

# A JOURNEY TO PARADISE AT THE TEATR WIELKI

**D**uring the September OISTAT conference in Warsaw, the Polish hosts are sharing with attendees one of the most exciting and astonishing productions of the Teatr Wielki. Ironically, it is also one of its briefest. *The Gates of Paradise*, an unforgettable work of modern musical theatre by Joanna Bruzdowicz, spans only an hour or so of stage time, but it encompasses the high hopes and the deep despair of the notorious Children's Crusade. Based on a story by Polish novelist Jerzy Andrzejewski, who also wrote *Ashes and Diamonds*, the sung text is in Polish, but the Wielki's production, staged by Marek Grzesinski with sets by Wieslaw Olko and costumes by Irena Bieganska, is so powerful visually that foreign audiences have no difficulty in following the broad outlines of this parable of a noble cause being perverted by evil human impulses.

At the Wielki, viewers journey alongside the masses of children on their trek. Audiences enter the Wielki's gleaming marble and glass foyers just as they would for a night at the opera in the modernistic auditorium. But that's where any similarities to a typical evening in the theatre ends. Audience members are directed down a long series of confusing corridors. Upon exiting, they are conducted to tiered seating on the huge wagon-revolve of the mainstage. Behind these seats, the orchestra is mounted on a podium so the instrumental music is always coming from behind the spectators, while the vocal

music seems to come from all sides.

Not only do audiences at *The Gates of Paradise* make a real journey as they follow the Children's Crusade, they also have an unparalleled opportunity to see all the Wielki's stage-machinery and lighting in action. This is the Stage Tour par excellence!

As the performance begins, the audience first focuses on an immense projection of a many-towered Paradise, projected on the rear of the vast iron-curtain which divides the spacious rear-stage of the Wielki from the mainstage. Slowly, this rises. Spread in front of the viewers is an army of sleeping children, the valiant Crusaders. As they slowly awaken, an aged monk begins to sing the saga of this heroic enterprise, so horribly compromised by evil. Bruzdowicz and her co-librettist Jerzy Lisowski have also given

voice to five monstrous, terrifying Guardian Angels who watch over the five corrupted children who have inspired this Crusade, which ended gruesomely with the deaths or enslavement of thousands.

Four of the hideous winged creatures are suspended high in the air over the stage as the wagon-revolve begins its movement downstage, following the Crusaders. Once downstage, the revolve rotates the audience to stage right. In the deep side-stage on four of the wagons, seemingly innocent children frolic, watched by another winged Guardian, but they are seduced to join the journey to Jerusalem to free the Holy Sepulchre from the Moslems. The revolve begins to move again, following them. Soon it is facing the stage left side-stage, where a young girl is tied to the mast of a ship sailing with the children toward the Holy Land. But it's clear from the lewd attitude of the boys dancing around her that this is nothing holy.

What soon emerges is that two of the boys on the Crusade have been earlier seduced by a Knight Templar, an adult crusader, now dead, whose spirit still haunts them. And they, in their turn, are pursued by two girls who are infatuated. This vast, hopeless swarm of children, most of them animated by the highest ideals, has been betrayed at the outset by corrupt passions. They will never reach their goal, neither the Holy Land nor the gates of Paradise. In performance, the major youthful roles are danced by out-



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