

## **Here is nobody, and least of all God.**

**In Verk Productions burlesque theatre adaptation of Pär Lagerkvists, in Norway, rather unknown text "The Eternal Smile", the ones with a non-reflected view on life that finds their meaning.**

- Review -

*By Anna Helene Valberg, Scenekunst.no (19.11.2010)*

On Black Box Theatres main stage there is a smaller stage. It is a small, classical picture frame stage, with golden tufts and heavy red curtains. The plays starts with an empty scene, but bathed in lights, with weird, twisted details. Then we hear the smoke machine, and through the curtains we can see small dots of fog. The illusion is broken when the heavy smoke pours out on both sides of the stage, and the audience starts to laugh. Then the four characters that gestaltes the plays many characters enter, and sits expectant in front of the stage. They sit quiet for a long time, smiling kindly... for a long time. For so long that we think "what if the whole play is like this, like this is how eternity is?" The audience smiles a bit... but the comedy disappear in the stiff smiles and the weird bodies on stage. Finally a man raises up on stage and grab the microphone.

In 1920 the young Swedish writer Pär Lagerkvist wrote a text he called "The Eternal Smile". Somewhere in the dark some dead people sit and talk. Where they are, they don't know. They tell stories about their lives so eternity can go by. Lagerkvists text is so good that it is a shame it hasn't been translated into Norwegian, and a big surprise that no one ever made it for the theatre before. Therefore it's such a pleasure that Verk Production stage "The Eternal Laugh" at Black Box Theatre. They arrange the play with sensitivity for the nuances of feelings the text evokes in us. Verk follow the stories in Lagerkvists prosa, and change between storytelling and sequences where absurd tableaux show us the anxious sides of life and a world that has lost its god.

### **Why do we live?**

The central question in the play is "why do we live?", and it's a problem Lagerkvist have examined in many years. He asks if we can accept life under any condition. When he tries to answer, he concludes that life doesn't follow any ethic. Life is what it is, and there's not much we can do about it. In a very beautiful passage, which (unfortunately) is not in the performance, a man who has lost his wife says; Life wants just itself. It wants trees and people and flowers, but not one of them. When he and his child dies in an accident, the man starts to doubt this; does life want anything? Maybe it just wants to be an empty desert?

Verk Productions is a actor-based ensemble who works with text-theatre, and view the theatre as a political place. In their interpretation they stress the many human destinies and how they are either satisfied or unhappy regardless of their positions in life. None the less, it's those with an non-reflected view on life who finds meaning, while the kings who believed in something more to life are disappointed when they get to the other side and realize there's nothing but empty eternity and a lot of old memories that that expected them when they reached the lifes highest degree and entered death.

## **A meaningless job**

We get stories about a happy man that worked in the toilets at a subway station, where he sold toilet paper for 10 pence. With touching empathy the man explains that he didn't intend to stay there that long, but after a while he realized that this was also a job that had to be done, and he got a mission: to never see daylight, but for the rest of his mission in life was to sell toilet paper. We are touched by the beauty of this mans happiness and pleasure of doing this, at first sight, a simple and meaningless job. Then we understand that it's not the job itself it depends on, but the attitude towards it; the ability to see people as fascinating fellow human beings is described as if the toilet employee is a poet.

During the performance the actors switch between telling life stories, and also between acting the different characters. We are continuously meeting new destinies. Anders Mossling have a kind of story teller-role, and recites Lagerkvists text with a bright and open-minded face. It works well that the different characters life experiences is not played out, but are told about. It creates involvement and a sharp concentration towards the stories. The acting is not naturalistic, but stylized with a great emotional aesthetics. The actors is in their own bodies, and uses their faces to signalize small secrets, as Lagerkvist writes.

Pär Lagerkvits writes deliberately about the different sides of life and about the different types of people, but he never judges: even not he who lived on stealing others happiness is judged. It seems like Pär Lagerkvist put ethics beside, and consider life as it is, and accept it. We have to accept that thieves can be happy. These are thought-provoking and challenging ideas, even 90 years after the text is written.

## **Bizarre baroque**

The times we get breathing space from the text is in sequences with scenic pictures and music. These disturbing passages shows us the horror side of the human life, where confusion and despair is haunting the people. To loud noise the curtains are drawn to the sides, and behind the small stage the room is expanded. Here there's several mannequins dressed up in wigs, lasors and trash. A fifth actor dressed in a pink gown and huge angle wings made of shining tulle. Slowly she raise her wings, and when she turns to the audience we can see that her head is a weeping skull who smiles confused...

The stage set is burlesque and witty. The costumes evokes a lot of associations; the upper bodies are nicely dressed. But it's all with a comical side, and with 80's tailored jackets, children ties, a golden top from a belly dancer, red scarfs and white blouses, there's something twisted and depressing about the expression. The men got golden tights, who looks like naked legs, and the women have trousers looking like skeletons. The lower part of the body is dead, the upper part is excessively living, or at least they try to live.

## **No role models**

In this strongly expressive and loud horror-sequence some text is introduced. After a opera-singing man with a head of a skull is shot by a gun made out of one of the other actors hands, he falls and screams in agony, while the blood, in form of a red silk scarf, is pouring out of his stomach. A women forces the wounded to make a portrait interview, which turns out to be the playwright Max Frisch's text

“Questionnaire”. Frisch use a socratic method where he cunningly gets people to agree with him. “Are you sure you really are interested in protecting the human race when you and everyone you know no longer is alive?” asks Frisch, and points forward to how we protect the earth. Is it how we live today – without any thought of future generations, with only short-termed perspectives, that is the foundation of our choices? The parallel to Lagerkvists non-concluding wonder is striking.

In Lagerkvists story there´s no role models. Those who are happy is not possessing any qualities we traditionally strive for. They are simple and partly materialistic, and appreciate observing other people. This lack of ideals seems distracting if you are used to follow a hero in a performance – here is nobody, and least of all God. In a long passage at the end the dead revolts. They get up and want answers. After a longer march, looking like a revolution, they go out and search for God. It´s a long and exhausting march, and when they finally reach God, he is a little, shy man who chops wood. And he continue chopping and chopping. When the humans ask what is the meaning of it all, he answers: I only did what I thought was best.

### **Impossible question**

Verk keeps the underlying unease in the text by Lagerkvist, but also promotes its humour. The artists break up the massive on our behalf and feed us with small bits of odd stories. With intense narrative voices and lifted eyebrows they show us how impossible the question posed by Lagerkvist is. The simple form suits the text and hopefully opens some new eyes to this recognized, but only to a little degree read, Nobel Literature Prize winner.