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Theatre

Il Deserto - review

★★★★☆

St Pancras Church, London



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Last winter in Athens I discovered the work of a major Greek director, Theodoros Terzopoulos. The piece I saw, based on the letters of Elizabeth I and Mary Queen of Scots, offered a stunning, highly physical re-creation of a mythical encounter between the two serpentine queens. Now

Terzopoulos pays a lightning visit to London with this astonishing work staged in the context of an exhibition by the London-based Kalliopi Lemos.

We assemble in a crypt, which seems apt, as *Il Deserto* is an evocation of a living death. The hero of the piece, written by Carlo Michelstaedter and performed in Italian by the virtuosic Paolo Musi, is entombed in the desert. Like some Beckett protagonist, he uses words to beat back the darkness. "You keep talking, talking," he declares in the English synopsis we are given on entry, "and no one is listening to you." Clad in an ash-covered suit, Musi goes through an extraordinary range of emotions - fear, rage, defiance - as he delivers for 45 minutes an almost ceaseless verbal torrent. The only relief comes when the director himself, seated in front of Musi, utters lamentations deriving from his native Pontus on the Black Sea coast.

What does it all signify? To me, it provided a frightening sense, reminiscent of Dante's *Inferno*, of being suspended between life and death in a subterranean world. The point is reinforced by Lemos's sculptures, which eerily enhance the action. Titled *Navigating in the Dark*, her installation is dominated by three stripped-down Greek boats. One contains writhing snakes, another life-sized human figures and a third death-symbolising ravens. All are made of steel, are accompanied by suitable sounds and suggest some Virgilian passage across the river Styx into eternal darkness. But relief is provided by a recess filled with floating white bees made of Japanese paper and indicating a lost paradise.

The performance lasted one night; the sculptures will be there for some weeks. But the evening transcended the barriers between theatre and visual art and showed a perfect synthesis between two powerful Greek imaginations. What puzzles me is our ignorance of Terzopoulos. Feted the world over, he has created a theatre that, while it has elements of the work of Poland's Jerzy Grotowski, seems very much his own: one that explores the cornered human animal in all its naked desperation. I was left both with a sharpened sense of life's joy and of its inevitable transience.

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