

Last night, the Mladinsko Theatre in Ljubljana saw the premiere of the *Song of Songs* by the Flemish director Jan Decorte.

TOMAŽ SIMON: There is a point when theatrical language bids farewell to philosophy and turns into provocation. The thoughts I already wrote last night, immediately after a thorough reflection on what I saw. It was undoubtedly performance art, like it was announced. In a way, however, it was also about a performance as conceived by a Flemish man of wonders, the versatile creator Jan Decorte. His creative opus consists of scripts, translations as well as dramaturgical, acting and of course directional feats, and he is obviously also fully trusted by the royal crown. A great number of strings were pulled by the Belgian guests although they chose Slovenian protagonists for the interpretation. To be honest, the performers Olga Grad and Robert Prebil were the least to blame if we did not know what to expect from the eminent, legendary text. The director simply demanded authenticity and no mimicry whatsoever, and I am still not quite sure whether the *Song of Solomon* was interpreted by heart or read. Several moves on stage, no psychological effect save that of the torn or even dissected hall, the music not entirely suitable for my taste, in which I first heard the well-known Belgian ZapMama band rather than the eclectic sound background of the mystique into which a love-smitten heart should have been entangled. The opinions differ, to be honest. One either likes or dislikes the performance piece, there is no middle way.

Radio Slovenia, 10 March 2007

Heart without Seal

theatrical performance art

The *Song of Songs* in the direction of Jan Decorte is a reading performance piece which will (supposedly) make the young audiences of this theatre familiar with one of the purest examples of love lyric poetry in the world. Although highly economical in a theatre sense, the performance is not only a literary reading, but also tries to implant its own theatrical, performative thought into the linear exchange of the verse parts that takes place between the performers (Olga Grad and Robert Prebil).

This thought is only outlined, but not entirely without sense. Seated on a bench covered by some kind of manes (of hair?), the two readers namely read out Bible excerpts in a somewhat bored fashion, without the passion that befits high erotic poetry, almost self-evidently, as if from a post-festum time, i.e. when the love is already gone. Judging by their identical costumes, the two “lovers” (former lovers or only readers of love?) are equal, with the male position somewhat more accentuated. At certain moments, Prebil stands up and dances a disco-like solo accompanied by the pop music coming from the speakers; breaking out of the (love, solemn) ritual, occasionally illustrated by them both through slight bows, he concentrates upon himself, his own egocentric ritual. In these moments, we face a sort of individualist of the new era, self-sufficient but in fact lonely and most of all without love, which is only offered by the closeness of another.

Where has all the love disappeared to that is praised by the song of songs – this might be the question of Decorte’s performance piece, and also: what’s left of it? The answer lies before us: only expressionless daily life, in such obvious opposite to the exotic “joy” surrounding the origin of love, and loneliness as the time without love; a parallel flow of two beings who, despite being driven by some cold persistence, no longer leave seals on each other’s hearts.

Blaž Lukan, Delo, 13 March 2007

Bare, Clean

The *Song of Songs*, originally ancient Jewish poetry included into the Old Testament, is a lyrical dialogue of the betrothed with a very special, in a way hymnic, charge. Today, this poetry is probably interpreted in a lot more erotic manner than at the time of its creation. About 2500 years after its creation, it is surprisingly contemporary in its subtlety and charmingly ancient in its metaphors. When it was not possible to say that a woman was beautiful like Mona Lisa or that a man resembled a film actor, they needed to be praised through similes from nature, by means of animals and plants, dishes, fragrances and beverages: “Your teeth are like a flock of shorn sheep which have come up from the washing”, with the breasts resembling gazelle fawns. This ancient language is both alien and close to us, old yet surprisingly fresh in its oblivion.

But how to convey this poetry without falling into the tautology of the bucolic? Only by reciting, by acting it out without the time determination or, if we remember Koltès’s *The March*, by doubling the betrothed couple with a married one? The Flemish director **Jan Decorte** obviously decided on a very bare form, on abstract minimalism at all levels. “The betrothed” (**Olga Grad** and **Robert Prebil**) are thick-spectacled readers sitting on a bench and reading the *Song of Solomon*. Plain reading it, as if it were read by ordinary persons, rather than reciting and thus “elevating” it like traditional actors. Fixed upon the white panels on their right are various horns (including those of a gazelle), which does not create the impression of a trophy but sooner that of a desert landscape with traces of vanished life; the hair on the bench is also remains of something past (set design by **Johan Daenen**). No relationship seems to exist between the two readers although they get up in sync, bow, and even dance somewhat every now and then. They seem more like incidental library visitors invited to read something from the Old Testament, or people attending an amateurish audition, rather than someone who wants to impress us with poetry by all means. Therefore, the poetry can only become alive when it is “invested into” by us spectators, if our attention does not wander due to the minimal action since the two do not try to seduce us as “readers”. Perhaps this is the very essence: at the time when everything is screamed into our faces and loquaciously illustrated to boot, many things remain “unread” if we fail to control our desire for instant spectacle.