

Stark contrasts

By Vibeke Wern, Berlingske Tidende, 24 February 2007

'The Sand Child'. Concept, installation, staging: Kirsten Dehlholm and Ralf Richardt Strøbech. Music: T.S. Høeg. Film: Joachim Hamou and Alejandra Pinggera. Text: Tahar Ben Jelloun, Michael Valeur et al. Performers: Anne Christine Bech, Aino Junka, Christine Pettersen and Maria Rich. Songs: Mark Linn, Harun Ates, MC Jabber. On until 17 March.

PERFORMANCE. Using the masterly novels 'The Sand Child' and 'The Sacred Night' by the Moroccan/French writer Tahar Ben Jelloun as its starting point, Hotel Pro Forma's new performance questions gender and identity in the Western world.

'The child about to be born will be a boy, even if it is a girl.' These are the words of the Arabian father in Tahar Ben Jelloun's fantastic, sensual and painful novel 'The Sand Child', which has given its name to Hotel Pro Forma's new performance-installation. After having had seven daughters, the Arabian father demands of fate that his eighth child is to be brought up as a boy. But when it turns out to be a girl, the father decrees that it is to be brought up as a boy even so. And in the two masterly novels 'The Sand Child' and 'The Sacred Night' we follow via a network of changing narrative voices various versions of the Sand Child's life. The artifice in Hotel Pro Forma's performance 'The Sand Child' is that using the brilliant Arabian tales about gender as fate and as choice as its point of departure, the themes from the Arabic world in the novel are reflected in our Western culture. By this means, Hotel Pro Forma is able to ask important questions as to how modern people in the West create their identity, change and adapt, suppress their feelings, shut themselves in and seek freedom.

Throughout the performance it is possible as a member of the audience at the over two-hour long performance-installation held in the newly renovated, white-painted rooms of the Mogens Dahl Institute at Islands Brygge to move freely between two interiors, the men's and the ladies' room, where traditional ideas about male and female clash like a contrast between the form and content of the subject. The core of the performance is a collage of well-chosen excerpts from the two Arabian novels, quoted mainly – with fine diction – by the blond Maria Rich, who has a strong charisma when, with her beautiful long legs, she struts around in a bright-red tailor-made suit with matching high-heeled shoes. A

style of dress repeated in shades of blue in the other three female performances, who, via newly written Danish texts and projections of CVs, represent modern career women with the, traditionally speaking, appurtenant virtues. Career women who train for marathon races and for whom the greatest meaning in life is their jobs, while family and children are wiped off the map. The contrasts are stark between the super-sensual Arabian texts and the streamlined Western universe. And while we listen to the Sand Child's stories from an Arab jail, we see at the same time office buildings as a symbol of modern man's prison, where women too incarcerate themselves with masculine attitudes.

Poetry and sensuality, on the other hand, there is plenty of in the men's room, even though the live bodies of the male performances are completely absent. In this room, where the audience can get refreshments from the bar, we only see the three suit-clad men from behind on large video images with simple, expressive gestures. Indeed, one is simply sucked in by MC Jabber's powerful English slam-inspired song about truth based on Tahar Ben Jelloun's texts. Mark Linn's gentle soul voice is sensitive, and Harun Ate's countertenor is enchantingly beautiful, with its female timbre. As is the rest of the music, which alternates between jazz metapop and hardgroove, the songs have also been composed by T.S. Høeg, who has created 135 minutes of extremely varied and well-functioning music for Hotel Pro Forma.

It is clearly an advantage to know the novels in advance when setting out for the Mogens Dahl Institute, which is not completely optimal as a setting for 'The Sand Child'. With its focus on gender as an amorphous entity, 'The Sand Child' is, however, a considerably more interesting and better structured performance than Hotel Pro Forma's collage of images in 'The Algebra of Place', which could be seen last year in the rotunda at Axelborg.