

MR. ANDERSEN IS SUFFERING FROM TOOTHACHE

On the track of the sensitive writer of fairytales – ‘I only appear to be dead’

A poetic performance of music, dance and art

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The 14 figures in white that come onto the stage could have come from Andersen’s fairytale ‘The Snow Queen’. Or from the bourgeoisie of around 1850. They are encased in stiff skirts and shirt blouses. One of them has a head-bandage; most of them are wearing heavy wigs. On the other hand, there are also short trousers and a short little skirt. In the gallery of characters Hotel Pro Forma sends onto the stage there is dream potential. You are allowed to think that every adult has once been a child.

‘I only appear to be dead’ is the title of the premiere in Cologne’s Halle Kalk. The same sentence was written by Hans Christian Andersen in the evening on small pieces of paper, for fear of being buried alive. It refers to the dark sides of the great writer of fairytales, to a fundamental uncertainty. This is more obvious in his (travel) diaries than in most of his fairytales. These diaries in particular have been attentively read by the director of the Copenhagen group, Kirsten Dehlholm. They have to do with a complex and often strange man’s encounter with the great outside world. Fervour comes up against the cold exterior – a difficult process.

Precisely this is brilliantly interpreted by Kirsten Dehlholm’s presentation. Admittedly, the audience must first familiarise themselves with the outer and inner aspects of the white figures on the stage. But suddenly, after the first 15–20 of the total of 90 minutes, the hall seems to breathe in time with the rhythm of the play. By that time Andersen – portrayed by the dancer Ninna Steen – has arrived on the stage, small and thin, with slow dancing steps – a childlike little fellow in a long coat. The made-up ‘mask’ with receding hairline, dark curls and bad teeth closely resemble the writer’s portrait, but apart from that, ‘realism’ is a long way away, also in the toothache scene, where Andersen, mouth agape shows holes in his teeth and black blotches on his dentures. Just as Andersen

walks with measured tread across the stage, so do the 14 figures follow a script of movement. They are placed according to a rigorous pattern and carry objects; they are almost sculptures, whether it be a flamingo, a stork or toy buildings. They adopt ‘speaking’ postures, but most of all they sing, and from time to time they sing with seraphic beauty, after which a sharp note sticks out that excludes every form of ingratiating harmony.

Here it is the Danish national choir that is involved – an elite ensemble. And for them Manos Tsangaris has written a floating-free a capella piece of music that Simon Stockhausen expands occasionally into something spatial with the aid of electronics. Gregorian chant meets the present day, just as Andersen meets the world, as Dehlholm’s long, varied wall of cards allows you to sense. Fragments of sentences from diary revelations emerge, for example, the horrible dream of a child that becomes a damp cloth. Via objects fairytales are cited, such as ‘The Wild Swans’ or ‘The Silent Book’. On one single occasion, ‘The Shadow’ cast by Andersen falls far indeed. Along the fated rope the ugly ducking rolls in. A ‘quack’, and the highly poetic performance of play, music, art and movement is over. Loud premiere applause.

BY RAINER HARTMANN

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