

Helena Smith



Kinetic theatre in Glasgow

The slick façade of 103 Trongate, Glasgow’s newest arts centre, conceals the home of one of the city’s strangest and most compelling attractions: the Sharmanka Kinetic Theatre.

Visitors gather in a darkened gallery surrounded by the looming shapes of mechanical toys. In the hush and semi darkness, one of the figures begins to move: a sharp-eyed crow clanging a bell relentlessly. Hurdy gurdy music is the comic but dark-hued accompaniment, lights illuminate the structure and throw the sharp shadows of animated monkeys, rats and skeletons on to the walls, and the magical world of Sharmanka begins. Each piece has its allotted time, rising to a frenzy of whirling, clamorous activity until movement, music and lights subside, and the next toy entices visitors through the gallery.

Created in Leningrad in the shadow of harsh communist rule, the pieces are unmistakably political – their creator Eduard Bersudsky lived with the toys in his flat in the 70s and 80s, because their grotesque and allegorical qualities meant they could not be viewed publicly in the Soviet Union. *The Tower of Babel* is tall and particularly intricate, its whirling, wheel-turning cast of donkeys, monkeys and historical figures including Stalin – brandishing an axe – engaged in a vain and doomed attempt to prove the supremacy of humankind. These are works of subversion, their comedy a fragile counter to a monolithic and oppressive state. And by necessity they were composed of junk: sewing machine parts, discarded motors, wire and pieces of old furniture.

But the effect of seeing the work is complex – they’re satirical, but there’s also something joyous in their inventiveness and in the simple pleasure of mechanical ingenuity. There’s an echo of the communality that draws onlookers to gawp at mechanical clocks in city squares, and there’s another thread of connectedness in that you are entering the fairytale world, with its shadows, its archetypes and its robust approach to sexuality: *Nickodym* is an unmistakably male figure, its erection rising and falling to hilarious effect as a little female bird sits atop his head and swings the bell attached to her beak.

Perestroika eventually enabled Bersudsky and his toys to leave the Soviet Union and move to Glasgow, free to create new pieces inspired by Scotland that are less overtly political. But, as the presence of organ grinder in his work suggests, humans are doomed to endless repetition. There is wisdom and warning in Sharmanka.