

The Stuff that Dreams are Made of

Retrospective exhibition on performance theatre Hotel Pro Forma is both a work of art in itself and a beautiful representation of the theatre's activities over the past 30 years

By JAKOB STEEN OLSEN (5 out of 6 stars)

It begins and ends with the pictures. The pictures that – no matter if one has perhaps forgotten everything else – have always imprinted themselves on the cerebral cortex, where they have lodged as ineradicable fragments of memory. They live on in one, these visual memory impressions from Kirsten Dehlholm's pioneer work with the performance theatre group Hotel Pro Forma, the fixed point for drama, visual art and architecture that the veteran loner in Danish theatre has stood at the head of for 30 years, and that has had an anniversary exhibition devoted exclusively to it at Gl. Strand.

Kirsten Dehlholm, who has personally organised the exhibition on the cross-aesthetic meeting place she founded in 1985, intentionally plays with the idea of the depositing of the pictures. A darkroom has been set up furthest in on one of the floors of the old exhibition building, where more than 100 lovely photographs succeed each other on the screen at precisely three-second intervals. Picture: 30 seconds. Darkness: 30 seconds. Picture: 30 seconds. If the onlooker has never seen the performances, they are just lovely photographs that can give one an idea of Hotel Pro Forma's activities. If, on the other hand, one has seen them live, one meets once more the visual impressions that have been stored. 'Oh yes, that's how it was.' The pictures also re-emerge when the performances are overwhelmingly interwoven into a tapestry in another room – a fine solution that emphasises their inner cohesion despite their differences as well as the many layers that can be read into every single one of them.

Here and Now

The exhibition is perhaps not the world's largest, but it has on the other hand been composed with the accuracy, precision and sense of beauty that characterise Kirsten Dehlholm's ritualised performances – let us call them that – installations of objects, light, sound and space – and of the human bodies when still and in motion, that stimulate our curiosity and identification in the abstract surroundings. It is so measured and thoroughly masticated that – even without the retrospective reference to performances and installations over three decades – it could function as an art installation in itself against the cool white walls of the lovely rooms. As an artistic experience here and now. As in the theatre – or wherever Kirsten Dehlholm has found herself – it is a question of the ability of the onlooker to see and listen. And to observe him- or herself while doing so.

Themes can come and go in Hotel Pro Forma's work; the shift between the elements varies. But at the exhibition one recognises the approach to the world which each time is that of Kirsten

Dehlholm: on the one hand, a fascination with the concrete, the precisely measurable, with science, biology, astronomy – and on the other hand, an abstraction of the tangible material, a large textural range of dream-visions and unfathomableness. Beyond time and place – and textbooks.

‘A sensory exploration of the world,’ Kirsten Dehlholm herself calls her many years of work, and it is this that Hotel Pro Forma has been and still is. Just take the title of the exhibition, which has been taken from a sound-bite picked up on a journey with DSB: ‘Today’s cake is a tree trunk’. It encapsulates most of it: the real, almost down-to-earth, and the unreal. Weight and weightlessness. The solidity that at the same time is transformed into a fascinating piece of poetic incorporeality.

A River of Words

Pictures that have settled gain new life in various forms of versions of quotations one can dwell on: the fluorescent, luminous darkness from *The One who Whispers* has been rearranged into an installation, scenes from the picture-spewing manga opera *War Sum-Up* can be seen on a megascreen, the 27 incredibly beautiful road maps from the Hans Christian Andersen performance *I only Appear to be Dead*’s narrow stage stretch out as far as the eye can see, the majestic staircase from the worldwide success *Operation Orfeo* and the play on perspectives from the third floor of the City Hall in Aarhus *Why does Night come, Mother?* can be taken in via beautiful photos – to mention just some of the things that are represented in reinterpretations or fragments of memory.

The pictures are one thing, the word-pictures something else. When Kirsten Dehlholm’s Illustrative Theatre was replaced by Hotel Pro Forma, the text also found its way into her universe. Space was always her point of departure, then words were added, created for the actual ceremony in the actual space. Coordinated, never overriding. Inger Christensen, Ib Michael, Søren Ulrik Thomsen, Carsten Jensen, Christina Hesselholdt, Tomas Lagermand Lundme, Morten Søndergaard and many others wrote them. The dimension of the contribution of decades is made visible in the best possible way. In an interior where long scrolls, rivers of poetically intensified words, wash over the floor – one is even permitted to unroll them further if one wants to see everything. Text extracts from the many performances are on offer. And as if that wasn’t enough, Kirsten Dehlholm even turns the exhibition into a performance in itself, for as long as the exhibition is open, changing performers will recite from the many texts in a verbal marathon. Lovely words to let flow through one and sink hypnotised into. At one’s own tempo. In actual fact, it becomes Hotel Pro Forma well to have come to a museum. Here there is plenty of room for one to breathe, room to explore what it means to be in the world that perhaps has been Kirsten Dehlholm’s for three decades but that now to the same degree is that of her onlookers.