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## KING

**Note: My critical authority was compromised more than usual here. All points speculative.**

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### *BOO.*

Schlock, a word derived from Yiddish meaning 'poor copy', is what happens when the horrific is made suddenly comic. It is also, for some reason, unfashionable in the theatre. This is something I've never understood. Despite its under-the-table connections with the world of 'low art', I've often found in it something deeply and surprisingly poetic, and it has a long and interesting tradition, beginning, at least in a spectacle sense, with the phenomenal immersive experiment of Étienne-Gaspard Robert's *Phantasmagoria* in 1797. The unifying nature of schlock - whereby an audience collectively faces a horrific encounter, and comes away laughing together - I find quite affirming, and sort of nicely, gently shocking. It brightens my mood.

Since the 1970s, all of this is cultural territory claimed by the contemporary horror film, and so Stephen King's work, which begins in earnest in 1970, sits exactly at this neat crossover, and in some ways defines it. If King wasn't a well-known exponent of schlock - he's far too earnest - it can certainly be interpreted that way from a distance. (From a distance, say, of Germany, although some might say that's not so distant).

This schlockification of King is evident when someone tries to make a film of one of his novels. They inevitably encounter this earnestness, the sincere psychological believability of King's narratives, which is just plain impossible to represent on film. The best film adaptation of a King novel is surely Kubrick's *The Shining*, which is actually open caricature. Jack Nicholson's performance is, to me, an acknowledgement of the medium's deficiency, an expression of defeat, let's say, likewise Shelly Duvall's often mocked performance, known mostly for its lack of acting and dilated pupils. *Pet Semetery's* adaptation, where a novel about the psychological torment of death becomes something more shallow and, well, gross, is another case in point. The TV-movie of *IT* is perhaps the biggest exponent, adapting an allegorical manifestations of a shape-shifting antagonist, standing for some darker psychological malaise in American culture, into a meaningless set of shock-cornucopia. One is potent, the other just means you can't ever laugh at a clown again.



Foto: Alexander Jaquemet

This is not to say that King's novels have suffered from adaptation. It's just that their earnestness becomes kinda funny, perhaps a bit 'pilgrimy', when you look at it with some perspective (side note: the recent production of Miller's *The Crucible* in my home town appears to have done the same thing entirely by accident). There doesn't really seem to be a way to avoid this, maybe because through their treatment of taboo the novels become kind of untouchable, a taboo unto themselves, and to re-create them imposes a kind of comic sideshow - like watching pornography. All of the nuts and bolts are there, and the thing should be damn well scary, but because you know it's not real, because there is this separation between the authentic and the reproduction, the visceral result is comic.

(*The Shining* is a genuinely terrifying standalone film from a genuinely terrifying novel. But even the scariest things, deeper terrors, can quickly become comedy, as the trailer [here](#) testifies.)

*King* is a new work adapted for the stage by *PENG! Palast* and with a four-night run at the Sophiensaele (now ended). Thankfully, it doesn't try too much to replicate the texts of Stephen King, and when it does, it goes for hyper-schlock. The approach to the material seems to be to use the material as a launching pad for an exploration, as mere starting point. The space repeats the resulting array of approaches, we sit on small poofs on the floor, perhaps a nod to the horror genre's preferred seating, and in small clusters with a scrim area in one corner and a single wall providing projections. It's an inventive, though I guess fairly standard post-modern approach to space, and points at the desire to 'open up' text to various possibilities.

The plot follows a documentary-maker attempting to make a film about Stephen King. Cue a cast of Germans on a farcical road trip across America visiting sites of significance in Stephen King's home state of Maine, having some encounters with the locals, and then some improvisations around the concept, and some excerpts of King's novels. A loose theme emerges, something like a European perspective on America, with its rags and riches narratives particularly acute post financial crisis, the American dream, and the dark solitude of American social arrangements. All of this is seen through German eyes, with the judgements of the characters reflecting their own prejudices (and by extension, those of a predominantly German audience). As my guide eloquently put it, "the poverty that Europe projects onto America is within itself".

This sort of moralising would seem to replace King's own. In which case, the question might well be - why use King at all? Why not just make a play about cultural differences, about the difference between German and American perspectives? If his earnestness is the problem, should it be taken down, only to rise up again as some other - equally sincere - point?

All of which is actually a bit of a stretch. I'll admit to being particularly lost in *King*. Normally I am at least able to have some semblance of what's going on, despite a hefty language barrier. With *King*, for whatever reason, I was unable to understand very much. Was this my limited comprehension, or a failing of the dramaturgy? Probably the former - though from what I have been able to glean, it seems like I was experiencing a concept that was an extremely ambitious attempt to use that great American novelist as a springboard for discussing cultural differences, and current events surrounding the financial crisis, through participatory and post-dramatic staging devices. That certainly sounds ambitious, and it was, I sense, a volume of water too large for its vessel. It seems like the kind of play that, with more time and resources, could narrow into a truly revolutionary argument. Certainly, it's a kind of high-concept theatre that's rare on any stages, bringing together Artaud's *Theatre of Cruelty*, Lehmann's *Postdramatic Theatre* and perhaps with a dose of Babak Ebrahimian's *Cinematic Theatre* and *Raum*. If it didn't quite 'get there' - and I should make it clear again that it may well have without my knowing about it - then the result was probably significant enough to warrant the experiment. I can take a stab and say this is something like where theatre is heading.