

## Archives, Classics, and Auras: The 2016 Oslo International Festival

The 2016 Oslo International Festival was the biggest to date. Stretching over three weeks, the festival offered twenty works of theatre, dance, performance, and music as well as seminars and talkbacks. It was also the last for its creator and Black Box's Artistic director since 2009, Jon Refsdal Moe, who is leaving to become Dean of Theatre at the Oslo National Academy of the Arts. Moe's successor, Anne-Cécile Sibué-Birkeland, is the founder of the arts administration and producing company Bureau Cassiopée-Paris and its sister organization in Bergen, Norway. In spite of Sibué-Birkeland's qualifications, her selection to head Black Box was met with some controversy. Sibué-Birkeland's spouse, Sven Åge Birkeland, is the current artistic director of BIT Teatergarasjen in Bergen. The same family running two of the three most influential experimental theatre houses in Norway—the third being Per Ananiassen at Trondheim Avant Garden—raised a few suspicious eyebrows in the press. But any fears of artistic or administrative collusion as expressed by the press of Bergen were absent from the festival. What becomes of the International Festival under Sibué-Birkeland's leadership, however, remains to be seen. Nonetheless, this year's event provided a worthy sendoff for its departing creator. The festival continued its agenda of mixing established globetrotters like the Italian company MOTUS and France's Joris Lacoste with Scandinavian artists and companies. This latter group including Iggy Malmborg, Spreafico Eckly, Verk Produksjoner, and Lisa Liewere were shown currently over the opening week alongside the Israeli choreographer Arkadi Zaides.

Archive (2014), the festival's opening performance by the Israeli choreographer Arkadi Zaides, considers how dance can contend with the voluminous documentation of the conflicts occurring on the West Bank. Zaides' source material is an archive of hand-held camera footage of human rights violations recorded by Palestinians. The registry of clips is spearheaded by B'Tselem (The Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories), which equipped Palestinians with cameras to document infractions by Israeli military and settlers. Zaides, on a bare stage save for two large video screens and a small table holding various pieces of technical equipment, provides this sparse context. He also notes that, like himself, everyone we will see in these videos is an Israeli. This fact becomes increasingly critical over the hour-long performance: while Palestinians are framing the scenes within this archive, they are exclusively of Israeli bodies. The documentation therefore provides an inroad for Zaides to examine how the occupied territories produce a unique choreography legible within the bodies of Israelis living in the West Bank.

The production has a deceptively simple conceit. Using a remote, Zaides plays clips from the archive on the center-stage screen while the details of the footage (name of documenter, location, and a brief description the video's content) appear on the upstage right screen. The bulk of the videos are less than a minute long. Zaides studies the footage as it plays out before us, pausing or rewinding the tapes for further reflection. Backlit by the films, Zaides' silhouette towers over the landscapes and crowd scenes—an imprint of the present upon these past and ongoing conflicts. In one clip, Zaides stands before a hilltop vantage of the countryside. An open blue sky hangs above a map of greenery snaked with white stone. Looming over the image like

a god, Zaides zooms in to uncover what appear to be military vehicles, the discovery shattering the pastoral serenity. Many of the videos are similarly deceptive, their tensions only revealing themselves under Zaides' reframing. Meanwhile, the upstage right screen juxtaposes this poetry with clinically contextual details: "drunk children attack a house." Often enough, we never see the event that gives title to the footage. In the haunting final image of the production, for example, we watch a clip attributed to "Raed," the title of which is, "A soldier throws a stone at Raed." In an increasing close-up, we observe an Israeli soldier outfitted with an assault rifle glare down at the camera operator positioned behind a chain-linked fence. Zaides does not show the stoning, but allows the image to capture the violence of surveillance. In another we simply watch distant, ant-sized men set a field ablaze, turning the horizon into a sea of flame.

As we move further into the archive, Zaides embodies the gestures and postures of the onscreen figures. These take overt and subtle forms. Zaides recreates the cat-and-mouse of an Israeli soldier ducking behind a building before stepping up the street, his rifle threateningly pointed at an off screen target. If Zaides' choreography captures the Israeli body in action, we, the audience, are recast as the unseen, witnessing Palestinians. In another video, Zaides adopts the physicality of someone launching rocks up at a balcony. The video taken by the balcony's inhabitant gives a bird's eye view of the aggression. Zaides, in turn, previews the gesture while facing the screen before reproducing the video's vantage point by planking himself in a push-up position and lifting his palm outward to the audience. Later, Zaides removes his shirt and wraps his face to mirror an Israeli menacingly advancing on a Palestinian settlement. Once Zaides masters the figure's lumbering gait, he turns to the audience and approaches. His ability to dress himself in these varying physicalities is uncanny and matches the images' political urgency with a sense of artful awe.

This structure repeats with Zaides taking on an increasing assemblage of gestures. Once the repertoire is established, Zaides loops the physical and vocal score. The vocalizations—a soldier's whistles and shouts to shoo away shepherders—are recorded and repeat through a delay pedal. The selected movements are threaded together, leaving the actions ghosted by their original contexts and redoubled with meaning. Independent of the videos, these gestures and sounds suggest vulnerable bodies, bodies in pain and desperation, in addition to perpetrators of violence. It is a complex portrait of Israelis' daily involvement in the conflicts of the West Bank that locates its violence and humanity in unresolved poetic tension. To call this performance pro-anything (let alone Israeli), however, would be to ascribe it too fine a point. Zaides' program notes identify him as an "oppositional" choreographer. The performance's fragmented beauty suggests that such didactic political stances are what his art very well may oppose.

### Boner

The lecture/demonstration/performance Boner (2014), by the Swedish theatre artist Iggy Malmborg, never shies from didacticism. "This is not a performance, it's a phenomenon!" shouts Malmborg in the waning moments of the show, a declaration that the performance slyly materializes over its preceding ninety minutes. The performance, in short, is an exegesis of the notion that subjectivity cannot be undertaken without simultaneously considering the role that objects play in the construction and establishment of the self. In this respect, the show is an

outgrowth of the recent interest in new materialism, object-oriented ontology, and actor-network theory, which have made serious inroads into performance scholarship as well as artistic practice. Boner utilizes the theatre as a site ripe for demonstrating the relationship between subjects and objects. At one point, Malmborg informs us that his aspiration was to reveal the subject's parallel-at-best, secondary-at-worst value in relationship to the objects of the theatre. He posits that the continual return to staging Richard III, for example, might not stem from the human need to parse villainy and virtue or other anthropocentric concerns, but rather from the fact that across the globe there are crowns in prop rooms begging to be onstage. Boner is an attempt to elucidate this idea by affording the theatre's objects an opportunity to speak and reframing the subject (Malmborg himself) as just another object.



Iggy Malmborg's *B o n e r*. Photo credit: Tani Simberg.

At the outset, we find Malmborg sitting downstage dressed in black jeans, high tops, and a sweatshirt with a reflective white square in its center. He welcomes us to the theatre before introducing his three co-performers: a hand-held wireless speaker, which will voice the thoughts of various objects throughout the show; a stage right speaker that functions as the MC providing instructions and using a chime to signal new sections of the performance; and a stage left speaker that keys up Booker T and the MG's "Green Onions" (1962) whenever the performance is in need of a little dramatic underscoring. Malmborg plays interlocutor to his co-performers carrying out tasks when prompted. These assignments fall under three categories. The MC speaker announces objects in the room (the floor, the fire hose, a column, an upstage black curtain, a desk, etc.), prompting Malmborg to carry the wireless speaker to the named object so that it can voice its properties and function.

The objects' self-diagnostics range from the comically matter-of-fact to the theoretical. The desk, for example, explains (via the wireless speaker) that its best properties are its height and evenness. Later, the wireless speaker is hoisted up to the lighting rig so as to voice a light, a PAR to be specific. While outlining its purposes, the lamp is careful to emphasize that its ability to create a uniform look is dependent upon the entirety of the lighting rig. A massive column—remaining feature of Black Box's original function as a chocolate factory—digs deeper towards metatheatricality by querying the relationship between independent art and former industrial structures. One possible correlation, suggested by the speaker, is the need for artists to ground their intellectual and emotional labor in the concrete artifacts of a bygone age. Other objects' confessions similarly reflect on the current state of experimental performance. The upstage black curtain notes that it is hiding a white wall, which was painted to accommodate the trend of video projections in contemporary performance. The curtain then goes on to predict that this trend will one day expire and the wall will be repainted black at which point the curtain's function will cease and it will be packed up for storage, reducing it to trash. All of the objects end their introductions on the inevitability of their own demise. The refrain is an unintended drop of sentimentality amidst all the mechanics. After all, once their value has expired, subjects and objects share in their obsolescence.

If this sounds hopelessly conceptual and plastic, Malmborg provides the evening a warm-blooded core. Despite his functionary role, Malmborg is tasked with demonstrating the properties of the human subject: he is assigned to cry, blush, produce an erection, and use audience-generated suggestions to come up with concepts for new performances. Each exercise is announced by the MC speaker, which gives clear guidelines for their successful completion: tears are water coming from the eye, blushing is redness in the cheeks, neck, and ears, and an erection is measured by anything steeper than a forty-five degree angle. We alone are, presumably responsible for determining whether Malmborg succeeds in creating new concepts. The MC speaker allots a time limit in which these feats should be achieved, which Malmborg dutifully logs into an onstage timer. Malmborg undertakes these enterprises with nothing more than his own human imagination and willpower. The tasks' requirements are not met, despite Malmborg's production of watery eyes, rosy cheeks, and a good fifteen-degree angle. The failed human efforts call for the stage left speaker to cue up "Green Onions," which recharges the scene with new, comic interest.

It is not until thirty minutes later, when Malmborg reattempts these tasks with the aid of objects that their point becomes entirely clear. An applique of Tiger Balm has Malmborg's face streamed with tears in no time. Blushing is quickly achieved when inflating dozens of balloons that, when released, zip through the theatre with unpredictable pleasure. The erection is assisted by a Viagra pill, which Malmborg took some twenty-five minutes earlier in full view of the audience. Although a forty-five degree angle may not have been achieved, the medicine significantly propelled Malmborg towards the ultimate goal. It also underscored the production's contention: if theatre is a human venue, its achievements are all couched in the technology of objects, whose function is deserving of our attention. This fact may not be a revelation, but in Malmborg's production the reality of the subject/object relationship yields moments of subtle beauty. In the final segment of the performance, a blackout slowly encroaches, and as the theatre darkens, the room's glow-in-the-dark safety instructions burn with a mossy-green light. Following the tutorial of Malmborg and inanimate company, these photoluminescent signs seem to emit more than stored light, they offer the aura of a co-star.

What a classic is and how it performs in (our) time. Paul McCarthy, Rocky, 1976

The relationship between the archival and auratic was a central concern of the Norwegian duo Spreafico Eckly's *What a classic is and how it performs in (our) time. Paul McCarthy, Rocky, 1976* (2015). Director Andrea Spreafico and choreographer Caroline Eckly, along with the dancer Sergiu Matis, set out to stage McCarthy's video performance *Rocky (1976)*. A pioneer of L.A.'s performance art scene of the 1970s and 1980s, McCarthy's *Rocky* is representative of the artist's early work. Filmed in an apartment from a single, static camera angle, McCarthy wearing boxing gloves and a rubber mask of an old-timey robber pummels himself in the stomach and face over the course of twenty-one minutes. He intermittently pauses to smear himself with ketchup or use the condiment to lubricate his genitals. Created in the same year that the titular film starring Sylvester Stallone nabbed an Academy Award for Best Picture, McCarthy's performance exposes the grotesque violence and sexuality beneath the heroic narrative. McCarthy similarly repurposed popular icons and narratives in his other video and installation performances, most notably *Meat Cake (1974)*, *Bossy Burger (1991)*, *Pinocchio Pipenose Household Dilemma (1994)*, and *The Painter (1995)*. In each, McCarthy's body becomes a conduit through which to animate the junkyard of Western culture as psychosexual ideology. McCarthy has always resisted didactic interpretations of his art as anti-consumerist. This is especially prescient given that today forty-years removed reveling in the perversity of popular culture constitutes successful sub-genres within nearly every industry. For proof, skim through the voluminous and steamy fan fiction for the mid-1990s sci-fi TV show *The X-Files* or dip your toe in any of *South Park's* nineteen seasons of barnstorming the cultural cannon. Renewed interest in McCarthy's importance coincides with a broader acceptance of the cultural underbelly. The influence of McCarthy's aesthetics is seen throughout contemporary performance. Vegard Vinge and Ida Müller's masked and blood-soaked *Ibsen-Saga (2006-2015)* owes more than a passing debt as do Ann Liv Young's sexually explicit and confrontational versions of *Snow White (2008)*, *Cinderella (2010)*, and even her *Elektra (2015)*. The Dutch company Wunderbaum's *Looking for Paul (2010)*, meanwhile, interrogates the need for such grotesquery while staging some of McCarthy's most iconic works. Spreafico Eckly's *What a classic is and how it performs in (our) time. Paul McCarthy, Rocky, 1976* offers a different take on this current wave of McCarthyism.

Staged as a lecture performance, *What a classic is and how it performs in (our) time*, sets out to earnestly answer the question its title poses. Staged as if in a gallery in the lobby of Black Box Teater, the show starts with Andrea Spreafico's professorial lecture on what constitutes a classic. For illustration, we begin with an excerpt from a "Cuban version" of Mozart's Symphony no. 40 in G minor (1788). The point is clear: classics, like those of Mozart, are the grounds for following generations' interpretations, homages, and bastardizations. What then does this mean for the medium of performance art that at least at its outset saw its ephemerality as resistant to restaging and canonization? As we well know, and Spreafico points out, we are now in the time of the genre's re-performance. The return to the performance art cannon is typified by Marina Abramović's performance/retrospective "The Artist is Present" (2010) at New York's MoMA, but is also evident in Rude Mechs' 2009 reconstruction of the Performance Group's *Dionysus in 69*. Spreafico suggests two possible engines driving this impulse. First, that the medium has exhausted itself and has nothing left to do but celebrate its prior accomplishments. Second, and our moderator's favored interpretation, is the possibility that the medium, fifty-years in, has reached something like adulthood and must contend with the weight of its own history in an effort to move forward. Enter McCarthy's *Rocky*, a "classic" of performance art, which will be the test case in Spreafico Eckly's proposal. Enter, also, Caroline Eckly, the other half of the duo, a choreographer, and company member of Carte Blanche, The Norwegian National Company of Contemporary Dance. Beyond its status as a classic, what interests Eckly and Spreafico about *Rocky* is McCarthy's choreographic score of self-inflicted punches, footwork, ketchup application, and grunts. The notation of McCarthy's performance, found on each audience member's seat, doubles as the show's program: a repetitive sequence of steps with intermittent instructions to put ketchup on one's ass or deliver a jab. The document abstracts the visceral violence of McCarthy's performance into an archival relic. It also reframes the original video's medium-shot of McCarthy into a landscape view. Scanning the pages of notation we can take in the breadth of the performance, we can, save for its sounds and smells, hold it in our hands.

Following Spreafico's opening lecture, we are introduced to Sergiu Matis, who will perform the work. Like a nude model in a sculpture class, Matis appears in a plain grey bathrobe, politely nods to the audience, and undresses before donning a replica of McCarthy's mask and boxing gloves. Matis now McCarthy's boxer takes to a corner of the lobby across from which a screen projects the notation of movements. Matis systematically takes to pummeling and fondling himself, applying ketchup to his body between uppercuts that rocket the red condiment across the white walls. Completing the choreography, Matis removes his mask and gloves, re-robes himself and takes a well-deserved bow. As he walks off, Spreafico pulls back a curtain dividing the lobby to reveal a champagne reception replete with a wall of video monitors playing previous performances of their re-performance of *Rocky*. We are invited to mingle, imbibe, and reflect. In the space of sixty minutes, *Rocky* passes from abstract concept to embodied performance to re-canonized artwork. If you had not thought it a classic before you would be hard pressed to refute it now.

At the reception, I find a friend who shares my suspicion that Matis was pulling his punches. Just ten feet from the action the jabs and body blows seemed softer, less violent than those of McCarthy. The artists, who attest to the Matis' abandoned slugging, quickly disabuse me of my suspicion. When I first happened upon the video of *Rocky* decades earlier at the Whitney, I was baffled. I had never seen McCarthy's performances and kept circling the gallery to return to the

monitor where he beat himself senseless. It was brutally captivating and mysterious. A performance seemingly didactic with its surface assault on Hollywood while ultimately inscrutable. Its inaccessibility is a product of McCarthy's unexplained impulse to channel the narrative through his own body in a (seemingly) private ritual that is at once laudatory and sordid. The ambiguity of McCarthy's reasoning engenders his performances with tremendous power. McCarthy's masks, more than lampoon a given icon, dehumanize him, leaving his actions to register as motivated by some unseen animalistic force. That Spreafico Eckly's production failed to capture the ambivalence of McCarthy's Rocky is, of course, its great success. While the promise is to open Rocky to the iterative, Spreafico Eckly's institutional presentation captures everything but the initial impulse the aura.

In place of McCarthy's aura, Spreafico Eckly opt to clarify and contextualize. The opening lecture and after party sandwich the performance between two styles of art-world discourse. More than simply see Matis, we can sip champagne with him and hear his thoughts on the project. This expanded access is unique to the reperformance and Spreafico Eckly are intent to throw the doors wide open. It is difficult for romantic notions of art to survive under such bright lights, but the clinical, if friendly, air of the performance invites a nostalgic longing. Holding the notation of McCarthy's performance, I am awed by its repetitiveness and Spreafico Eckly's exactitude while melancholy for the original version that dripped with pathos.

What this desire exposes is a question not of what Rocky can tell us now in 2016, but what the transference of the art from one medium to another does to the performance. The mediation of the original and its re-performance force two decidedly different distances. In McCarthy's version, locked inside a video screen, we lose proximity and intentionality. The film starts and so does the behavior, its reason for existing is as sealed as the loop it runs. For Spreafico Eckly's production, we are given total access to the rationale, the artists, the score, and the performance. This transference into the flesh should, presumably, reap visceral rewards. What is kept at arms length in the transposition, however, is a sense of passion. We are instead under the steam of "the classic." The category of the classic, we learn, is a self-validating moniker to which Spreafico Eckly offers no rebuttal. What we are given instead is the space in which to relish the circularity of its logic, and all that the circle excludes.

### Beat The Drum: Walk

The Oslo-based company, Verk Produksjoner, offered an equally contemplative piece for this year's festival. Beat The Drum: Walk (2015) is the tenth show created by the eighteen-year old company and the first in the Beat The Drum series. The performance is separated into two sections, first a walk, then a performance. The audience of fifty or so gathers in the theatre lobby where Mia Keinänen, an academic at the Norwegian School of Sports Science who studies walking, introduces us to the performance. Keinänen explains that historically dating back to at least Aristotle walking has been considered a powerful instigator of thought. Its disciples, we are told, include Henry David Thoreau, Virginia Woolf, Nietzsche, and Steve Jobs. Walking, Keinänen explains, impacts the body physiologically, neurotically, and visually by increasing blood flow, neuron extension, and providing a constantly changing landscape. Contemporary proponents of ambling note that an "optimal speed" exists at which good thinking emerges. Finding something like this optimal speed is our task for a brisk twenty-minute walk.

Before heading out, we are instructed to keep a question in the back of our minds: "What would you like to see around you in the future?"



Verk Produksjoner's Beat The Drum: Walk. Photo credit: Camilla Jensen.

In early March, Oslo is pitch black by 6pm. Our path was a dark, snowy hike along the edge of Torshovparken, a large open lawn on the Northern end of Oslo. Buried under a blanket of the snow, the rising green could be mistaken for a massive wedding cake with the property's signature music pavilion serving as decoration. Dogs with LED light collars zipped through the dark like flares aimed at their invisible owners. The surrounding apartment windows offered boxes of warm light. Mindful of our assignment, I could only conjure the immediate or the banal: in the future, I wanted to see more sunlight and kindness. I recalled one of Keinänen's conditions for optimal thinking/walking was to stroll in a familiar place. Was the foreign local edging my brain down these well-trod paths of thought? The contemplative space the hike affords for thoughts like these was pleasant enough, especially in contrast to the overbearing walking tour offered in Rimini Protokoll's Remote series. At least here if my thoughts should fail me or turn out more pedestrian than I would hope, I only had my engagement with the geography to blame.

If our walk was to bring attention to our hopes for the future, the second section of the performance asked us to contemplate what function the arts might play in that future. Returning



to the theatre, we are led into an upstairs dance studio bathed in white. A ring of white plastic chairs encircles rows of fluffy white pillows set before a massive white shag rug, ringed by a string of soft amber bulbs. To the left of the performance space—a mix between alpine snuggle-hut and impeccably clean dorm room—is a drummer enthroned behind his kit, gently brushing a cymbal. Cards are distributed to the audience, restating the initial prompt of what we would like to see in the future. Once the audience writes down their thoughts, the cards are collected and three performers come center stage and kneel before us. Each is dressed casually and wears a headset that feeds them the performance text. This text, we are told, is collected from conversations with people about theatre, the arts, the future, and what they are willing to sacrifice. The three performers serve as mediums for those voices. They deliver the text unedited, preserving digressions, interruptive laughs, and other disfluencies, a performance mode popularized by Nature Theatre of Oklahoma. Whereas NTOK layers their colloquial speech with ironic humor and art-school conceptualism, Verk, conversely, aims at illuminating the earnestness of their source material. To that end, the actors adopt an unaffected performance style to complement the informality of the source material. Like any genuinely searching conversation, the text moves between comments that enlighten and embarrass.

After recalling a list of the production's aborted titles, the performers explain that "beat the drum," means to "bring attention to something," and that beating a drum also produces "energy" to all those who hear its sound. Our onstage musician then treats us to a drum solo. During this interlude, the performers switch places on the rug. Our first voice—a dancer—wants to "slow down" and "produce less," for which she is willing to sacrifice her car and participate in a communal refrigerator with the other inhabitants of her apartment. The next speaker speculates on the nature of sacrifice, noting that it means something different to everyone, and that real sacrifice is never a choice its simply something that happens to you. The earnest re-embodiment of these pronouncements has a contradictory effect. The redirection of the dialogue through headsets and the conduit/performers seemingly stilt the comments' forthright sentiment. This disconnect is most evident when the performers holdup a bed sheet on which video is shown of an unidentified poet and Black Box's artistic director Jon Refsdal Moe. The poet recounts his love of the romantic, his art, and others that share his interests, while Moe shows us his favorite place in Oslo, a cemetery where lilacs perfume the air. These less mediated portraits land more sympathetically and force the question: if direct communication is the goal why take such circuitous routes? Channeling the earnest through a performance of earnestness causes a discontinuity. But like my less-than-revelatory thoughts on the preceding walk, might I also be the author of this suspicion? Performative earnestness, after all, always seems to be a true gauge of one's own cynicism.

The discourse pitches upwards with stronger declarations of art's function in society. These pronouncements tread down well-worn paths: art should not communicate; art is a form of communication; art should be political; the artist as precariat; the global influence of capitalist aesthetics. We segue into a pair of solo dances as Jeremih's affirmational pop song Holding On (2010) pumps through the speakers. While dancing, one of the performers dons a Moomin costume based on the children's hippopotamus characters of Finnish author Tove Jansson. Meanwhile, the rest of the cast distributes beer and wine to the audience while a dish with an orgiastic heap of sweets—orange, gummy fruits, and wormse—circulates among us. As we dine on booze and sugar, the drummer takes the floor and recounts how he fell in love with the

instrument as an escape from his hellish family vacations. The drummer's father responded to his passion with a bit of wisdom: "You can't eat [musical] notes; you have to eat potatoes." Forty-five years later, he tells us, he is still banging around. He returns to his kit and rips into a two-minute solo, deftly and defiantly removing his shirt while thundering away. Our three interlocutors return to the stage and begin to speak the notes that were collected after our walk. I am relieved to discover that a good majority of us want more sunshine and kindness. In fact, our wishes are almost uniformly for versions of peace and quiet. We are then shown a driver's-view video of cruising an open road through the desert. DaftPunk's *Within* (2013) plays over the image—a mechanical voice whispering sentimental longing before the driver's voice is heard explaining that the car is his favorite place to be, yet god only knows what will be around the next curve. The cast takes a bow and invites us to stay and drink, talk, and listen to music. As I stood around happily chatting with the artists of the festival, I kept returning to the drummer's solo. It struck me as the lone attempt in the production to manifest the ideas we spent so much time discussing. Thankful as I was to pause and check my cynicism, I repeatedly wondered why the production did not take up any of the calls it collected. For two hours of discourse on the need for this or that aspect of art or life to leap to the forefront, the artists themselves never took that leap. But if art as some of the voices suggested reflects the condition of the times, the show captures a contemporary sense of artistic inertia: that while we decide what is to be done, we might as well be in good, agreeable company.

### Woodland Games: Talk Softly But Carry a Big Stick (SKOGSUNDERHOLDNING)

Lisa Lie's play, *Woodland Games: Talk Softly But Carry a Big Stick* (SKOGSUNDERHOLDNING), offered an altogether different type of discourse. Lie, who wrote and directed the production for her company Pony of No Return, is an established poet, novelist, actor, and theatre maker of all stripes. For its brief sixty minutes, *Woodland Games* leads us through a world of comic horror stories. The scenography, designed by Erik Tidemann, is a grove of seven upended pine-trees suspended from the theatre's ceiling, a rickety wooden table, a pop tent, and an abandoned Tiki bar. Lurking within is *The Reptilian Host*, a psychic, conspiracy theory junkie, soothsayer, and all around witch, played by Lie. The Host is a mash-up of a late night horror-TV personality (think *Elvira meets Vincent Price*) and a B-List Grimm's Fairy Tale seductress. Straddling the gothic and pop, the Reptilian MC's objective is to hypnotize the audience and use our impressionable state to spill the beans about what really lies beneath perceivable reality.

We are treated to tales of mammoth, nocturnal reptiles that rape and terrorize the human race; a taxonomical breakdown of the alien breeds currently inhabiting the earth; ominous rainstorms of jelly, clams, and snakes; and the probabilities of spontaneous combustion, which turns out to be a bit more likely than you would think. *The Reptilian Host* speaks her conspiratorial musings directly to the audience as she lurches towards us with quivering arms and spidery tree limbs. The Host enlists a volunteer to aid our collective hypnosis. His task: crush individual chocolates with a pack of dental floss. The Host's audience repartee is supplemented with exchanges between herself and the mute *Dirty Reptilian Bumboy* (DRB), played by Ivar Furre Åm, who the Host drags feet-first from an upstage tent nestled between the trees. DRB sports skimpy white track shorts, a shirt with his name, and a mask made of blonde hair. Bumboy busies himself catering to the Host and concocting caldrons of unknown substance at the Tiki Bar. He is a

grotesque comedy sidekick who silently offers unflinching support to the bat-shit crazy and bloviating Host. Bumboy graciously serves his master who repays him with disinterest. Their antics include rearranging microphones, serving blood cocktails, and transforming the Host into a massive birthday/séance cake. Dotted with burning candles, precariously held in place by frosting, our Host takes a beat to confess to us all: "Just so you know. The emergency exits are full of bicycles." The promise of an audience immolated in a tangle of handlebars is just one of Lie's many evocative and funny images.

The star of the show is, in fact, Lie's writing. The text is a thorn bush of digressions, asides, and juxtapositions, each striking like a little dagger. Take, for example, our Host's declaration: "Reality is enormous, while the tangible world is teeny-weeny like a Cornflakes box containing a dead mouse, taped across your nipple." The simile's tumbling use of scale registers just after you stop admiring its audacity. Take, again, the Host's self-assessment: "I'm the singing, dancing virus on the cornea of the world." Or in her explanation of the onset of the aforementioned spontaneous combustion, it is, "A bit like pineapples in Northern Europe. They can go from rock hard to rotten without being ripe in between." Linking the Host's gaga imagination to the everyday keeps us and the absurdity firmly rooted in reality. Performed in Norwegian, Lie employs a Trondheim accent, with its associations of ruralism and stupidity. Ineptitude is central to Lie's performance. She moves with serpentine gracelessness, dances with more effort than skill, and sings with emotion rather than harmony. This is, of course, the Host's greatest charm: her ability to seduce us with her conviction, regardless of how improbable her beliefs may be.

More than a string of clever epigrams, *Woodland Games* features a four-part structure. Each section begins with the Host crooning a verse and the chorus of Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller's "Is that All There Is?" (1969), made famous by Peggy Lee. These interludes underscore the show's vaudevillian underpinnings as well as its central theme: the disenchanting imagination. The narrator of Leiber and Stoller's song is a young girl who, after being rescued from a fire, taken to the circus, and falling in love, indifferently asks, "is that all there is?" In Lie's text, the song's sentiment dovetails with what is described as "the void" between the end of childish belief and the mature realization of the world's true boundlessness. While it is we, the disillusioned audience, who is presumably being enlightened by The Reptilian Host's connection to the spectral realm, the show is ultimately a comic lament for lost faith. If the ghouls of an early age have been shriveled by our current techno-secularism, Lie's production allows us to remember what we have lost. In the finale, the Host produces a small bag that we are told contains the world's last dragon, a unicorn, and dwarf hamsters. Holding up the sack for our inspection the Reptile accusatorily wonders, "Just imagine what a thousand years of no one believing in you does to mythical creatures?" The Host then drops the bag and mercilessly clobbers it with a cane all the while shouting, "I'm alive!" The violent turn against the mythological produced more than a few gasps and laughs. It turns out, in the end, it was us who had believed all along.

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