

The Overwhelming Victory of *The Battle of Stalingrad*

By Robin Lyon

The portrayal of violence and war in theater is always a difficult and complicated task. How realistically is it done? How much is implied? How much representational? How much can the audience take? How long will it be believable? Where is the line between dramatic and silly? Rezo Gabriadze's *Battle of Stalingrad* takes on one of the bloodiest battles of the last hundred years and pulls it off in a wonderful and unexpected, though equally risky way. The Russian-language production focuses in on the lives of people, horses, and ants—all through puppets.

Looking at the subject matter, the production takes everything that could be difficult about a performance, and then doubles it, like a tightrope walker deciding to perform during a hurricane. It is no longer just the question of whether the violence in the show will be dramatic or silly, should be realistic or representational, it grows to include whether puppets (and animals) can be taken seriously. Can the puppets become real enough that they can produce an emotional effect? Can animal characters produce the same level of sympathy as human characters? And along with this, the challenges of representing armies and battles, having believable and effective violence on stage are made infinitely more complicated.

Rather surprisingly, all of the problems one might foresee for the production of such subject matter seem miniscule after viewing the ease and exactness with which the company pulls it off. Puppets, both human and animal, draw immense empathy from the

audience; their plight is completely believable and there seems nothing silly about them; and the battles are creatively and effectively represented.

One important element that helps to make the puppets real and sympathetic to their audience is the decision to focus in very specifically on certain characters, following them from before the battle through to the end. We know what they have to lose, we know their real desires; we know what it is that's interrupted by the battle, what they would be doing otherwise. We know that Lacha has lost his only love while away; we know that Aliocha and Natasha (both horses) are never going to end up back together, that there will be no more opportunities for redemption from previous fickleness; and we learn that the ant's child will never see sugar like they've always dreamed.

Another main ingredient to the successful animation and "humanization" of these puppets is in the immense skill and involvement of the puppeteers. Throughout the performance, the puppeteers are occasionally made visible, both through direct interaction with the puppets on stage and additional lighting. It's in the way they interact with the puppets that brings more life and empathy to them. The puppeteers treat them like real people, their own hands occasionally entering the stage, their facial expressions visible and expressing sympathy and feeling toward the characters. With each character that dies, the puppet is buried in sand by the hand of the puppeteer, and there is palpable sadness and solemnity in that. The puppeteers, along with their regular and well-done job of moving and animating the puppets, have also transferred their own humanity to them in this production.

The animal characters are developed to the point that they are taken seriously and are emotional impacting, which is even more impressive. The animals, whether horses or

ants, are given as much personal background and depth of situation, and are treated with the same emotion and sympathy as the human characters. The risk of silliness entering and taking away from the intended seriousness is irrelevant here, and the fact that it works adds immensely to the drama, seriousness, sympathy and effect of the piece. The battle is made all the more devastating and universally affecting, as we are allowed to view its effects from humans down to some of the smallest animals there are.

The representations of violence, death and battles is also carried off with creativity and effectiveness. Through the use of lighting and rows of helmets, the marching in of an entire army is shown. One character's slow death is represented through the release of strings. Red lights on sand become a bloodied battlefield.

The puppets themselves are beautiful, ranging greatly in size and style, and wonderfully fitting to their character. The Russian general takes up the entire height of the stage, the soldier reaches only about halfway up his leg. The varying size allows for the stage to change the width of its window, sometimes an intimate close up of a room, sometimes the widespread landscape of streets and fields.

The lighting and sand are used to create numerous situations. The lights on the sand change it from blood-soaked fields to desert sand, to snow, to sugar. The sand often provides a medium for the beam of light to be shown, also acting as wind, falling rain or snow, also dramatically burying characters.

Another one of the performance's strong points is sadly also its one main weakness. The music and language are beautiful, soft and expressive. The choice for providing a translation however, through a loud monotonal voiceover, took from the

beautiful expressiveness of both the music and the spoken language to the point that one dreads the sound of the speakers coming on.

The Battle of Stalingrad provides a very emotionally effective representation of the battle and its effects on life and lives. Though it could be aided by some supertitles, the production pulls off all the difficult aspects of the play with incredible creativity and success, creating an incredibly rich and beautiful tapestry of experiences and losses, while not only animating puppets, but giving them souls as well.