

Raw, absurd and relevant

FUNDING ELIMINATED: But Theatre in the Raw soldiers on

On stage

Vatzlav

Where: Studio 16, 1555 W. 7th Ave.

When: Wednesday to Dec. 20; matinees, Dec. 13 and 20, 2 p.m.

Tickets: \$20; \$15 at theatreintheraw.ca or 604 708-5477

BY STUART DERDEYN

ARTS REPORTER

Polish playwright Slawomir Mrozek's 1968 work *Vatzlav* marks a high point in the oft-censored political journalist's career. While 1964's *Tango* and 1975's *The Immigrants* are the most often mounted of his many plays, with *Vatzlav*, his pen is perhaps at its most sharply absurdist and tragicomic.

There is nary a moment of humour in the piece that doesn't turn somehow political.

Like life under the totalitarian regime of pre-Berlin-Wall-collapse Poland, there is rarely a moment without multiple meanings. Power structures exist in a number of distasteful and crude combinations and frequently get intertwined. But what links a family with a grown son who wears diapers and also happens to be a bear, a father named Genius whose daughter Justice must be "revealed," and no less than Oedipus Rex in the guise of an old blind keeper of the truth has to a slave who has washed up on the shore of a strange island is explained in the play's 77 scenes. Acting out those scenes are 13 actors — and a prop baby.

Yes, you read that correctly. This work packs in 77 scenes into a mere 120 minutes.

"Some scenes are as quick as one word, however" says Paul Beckett, who plays Oedipus. "The crazy thing is, they all matter."

"It's incredibly relevant to today's world because the absurdity of it is all around us in the present day," adds Jay Hamburger, who, for the past 15 years, has specialized in "giving exposure to voices seldom heard" through Theatre in the Raw.

From works by Gogol to original new plays such as the hit *Bruce* — *The Musical*, the East Side company has produced 10 full-length works, including five original Canadian premieres and toured a number of one-acts across the country. It's specialty is in art that makes a point at a time when too little does. The company recently had all of its provincial funding axed. This hasn't stopped it from soldiering on



The absurdist *Vatzlav* is both tragicomic and pointed. —SUBMITTED PHOTO

and bringing emerging talents such as recent Studio 58 grad Emily Rowed in to the fold.

"I play the role of Justice, who is lied to and betrayed by her father [played by Hamburger] and, ultimately, comes to see the world tragically," says Rowed.

This exposure to the truth ties in with a burlesque dance number central to the storyline.

Musician Earle Peach composed the

original music for *Vatzlav* and Hamburger put his pen to paper for the lyrics. This wasn't unfamiliar territory for him. Hamburger wrote lyrics for some tunes in the classic musical *Godspell* that still brings in royalties. He says that these have had to be dipped into to make this production come to be.

But it's worth it for such "an absurdist tour de force to be seen locally."

sderdyn@theprovince.com