



New York Theatre Wire<sup>sm</sup>

Theatre Dance Performance Art Music  
Alternative and International Theatre

## Beate Hein Bennett

### Stunned by the World... But Time is Short

“This Is Why We Live”

From the poetry by Wislawa Szymborska

September 19 to 29, 2019  
LaMaMa Downstairs, 66 E. 4th Street, NYC  
Presented by Open Heart Surgery Theatre, Toronto, Canada  
Thurs. – Sat. at 8 PM, Sun. at 5 PM  
Gen. Adm. \$ 25, Sen./stud. \$20+ \$1 facility fee  
For tickets, call: 212-352-3101 or go to [www.lamama.org](http://www.lamama.org)  
Reviewed by Beate Hein Bennett Sept. 22, 2019



L-R: Alaine Hutton, Elodie Monteau, Dobrochna Zubek.

If we think of poetry as sound in space-- words gliding in and out of our hearing-- then poetry is movement, a body of sounds. Poetry as concentrated language that shifts in tone and mood has always had a stronger impact when spoken, and if one adds the body as the conveyor of these shifting tones and moods, the experience is one of concentrated empathic sensations. The Open Heart Surgery Theatre accomplished this magnificently with Wislawa Szymborska's poetry. The two performers, Alaine Hutton and Elodie Monteau, together with cellist Dobrochna Zubek, and the director Coleen Shirin MacPherson have produced a 70 minute mimetic rendering of Szymborska's poetic world that embraces humor, pathos, absurdity, and tragic recognition, often in split second transitions.

While Wislawa Szymborska (1923-2012) is not a household name in America, she is a winner of the 1996 Nobel Prize in Literature which she called “a Stockholm tragedy”, a reflection on her quirky humor, found in her collages as well. However, her poetic work also reflects the tragedies that had befallen her home country, Poland, through the dismemberments and the invasions from East and West, most horribly in her life time by Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany. “This Is Why We Live” presents this complex trajectory through the deceptively simple means of mime

with a poignant selection of her words spoken in three languages-- Polish, French, and English, and with the plaintive voice of the cello that is part of the verbal-musical-gestural performance. Dr. Dobrochna Zubek and Tatiana Judycka composed the original music. The French translation is by Piotr Kaminski, the English translation projected on the back wall for the texts spoken in Polish or French is by Clare Cavanagh and Stanislaw Baranczak. Viktor Lukawski contributed dramaturgical and translation support.

The Downstairs space at LaMaMa lends itself perfectly to this work. The wide space is kept mostly bare with a minimal but brilliant lighting design by Rebecca Picherak. The only larger element on stage left is a pile of large sacks in muted colors forming a mountain in the midst of which the cellist is seated on a table. Some onions are haphazardly suspended over the stage and some placed on audience seats. Set and costume design is by Helen Yung.



Alaine Hutton.



Elodie Monteau.

At the beginning, two figures lying close to each other on the floor can be barely made out in the penumbral light. The cellist begins a plaintive tune, in minor key, vaguely echoing Jewish musical motifs, seemingly improvising, while on the back wall a mysterious line is creeping upward as though searching for direction or a path until a silhouette of the poet's head is completed. It flies up like a balloon and the last stanza of "Microcosmos" is projected as though being typed at the moment. The cellist plays a Prayer and then speaks, in Polish, the poem "Nothing Twice" by Szymborska. The projection of the subtitles morph into two drops of water as the Cello improvises and the two figures rise. The morphing of forms musically and physically

become the dynamics of the performance that follows allowing for rapid or slow transitions through mimetic means carefully choreographed and masterfully executed. It is clear that the performers, Ms. Hutton and Ms. Monteau, and the director Ms. MacPherson speak a common language of Jacques LeCoq's training, the foremost school for mime and mask training that lends itself superbly to Szymborska's poetry and aesthetics with its surprising imagery and stunning turns of mood.



Dobrochna Zubek.