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And The Ghost Ship of War is Floating

by Maija Treile

Is there a war in Latvia right now? My first answer is – no. I am not afraid that someone will bomb my house, my closest men are not enlisted into the army, I am not afraid to be raped by the enemy, my plans are under control and I know what to expect, they are mapped with my personal desires and possibilities.

At the same time Latvia takes part in international war missions, the soldiers are real people, who have real families, and some of them die. The nature of war or the ghost of war is somewhere close or distant, existing alongside everyone. For someone it is a grand-grandfather, who blew up bridges in WW1, for someone these are family memories or history books from WW2, for someone – his own experience in Afghanistan, for someone – the present. Do we feel war as something being close to us or just as a distant historic or geographic phantom?

The multimedia manga opera *War Sum Up*

Eastern and Western traditions, ideas, esthetics and philosophy. The structure is set by different cultural history phenomena, including classical Japanese Noh theatre and manga comics (literally meaning “weird drawings” - Japanese comics, which are widely popular also in Western culture), Danish design, French electronic music, British experimental pop and Latvian academic music.

The international project is headed by the international laboratory of visual music performance Hotel Pro Forma with director Kirsten Dehlholm, Latvian Radio Choir and The Latvian National Opera. The composers/creators of music are also three – Latvian composer Santa Ratniece, British experimental pop music union The Irrepressibles (in the British performance orchestra is represented by its founder, artist and composer Jamie McDermott, although he wants the group to be the author, not himself as an individual artist) and French Gilbert Nouno, who electronically arranged the compositions of Latvian and British artists.

It is interesting that neither Santa Ratniece, nor The Irrepressibles have heard each others' music during the creation process. Contemporary choir music's structure is complex, usually is not tended to be melodic and with no adhesive motives. Comparing to Santa Ratniece's more meditative music, The Irrepressibles' musical motives, especially the “hit” sung by Ilze Berzina sticks for a long time, just as in 19th century Italian opera aria.

The Opera's librettist Willie Flindt has created the text, using several classical Japanese poem, which poetics can be perceived from the translation subtitles. Texts are sung in Japanese, but as it was told in the press conference by one of the conductors of Radio Choir and War Sum Up – Kaspars Putninš –, the language made no difficulties for the choir.

One of the esthetic influences is “Noh theatre” which originated in 14th century Japan. Alike other Eastern theatre forms Noh theatre is based on conditionality, accomplished form and sign language, alienation, anti-psychologism (therefore, when trying to renew

“the old blood”, it was one of the most important inspiration source for Western vanguard theatre in the 20th century). In Noh theatre there is no dramatic acting, it is meant to be with no action – a story is followed by another story, experiencing and following the plot is replaced by experiencing “saint theatre” (as it was defined by one of the most significant transformers of performing arts in 20th century).

is structured in several parts – stories. The performance starts with Ieva Ezeriete's Game Master, followed by Aigars Reinis' Soldier, Gundars Dzilums' Warrior and Ilze Berzina's Spy stories. They do not create a united, linear plot, but add impression upon impression, element upon element. The performance is also made like laying upon layer, overlapping, interacting, flowing out, not creating a one-piece picture with clear message.

In my opinion, the projections of Hikaru Hayashi manga comic drawings and Jesper Kongshaug's lights create the most ambitious high technology use example on Latvian theatre stages, furthermore – artistically convincing and meaningful. The stage is divided into three levels – the middle one (bordered by “tulle curtains” on both sides, which is used as screens for the projections) has two-storey scaffolding, where the Radio choir singers stand for the whole performance, monumentally like statues in costumes designed by Henrik Vibskov.

For some time they are seen, for some time they turn into shadows. Projections of signs, weapons, impersonal superheros-robots flow over the bodies of the choristers. Coloring turns from bright contrasts and color explosions (beautiful kind of “flamy explosion” – beautiful, if we distance ourselves from the misery and death followed after the impact) to black-and-white and grey post-apocalyptic scene. In the back, behind the scaffolding there is no action, but you can feel the dimensional continuation, where the background lights change.

The stage foreground links the audience with the action on stage, where Ieva Ezeriete's Game Master acts in a yellow costume, sometimes carrying the scattered chairs (in the final their shadow will create the silhouette of tank – the war comes close to office), sometimes apparently knitting cozily. The Game Master is not the character to identify oneself with – eurocratic, calm and with localized movement on the background of a global catastrophe, something of the Latvian desire to tidy “one's corner, one's nook of land”, while other areas of the globe can explode – beautiful and entertaining.

I am not sure that the choice of the creators to replace the manga comic drawing projections with pictures of real war place and warriors/war victims' coming close to the final is not didactic, but I can assume that this change influence the synergy of perceptible forms, the message and the real life experience.

Alongside different professional qualities, which are doubtlessly ensured also due to the more substantial Scandinavian financing [than usual], I would emphasize The Latvian Radio Choir as the basic key to success. The vocal perfection and cooperation exceeds the audial level – the smooth performance ensemble acts together for a common goal and common motion score (it is not intensive, but also not easy). Despite the fact that there are four soloists, here are no extras, no clumsy corps de ballet dancers, no aimless tray carriers (i.e. weak links) that are usually seen in opera, ballet and dramatic performances.

This is an ensemble, where there is no ambition to surpass colleagues, but only to work together for a common goal.

The plasma of _____ is not social or political critical discussion or manifest. The War's Flying Dutchman floats – somewhere between the universe, war's archetypical nature, pop culture, comfort and the ability and yearning of the consumer society to turn the real horror of war into a geographically, historically, psychologically distant phenomenon.

Translation by Liga Svempe, SDH