe, which makes its West Coast debut this year with *The Solitary*, a two-person play that posits the relationship between a political prisoner and the guard who represents his sole human contact.

And almost as rare: a new show from the Bay Area's legendary Antenna Theater. The Sausalito experiential theater company (inventors back in the 1980s of *Walkmanology*, which adapted portable audioplayers to their all-encompassing sensory spectacles) rolls out its world premiere of *The Magic Bus*, a forward-moving look back at the Summer of Love and Ken Kesey's Merry Pranksters that (tooling around the city on a tricked-out bus) will be a real trip.

Also worth checking out: the circus-inspired French company A.K.Y.S. Project, making its U.S. debut with *100 Percent Croissance (100 Percent Growth)*, a highly physical meditation on contract workers in the high tech industry. SF's own Keith Hennessey, of Circo Zero, presents one of his acclaimed (but rarely performed locally) all-improv concerts under the title *Almost Nothing, Almost Everything*. SF's foolsFURY offers, as a work-in-progress, the American premiere of French playwright Fabrice Melquiot's *The Unheard of World*. Local shadow theater masters ShadowLight unveil their latest, *The Good-for-Nothing Lover: Concert Reading with Shadows*. And last but not least, Australia's Sunny Drake is here with the U.S. premiere of his *other-wise*, a solo multimedia performance piece as magic act about accepting yourself as different, distinct and not alone — a play that comes with a flat disclaimer: "You will only understand this show if you are human and born on Planet Earth." You've been warned.

SAN FRANCISCO INTERNATIONAL ARTS FESTIVAL

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