



Machines spring to life as human actors lose the plot

STAGE
STIFTERS DINGE ★★★★★

Heiner Goebbels
 Malthouse Theatre, until October 12
Jessica Nicholas Reviewer

THERE is one awkward moment in *Stifters Dinge*, Heiner Goebbels' mesmerising theatrical production. It comes at the end, when the audience hesitates before applauding tentatively. It feels odd to be clapping for an automated set, emptied of humans.

Yet the set does exude a presence. Indeed, in the absence of performers, the set becomes a character, as do the mechanised interpretations of natural elements: rain, fog, light, shadows.

The backdrop to the production is a moveable wall consisting of five partly deconstructed pianos, a handful of bare trees and an array of industrial apparatus. On the floor lie three rectangular panels, bathed in low light.

In the opening minutes, two

men appear briefly to shake salt through giant sieves into each floor panel, then fill the panels with water to transform them into reflective pools.

The rest of the drama unfolds via visible (low-tech) robotic arms and invisible (high-tech) digital triggers.

Semi-transparent screens raise and lower themselves across the room, lit from behind to form shifting, monochromatic shapes. Disembodied voices are heard singing or speaking in various languages.

Puffs of smoke hiss from long PVC cylinders, while whirring machinery adds to the muted, semi-industrial soundtrack.

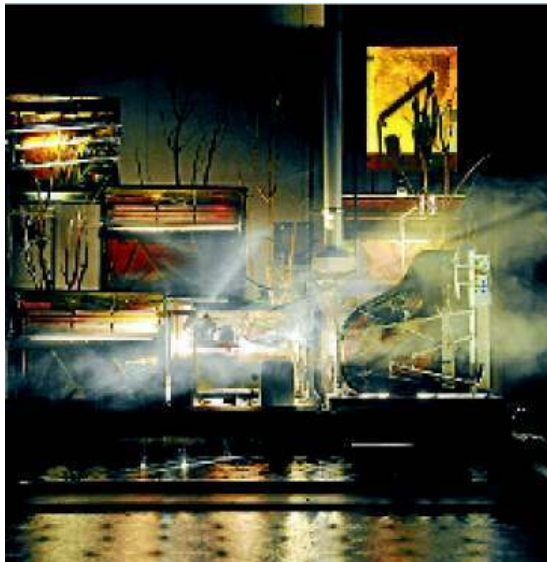
The ghostly pianos play themselves — mostly in abstract fashion, but occasionally melting into a graceful melody.

One evocative sequence features delicate raindrops falling while a solitary piano plays Bach's Italian concerto.

Another sequence invites us to contemplate a swamp, as we listen to an extended description of ice, snow and frozen trees (the words drawn from a novel by Adalbert Stifter, whose words inspired the title).

As the performance nears its conclusion, the piano-forest begins to move towards us, almost menacing us with frenetic glissandi that sweep across all five keyboards.

When the wall retreats, dry ice seeps into the exposed pools to create opaque geysers, and bubbles dart across the surface before dissolving in tendrils of smoke. It is entrancing to behold.



Some of the animated machines in *Stifters Dinge* PICTURE: MARIO DEL CURTO