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### **Kirsten Dehlholm goes to war**

*Hotel Pro Forma's* aesthetical war-nightmare 'War Sum Up' transforms suffering into cool images and bel canto, thereby enabling the performance to bore its way into the spectator in psychedelic fashion

by Anne Middelboe Christensen

Streaks of white etch a path across the stage picture. A woman in yellow sings with a dreamlike voice and the body of a housewife. Soldiers are mummified in white. Manga drawings of tanks shoot across those in battle. Death arrives in explosions and bel canto. The bodies leave bloodstains behind that congeal as dots on the drawings. But the housewife tidies up and puts the chairs back in their places...

Welcome to the paradoxes of war in *Hotel Pro Forma's War Sum Up* - a performance that fuses classical warrior texts from Japanese Noh theatre and modern, war-fixated Manga drawings into an ultra-topical performance about war.

Kirsten Dehlholm's universe is true to form - highly aesthetical and sustained by images. The music has become even more highly strung, and the dramatic tension is only for those with plenty of persistence.

But the protest has become sharper, the voice clearer. And the space has become flatter, more two-dimensional - just as modern war has been reduced to target-practice aesthetics on computer screens?

*War Sum Up* dissociates itself from pain. Willie Flindt's choice of textual material is bloodily sober and Jesper Konghaug's lighting has renounced all reconciliation. Here there is death and war and death. Nothing else. And war has been pressed up against the wall and the horizon, so that its soldiers can only move crabwise into death. Only the spy enters the space outside the line of fire, but she becomes trapped in her own lies, while wringing her hands in a belt-muff that has been designed by Henrik Vibskov as a queer greeting to World of Warcraft.

The Latvian Radio Choir leavens the performance with a frost-clear Latvian sound and Japanese words. And the performance actually had its premiere in Riga before setting out on a tour of Denmark that brings it to the Royal Theatre's Skuespilhuset next weekend.

**Opera on two floors**

The intense performance calls for a seasoned spectator. In Hotel Pro Forma performances, plot and image often compete for attention. The Darwin electro-opera *Tomorrow, in a Year* experimented with laser drawings in a vast space of emerging life, while the urban-specific performance *Ellen* combined an existential lyrical performance with the contribution made by local citizens to their own city.

In *War Sum Up*, Kirsten Dehlholm is back on a traditional stage with a mega-sized global message. As in *Operation: Orfeo*, she has positioned the performance vertically on two floors and with silhouette effects ad libitum. She only alters her stage pictures by Asian-like minimalist displacements. The dramatic stasis threatens to sweep the spectator along into the sound alone - into the satirical *bellum musica* of *The Irrepressibles* and the rumbling doomsday thunder that the conductor Kaspars Putnins controls with precision and surprising gentleness. But if you blink, you will miss out on the visual time-lag which makes performances by Hotel Pro Forma so psychedelic to behold. And which typically include a moment of complete surprise that changes everything.

#### **Civilians like you and me**

As far as I was concerned, it was the image of the helicopter. After scenes with the soldier voices of the Riga singers, whose resonance was such it could carry all the way to Afghanistan, the horrors of war were on the point of turning into a shimmering haze - the kind of shimmer that the media unceasingly sprinkle over their war coverages. But the stage vacuum evidently accumulated in the spectator. The mind became receptive. And then it happened. The projected Manga drawings disappeared. They were replaced by photographs of abandoned rooms in war-ravaged houses - and abandoned people. And then the overpowering storm of emotions was let loose. For the photographs depicted ordinary people, civilians like you and me. Bodies that had been brought to a halt in medias res - killed by bullets that had left strange patterns of holes in their legs and pitted their faces. And feet that had lost their sandals on their way into death.

#### **Helicopter drama**

And then vinegar is poured into the wound. A Manga helicopter 'lands' on the stage curtain in the Sine Kristiansen's tremendous mega-projection - as a skewering cynical image of the victors of war, who are only capable of fleeing from death. But this is not Miss Saigon. And this Manga-copter not only rises a couple of metres above the stage but also flies off, while the dead are left behind. And no one collects the bodies.

This is where Dehlholm triumphs with her brilliant image-narrative. No accounts are settled and there are no conclusions. Only sensory images that the audience will have to filter for themselves.

'Like floating seaweed we drift with the tide' is how it sounds in harmonious English. And the exotic Japanese sounds of death encircle the soldiers, who are powdered in white as is the dust which soon will cover their dead bodies.

But the housewife tidies up and puts the chairs back in their places...

Photo byline: *Nothing apparently takes place in Hotel Pro Forma's new war-performance 'War Sum Up'. But when the silence reaches its climax, the attack suddenly comes - on both the civilian victims and the spectator.* Photo: Gunars Janaitis