

Party like it's the end of the world

Futurology's international cabaret, complete with Sandwich Island clown, doesn't entirely fulfil its potential as a social commentary on what lies ahead for mankind

Joyce McMillan

FUTUROLOGY: A GLOBAL REVUE
SECC, GLASGOW
★★★★

**AMADA AND MOTHER, FATHER,
SON**
ARCHES, GLASGOW
★★★★

FRIDAY THE 13TH, and the future of humankind has never looked more frightening. Our food security, our water supply, the very land on which most of us live, is under threat from climate change; and as Scotland's specialists for the last decade in uneasy theatrical explorations of the zeitgeist, David Greig and Graham Eatough of Suspect Culture are dead right to conclude that it's time for a big, rip-roaring, desperate cabaret at the end of the world. The only problem with the show they've produced – in co-production with the National Theatre Of Scotland, the Brighton Festival, and a host of artistic collaborators – is that it isn't quite the cabaret it could be; its format is more ambiguous, and the effect more diffuse.

The show is set at a surreal version of a UN Climate Change conference, taking place in some clapped-out city in a region of the globe rapidly turning to desert. Delegates arrive, one from each nation, on a cabaret set that also suggests ranks of conference tables ranged in a massive hall.

We follow the story of Patrice, played by the astonishing Brazilian clown Angela de Castro. She is the large, naïve and friendly delegate from the Sandwich Islands, who has come to explain that her tiny homeland is about to sink beneath the waves; but she has trouble networking, since her endless supplies of homemade sandwiches fail to impress her sharp-suited colleagues, or a conference management increasingly preoccupied with imminent civil war outside.

The show's basic strategic error, though – as it sets out to combine dream-like stereotypes, shrewd sociopolitical observation, and bursts of wild or beautiful cabaret entertain-

ment – is that, right from the start, it lacks that detached and slightly ruthless master-of-ceremonies figure who is key to the success of all great cabaret.

Instead, the role of presenter falls to the city's greasy opportunist of a mayor, played with terrific sleazy energy by Grant Smeaton, and his mistress and chief of protocol, Valentina, represented by a magnificently sardonic Morag Stark. Both are superb characters, but as key players in the drama they simply can't keep the entertainment at that critical, ironic distance from the events around it that gives great disaster cabaret its hard-edged theatrical energy.

The result is a show full of good things – haunting dance, rowdy song, raunchy show-tunes, ventriloquism, hypnotism, stand-up comedy and political satire – that nonetheless seems oddly variable in quality, and a little less impressive than the basic materials would suggest. The strength of the idea, the excellence of the performances from Suspect Culture's international team of actors and musicians, and the company's trademark combination of deep lyrical humanism, all-embracing political intelligence, and honest middle-class angst, all conspire to nudge *Futurology* into the four-star category; no serious fan of 21st-century theatre should miss it. But there's a nagging sense that, given a final twist of the theatrical perspective and flair, this could have been twice the show; rather than a good shot at the last word on the world we live in that somehow just misses the bull's-eye.

If there's one theme that haunts *Futurology* – and many other debates on the global future – it's the sense of a bustling urban civilisation that has

somehow lost touch with the well-springs of life; and by chance or design, the two shows created by this year's winners of the Arches Award for emerging directors – now run jointly with the NTS and the Traverse Theatre – present a fascinating double reflection on the life-force itself, and its complete failure in some victims of our increasingly sterile civilisation.

Amada, adapted and directed by the wonderful actress and musician Cora Bissett, is based on Isabel Allende's story *Simple Maria*, about a young woman from a respectable family who – following a severe head injury – becomes a naïve and enthusiastic nymphomaniac, and eventually a great star among prostitutes, a woman who truly believes in love, and can give men the illusion of it for cash.

Bissett's version – for three actors and two musicians – adopts a fairly conventional illustrated-narrative style. But both visually and musically, the show has a tremendous rich sensuality that both reflects and celebrates the powerful earthy energy of the story; and Nerea Bello's wonderful Basque singing celebrates the true female voice, and the deep, raw physicality of love, birth and death, in a way that still seems far beyond the reach of our cold northern culture.

Rosie Kellagher's *Mother, Father, Son*, by contrast, describes the travesty of a conventional family life reduced to roles without love or meaning, and finally rejected by a twentysomething son who – in the phenomenon the Japanese call *hikikomori* – finally locks himself forever in his room.

Scripted by Hugo Plowden, Kellagher's show is a tremendously shapely and stylish event, with a hauntingly





claustrophobic, hyper-realistic domestic set by Lauren Brown, and inspired use of music and movement to evoke the creepy and deadening rituals of a too-comfortable domestic life.

It's debatable how far Plowden's script really advances our understanding of the *hikikomori* generation. But this show signals another sure step in the career of one of Scotland's most gift-

ed young directors, created with an impressive eye for the shape and impact of the whole theatre event. And it also features a couple of treasurable performances from Anne Scott Jones and Peter Kelly as Mother and Father, a pair of hapless victims of the parental role in which most of us will recognise at least of our parents; and many of us will also recognise ourselves.

● *Futurology* is at SECC, Glasgow, until tomorrow; the Corn Exchange, Edinburgh, 17-21 April; the AECC, Aberdeen, 25-28 April; and the Brighton Dome, 5-10 May. *Amada* and *Mother, Father, Son* at the Arches, Glasgow, until 14 April, and at the Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh, 17-21 April.



Angela de Castro stars as the irrepressible Sandwich Island delegate in *Futurology: A Global Revue* Picture: Douglas McBride