

The Golden Ass

Extract from The Guardian

18/12/00

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Earlier this year, their *Candide 2000* brought Voltaire to a shopping centre. Now, just as audaciously, they bring the Roman novel by Apuleius – a scathing satire written at the height of the Roman Empire – to modern Glasgow via Italy and Brazil. The result is theatre as it should be: a physical and intellectual thrill, a challenge and, at times, a puzzle. Our narrator Lucius (Sergio Romano) is a storyteller and magician who will give us “a good history” if we will part with our change. He tells tales of magical realism, of transformation and madness, while a member of the audience is pulled up to stand guard over a corpse by keeping a torch light shining on it.

As if all this isn't strange enough, Lucius speaks only in Portuguese, although he is Italian. A Brazilian woman, dressed in tartan, translates. That is just the first half. In the interval, Lucius leads us through the theatre, telling a love story without translation simply by pointing at paintings on walls. Somehow, we are rapt.

But, at this moment Lucius is turned into an ass for dabbling with magic powers he doesn't understand. Transformed from a spinner of tales to a beast silent except for donkey-talk he runs from the place and is brought back in by a troupe of Glaswegians, some sympathetic, some mocking. And so begins the present-day, local aspect to the production, with non-professional actors from the Gorbals being headbutted by Lucius until they tell their tales.

Poverty, crime, lack of power, consumerism – this is what they talk of. Damilola Taylor's mother and father are quoted, his death re-enacted. As a short chorus between stories, they shop until they literally drop: walking between a box of brand names, a bottle of coke, a Barbie doll and a mobile phone. Stirring music plays and, inexplicably, a man starts doing Rolf Harris-style paintings on the back wall. It is a very Suspect Culture moment: ideas swirling around into some new meaning, local and international brought together.