

Fine new book on Hotel Pro Forma excellently documents that the Danish theatre hybrid has developed a performance genre that is all its own

Behind the scenes at Hotel Pro Forma

Hotel Pro Forma a spearhead within the cultural export of Danish theatre. The production has been high and the demand great, something audiences both at home and abroad have benefited greatly from. In connection with the 25th anniversary of the establishing of this theatre hybrid – a cross between theatre, performance, visual art and architecture – Arkitektens Forlag (The Danish Architectural Press) is publishing a large and extremely adequate book about the performance group, which is not afraid of going into a clinch with the theatre.

The very attractive book has 204 pages and over 300 photographs, texts by Kirsten Dehlholm, Per Theil and Lars Qvortrup as well as previously unpublished texts for the performances by such writers as Inger Christensen, Morten Søndergaard and Ib Michael. In addition, there is a complete list of works.

The whole book clearly shows signs of having been meticulously organised in such a way that it appeals both to the expert and the layman who has only heard about Hotel Pro Forma but who is now curious to know more. So the book is both a brilliant account and an excellent reference work – if one chooses not just to concentrate on the highly delicate and sophisticated pictorial material.

Each of the contributors has a personal approach to the material. Kirsten Dehlholm, who is the primus motor of Hotel Pro Forma – and its predecessor, 'Billedteater' (Theatre of Image Material) – outlines in her contribution the considerations that underlie the individual performances which have taken place annually since 1985.

It is rare that the creator of a work of art or of a performance wishes, or is able, to explain or uncover the thoughts behind the individual product. Many artists feel that is the task of others, but Dehlholm is obviously a brilliant exception, for she uncovers layer upon layer in the individual performances, where the manner, process and result all surprise.

The drama critic Per Theil, who has followed Hotel Pro Forma from the outset, goes through and interprets with great acumen the many diverse performances. But since Theil is and remains a rebel and cheeky devil, the texts never give the impression of being laboured, and time and time again the reader is surprised by nonchalant asides and jesting yet fine reflections that hit the target.

A text that understands in a sophisticated way to combine the witty with the intelligent. In this connection, he draws parallels between Kirsten Dehlholm's research into the conception of space and the investigations carried out by Peter Greenaway and Robert Wilson. In his contribution, Professor Lars Qvortrup from the University of Southern Denmark relates the work of Hotel Pro Forma to the world picture of the 20th century. Not as a psychological theatrical experiment but as a research laboratory with the key questions: What is space? What are time and form? And what is the relationship between observing and the actual observation? The text is fluent and highly informative without seeming to be pontificating, often encouraging the reader to find a personal position.

In terms of performances, Hotel Pro Forma goes through a considerable number of stages that correspond closely to the world's conception of space from the Middle Ages to the present day, while also dealing in its most recent performances with virtual space.

All in all, Hotel Pro Forma is not afraid of going into a clinch with widely held opinions, which justifies one claiming that Hotel Pro Forma has developed a performance genre that is in a category of its own.

This is very well documented in the book. If one is interested in modern theatre, or curious to know more about what a performance is, this book is a must.

BY LARS WREDSTRØM