

## A Dizzying Arabian Visual Poem

By Mette Garfield

The Dubai skyline in a soft light, two people on horseback, a man walking across a square, hands above textiles, a boy playing with toy bricks, keys for hotel rooms, a red ball and a woman's shaved armpit – these are but a few of the images that, along with the tender Arabian techno-beats, formed part of Hotel Pro Forma's latest kaleidoscopic production, *The Algebra of Place 1*. These images from intimate and public life in a modern Arabian world are altogether more sensuous and quiet than the violent images that we have been exposed to again and again by way of the media and their coverage of the disturbances in the Middle East in relation to the Muhammad cartoons controversy.

At a slower pace and in the subtle and complex language of cinematic art, Hotel Pro Forma's visual poem adds a new angle of expression to the reality of Arabian culture.

*The Algebra of Place 1* was performed in Axelborg Tower, a fabulous space that only few Danes know from the inside, a space that allows the audience to experience the performance from above as well as from below. As spectator you find yourself on one of the six top balconies, looking down into the vertiginous gorge of the tower. This means that you direct your attention, not only to the performance, but also to yourself and your own body – hoping that the railing will hold.

So you have to dare to lean out, if you want to see the film montage that is projected onto the floor of the tower in quadrangles that are partitioned by a screen placed on the floor in circular metal band. Thus, by way of the changing framing of the film, various

geometric patterns are created in the course of the projection. On the vertical screen you see only faint glimpses and fragments of the film, since you look at it from a bird's-eye point of view, but if you dare lean out a little further, you can see a little more. And if you move about on the balconies, as indeed you are urged to do at beginning of the performance, you will see other things and even more of Hotel Pro Forma's beautiful, subtle and challenging arabesque.

As it is often the case with the performances of this theatre company, the focus is on the audience's own perspective. The members of the audience, then, become co-producers of this very open kind of performance, because their own perspectives and their own associations influence the creation of meaning during the performance.

### Hotel Pro Forma

Since 1985 Hotel Pro Forma, headed by Kirsten Dehlholm, has experimented and toyed with the perspective of the audience in hybrid performances that combine music, dance, architecture, science, digital media, film etc. Hotel Pro Forma's highly visual performances are not, as opposed to traditional Scandinavian theatre (Strindberg, Ibsen), based on a written text that is to be performed and interpreted. Rather, they juxtapose the text with the acting, the architecture, the music, the scenography, the light etc. This is what is called performance theatre: Meaning is transposed to a staging of the space that remains hidden in traditional theatre. In traditional theatre, as a member of the audience, you more or less expect to identify psychologically with the characters

that act on the stage as if the audience was not there.

Performance theatre, however, focuses on *how* the presentation is carried out and on the inclusion of the audience's own thought connections. One example is Hotel Pro Forma's opera-success *Operation : Orfeo* from 1993. Here the visual compositions were based on the graphic patterns created by the participants as they moved up and down a flight of stairs. The creation of meaning did not take place in narrative plot meant to interpret the myth about Orpheus in specific way – the crucial part was rather the movement, the light, the music and not least the silence that the members of the audience, in their physical experience of it, were free to give which ever value they wanted.

As suggested by its name, Hotel Pro Forma is a nomadic theatre company that does not work with a regular cast, but develops a co-operation with different artists for each new performance.

*The Algebra of Place 1* created by Kirsten Dehlholm and architect Ralf Richardt Strøbech in a collaboration with the Swedish-French cinematic artist Joachim Hamou, the Iranian-Dutch DJ Sharie Parsipoor and Finnish performer Aino Junka. The performance is partly inspired by the French-Moroccan writer Tahar Ben Jelloun's book *The Sand Child* which is a novel about an Arabian girl brought up as a boy. *The Sand Child* follows the Arabian narrative tradition in that it is narrated in numerous voices and composed in an intricate system of boxes. This style is also felt in *The Algebra of Place 1*: It is, for example unclear who the narrator is and whether the performance is seen from our point of view (the western perspective on the Arab world) or from their point of view (the Arabs' own experience of the Arab world from within). The much-debated dichotomy

between *us* and *them* is thus erased in this performance.

The dramaturgic structure of the performance is an international hotel through which the audience is guided by the voice of the DJ. It comprises 11 scenes, i.e. 11 rooms in the imaginary hotel – the lobby, the gift shop, the club room, the patio and the phone booth. Each room brings about new meetings and patterns as a result of the various constellations of the cinematic montages and their framings, almost like a moveable mosaic – all of which is simultaneous with the real-time intervention of a female performer.

In real-time, for example, you see the performer lying on the floor dressed in black and attempting in vain to reach out for her shadow that appears on the floor by way of the film projection. A concrete and open expression, perhaps, of the Western and the Arab world having difficulties reaching each other?

### **The distance**

For a brief moment this scene plays on the optical illusion that arises when the performance is viewed from above. The performer seems to be hovering in the air, although we, the audience, are aware that she is just lying on the floor. Including optical illusions in the performances is something that is very characteristic for Hotel Pro Forma. It emphasizes that you can toy with the perspective of the audience and that appearances can be deceptive. What the audience sees is not necessarily what it seems.

This way the performance questions the perspective we have as viewers and makes us aware of the importance of our perspective on the Arabian which is the theme of this performance. It is not possible to place yourself somewhere outside and

comprehend the whole performance in one unified view. The performance points out that our world is, so to say, a world of worlds that are entangled in one another.

Apart from the fact that the performance is inspired by the surface-oriented Arabian ornamentation, this may be the reason why the performance paradoxically insists on keeping a certain distance to the audience, e.g. the distance created by the dizziness that follows from viewing the performance from high above. The performance is surface-oriented due to the two-dimensionality of the film montage, and because it refrains from making use of the depth of the tower. This, too, accentuates the distance between audience and performance, just as it engenders a certain lack of intensity.

This, however, constitutes a subtle way of discussing the distance that can be between for example different realities or cultures, e.g. the Arab and the Western world. Possibly, Hotel Pro Forma seeks to emphasize the necessity – a very concrete necessity during the performance itself - of having the courage to lean out a little further so as to be able to see more of each other's worlds and thus approach each other a little further. But, as in the many other performances by Hotel Pro Forma, the intention is not to supply readymade answers, but to question our view of reality in an ambiguous and open way.

## **The enigmatic**

Another recognizable feature of Hotel Pro Forma's performances is the enigmatic. The red ball that shows up again and again by way of the film montage, but also – as the only element other than the female performer - breaks the two-dimensional surface of the film by its physical presence in real-time, could be an example of the enigmatic or the inexpressible in Hotel pro Forma's productions.

The performer rolls the ball under her foot, plays with it, and the ball can almost be seen as a leitmotif that recurs throughout the performance in various ways. Perhaps it would even be justified to claim that the ball assumes the character of a supporting role in the performance.

In a concrete sense, the ball adds different dimensions to the performance and ties them together. The ball could also be said to reflect the inexpressibility you encounter when trying to say something about the Arabian – a situation in which it is only too easy to fall back to one's own notions and prejudices, expressed in exotic and nostalgic stereotypes that do not change the viewer's perception, but rather reinforce the fixed dichotomy between *us* and *them*.

The physicist and philosopher Archimedes said: Give me a fixed point, where I can stand, and I will move the world. Perhaps the ball is Hotel Pro Forma's fixed point in this performance – a performance that, let us hope, will manage to move the world just a little bit...