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Wrestling Dostoevsky

SS Michael & John, Dublin

"No name, no person," interrupts Dasa Doberek, just as Branko Potocan is about to reveal his character's identity. However identifiable the characters in Slovenian company Betontanc's deconstruction of Dostoyevsky's novel, *Crime and Punishment*, the performers wish to keep artistic distance from merely representing them. It's all summed up in director Matjaz Pograjc's mini-manifesto in the programme notes, which urges a reaction to psychological realism.

Instead of reproducing characters, his performers "wrestle" with them to construct their own version: they play wrestling Raskolnikov, wrestling Sonja, wrestling Porfirij, wrestling Polja, wrestling Dunja and wrestling Svidrigajlov, a *dramatis personae lite* for the epic novel.

Pograjc places the audience close to the action, sitting them in the round as part of the action. Four rugs and lamps draped with blouses and other clothing create an intimate sitting-room setting, but rather than sinister, the atmosphere is actually quite homey, helped, no doubt, by the offers of biscuits and the requests for help turning on and off the lights around the perimeter of the performing space.

At a superficial level, the particular language of physical theatre chosen for *Wrestling Dostoevsky* is also soft-focus, however brutal, simple and crude. The physicality of thudding bone to floor never quite horrifies and even the kinaesthetic whirlwind at the climax didn't live up to its promise.

The scab-picking is clearer in the psychological barbs between the characters, an altogether more visceral battleground. Fed by their internal wrestling with self-doubt, each character desperately seeks understanding and approval, however extreme their thoughts. Within this mental anguish, compromise is needed, which fuels even more anxiety. "I would not mind if you would say, I am strange in a strange way," goes the song by Silence, whose music subtly underpins the action, but the crux of *Wrestling Dostoevsky* (and *Crime and Punishment*) is self-justification.

Pograjc rescues the characters from Dostoyevsky's plot and offers them a safe-house for self-examination, a metaphoric sanctuary that prompts Doberek's appeal for anonymity ("no name, no person"). Within this setting there are certainly inconsistencies and predictabilities, but the incongruent elements do manage to coalesce to form something much more symbolic.

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