

Politiken

It almost makes one weep with gratitude

Two review of Today's Cake is a Log – Saturday November 14th 2015

By MATHIAS KRYGER (5 out of 6 hearts)

It is perhaps a bit odd to send precisely this reviewer off to see an exhibition that is based on Hotel Pro Forma's work on stage over 30 years.

For I have not seen one single one of the theatre and performance company's performances. Ever. And I do not in a sense want to apologise for this, just state that Hotel Pro Forma was not exactly part of my life's syllabus. That, on the other hand, I can almost regret this when I now look at the exhibition at Gl Strand.

And we might as well get it over with straight away. It is a really appetising exhibition that Anne Kielgast from Gl Strand and Hotel Pro Forma's Kirsten Dehlholm have kneaded together out of the productions of their 30 years of existence.

With the reviewer's lack of previous first-hand knowledge, this even makes it possible to consider the exhibition in isolation as precisely that – an exhibition.

I take the best – and for me the most important – first. The exhibition swings like a pendulum in an aesthetic that is reminiscent of a time in the 1990s. Between transparent and gleaming surfaces where a number of images are found on top of each other on the one hand and texts in fragments on the other.

And midway between one has the spatial dance that arises when a person (Dehlholm), who works scenographically and with the black and high-tech stage space, chooses to appear in the less playful white cube of visual art.

Perhaps that sounded rather too abstract. Physically, the exhibition spreads out over two floors at Gl Strand and over the staircase. It consists of photography, video, objects, installation and performance.

It is retrospective, but is so in a way that does not directly represent the oeuvre – rather, it unfolds it performatively.

So we are not dealing with showcase upon showcase of ephemera, sketches, programmes, manifestoes and manuscripts from a long life with design theatre and performance. Nor is there a whole series of TV screens with video recordings of all the performances. None of this.

Kirsten Dehlholm plays with the visual and textual elements from Hotel Pro Forma's history and allows them to gain their own life as sort of hybrid works of art, mixing them with completely new productions.

At two points one senses clearly the precision of the cutting that come from so many years of spatial image creation .

The installation of serial scenographic elements from the performance 'I only appear to be dead' cuts through three rooms on the first floor and directly lengthen and conjure with the perspective of the building. It takes an experienced eye to see such spatial potential in Gl Strand's bourgeois architecture.

A similar transverse cut takes place on the second floor, where the specially commissioned work 'The view has been painted' cuts across two rooms. The work is what the title says: a painted representation of the view that can normally be seen from the two now blocked-off windows of the two rooms – the view out across Gl Strand towards the metro construction taking place, Thorvaldsen's yellow museum and Christiansborg.

But the work is also a backdrop where, during the exhibition period, there are performance readings of fragments of the texts that have been included in Hotel Pro Forma's performances.

Dehlholm knows what she is doing when she cuts a space with a stage, or a stage is shared by two rooms. One clearly senses theoretically and practically experienced reserves of energy in working with the given frameworks of the exhibition venue, which are activated in a quite phenomenal way throughout.

But let us pause at this work for a moment. On the two occasions when I visited the exhibition, there were children and young people reading aloud from difficult and extremely beautiful texts in the painted installation.

Vladimir Nabokov, from the performance 'Relief' (2004), which was being read out by two persons who had just left the ranks of teenagers, was particularly moving. The recitation was slow, precise and concentrated and seemed to free of any affectation or nervousness.

I am wild about the reciting voice when it is unmannered and tries to understand what is being read while it is being read – and that was exactly how it was.

A layer is added to this voice-relay work, as the microphones that are being read into are linked to voice remodelling technology. The clear voice of the young man was suddenly doubled and later extremely deep and 30 years older, and shortly afterwards it had returned to itself.

That is a good trick to sharpen people's attention and, in particular, it punctures the direct authenticity that can often be a bit oversimplified in the performance situation.

In the course of the exhibition, a number of the writers who have written for Hotel Pro Forma's plays will come and read aloud – and former participants and actors will also put in an appearance. People like Søren Ulrik Thomsen, Ib Michael, Christina Hesselholdt, Torben Zeller and Ellen Hillingsø.

My own recommendation, though, is the young, unknown voices that I heard – when they will be reading again, I do not know, however.

That Kirsten Dehlholm insists on the exhibition being performative, and thereby pushing aside the direct representation of the Hotel Pro Forma project, is first and foremost an insistence on the complexity of her project.

'Today's cake is a tree trunk' does not thus appear to be a conserving, self-mythologising affair, but a generous gesture that feels inclusive and enthralling to be a part of. Also without previous knowledge.

Theatre is a social concern, and this exhibition reminds us of the fact.

/ PTO

By LISE GARSDAL (5 out of 6 hearts)

In the small country where lovers of the tradition of vaudeville and Holberg comedies abound it is frightening to imagine where the history of the theatre would have taken us if we had not had an avant-garde figure like the space explorer Kirsten Dehlholm.

Even though the anniversary exhibition at Gl. Strand does not specifically have to do with her or the significance of Hotel Pro Forma except for the dizzying production of the theatre laboratory, one is nevertheless, from the very first photo of the legendary huge staircase from the performance 'Operation: Orfeo' in 1993, reminded of where the young innovative scenographers and lighting designers of the 1990s got their aesthetic fix. One that enabled them to implement the visual impending revolution of the country's traditional theatre space.

Admittedly, there were historical artistic collectives such as the German Bauhaus and a handsome American by the name of Robert Wilson in which they could mirror themselves, but it was Kirsten Dehlholm and her crew who showed the Danes what visual theatre *is*.

She was the one who installed herself with her 700 performers at the top of the Kvickly supermarket in Holstebro, who stopped all the traffic in Stormgade, so that 'Radio for the Village' could wreak havoc in the street and get the Copenhageners to open their peepers wide. And who got a chorus line of orange rowers with gleaming acrylic thighs to officially open the art museum *The Ark*. In an unforgettable visual burst executed with soundless perfection.

'You are to laugh some more,' the woman with the knitting says from her museum attendant's chair, and I just manage to bark out an answer before I realise that I am wading around in a live installation. Texted, slightly hysterical video pictures from the manga opera 'War Sum Up' (2011) are being shown on two walls, and now the knitting museum attendant can also be found there, in quite a number of duplications or distortions of herself.

Suddenly I am sucked into the genuine Hotel Pro Forma universe, where scale and dimension are always subject to negotiation, where what one first assumes is reality incarnate is transformed into something abstract, or vice versa.

For it is of course not dry theatrical history that Hotel Pro Forma exhibition relates in pictures, models, costumes, sounds and words.

That would be highly insulting in relation to an artist who, like Kirsten Dehlholm, has 'opposed' habitual theatrical thinking when it comes to perspective, dramaturgy and Gestalt. Who during the first years steered well clear of goggle-box theatre, and whose 'performances' one could just as well call installation, or cabinets of curiosities.

'The commonplace always takes us by surprise,' is a quotation from the performance *Fact-Arte-Fact*, which was a ultrasmooth charade about mirroring, genetic engineering, mysticism (and artefacts), presented by identical twins in a strict choreography at Statens Museum for Kunst in 1991.

The quotation is found on one of the exhibition's huge scrolls of text fragments, which make visible in black and white the mixture of philosophy, science and poetry that has always been Hotel Pro Forma's point of departure. If one unrolls the scrolls, which one is welcome to do, one can put together one's own completely personal pot pourri of limitless, easily incomprehensible wisdom.

And yes indeed, when Mrs Dehlholm constricts the commonplace in corsets, lifts it up on cothurnes or turns the perspective upside-down, it takes most people by surprise.

But it is precisely here, in the meeting between the artificial and the commonplace, that Hotel Pro Forma's works gain what is perhaps the greatest and loveliest awareness. The performer, who is rarely someone schooled in drama but authentically *himself* or *herself*, no matter whether a child, young person or old person, has a twin, a missing leg or is a dwarf, places all his or her candour at the disposal of all sorts of metamorphoses, uncomfortable costumings and theatrical conjuring tricks, without he, she or us losing sight of humanity *as such*.

On the second floor of the exhibition we are given a demonstration. A well-dressed elderly woman in sensible shoes recites from Inger Christensen's wildly poetic text from the performance 'Aether'. Enveloped in almost classically painted scenery, the performer – as the séance progresses – becomes both art and nature, work and, yes, human being.

The last room of the exhibition is a kind of small memory museum where I collapse onto a bench while the freaked performance images of decades flicker past on a screen: slightly grainy and without any obvious coherence they remind one most of all of a wonderful and sinister dream. Or of the seconds in which the loveliest scenes of a whole life file past, just before death takes place. One was there. But when and with whom? Thirty years of gallopingly intense near-death experiences. It almost makes one weep. And feel profoundly grateful for.

