A marathon effort lifted by humour

Theatre Donald Hutera

Sports Play
Nuffield, Lancaster
★★★☆☆

Tired of all the ballyhoo about the Olympics even before the Games have begun? Casting a light on competitive sports as a breeding ground for fascistic behaviour, and coming after Euro 2012 and Wimbledon, this timely touring production by the young, London-based company Just a Must could be just the ticket.

Ein Sportstück, as *Sports Play* was originally called, is the work of Elfriede Jelinek, a prolific, polemical Austrian writer whose vision of sports is an antidote to romantic notions of guts and glory. Winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2004, Jelinek is probably best known in the UK as the author of the novel upon which Michael Haneke based his devastating 2001 film *The Piano Teacher*. Her plays, however, are rarely seen here.

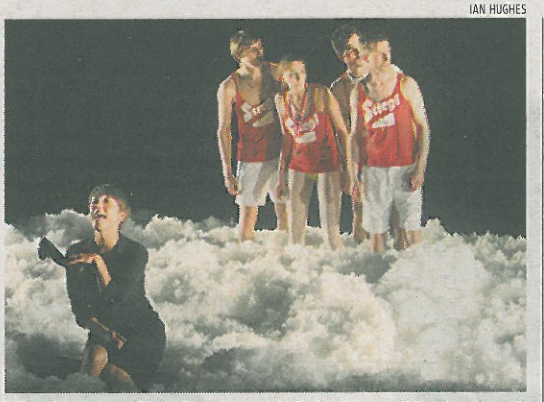
Such neglect is perhaps understandable, given the difficult nature of the work. As a key figure in so-called post-dramatic theatre, Jelinek eschews plot and characterisation. Driven by language and ideas, her plays tend to be epic terrains of dense, rhythmic verbiage that take shape as lengthy monologues pitched somewhere between poetry and diatribe.

The premiere of *Ein Sportstück* in Vienna in 1998 featured a cast of 142. There were two versions, the shorter one lasting five hours, but Vanda Butkovic's often playfully barbed staging of Penny Black's English translation is altogether more modest. The show features seven actors (and one cameo appearance) and has a running time of over two hours. Even so, it has its longueurs.

Still, it's valuable exposure for an important voice. Jelinek is keen to examine how organised sports influence mass perceptions. She is no less interested in the commodification of bodies and emotions.

There are echoes of Greek tragedy, with her onstage alter ego identified as Elfi Elektra, two of the male speakers going by the names Achilles and Hector and several choral passages. Jelinek also thinks generically: the bitter mother of a young sportsman is called Woman and her son is labelled Victim.

IAN HUGHES



Nina Hatchwell finds team spirit. Below, with Tom Lyall

Jelinek's torrential, haranguing wordplay can be daunting for the cast and hard work for the audience. The correlation between sports and war — both, in her view, driven by corporate interests — could be more pronounced and urgent. The production scores points, however, for its cutting humour and an inspired set by Simon Donger consisting of a huge, cloud-like mound of white fluff which the actors gamely sweep, jog through, sink into and stuff into their sporty costumes.

Next performance: tonight at The Maltings, Berwick-upon-Tweed. The tour ends on August 4 at the Chelsea Theatre in London. www.justamust.com/sportsplay

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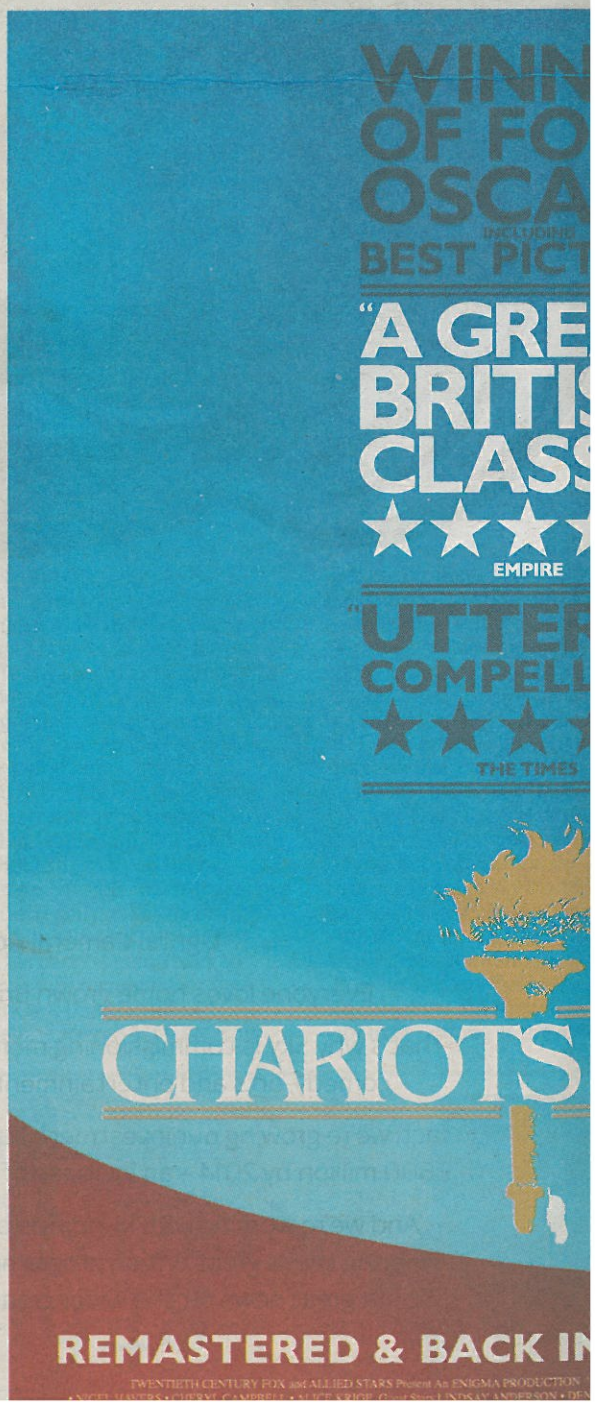

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Avalanche sweeps nine to their deaths on Cursed Mountain

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Laura Pitel Chamonix

Three British men, including an experienced mountain guide, were among nine climbers killed in the Alps yesterday in the worst mountaineering tragedy in France for more than 12 years.

A huge avalanche struck a popular climbing route on Mont Maudit (Cursed Mountain) in the Mont Blanc Massif at 5am, killing the nine and leaving eleven others injured.

In all 28 people were ascending the mountain, roped together in two groups, when the wall of snow struck. Manuel Valls, the French Interior Minister, said that the avalanche was "catastrophic".

Roger Payne, an expert mountain guide, died along with two other Britons

Roger Payne, a British expert mountaineer living in Switzerland,