

A metaphysical comedy

Verk productions shows: "The Eternal Smile"

"There once were some dead people, they sat together somewhere in the darkness, they knew not where, perhaps nowhere, they sat and conversed to pass the time". These are the opening lines of Noble prize winner Pär Lagerkvist's "The Eternal Smile", and these are also the first words in Verk Production's staging of the peculiar story. But before they are uttered, we witness an introduction over several minutes, where the four actors do not speak a word, but exchange deeply meaningful glances and smiles as they sit in front of a classic 1870's theatre, elegantly ornamented with gold, red velvet, marble and flowers.

Signe Becker's scenography is charming and almost excessively accurate in style, and because nothing could be further from Verk production's view of performing art than this miniature National Theatre, it provides emphasis to the image on stage, thanks to the interplay with the actor's fantasy costumes and rigid facial masks, that no attempts shall be made here to strive for an authentic reality. This is to be a theatrical staging for, as Lagerkvist himself wrote in 1918, "the word shall no longer be supreme as a theatrical expression, only a theatre that plays on all of our senses, is capable of communicating the plethora of expression, the fever rush and madness that constitutes the modern".

Just as the silence threatens to become unbearable, a distant sound is heard from the stage. - a vacuum cleaner? In any case - a signal has been given. Anders Mossling approaches the microphone. He begins to recite Lagerkvist's text and soon the others join him. From where they stand on the floor before the classic stage they conjure up many different life stories: a key blacksmith, a butler, a hermit, a warlord, but also the lord himself, are among the multitudes that populate the kingdom of death. Lagerkvist's text is witty and devoid of illusions, and is performed here with both empathy and detached sobriety. But this storytelling style of play is broken by several brilliant and physically very expressive intermezzos. The four mount the stage. On the other side of the red velvet curtains people and paper mache figures populate the no man's land of death. Transformed, to great dramatic effect, into murderous snipers, skeletal figures with skulls or grotesque Negroid monsters from anno dazumal, the four actors fling themselves into a lavish, melodramatic stage romp.

The two-tiered performance gives the play a fascinating duality, that culminates in a fantastic visualization of the unexpected, metaphysical end of Lagerkvist's story, where the dead, who are, paradoxically enough, relatively content with their existences both before and after death, rebel against life's meaninglessness. They resolutely break free and set off to find god and hold him responsible. The tones of Mozart's "Elvira Madigan" provides the exodus of the dead souls with its

own depth, but irony imposes itself once again when the god they eventually find gives them a somewhat unexpected answer. In the story, god is a meek, hard working old man. He has been given characteristics here that bring me to think of blessed Henrik Ibsen. But - and here lies the strength of the play - Verk's satirical commentary passes on the wit in Lagerkvist's text without overshadowing the serious, existential questions he simultaneously poses.

Verk's theatrical rendering of "The Eternal Smile" is a good experience: A thorough production where the group uses different familiar theatrical expressions to explore new avenues, and create a meaningful, witty metaphysical fable.

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