

Theatre

Polish theatre comes to the West End

A crop of new theatre from Warsaw, Wrocław and Poznań is hitting London this autumn. **Caroline McGinn** finds out why

Since the economic tables turned in 2008, many of London's Polish migrants have headed home. The zloty is strong now and there's plenty rebuilding work in cities like Warsaw which, despite its blunt new skyscrapers and the monolithic Stalinist Palace of Culture, still has gaps razed by German and Russian invasions and the Warsaw Uprising, but Poles remain a big part of British life: one reason why the country's Ministry of Culture has been so keen to back 'Polski Year', a 200-piece program of theatre, film and music that should have Polish artists flooding into the UK as rapidly as builders and plumbers are pouring out.

The cultural counterflow is good news for us. Theatre flourished in Poland even when it had to head underground or into increasingly abstract forms to escape Stalin's censor, and the Poles still take it very seriously indeed: stand-up comedy has yet to arrive. Londoners go to the theatre hoping to laugh but, according to Grzegorz Jarzyna, the wild-haired young artistic director of Theatre Warszawa, Varsovians go 'to cry'. It's no surprise then that Jarzyna's pick from the British rep is Sarah Kane's '4.48 Psychosis' – his controversial production of the last play Kane wrote before committing suicide will come to the Barbican early next year.

British joking aside, it would be misleading to characterise Poland's diverse and passionate theatre scene as miserable. If any thing unites theatre-makers as different as straight political writer Tadeusz Słobodzianek (whose play 'Our Class' premieres at the National this week) and folk-rooted anthropological singers Teatr ZAR (whose triptych 'Gospels of Childhood' opens at the Barbican on Friday), it's history. Try to Polish directors, performers and theatre-lovers, and one phrase gets repeated: 'We carry the past

Top: Teatr Biuro Podrozy's 'Macbeth'
Middle: village singers in the Georgian Caucasus who inspired 'Gospels of Childhood'
Below right: 'Our Class' at the National Theatre
Below left: 'Gospels of Childhood' at the Barbican Pit and St Giles Church



'We carry the past on our backs'

on our backs.' Take Słobodzianek's new play, which provides a direct dramatic tour of Poland's bloodiest century. According to its talented young British director Bijan Sheibani, it is a 'dreamlike' portrait which shows us 'a group of classmates, half Jewish and half Catholic, from 1926 through the Nazis and Soviet years and into the twenty-first century'.

Teatr ZAR's work is more oblique but also haunted by unquiet spirits. Their triptych, which will be presented this week as a three-part show in the



Barbican Pit and in nearby St Giles Church, weaves together astonishing fragments of some of the world's most ancient polyphonic music. They first discovered it ten years ago, sung by generations of villagers in the Georgian Caucasus. Since then, they've combed the hills of Corsica, Chechnya, Romania and Armenia for this beautiful and powerful popular religious music which, in some areas, is being repressed by the Church. The result is astonishing. Teatr ZAR's candlelit productions, which also re-tell apocryphal stories

that didn't make it to the official Bible, look like humble church paintings brought to life. But they sound like cathedrals, with a dozen voices rising and falling in columns of sound that pay little respect to the Western octave and have a breathy, gasping quality to them which makes them all the more intimate.

It's avant-garde work that follows in the footsteps of the centuries of singers who have kept these musical rituals alive. As Teatr ZAR's director Jarosław Frol explains, My grandfather was a church singer. And I spent a long time trying to remember his voice before I realised that I am

now his voice.' Teatr ZAR's pieces are made from fragments (Polish theatre is not very concerned with following a plot) but they aim to immerse secular audiences in a sublime experience that has little to do with being shown a story and a lot to do with feeling what you hear. That's palpable: Frol's audience members have claimed the vibrations they feel from the singing can cure headaches, and the company's set, which includes wooden floorboards which resonate like xylophone keys, hanging metal tubes and doorways which are strung like harps, is intended to turn the theatre itself into an instrument of collective memory.

Given the fact that Poland's own identity and culture was stamped upon by many years of occupation, it's no wonder that one of theatre's main roles now is toising the country's history. In Teatr Biuro Podrozy's hugely popular 'Macbeth', soldiers sported Soviet uniforms and rode motorbikes. And Teatr ZAR's trilogy begins and ends with performers astride open graves. That's tribute to the dead stacked beneath our feet. It's also a sombre but uplifting tribute to new life arising from the ashes: something that thousands of Europeans can feel belongs to their own story.

'Gospels of Childhood: The Triptych' is at the Barbican St Giles and Pit from 24 Sept 2009 to 2 Oct 2009 at 7pm. Tickets £20-£85 121 6823.

'Our Class' is at the National Theatre, Cottesloe. See West End listings. For more information on Polish events in London see mini-map on p 19.