

György Schwajda: National anthem

Tragicomedy in two parts
Characters: 3 men, 2 women
Revival: Playhouse
Budapest, 16th January 1989.

The unorthodox structure of this play could perhaps be best defined by the term "theme with variations".

It is constructed chiefly of the early morning dialogues of a married couple living in the periphery of society. Conversation is restricted to what happened during the previous night. The husband, a factory worker, comes home regularly before midnight after a long day's work and boozing. He wakes the three kids up exactly at midnight and the family sings the National anthem together. Wishing them all a happy new day the man goes to sleep in the coal-scuttle so that his wife can wake him at four in the morning. Then they drink their coffee together, the wife tells him what happened the previous day as he doesn't remember a single thing.

This is the usual daily routine. Their words, gestures all speak of love, harmony and understanding between them.

However, the neighbourhood puts a stop to this idyll, they want to deprive the man of his only pleasure. The neighbours report them to the police; it is not only the noise they make, but

their miserable poverty is embarrassing. They report them merely out of helpfulness, they only want to help when they call the police and the public guardianship authority... Help comes violently, there's no way to evade it.

One night the man doesn't come home, he does not even have time for dropping in to sing the National anthem. The morning conversation informs us that he went round the neighbours to thank them for their help: he strangled them all. He is telling about it all dispassionately. The wife is also much more worried about them having missed the anthem. Now they can make up for the loss. They stand up and start singing it in a choking, faltering voice, but before they could be through the woman collapses to the ground, dead.