

James Corden loses a brawl with a trash can in *One Man, Two Guvvners*.

COMPILED BY NICOLE ESTVANIK TAYLOR

## London, England

**ONE MAN, TWO GUVVORS:** The National Theatre's critically gushed-over adaptation of *The Servant of Two Masters*, following a U.K. tour and "NT Live" broadcasts on movie screens worldwide, gleefully pratfalls this month into the West End's Adelphi Theatre. Richard Bean has transposed Carlo

Goldoni's classic commedia romp to early-sixties Brighton with the kind of rude, crude abandon British humor does so well—but which isn't the first thing you might picture on the National's dignified boards. Director Nicholas Hytner has punctuated his staging with tunes by Grant Olding's skiffle band the Craze (think early-Beatles suits and narrow neckties, vintage guitar, toe-tapping washboard and banjo). Cast members gamely take turns entertaining during the interludes, dishing out harmonized ditties and makeshift instrumental solos.

Among a strong ensemble cast, the show's backbone (and belly) is James Corden, previously seen in the National's *The History Boys*, with which he traveled to locales including Broadway. Corden is more than equal to the slapstick hijinks choreographed by comedy guru and assistant director Cal McCrystal, and he blends scripted banter with improv so deftly that the audience is left wondering at times whether the show has gone off the rails. Really, it never careens too far from Goldoni's main plot points: Corden is the conniving yet dim *zanni*, motivated by his appetites to play errand-boy for two employers, unbeknownst to both. Unbeknownst to everyone—except the audience, of course—the employers are lovers on the lam, disguised even from each other. What ensues, the critics broadly agree, can be termed hilarity. (Opening Nov. 8; (44) 20-7452-3000; [www.nationaltheatre.org.uk](http://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk))

## POLAND'S CHORUS OF WOMEN HITS THE ROAD

This September, when I first walked into the rehearsal room at the **Zbigniew Raszewski Theatre Institute** in Warsaw, an actress asked me, "Are you here to join our show?" The performers of *chór kobiet* ("chorus of women") had gathered for rehearsals before their upcoming international tour. They were putting in new singers and introducing a tour choreographer.

The *chór kobiet* ensemble was created by director Marta Górnicka in 2009, under the aegis of the Raszewski Institute. She held open auditions; more than a hundred women of all backgrounds showed up. Her cast of 28 includes younger and older women, singers and non-singers alike. The chorus speaks in Polish, but its voice has proved accessible to many audiences. This fall, *chór kobiet* toured Tokyo, Kiev, Lyon, Belfast and Frankfurt, as well as Kraków, Warsaw, Bydgoszcz, Gdańsk and the Czech Republic.

The ensemble's scripts are mash-ups of many different texts relating to the roles of women in society. In the group's first show, *Tu mówi chór: tylko 6 do 8 godzin, tylko 6 do 8 godzin...* (*This is the chorus speaking: only 6 to 8 hours, only 6 to 8 hours...*), Górnicka samples from Greek choruses, opera, Disney movies, found speech, recipes, literary theory and fairy stories, among other sources. She and *chór kobiet* have also created and performed a second piece, *Magnificat*, about the role of Mary in the religious lives of Polish women.

Górnicka, who is trained as a classical musician as well as a director, conducts throughout *This is the chorus speaking...* There are precedents for this in Polish theatre; Tadeusz Kantor's production *Umarła Klasa* (*The Dead Class*, 1975) contained a collage of choral voices, with Kantor serving as the onstage conductor. Górnicka, however, never walks on stage or faces the audience. She counts beats during the rests, cues vocal entrances and precisely orchestrates the voice of *chór kobiet*.

One striking moment in *This is the chorus speaking...* comes after a section on fairy tales and women's magazines. The tall alto Alicja Herod steps in front of the group (Thespis!) and asks, in a deep rumble, "Jest pan naprawdę księciem, czy tylko tak się pan nazywa?" ("Are you really a prince, or is that just your name?") The chorus gleefully joins her, swaying like backup dancers. It is *chór kobiet*'s sense of humor that makes these women so watchable. To them, "Someday my prince will come" is not a tragedy, it's a joke.

*This is the chorus speaking...* performs at Berlin's **Hebbel Teatr** Nov. 22–25, and will tour to the North Rhine/Westphalia region in the spring of 2012. *Magnificat* will perform during the **Warsaw Theatre Meetings** next March. Visit [www.chorkobiet.pl](http://www.chorkobiet.pl) or check out the company's trailer at [www.youtube.com/user/instytutteatralny](http://www.youtube.com/user/instytutteatralny).

—Dara Weinberg



Vocal rest: *chór kobiet* performs *This is the chorus speaking...*

## Baku, Azerbaijan

### BAKU INTERNATIONAL PUPPET FESTIVAL:

According to the Azerbaijani director and translator Shaig Safarov, his government's Ministry of Culture and Tourism has pledged to invest about \$40 million in its theatre scene over the course of this decade. International interaction is a major priority. Baku's first international puppet festival, running this month with Safarov at the helm, will present work by two dozen professional theatres from nearly as many countries. Last year, a theatre conference, also helmed by Safarov, attracted 60 participants from 30 nations.

Among the American attendees at that 2010 convening were Theatre Without Borders members Daniel Banks, Ruth Margraff and Roberto Varea, traveling as guests of the festival. According to Banks, who gave hip-hop theatre talks and workshops, "The students and teachers we met seemed to be interested in ways of innovating their theatre traditions, without losing the long and proud history of Azeri *mugham* [vocal music], poetry and drama." He reports that a hip-hop remix of the beloved 1908 *mugham* opera *Layla and Majnun* is now in the works at one of the

country's national theatres. "Hip-hop music is incredibly popular among youth in Baku," he notes, "both in terms of the music and as a voice of progress and change."

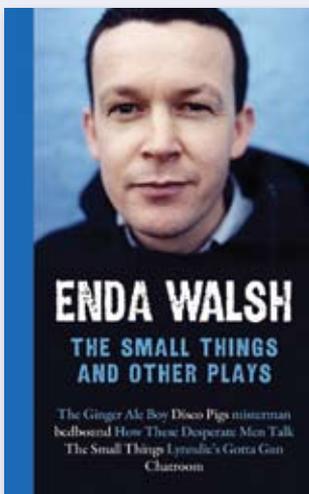
Margraff spoke in Baku about her work in a genre she calls "working-class opera." Azerbaijani listeners, she says, were particularly curious about her "vampyre opera" *Night Vision*. "I understood from a few conversations that darker subjects are of more interest to writers now than before," she says, also observing, "Their own theatre, architecture and art seemed to be laden with a Soviet style and influence they are eager to shake off." Margraff believes U.S. play-and-playwright development models could be useful to Azerbaijani writers, while the U.S. could learn from Azerbaijan's dramaturgically advanced operas. She says she was "blown away" by a traditional staging of *Layla and Majnun* and now teaches an English version of the libretto to her students at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

Banks explains that, as the TWB delegates planned to depart for Baku, "we asked ourselves challenging questions about the meaning of our presence at a government-

sponsored event in a country whose political complexities we did not fully understand. Speaking for myself, I decided to take the trip because I wanted to have a firsthand experience of the people and the culture, and I am very happy I did. I was moved by the people and the history." He adds, "As artists, we always need to ask these important questions about how any country leverages arts and cultural diplomacy, including our own. Ultimately, the opportunity extended to us to connect with so many incredible colleagues is one I will long cherish."

Why such a push for exchange on the part of Baku? Safarov explains that when Azerbaijan gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, it no longer shared Moscow's seat at the tables of organizations such as the International Theatre Institute, the youth theatre network ASSITEJ and the puppetry association UNIMA. Baku now hosts its own centers of those global groups, and leaders from UNIMA, ASSITEJ and the International Association of Theatre Critics will be on hand at this month's festival for a symposium on modern puppetry. (Nov. 1-6; (994) 50-2222441; [www.mct.gov.az](http://www.mct.gov.az))

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