

British Theatre Guide

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Nordost

Torsten Buchsteiner (trans David Tushingham)
Company of Angels and Salisbury Playhouse
Salisbury Playhouse
15–27 April 2013

This is not your usual kind of play. For one thing, there's little—almost no—dialogue. The story is told, not through interaction between characters, but by a series of monologues divided amongst the three main protagonists and aimed directly at the audience.

As we take our seats for *Nordost*, we're given a torn scrap of paper, a handwritten note: "On Wednesday October 23, at 9:05PM, 42 Chechens attacked a theatre in Moscow. They interrupted a performance of the musical *Nord-Ost* and took the entire audience hostage." Yes, just for a moment we look around the auditorium. The Salberg's packed with people, mostly young, and there's only one exit point for the audience. Should we be worried?

Zura (Ellie Turner) is the first of the women to leave her seat in the auditorium and speak to us. She's a 'black widow,' one of the young brides whose husbands have been killed by Russian troops and for whom this is an act of justified revenge. Like the other two, she's not in costume, so we are left to imagine the burka concealing her belt of explosives, while the invisible Kalashnikov-wielding minders hover in the background. There are 20 of these female suicide bombers in the theatre this fateful night.

Then there are the hostages. Olga (Nia Davies) is an accountant, visiting the theatre with her husband and nine-year-old daughter while Tamara (Emily Bowker) is an off-duty Latvian doctor, called in to help with medical emergencies after the beginning of the siege, and whose daughter is at the theatre with a friend.

Each woman describes the events of the ensuing three days from her own perspective—the hunger, the necessarily undignified toilet arrangements and the desperate anxiety and fear when the women are forcibly separated from their children. It is only towards the climactic, harrowing end that the women begin to speak to each other as well as to the audience and we can begin to try and understand, if not exactly empathise with, the motives that drove these intended suicide bombers to such acts of desperation.

I think one of the things that makes David Tushingham's translation of Torsten Buchsteiner's play so compelling is the complete absence of polemic. There is no blame, no rhetoric, just some clever lighting, a silent chorus of young people, including children, to stir our emotions, and the reported experience of three women who just happened to be there.

Nordost has already been performed in theatres all over the world, including Russia, collecting awards on the way. This is its UK première.

And sorry about the old cliché, but if you only see one thing this month... Yes, it really is that good.

Reviewer: [Anne Hill](#)