

## Hamletmachine at Castillo Theatre

Reviewed by Jason Fitzgerald  
June 15, 2009

In Castillo Theatre's new production of *Hamletmachine*, the complete text of Heiner Müller's 1977 play is transcribed along the two walls that bound the stage. The actors, directed by Viennese auteur Eva Brenner, interact with the text as they move through the space, drawn to it like magnets, tracing words with their fingers, examining letters with magnifying glasses. This curious, critical engagement is the heart of Brenner's concept: not to present the text but to map a contemporary response to it.

The stage design itself – a neutral space that the actors, in contemporary dress, manipulate with simple props, rehearsal chairs, and the commitment of their bodies and voices – is a kind of workspace for their explorations. Brenner intersperses the text with Tin Pan Alley – style songs, speeches by Sojourner Truth and Otto René Castillo, and the actors' own reflections on performing Müller. One senses the actors had great autonomy in constructing the piece, and their investment shows in their compelling physical performances – Yap Sun Sun's deserves special mention – and coherent



Photo by Ronald L. Glassman

interpretations, despite a few sequences that feel like uninspired rehearsal exercises.

Overall, the company has made the notoriously difficult *Hamletmachine* into an eminently watchable experience, but that palatability is troubling. The performance comes most alive when asserting an optimism intentionally at odds with the nihilism of the original play. In their departures from the text, actors speak of the power of “hope” and “revolution” in their lives and work, with the Obama election unsurprisingly invoked. The apocalyptic monologues that Müller gives to Ophelia – “I turn the milk of my breasts into lethal poison” – are delivered like proud feminist sermons. To *Hamletmachine's* five acts, they add a sixth, a spirited performance of a song whose main

refrain is “Oh no,” an outright rejection of Müller's tragic despair as no longer useful for 2009.

It is as though the company prefers not so much to engage the play's dark impulses as to step around them. As the performers danced and harmonized in a celebration of hope, I couldn't help but wonder what place was left for *Hamletmachine's* critical warnings, composed amidst the failures of utopian idealism in Eastern Europe, now buried in the letters that lined the theatre walls.

Presented by and at Castillo Theatre, 543 W. 42nd St., NYC.  
June 12-28. Fri. and Sat., 7:30 p.m.; Sun., 2 p.m. (Sunday, June 28 performance is at 5 p.m.)  
212-941-1234 or [www.castillo.org](http://www.castillo.org).  
Casting by Kenneth Hughes.