

The **play's** the thing

This year a group of LSE actors took a play to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. Its director **Ion Martea** gives a taste of their Edinburgh experience.

The Edinburgh Fringe Festival 2004 has to be one of the best experiences of our lives so far. Despite the numerous difficulties – sleepless nights, technical rehearsals at dawn, trying to promote our show in countless hours of flying – none of us regretted taking on a project which was both inspiring and fulfilling, a project which has helped us become friends for life.

We are a bunch of five people from LSE: actors Steve Bond, Irina Janakievskaya and Fionnuala McLardy, producer Jonathan Maron and myself as director and actor – all going by the name of ON Productions. Our play, *Ashes to Ashes* by Steve Lambert, was about the horrors of Auschwitz. We first performed it in January at LSE, received good reviews, and so decided to take it to the Edinburgh Fringe this summer.

At first, our production seemed doomed. In May we had to recast two out of the four characters (in January our cast had included Giorgia Demarchi and Ruth Austin), and make the decision to go for a recorded choir rather than a live one. On top of that, we decided to radically change the delivery of more than three quarters of the play in the last 30 minutes of the last rehearsal! All this did not add to a joyous feeling. And the prospect of a ten hour overnight coach ride up to Scotland didn't help.

By August we had enough money to ensure that the show would go on, due to last minute support from the Director and from alumnus Ashley Mitchell, who put us in contact with generous souls willing to sponsor us. We are boundlessly thankful.

So, to Edinburgh. It is an amazing city, and it greeted us in all its grandiosity on Sunday, 15 August. Our venue of choice was Sweet at the Grassmarket, because of its location, and, at the time of the booking, because of the cost. Unfortunately, we had been shown the wrong plans for the theatre, and so we were forced to move to a different venue but one which better satisfied our needs. This affected our performance time. Originally 7.45pm, quite reasonable for a Holocaust play, we had to change to a rather uncomfortable 10.50pm for one week, and a more appropriate 12.45pm for the last week.

We went ahead, however, despite the risk of losing an audience by shifting start times. Our motto was always 'quality over quantity'. And hey, it was the Fringe. Everyone had some problems – even the production of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* with Hollywood actor Christian Slater, possibly even the show with two masters of genital origami, *Puppetry of the*

Penis. But if a handful of individuals leave the Fringe thinking that you are the best of the bunch, then you have definitely succeeded in establishing a buzz around your play.

Our tears while performing were deeply felt by our daily audience who would either leave in tears themselves, or wait for us after the show to offer their praise. We appreciated an uncomfortable clap perhaps more than frantic applause. It gave us the assurance that we might be contending for the best of the bunch, that we had moved people. One critic, Patrick Hayes, writing for *Culture Wars*, helped us spread the word, recommending the play as a must see at the Fringe. But ultimately it was the moving reaction of a Holocaust survivor and her positive criticism which gave us the laurels we were looking for.

Aside from being in our own play, we were also, of course, at the Fringe. This meant often succumbing to the Fringe experience: watching from two to four other shows a day, from drama to stand up comedy to physical theatre; as well as sweet jazz nights. We saw great plays such as *My Long Journey Home*, *No Man's Land*, *Catching Dust*, *The Real Thing*, *I Can Cry*, *1984*, *Metamorphosis*, *Poe in Pieces*, and pure trash performances, such as *The Threepenny Opera* and *How to Philosophise with a Hammer*. The *Henmen* became our flying brothers when handing out leaflets, and the cast of *Offensive Shadows* were our main Fringe companions. Late night pubbing and clubbing were of course on the programme, as unforgettable as the Victorian house in which we all lived (actually rather spooky at the beginning). And how can we forget the pizza lunches at Mamma's.

In no time it was all over, and we had to say goodbye to a remarkable experience, taking with us priceless memories and a great number of new friends. Plans for Fringe 2005 are already on our minds. We're thinking of taking up three productions next time. The only problem would be funding, but hey, we'll think about that later. ■



Ion Martea

is a third year Philosophy and Economics student in the Department of Philosophy, Logic and Scientific Method and an award-winning published writer, actor and director.



Ashes to Ashes review

'In *Ashes to Ashes*, Steve Lambert does not dwell upon the emotional aspects of the Holocaust. Rather than subjecting the audience to an immediate flood of emotion about the terrible treatment in Auschwitz, Ion Martea works wonderfully with Lambert's script to develop intimate friendships between the characters in the tiny windows of time they have to talk before they go to bed in the evening.

'In these small moments of intimacy, the prisoners, powerfully played by Fionnuala McLardy, Steve Bond and Irina Janakievskaya, unbottle all their reflections and emotional responses after extreme repression through fear and perpetual action during the day. The repetitive gruelling labour under the cruel reign of the prison officer (Ion Martea) reduces the prisoners to mechanical objects. They have no choice but to inhabit this role. To choose not to obey orders would result in certain death.

Ashes to Ashes is not afraid to present to the audience the true reality of the death camps. This is a far greater challenge than those who leave this vague and, in doing so, making it simply embody true evil in a mythical fashion. Through showing the extent to which the Nazis attempted to dehumanise the Jews the play shows that even though the body can be crushed, while alive, the thing that makes us human – our ability to choose how to act – can only ever be repressed, not destroyed. The greatest achievement of *Ashes to Ashes* is to present a fully human engagement with the characters rather than simply an emotional one.'

From a review by Patrick Hayes, see www.culturewars.org.uk