



Theatre review: Guerre et paix's puppetry and Hana's Suitcase don't turn war into kids' stuff



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Paul-Patrick Charbonneau and other puppet operators know when to put the joking aside in Théâtre du Sous-marin jaune's *Guerre et paix*.

NICOLA-FRANK VACHON

Remembrance week has coincided with a handful of plays about the horrors of war. And though one of them involves puppets and another is aimed at young people, they are far from being kids' stuff.

Tolstoy once said that Napoleon and other great warmongering figures were mere puppets of history. Théâtre du Sous-marin jaune takes this quote literally, rendering Tolstoy's 2,000-page *War and Peace* as a 90-minute puppet show.

Guerre et paix is told by the company's resident narrator, a sardonic canine named Loup bleu, who is assisted by a horse and a bear — the latter being the very same who makes an appearance at the drunken party at the beginning of the book. (Later he

accompanies the heroine to the opera — an incident I'm pretty sure isn't in the book.) The human figures include the aristocratic Pierre, the philosophical Andrei and, of course, Napoleon, who is represented as a Monty Python-esque cut-out with swivelling eyes.

Silliness abounds, with Loup bleu wearing a Pussy Riot T-shirt, a Sputnik standing in for the novel's transcendence-inspiring comet and the puppet operators sending up Tolstoy's epic seriousness with funny voices. But it also puts the joking aside at key moments, particularly for the battle of Borodino, where the operators, like nightmarish figures from a Goya painting, set about annihilating the armies in a shambles of red thread and dismembered limbs.

Hana's Suitcase tells the true story of a battered old suitcase that turned up at the Tokyo Holocaust Education Resource Centre in 2000. In this revived co-production from Geordie (celebrating its 35th anniversary) and Toronto's Young People's Theatre, we're told from the outset not to expect a happy ending. Hana was a preteen Czech girl who died in Auschwitz — just one individual, honoured in this moving and thoughtful piece, out of the 1.5 million children murdered by the Nazis.

In Emil Sher's adaptation of Karen Levine's book, two children turn detective in their attempts to unearth the truth. Events from the past are conjured up onstage in dramatized scenes and projected images, with Hana and her family enjoying an idyllic ski in the woods before the inevitable horrors. Sher's script, mindful of the young age of his audience (the play is recommended for age nine and up), carefully explains the complexities of European history as well as the terrible vocabulary of the Holocaust.

Wars from antiquity are less likely to resonate with modern sensibilities — especially if, like the Trojan War, they may well be mythical anyway. But **An Iliad**, written by actor Denis O'Hare (from American Horror Story) and Lisa Peterson and presented by Chocolate Moose, takes great pains to drag Homer's ancient narrative into our mind's eye.

"Do you see?" is a constant refrain from the barfly-like Poet (Martin Law) who retells the tale, helpfully substituting Canadian place names for the obscure regions from which the vast Greek army was drawn. At one point, Law, in a heroic feat of recall, rattles off the names of every significant conflict from the dawn of history to present-day Syria.

For the most part, his commanding one-man performance brings the epic clash between Greeks and Trojans, and particularly Achilles and Hector, to vivid life. But the taxing 90-plus minutes of the show, coupled with a lack of a clean narrative through-line, proves to be something of an Achilles heel.



Finally, just room to mention another representation of man's inhumanity to man, again involving puppetry. Kafka's **Le procès (The Trial)**, as presented by Slovenia's Théâtre de Marionnettes de Maribor, takes place inside an intimate and threatening theatre machine. Two puppeteer-performers, dressed in the long leather coats favoured by East European secret policemen, freely adapt Kafka's judicial nightmare using finger puppets, items of clothing and an all-purpose cabinet. It's enthralling, visually stunning and unforgettably eccentric.

AT A GLANCE

Guerre et paix continues to Nov. 25 at Théâtre d'Aujourd'hui, 3900 St-Denis St. Tickets cost \$26 to \$35. Call 514-282-3900 or visit theatredaujourd'hui.qc.ca.

Hana's Suitcase continues Saturday, Nov. 14 at 2 p.m., and Sunday, Nov. 15 at 1 and 4 p.m. at the D.B. Clarke Theatre, 1455 de Maisonneuve Blvd. W. For more information, call 514-845-9810 or visit geordie.ca.

An Iliad continues Friday, Nov. 13 to Sunday, Nov. 15 at 8 p.m. at MainLine Theatre, 3997 St-Laurent Blvd. Tickets cost \$14 to \$16. Call 514-849-3378 or visit mainlinetheatre.ca.

Le procès continues Friday, Nov. 13 at 8 p.m. and Saturday, Nov. 14 at 4 and 8 p.m. at Théâtre aux Écuries, 7285 Chabot St. Tickets cost \$19 to \$27. Call 514-328-7437 or visit auxecuries.co