

THE WRITER MAY WILLINGLY REMAIN A MYSTERY

Fascinating music theatre about Andersen: 'I only appear to be dead'

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When it comes to Hans Christian Andersen, a certain distance would not seem amiss. This was something even his own age displayed towards him – sometimes out of sheer class arrogance concerning the former street urchin, but for the most part probably out of a dislike of a rather complex personality. The immediate pleasure at having procured the famous writer as a guest quite often went hand in hand with the hope of soon being able to get rid of this irritating person once more.

Andersen had aches and pains practically everywhere. Toothache was one of his favourite subjects, and even the slightest skin rash instilled mortal fear. And it was even worse to fear, as he did, that he would one day be buried alive. That was why he always placed a note with the warning. 'I only appear to be dead' on his bedside table when he went to bed. Kirsten Dehlholm's distance regarding Andersen, on the other hand, is a consequence of the historical greatness that surrounds the most famous of all Danes and that dooms even the most well-meaning attempt at an embrace to fail in advance. In 'I only appear to be dead' the director of the Danish performance troupe Hotel Pro Forma is therefore cautious when it comes to hinting. Nor are we dealing here with the fairytales but with the writer's lesser known vita. The stage of the music theatre performance, which had its premiere in Halle Kalk, is a catwalk that stretches across the stage in front of the audience. 32 magnified playing cards form an endless landscape that marks off the catwalk to the rear. The landscape is re-arranged from time to time by white-clad, made-up figures – 14

members of the excellent DR National Choir, conducted by Kåre Hansen.

Dehlholm lays out many clues.

Play bricks take you to the world of childhood, which Andersen enriched to such a great extent and which he never really left. In a long rope we recognise the famous rope that the fear-stricken writer always took with him on his travels, so that in the event of fire he could rescue himself from his hotel window. And then there is the lonely dancer (Ninna Steen), who sees and thinks more than she moves, let alone dances, and who has clearly been fashioned in the writer's image, with his receding hairline, bad teeth and androgynous appearance.

This quiet and spatially very precise scenery is permeated by a strange music which, like the staging, avoids intruding on its subject. Manó Tsangaris' first major vocal score works on the deserted construction sites of musical history. At one point it writes a new chapter in the Christian vocal tradition of the Middle Ages, at another it places layer upon layer of voices on top of each other so that they become great vibrating sound interfaces, linking them to Ligeti's great choral works from the 1960s. Then suddenly it once more creates dense, polyphonic fabric, out of which individual words and sentences can emerge as if out of a mist. Voices that have been pre-recorded and electronically distorted (electronics: Simon Stockhausen), and that both feature alongside the live singing and are mixed with it, spread out the sound panorama – and heighten the artificial effect. Just as on the stage, Andersen is also present in the music – and yet is directly never quite capable of being grasped.

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