

# British Theatre Guide

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## Purgatorio

Romeo Castellucci

Societas Raffaello Sanzio

Barbican Theatre

(2009)

This second part of Castellucci's work inspired by Dante's *Divine Comedy* follows on from his *Inferno* but it is a very different piece. I'm beginning to feel that Purgatory, at least for a theatre critic, is having to review 'performance' art. There was a point in watching this show when purgatory seemed to equal boredom. I hasten to add that in the past I had thought of this company's work as definitely 'theatre' for it has always been very theatrical and I have found it fascinating (*vide* my review of *Inferno*).

It is my belief that a work of art and/or entertainment should stand up on its own. Of course, there are bound to be cultural references. You can't avoid them. But if you want to reach other than a very special and hermetic audience you must be able to connect and be comprehensible. An Italian audience, who perhaps all do Dante studies at school, or an audience of Italian Literature department university students might be expected to already know the *Divine Comedy* enough to read this sequence of works as a commentary on it, but not the wide cross-section of the theatre-going public to which most of us belong. An essay by Claudia Castellucci, co-founder of the company and responsible for the theories and dramaturgy behind their work was, I believe, handed to the audience on leaving. Critics were given it beforehand, with advice not to read it until afterwards - with which I whole-heartedly agree. I never read programme notes first, unless the audience gets them for free because there is some obvious need for explanation - the use of *patois* words or similar expressions for instance, or instructions in using some essential apparatus that you are given. More of that essay later.

As far as I could see there is no structural correlation between these works and Dante's Circles of Hell, Terraces of Purgatory or Spheres of Heaven: the stages of after life and the categories of sin are not especially relevant to them. Just as *Inferno* seemed to show us episodes from earthly life *Purgatorio* opens in a modern kitchen - a huge one that fills the stage admittedly so perhaps we should not see it as a real one but as some sort of metakitchen. It is ill-lit, except for a bright window that makes the rest seem darker, and very quiet.

Stillness and silence are very potent tools of theatre. Every word that breaks it, the chopping of a knife, a footstep is given an added emphasis. A mother is serving some food up for her son who has a toy that looks like some sort of robot. He isn't feeling well and is reminded to take his medicine. He asks if 'he' (his father or someone else?) is coming.

A large disc descends and the lights go down while the text of the previous dialogue is projected on it. Behind the scene is changed. It is very noisy, in contrast to the previous scene, and it takes a very long time,

In the boy's bedroom - not a realistic one: it is huge, the boy watches a television set on the floor beside his bed across from an elaborate table lamp that looks like a bunch of balloons also on the floor. When mother has left him alone he climbs into the wardrobe. Through glass panels in it we see flashing lights. Has he got a torch? May be the robot has light up eyes.

The routine and tedium of life is very firmly established and now, with yet another long scene change with text projections, is becoming actual for us, not just performance.

Now we are in dark uncertain space a huge sitting room. There is a whirring sound and dimly we see a huge robot towering above the boy, it does have flashing eyes.

Another scene, father comes home, watches television, is served a meal, oddly out of context, while embracing his wife asks where is his hat. Now the disc has gone but there is a gauze across the stage on which projections give not just dialogue but describe the characters' every move.

Most of the rest of the work concerns father and son. Father plays the piano but the boy comes to him and takes one hand off the keyboard, sits on his lap and embraces him. Or have I misremembered (does this come later as a reconciliation) did strobe lighting damage my concentration or just the minimalism?) The projection says 'The Music' as the boy is led upstairs to bed. It stays there with an empty stage for a long time while we hear noises off which are difficult to identify clearly. Is the boy crying? What is going on?

When they come back the boy appears to have some sort of epileptic fit and the father lies on him. Is he suffocating his son to save his pain or is this a rape - though a symbolic one since they are clothed and penetration not even a simulated possibility. Presumably this is a re-enactment of what we heard.

Another sequence has an open disc through which we see huge flowers circling while a silhouetted mother stands downstage, a long sequence like one of those art films that seem to be trying to simulate incompetent cinematography. Eventually flowers turns into stalks and through them climbs the figure of the father but, when the cloth rises and we see him on the full set he has been a tiny figure while the son has grown to tower above him. The roles are now reversed and son dominates father. The father is the one who now lies in spasm on the ground.

There are a lot of ideas here, the boredom of conventional family life, oedipal rivalries, and incestuous exploitation, but how do these fit with the theme of purgation? Is it a matter of facing up to one's unfathomed fears and motivations? Disturbing certainly, both on a psychological level and in making one think about why we are prepared to watch things just because they are presented before us with expensive mounting and the tag of art. I couldn't help feeling that this was asking how long are you going to allow yourself to go on being fooled?

Reading Claudia Castellucci's essay afterwards I clearly had not got the point at all. Nor did I really understand after reading it. Perhaps what she says is clear in its original Italian, or if I was a deeper religious person, for apparently this work is about God (the Father) and is relationship with his human creation - the Son in his own form. "Evil is life," I quote. "Original sin arises from the father giving life to his son. The father must be forgiven for this." "Having committed his crime, the Father crumbles but the Son sees him and carries him on his shoulders, announcing the end of time. 'Don't despair. It's all over.'"

I'm lost and despite some magnificent physical performances by the two actors playing the son (small and large) I could not help feeling this was some sort of joke on the spectators - but that did not prevent most of them from applauding loud and long.

Howard Loxton also [reviewed](#) "Inferno" and "Paradiso"

Jackie Fletcher [reviewed](#) this production at the Kunstenfestivaldesarts, Brussels

**Reviewer:** [Howard Loxton](#)