

Arabian floorshow

By Monna Dithmer, Politiken, 4 February 2006

You may not be able to get a mosque in Copenhagen, but you can at any rate get an Arabian hotel. One such hotel Kirsten Dehlholm, with her usual telepathic instinct, has had constructed at Axelborg in Vesterbrogade street. Admittedly, it takes place in something as prosaic as the building of the Agricultural Council, but the white-domed staircase winds its way upwards like a spiral full of promise.

'Welcome to our main lobby.' A servicing female voice guides us through the hotel's imaginary interiors, while film projections of strange landscapes appear on the floor. There, then, we can stand with our white faces out over the well of the staircase, gazing down into the depths, where the Arabian world unfolds.

Even this culture-confrontation tableau is a coup – pure Dehlholm. The distance between us and them is tangible; it is impossible to be completely sure of what is up and what is down, or where the Arabian world actually begins and ends. And what some of the spaces show us is hardly what we had expected, either.

True enough, we see unobtrusively crawling street-life with genuine Arab stallions (men) in finest apparel, exotic sunsets and roadways with palm-tree skies and cars driving down into the abyss. But one space also reveals bikini-clad dark-eyed pin-ups who cheerfully volunteer their services, while the skyscraper-scapes slide past in the background. And the onlookers seriously start to crane their necks

when another black-haired pussycat does an honest Arabian striptease on a staircase with a royal-blue carpet.

'It's a man's world,' is one zesty musical comment of the performance's DJ Ishtar, while a small boy in a suit builds a tower out of bricks. However, it is mainly women who appear in this man's world, although they are, it should be noted, seen from a man's point of view. This ingenious gender optic – as if Dehlholm and co-creator Ralf Richardt Strømbech had chosen woman as a back-entrance to the Arabian world – is strengthened by the fact that a live woman sometimes appears down there as a figure with sun-glasses and a long shadow, or a sexy sphinx in a shimmering party-slough.

In comparison with the renowned 'Why does night come, Mother?' (1989), where the same technique was used of letting onlookers stand high up and look down into the depths, there is now no experience as a whole of falling into another world, where gravity seems to be suspended. That is of course a lot to demand, but expectations are always high when it comes to Hotel Pro Forma. At powerful moments, however, one does feel sucked into this world, as when we arrive at the innermost, holy space of the hotel, where gleaming geometrical figures on the floor suddenly multiply, opening up yet another space even farther below. It was also possible en route in magical glimpses to see landscapes of images open up towards another world.

Translated by John Irons

