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### **What is the nature of a war machine?**

*It takes a Kirsten Dehlholm to take on war. Hotel Pro Forma's storm of images that pulls out all the stops is on its way from Riga. Painfully beautiful.*

*by Monna Dithmer*

It sounds like a battle one must inevitably lose: to want to make a performance on the nature of war. But the manga opera 'War Sum Up' shows in masterly fashion how the performance pioneers Kirsten Dehlholm & Co. have sufficient flying altitude to be able to approach war from the greatest possible distance, to finally end up so close that it hurts.

Threateningly, the creatures of war come into view: a small troop that seems to have come straight from the Chinese emperor's many thousand-year-old terracotta figures onto the stage of the National Opera in Riga, where 'War Sum Up' had its world premiere at the weekend. Here Hotel Pro Forma have had the unheard-of luxury of having a large stage placed at their disposal for three weeks of rehearsals. It shows.

Like white chess pieces marshalled and ready for battle, the warriors stand and sing. Incomparable voices coming originally from the deep belly of Noh drama. The unwavering archetypes of war – though under constant transformation. Under attack.

The performance is, as Dehlholm puts it, in itself 'a war machine that spews out images, voices and music'. The stage is set for a head-on collision between raw present-day manga drawings and poetically concentrated Noh texts, between classically based choral music, electronic music and melodious chamber pop – created by the Latvian Santa Ratniece and the British group The Irrepressibles.

As the centre of this Operation Picture-Storm that pulls out all the stops, the players of war are hurled out into a hyperreal, dreaming universe. The dust-white warriors in the sculptural, felt-fat costumes of the fashion guru Henrik Vibskov can suddenly shrink into razor-sharp black silhouettes, only to be hit by manga explosions of glaring yellow, surrounded by huge hands and XL firearms, while a superhuman robot towers up in the background.

Amazingly impressive – powerful – purely visually, and the music sucks you in with its sometimes intimately melodic, flowing passages, sometimes ethereally chanting harmonious sounds as sheer vertical columns of sound. It seems somewhat claustrophobically static at first, but this corresponds exactly to The Soldier, who as the first of the figures of war steps forward and has his clinical diagnosis projected out over the stage: 'post-traumatic stress, depression, angst...'.

The war machine increases in explosive strength when the old, big-bellied Warrior steps forward, framed by black spectres, red ruined landscapes and cacophonous clashes.

But when The Spy takes over the stage in the form of a two-metre-tall Superwoman with luminous eyes, the stage lights up into a flower-power orgy, and the music pulsates and pounds away with a playful speaking choir. Sheer feminist-fantasy utopia.

Dehlholm herself has the reputation of being a superwoman, who with her x-ray-like performance eyes has, like a spy, entrenched herself in traditional theatre and transformed it into her own magical machinery. But in 'War Sum Up' this is with an impact Hotel Pro Forma has not demonstrated for many years. With her super-taut form stretched out over the classical proscenium framework, it is a successor to the greatest of their previous hits, 'Operation : Orfeo' from 1993.

It is not just a smart expression to refer to 'War Sum Up' as a war machine. The hyper-precise interweaving of music, image and light, of physicality and technique, really makes the performance a machine of transformation that, like war, can spew out people as flat figures or three-dimensional beings. Which, basically, is the difference between the dead and the living.

Just as the terracotta figures gradually assume their true identity, out of the interwoven images there finally emerge authentic war photos, where a pair of bloody legs can stick out of a uniform. These are not just performance-stylised tableaux, but war as an unbearable here-and-now reality.

Not even Superwoman is able to put this right. Nor can the housewife-like little figure in a yellow dress, who goes about the stage clearing up throughout the performance. For what sort of a shadow is it that her neatly ordered pile casts while she sings a painfully lovely good-night song to all of us? A tank! That is the true nature of war – that it never stops.

#### *SUPERWOMAN*

*The players of war emerge as a fascinating fusion between ancient terracotta warriors and manga-grey animated cartoon figures – with no less than costumes by fashion guru Henrik Vibskov thrown into the bargain. Photo: Gunars Janaitis*

