GAIA GLOBAL CIRCUS

Review par Andrew Todd

The catastrophe we face is, then, imminent and requires urgent action? Not according to Bruno Latour: we need, rather, to slow down -to take all the time in the world- to be able to digest what is happening -and will happen- to us, and we need to do this facing each other, in shared space.

Philosopher Bruno Latour is, like Stephen Emmott, someone who spends his life at a lectern, behind a desk or in a laboratory (in Latour’s case studying scientists rather than being one). Both have decided -for slightly different reasons- to quit the day job, to run away with the circus, to stick their necks out, to put on the make up and light the lights, and use the theatre as the medium for addressing the profound changes our world is undergoing.

For Latour the fact that we have shifted from the Holocene to the Anthropocene -a recently-begun geological epoch where the world is largely under the influence of human-generated forces rather than volcanoes or tectonic plates- is akin to the discovery of the New World in the 16th Century. What we thought we knew is revealing itself to be something completely other, and something which is shifting and evolving in real time. As soon as we have got our heads around one syndrome, another contradictory one pops up: the curves in graphs predicting ecological change are all wobbly, threatening to shoot off the scale or catch on fire (the one thing they refuse to do is lie flat or go down -as climate change deniers would have us believe).

How do we begin to understand something so vast and inconceivable, so contradictory to every urge we posses -to reproduce, to prosper, to settle, to make plans? Well, we can try to make a model of it, like scientists, and this model is the world in miniature co-created by performers and witnesses in a theatre.

Latour and his collaborators Frederique Ait-Touati (a historian of science and a theatre director) and Chloe Latour (a repentant lawyer turned theatre maker), together with a collective of performers, a writer (Pierre Daubigny) and designers, have done just that: they have put on a show about the end of the world, which they have called Gaia Global Circus. The show is entertaining, funny and moving, inventive, stimulating and skillful (as we would hope). It is not a polemic or a didactic lecture (like Al Gore’s film An Inconvenient Truth), it assumes that -by now- the problem is not one of knowledge of the facts but of understanding, of developing the emotional equipment to deal with our predicament. This is why Latour thinks we should slow down: the die is cast in terms of the problem, the real challenge is whether we will go down the drain raving mad, in denial, shooting the place up to pillage ever-dwindling water and other resources, or if we can engage with the process, facing ourselves and the world.

Gaia Global Circus offers no answers to these questions; instead, it presents a tapestry of scenes interweaving familiar and mythological characters such as Gaia
and Noah, each wrestling with aspects of the ecological question. Noah, faced with the challenge of a fresh deluge (ours), takes his plans for a new Ark to his bank manager, who rejects them for having a too-uncertain business plan. He concludes solemnly that we are already on the second Ark and are condemned to remain here. A Prime Minister holds a triumphant press conference at the end of an unprecedented international summit where he announces a total consensus of the world’s powers to continue fucking up the planet and to let our children sort it out. A scientist - bamboozled by the situation he is studying - is reduced to a stammering wreck in a televised debate by a well-funded climate change denier (called Ted, a recurrent character in the piece) whose only skill is rhetoric: he can speak smoothly and convincingly because he has no need to believe what he is saying.

Much of the show concerns language and communication: when scientific language is not up the task and words can be bought, how can we forge a new form of speech which allows us to grapple with our predicament?

Looming over these challenges is a kind of model world, a stand-in or talisman for the fluctuating environment outside the theatre’s walls. A vast, billowing white cloth is suspended from a grid of helium balloons -a form which references the techniques of basic climate science as well as the clowning implied by the Global Circus on the tin. At the beginning we are specifically told that this is a representation of the world and that it will respond to its immediate environment generated by us, the audience - we should mind our CO2 levels and not laugh all at the same time (which of course elicits a laugh). Throughout the show it warps, shifts and migrates, being put to ingenious theatrical use as a screen for projection (including, very memorably, of the image of an actress’s face playing ..... projected by a powerful magnifying glass). At a climactic moment it invades the audience, swooping down over our heads, implicating us physically in the story. The show is magnificent, a heady brew of Lecoq theatrics, Greek tragedy and Latourian wrestling with how we can (collectively) create the tools to understand our self-made ecological predicament. Latour starts from the premise that theatre is the only way we can possibly figure this out, and the show is definitely up to the task, full of invention, laughter, tears and fierce engagement from the audience in the post-show debate.