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Paul Taylor

Bad Roads, Royal Court, London, review: a savage look at the dehumanising impact of war

*«Погані дороги», «Королівський двір», Лондон, огляд: дикий погляд на
нелюдський вплив війни*

*Театр Royal Court поставить нову п'єсу української письменниці та драматургії
Наталії Ворожбит «Погані дороги». Ця сардонічна драма про жінок під час війни
написана спеціально для театру Королівського двору. Гра української драматургії Наталії
Ворожби переключається між гіркою комедією та жахом, оскільки вона зосереджена на
досвіді жінок у період війни на Сході України.*

<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/reviews/bad-roads-royal-court-london-review-a-savage-look-at-the-dehumanising-impact-of-war-a8071501.html>

There are two main plays developed by the Royal Court's superb international department that are being staged by the theatre over this end-of-year winter period. The first to open is Bad Roads, a savage look at the dehumanising impact of war by leading Ukrainian dramatist, Natal'ya Vorozhbit; it will be followed by Goats, by Syrian playwright Liwaa Yazji, next week.

Set in the Donbass region of the Ukraine, where war has been raging since 2014, Bad Roads has been put together from the recorded first-hand accounts of people caught up in conflict. The chief focus is on what it like to be a woman in wartime and the play's structure of vivid vignettes that swing queasily between matter-of-fact horror and bitter comedy is served well by Vicky Featherstone's brilliantly acted production.

It uses a tonally agile translation by Sasha Dugdale, and arranges the audience in the Theatre Upstairs on three sides of Camilla Clarke's clever, creepy design with its birch trees that spring up from an industrial tiled floor and recede into dark unsettling secrecy at the rear.

“Our women have gone crazy for soldiers this past year,” declares the 40 year old journalist (excellent Kate Dickie) who kicks things off with a long monologue about how she became erotically obsessed with a soldier and travelled with him to the front line. How crass and cringe-worthy to talk of love in war-time, she admits, that first kiss against a backdrop of bombing. But she also she also accuses us of envying her.

When the big moment comes, though, she finds that PTSD has left the soldier impotent and that she must earn her medal as a Ukrainian patriot in other ways. “Conviction is contagious,” she wryly remarks. “Did you know – you can catch it though oral sex.”

In the next scene, we see three young girls hanging round a military base, exchanging sex for the gifts and a semblance, at best, of love. In the next, a head-teacher, stopped at a military check point, drink driving and without a passport, is in a very sticky situation, but brings himself to protest at the exploitation of one of his underage pupils.

There are several recurring motifs throughout – dead bodies in a freezer being one, seen at its most surreal in the strand about the paramedic driving back the headless corpse of her soldier lover to be reunited with his widow. Then the jeep won't start and she's stranded with her living passenger at 12 degrees below...

The longest and most appalling of the episodes is set in the dark basement, where a separatist insurgent (Tadhg Murphy) inflicts unspeakable abuse on a young

woman whose attempts to find some common humanity with her persecutor have a harrowing gentleness and compassion in Ria Zmitrowicz's superb performance.

Bringing out the hideous closeness of racism and misogyny, and showing the horrible things that war does to already disturbed men, it's a play about poisoned power relations and it's staged with terrific rhythmic finesse (Nick Powell's sound-design making my heart thud).

But it's not the end. The piece modulates into a funny, folktale-like yarn in which a woman, tearfully compunctious about running over a chicken and anxious to offer compensation, find herself touched for nearly everything she has by the crafty peasants. A masterly and woundingly memorable evening.