

ball, but offstage, these performers are as solace-seeking as their neighbouring puppets and they snort cocaine and squabble in their native tongue.

This is a life where sex is snatched and desperate, deprived of privacy, as the dancers wind in and out of billowing white cloth. But what poses as lovers' sheets can easily pass for a death shroud, and, later, the same material is used as a flag that can only mean surrender.

To whom this troop and the Argentineans are surrendering is never made explicit beyond the looming shadows, but the consequences are certainly alluded to. When the performers don apparently large lampshades, they become spectacularly illuminated giant skulls. Later, a skeleton performs a desperate jig to the strains of a military band. By the time Mozart's Requiem marches towards its encounter with the judgment day, the circus act has turned into a tremendous death dance. Exquisitely performed and hauntingly beautiful, the poetry of *Dias de las Noches* lingers long in the mind.

Both shows run until 30 August.

The Scotsman

Edinburgh Fringe 2004

Caravan / Dias de las Noches

Shadow dancing

LOUISE RIMMER

CARAVAN ****

DIAS DE LAS NOCHES ****

ST STEPHEN'S CHURCH (Venue 8)

IN THESE two beautifully crafted theatrical jewels, the audience slips effortlessly from circus punter to backstage voyeur. But these are far from twee tales of the romance of circus life. Set in two very different worlds - an unnamed town in the 1950s and a steamy Buenos Aires teetering on the edge of military coup - both groups of performers expose the sadism that lurks alongside artistic comradeship as they wrestle with terrifying internal and external threats.

Melbourne-based Black Hole Theatre Company have seized the art of puppetry to create a disturbing black comedy in Caravan. Armed with imaginative lighting, a sultry soundtrack and focus-defying video, four puppeteers play out a story of sexual brutality, betrayal and violence. Performer Klaki Henenberg sets the tone immediately, as she teases out a breathlessly sexy dance in red taffeta knickers and a hula hoop. As she hops backstage into the caravan, out troop our miniature performers, exquisitely crafted in wood, features in grotesque exaggeration. Manoeuvred brilliantly by their four masters, who occasionally light their tiny cigarettes and echo their kisses on human cheeks, the puppets are led through their outrageous show acts.

At first, the scenes seem simply surreal, and apparently inconsequential. Although a plot is gradually sketched out, stronger definition is required in order to produce a more coherent story. Nonetheless, each scene is gloriously engrossing, from the confession session with the masturbating vicar to the pole dance performed by a female Satan.

Nestled within this pornographic puppetry are tiny gestures that are startling in their likeliness to life. At one point, the brutalised and sexually humiliated stripper sobs inconsolably into her forearm. The tender wooing that takes place between her and her comforter is a rare moment of kindness in this dark, dark tale.

Otherwise, these maverick puppets are all too human for the wrong reasons: they booze-binge, stamp out fags on live cats and worship at the altar of ridiculous icons. Of course, male brutality and female suppression have been well represented in puppetry, thanks to its most famous husband and wife duo, Punch & Judy, but never has sex in all its gratuitous, greedy and visceral forms been so intimately re-enacted with stringed-held limbs.

Teatr Novogo Fronta's gorgeous piece of physical theatre, Dias de las Noches, is a meditation on the isolation of the immigrant; the helplessness of the individual in the face of an oppressive state and a powerful exploration of the old Shakespearean metaphor of human existence and theatrical performance. The imagery summoned by these four superb performers from the Czech Republic and Russia is wonderfully ambivalent. A telephone call ignites a graceful duet that quickly turns to a power-hungry duel as the coil of the receiver wraps around their limbs, the persisting rings seeming more like a death-knell. The telephone can be contact with the homeland, but may also bear alien threats.

We are told it is an oppressively hot night and, as the soundtrack of drips and distant bells mixes with increasingly manic laughter, we feel the tension of a society on the brink of dictatorship. The fragility of its citizens is beautifully highlighted by two performers showering naked behind a shimmering curtain, looking at once like twins in a womb or two men hanged.

There are playful moments, such as the lovely audience interaction between a docile clown and his bouncy