

“HOME” FROM THE PLANET GONG

Crisis! Problems! HSC-wars!...Against this dismal backdrop of our everyday life the production named “Home” by The Gong Actor-and-Puppet Theatre comes as a rainbow, a sunshine, a warm summer rain with sunny spells. Those who came to the Social and Culture Center of the city of Kamensk-Uralsky on October 31 knew the Gong had a potential to surprise and make one happy – one just had to recall performances like ‘A Little Fool’, ‘A Dream’ or ‘The Lizard’ – but what was going on stage that evening might be more accurately termed ‘a fantastic reality’, using Dostoyevsky’s words about the puppet theatre. And it is quite true. How else can one define that show and its stage images – people, puppets, objects? It is a combination of an unusually impressive performance with intensive brainwork. It is a mix of a philosophical parable, a graceful, Japanese tanka style, miniature and a succession of vivid show-numbers – all to make the viewers feel the unity with the world and how everything is interconnected. And it’s only love and good that can keep this delicate balance. One can hardly feel it to the full without having been to the performance but we’ll try to recreate the overall picture of the first-night using some of the spectators’ impressions and interviewing the director.

“The more I watched the performance, the more I lost contact with the reality around and felt a strong wave of warmth engulfing me...I felt I was a member of a big and loving family...It was utterly novel to me”, a viewer said after Home’s first night on October 31.

Here were as many opinions as there were people who filled the hall of the SCC last Saturday, but there was one thing about which everybody agreed: the magic of the puppets fascinates and holds you enthralled till the very last minute of the show. The stories replace one another, as do the emotions evoked



by them, and you end up feeling part and parcel of that home, that family the puppets tell about in their peculiar stage language.

WE HAVE BEEN BUILDING, BUILDING...

“Home” from the Planet Gong! It all began more than 20 years ago, in 1984; it is in that year the Gong Actor-and-Puppet Theatre sprang into being. Its firstling was a performance named ‘A Dream’, a tragicomedy phantasmagoria followed by ‘A Little Fool’, ‘The Lizard’, ‘Two Maples’, ‘Peppy’, ‘The Wizard of Oz’, ‘Tramps of the North’, ‘A Pie with Mustard’, ‘Angela and the Wind’, ‘The Scarlet Sails’ – staged for children, teenagers and adults. The actors and the puppets have scored a success with the audiences not only in their native city and country but abroad as well. In 1993, when the company took part in an international theatre festival in Northern Germany, the performances were hailed by the public and the newspapers carried

loud headlines reading, “The Magic of Russian Puppets” and “Gong Bewitched German Kids!” However, a crisis that broke out at the turn of the century thwarted the company’s plans. To preserve the theatre in that situation Gong mustered up all its resourcefulness and jump-started developing areas seemingly far from the stage. With the help of mass media, itself in need of investment, the company managed to make money to return to its dream – the theater.



...AND HAVE FINALLY BUILT

“Home” from the Planet Gong! And on October 31, the crisis notwithstanding, Gong invited its guests to the first-night show. On that day most of the people in SCC were the theatre’s and the media-holding’s old friends, partners and colleagues. No wonder the exited director himself welcomed them in the foyer. He was handing out the playbills with the summary and the names of the production’s ‘creators’ and performers. It included 16 stories each of which made the viewers reflect on things like love and life, homeland and its environmental problems, creativity and creed, the ability to dream and live up to one’s dreams and stand up to life’s



challenges...For the hour and a half the puppets were acting out those stories for the spectators making them watch, as it were, their mysterious existence. The tantamaresques, the flatbed and cane puppets, the marionettes and masks, and the actors in flesh – were all performing in the so-called ‘black cabinet’ style, within a black velvet space where actors seemed to dissolve while the puppets came to the fore with a life of their own...

Watching a production, whether a film or a staged piece, one invariably and involuntarily feels drawn to her or his ‘favorites’ – and it was absolutely true for the Gong’s production; some took to heart the fate of the Flying Obstinate who kept on taking off the ground even when seemed deprived of the slightest opportunity to do so while others fell in love with the beautiful Eva who was so touchingly ashamed of her nakedness. Personally, I was charmed by the Bow and Cello virtuoso duo.

The finale over, the puppets made way for the puppeteers who appeared in the limelight. We see their spirited faces, young and beautiful. In Home, it should be mentioned, all actors are men. There is excitement and secret anxiety in their eyes as they look at the rows of viewers; their judgment is what really matters for them. Dissolved are fears that some would fail to grasp the message of the performance that was far from being mere entertainment. The Kamensk spectator is clever, sincere and sensitive. People understood and assimilated the ideas of the director in their own ways. The audience applauded stormily, bunches of flowers went to the stage, and many ‘bravos’ were heard...Later, the views exchanged their impressions in the foyer.

Yuri Garkul, head of the city Culture Administration:

Today “Gong” has realized its dream. It has done brilliantly and we have seen that. The performance met our expectations and even surpassed them! Not only did I like the show but I’d like others watch it, as it is not just for entertainment but makes one think.

Irina Melnikova, the Municipal Printing House manager:

I have waited for this performance ever since I first heard from our townsmen, my colleagues, their opinions about the theatre. Unfortunately, I haven’t had the opportunity for as long as 15 years. I am very happy to have finally seen it

– it surpassed all my expectations. I've been to a lot of different shows both in Moscow and abroad, but surely never have I seen one like that. The production deals with many problems that touch just everybody. I believe, great future is in store for the theatre. I am very glad there are people who make us aspire to be better. God give them good luck!

Natalya, a viewer:

Bravo! Superb! I have seen a great deal of productions both in Russia and abroad, including Broadway. This performance would be a success everywhere. It's a very special one, just splendid!

Valentin Dvornikov, head doctor of the city Diagnostic Center:

I have never seen anything like this. I feel greatly delighted, the performers did magnificently. Many thanks to the actors! I believe this is not your only performance and will be eagerly expecting new ones. I'd like to wish the director further success in his creative endeavors.

Mikhail Koval, the director of Krasnogorskoye JSC:

For over 20 years "Gong" has been educating me culturally, and quite successfully, too. I always marvel at their vitality. The company has put a lot of effort into the performance. I sensed the

anxiety of the director, Takhir Ibatulin. I greatly appreciate this festivity staged for the city and, as it was, for me personally. The production "Home" is something unusual, new and challenging. I wish good luck to the theatre.

HOME FOR EVERYBODY

"Home" from the Planet GongThe production's author and director was excited indeed as 'Home' for him was like a lodestar, a particular pet which came to life thanks to his ideas, talent and sleepless nights. But Takhir is not used to talking about himself; he even didn't take a bow leaving all the laurels to the performers. The production's highly innovative style was quite a challenge for them, and they passed the test with flying colors. Most important is a closely-knit and harmonized company, the director kept insisting. What the viewer sees now is an unusual show with puppets and masks, and admires it. But long before the first night many people – artists, stage designers, seamstresses – worked hard to make the dream come true; the public was presented with the end result of it all, the finely finished product. Natalya Chilnikina, the production's chief stage



and puppet designer, has authored quite a number of puppet characters for other Gong's performances. Takhir says the actors and creators got to like each other and became one family.

The stormy first-night applause over, we believe the life of 'Home' will be long and happy with many viewers from many countries to see the performance and, sensing its warmth in their hearts, to feel themselves part of that 'Home'.

TAKHIR IBATULIN'S MYSTERIOUS STORY



About how one shouldn't 'sever the chords', as He who leads you can give you a dream of your life, we are talking with Takhir Ibatulin, Home's author and director.

Takhir, how the concept of 'Home' came to you?

Imagine the end of August 1981. Wearing a black suit and a bow tie I was walking Moscow streets led by the unknown. I had 9 spare hours before my train's departure. Suddenly I noticed an unmistakable theatre virtually awash with cars, diplomatic flags, with a red stair-carpet stretching towards the doors... And walking upon it were men in turbans, snow-white soutanes, tailcoats, and women in evening dresses. The whole crowd was heading towards the entrance which emitted a bright glow of lights. I hadn't even the slightest intention to join those people, especially with a trip row of liveried ticket collectors in view. A simple poster in the corner announced 'The Puppets of Phillip Janti'. I was about to pass by when a totally mysterious thing happened. Having cast the last glance into the luminous doorway I felt I was sort of switched off. Then I was watching myself as if from outside: there I was slowly

walking along the red carpet and nobody ever tried to stop me, although I had no ticket in my hand. I entered the hall, took a seat...And then I was switched on again. I found myself sitting inside that theatre, the house was full, but there were no people around me. I heard English, French, German and Spanish being spoken and realized that all Moscow diplomats were there. After the performance everyone stood up and headed for the exit, but I felt sort of taken by scruff of neck and seated back to watch the whole thing another time, from the very beginning. Nothing of it save a number named 'Pierrot' has stuck in my memory. There a puppet served the chords having noticed it was being manipulated by some outer force. At that time I thought it was the worst possible thing to do, anti-Christian...On the other hand I understood it was a drama. That is why we included the 'Marionettes' number, devoted to Phillip Janti, in our 'Home'.

26 years have passed since then...