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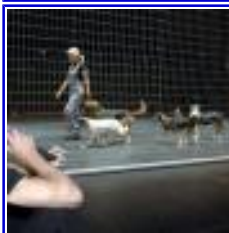
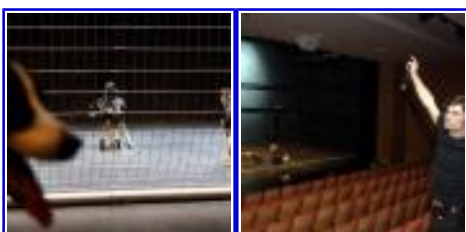


Dogs take centre stage for feel-good Croatian play

5 hours ago



Dogs in the Zagreb theatre where they perform in the play "Timbuktu"



ZAGREB (AFP) — Stray dogs play a star role in a groundbreaking Croatian show that has won rave reviews for raising awareness about abandoned canines and homeless people.

Director Borut Separovic's "Timbuktu", which premiered in Zagreb at the weekend, is a moving play about social outcasts based on the 1999 novel by US author Paul Auster, who backed the ambitious production.

Separovic took the unusual step of casting a dozen strays from a Zagreb animal shelter, with the main role of "Kosta" (Mr Bones) played by Cap, an eight-year-old champion border collie.

The play consists mainly of a 45-minute monologue by Mr Bones, with narration provided by actor Sven Medvesek, from his chair in the audience.

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On the stage, the gifted pooch runs, lies down or barks -- making movements to accompany his "thoughts" about relationships, loss and loneliness in a modern consumerist society.

Mr Bones receives quiet orders from instructor Alen Marekovic in the front row as he recounts the story of his life with his deceased master Willy.

"It's a story that emphasises the incredible love between a dog and his master, a homeless person," Separovic told AFP.

"The voice is metaphorically transferred to all the socially rejected people living in invisible and silent existence," said the director who lives and works between Croatia and the Netherlands.

"Timbuktu offers a therapeutic insight into how not to interpret democracy solely through rights, but also through responsibly and solidarity towards others."

At one point, the 12 stray dogs come on stage, a net falls between them and the audience and the play switches to the style of a documentary.

Narrator, Medvesek, tells the audience: "These dogs have a story which resembles that of Kosta's. We call on you to provide them a home. You can contact me after the show."

"For me it was extremely important that real, abandoned dogs appear in the play and be given a chance to be adopted," said Separovic.

"Then fiction enters real life. The play does not stay within a theatre framework only, as it continues after the performance," said the 40-year-old, who runs the Montazstroj performance group.

The pack of strays is led by Bel, an amiable brownish half-breed whose fate resembles that of many of the 150 dogs in the Zagreb shelter.

The 18-month-old arrived in the shelter last November last year after being found patiently sitting on a highway.

"As soon as Borut contacted me, I knew I would do everything to help make this play a success," Tatjana Zajec, a veterinarian who runs the shelter, told AFP.

Critics have heaped praise on Timbuktu. The weekly Globus described it as a "unique play which radically breaks through theatre boundaries."

"Every child who watched it will forever remember those who have been abandoned and forgotten," a theatre critic for Vecernji List, the country's largest-circulation newspaper, said.

"Borut Separovic evokes very powerful and daring scenes."

The show left many in the audience moved.

"I enjoyed it very much since the play is original and in our society there is a tendency to neglect all of those who have been abandoned -- animals or humans," said one of them, Nenad Kovac.

"The most touching moment was the entry of stray dogs and homeless. Their simple presence... brought tears to the eyes of many."

Separovic stressed the play also aimed at focussing attention on the fate of homeless people, 12 of whom play a role from the audience.

While Timbuktu's premiere was held on October 4, World Animal Day, one of the performances is scheduled for October 17, the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty.

The team hopes that all the stray dogs involved will be adopted during the 11 performances in October.

"Had we done a play only on abandoned people, the audience would be much less sensitive," Separovic said.

Homelessness was "something that one does not like to see and hear, but it can happen to any of us."

The homeless actors say they took pleasure from working on the project, for a symbolic payment.

"It was very enlightening," said one of them, 35-year-old Sinisa. "Actually, I would like to be engaged in something similar again."

Separovic said he set out to enlighten audiences through the project, which he says he created for his 10-year-old daughter Katarina and dedicated to his 13-year-old black labrador Max.

"I would like young people to understand that it's important to take care of others, those who are in a worse situation than we are," he said.

Actor Medvesek agreed: "We are calling on people's conscience that there are other creatures on this planet too, that we live together, that we must tolerate, respect and communicate with each other."