

La Scabreuse: [TAÏTEUL]

Cirko festival, Kiasma Theatre

10th and 11th of May 2008

The title “[Taïteul]” is the phonetic writing of the English word “title” in French. Already this indicates the reflective world that we are going to enter. However, this is only the beginning. From here follows a hyper complex performance, full of references, plays with signification, high and low, words and sounds, repetitions and enumerations. But the performance also has a strong sense of physicality and presence.

We enter into a closed and slightly claustrophobic universe inhabited by three samples of the human species: Acrobat, Juggler, Musician. It is a universe of oblivion; all knowledge and human memory has disappeared and they are desperately trying to reconstruct it through writing everything down on the floor and the walls: Romeo and Juliet, Tom and Jerry, May 1968 and so forth, everything in a chaotic order. Also the body memory of their disciplines has disappeared: the musician is trying to reconstruct tunes on her cello, the acrobat is trying to remember how to do the German wheel, and the juggler how to juggle.

At the same time they are menaced by something that has apparently made all these things disappear. This menace is represented by all the objects painted in harsh blue (the blue of Yves Klein’s monochromes), some of which fall from the ceiling and which gradually take up more and more space on stage. – In contrast, the objects of the three persons, the German wheel, the cello and the juggling equipment, are black. First, a blue bag falls from the ceiling. The first person takes and starts crying, as it is passed on to the next even he starts crying, and the same repeats itself with the third. Slowly, one starts to understand that the blue objects represent – in an immanently theatrical and ironic form – the manipulation of feelings by the mass media. Each object manipulates the actors in different ways: makes them cry, laugh, be selfish, be violent and so forth. We are finally beginning to understand that it is as if the manipulation of the mass media has made our history disappear, and the juggler, the acrobat and the musician are leading an impossible fight to restore it.

In writing one can try to reconstruct this storyline in a rather linear way. But in the performance it shines through in an overwhelming and chaotic multiplicity of acts, words and references. Though it has a narrative reason, the constant enumeration of words, artistic references, historical events, but also the acts’ of physically trying to remember their disciplines, comes forward as an almost absurdist play. The theme of recovering memory suits very well with these hyper complex enumerations, but in the performance the acts also stand very much for themselves and often without any causal relation to the fragments of narrative.

Though it is almost banal to demonstrate that this is indeed a postmodern performance, it certainly has so many of the traits of post-dramatic theatre (as coined by for instance by Hans-Thies Lehmann) that it is difficult to ignore. The abundance of references is only one. Another is

the mixture of high and low culture. The most remarkable – and critical – example of this is when the acrobat sings an (I believe) Elizabethan tune in falsetto, very beautifully, but the text consists not of poetic exclamations of love, but of names of different trade marks: Nokia, Kellogs, different kinds of cereal, coca cola, Siemens and so on. Yet another is the extensive play with sense and signification. A very telling example of this is when the juggler puts a ball on his foot and mentions the koala, and continues to relate different body parts and juggling movements with different animals: the koala, the lion, the reindeer. He is at once trying to remember how to juggle, and to restore the multiplicity of nature – the result is both comical and ironic. This at the same time illustrates the arbitrary relation between name and meaning, or in the more intellectual version: signifier and signified.

As this performance obviously stems from a clearly intellectual impulse, one could go on and on. Outside the performance space the company has put a number of the works that have inspired them for exhibition. Clearly, they have the intention of making a show that speaks to the philosophers of our time. One quickly finds oneself in a game of trying to be able to follow all their references, and trying to imagine the philosophers they have taken their impulse from. But it would be too easy to just stay in the realm of ideas, for the performance is also extremely physical and present and does not shun away from the burlesque, grotesque and comical. This is taken the extreme in the sequence where the juggler has been caught in the power of the blue mop. This object compels him to be not only extremely narcissistic, but even convinced of his own sexual power and affinity to God. – This combination is of course highly ironic. And it does not become less so when he plays the death of God (bonjour Nietzsche) in different versions: as Santa Claus in the summer, as lady Diana, and lastly as (a most chicken-like) phoenix. All this raving naked with one end of the mop hiding his private parts, and the other end sticking out into space. I need say no more. That the sign of male power is the object of the house wife par excellence does not make it less ironic.

For a circus performance one must say that the text plays an unusually strong part here. The actors are performing in English, with an impressive diction. But though the idea of the performance does not stem from the circus disciplines involved, these are nevertheless indispensable to the performance. Not only are they completely integrated and thus an equally important part of the action. They juggle, play music and do acrobatics in a way that lends it the same level of expression as the words, and the performance is equally structured through the use of the circus disciplines – indeed it is the physical activities rather than the words that give it the strongest sense of structure.

The performance starts in the darkness with the sound of the German wheel rolling against the floor. After remembering how to do the acrobat also has a sequence in duet with the Juggler and one alone. As the dominance of the blue power explodes, the wheel is dismantled and the performance ends with the wheel reconstructed in the wrong way: it is open as an “s” rather than forming the wheel. This is indeed a highly symbolic sign – though completely open for

interpretation. Equally significant in the end is the juggler's action: he finds a pot of black paint, drops his balls in it and juggle with them on his body so that they leave thick black traces of paint of his skin. The circus acts are not just a poetic surplus, but indispensable to the performance. They both present and represent cultural and expressive skills no less important than words.

According to Jean-Michel Guy's own terminology this performance pertains to the genre "l'outré-cirque", in which contemporary circus is not only cross-over, but in which the genres disappear completely. Indeed, this seems to be the case in this performance. However, this also means that it is the theatricality that spreads to the other elements. In this performance it is impossible to distinguish what is theatre and what is circus.

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