

Stilting on the borders of the possible

Reflections on *Pillars of Blood* performed by Iraqi Bodies

“We express ourselves through silence and through our senses” - Anmar Taha’s recent poetic work is balancing on eggshells between physical theatre and dance attempts to explore the touchy themes that keep our minds busy nowadays, the absurdity of murdering, atrocities and suicides taking place in today’s society, the desperate search for a reason to be alive for a humanity that has been left on its own and deprived from a divine intervention.

Influenced by the self-destructing anti heroes of Camus’ *Caligula* and Lautréamont’ *Les Chants de Maldoror*, the loosely tied narrative line of *Pillars of Blood* presented on the stage of Divadlo Andreja Bagara in Nitra on 25 September 2016, although probably being an excerpt from a longer production, seems to be framed by two powerful and silent scenes depicting a fishing monkey figure as a Beckettian protagonist, waiting for something - perhaps God or a higher knowledge? - that just refuses to show up. Reminded to the story of the *Planet of the Apes*, the audience is immediately bombarded with unspoken questions whether development and evolution for human kind are possible and is being drawn into the peculiar world of this hybrid work accompanied by various styles of compelling music and a stream of sketchy images built on memories of a war-torn Western and Eastern civilisation. As the creator himself, Anmar Taha, together with other members of his troupe has also been wounded in a religiously-motivated incident in his home country in 2007, his pieces have certainly been shaped by the experience and the questions he raises could not be more relevant today.

Has humanity really not learned anything from the errors of the past, is it really doomed to disappear from the earth, and does life have any meaningful content if people are not even able to sense any difference between not existing before their birth and being dead after their lives have ended? Are we still just toddling towards our final goals to find some answers to our most important wonderings in life? The fact that the slightly cynical, maybe even a bit crazy, bizarrely babbling nun walking on stilts in the initial scenes wears a black uniform that is erringly similar to the Muslim women’s veil showing up in the later scenes gives the spectator goose bumps to say the least, suggesting that fanaticism and intolerance are not restricted to certain places but are universal issues. Most of the time it is not quite clear where the dreamlike events take place or what relationship there is between the different characters, although several scenes contain allusions to the Islamic world with women in black burquas desperately running for their lives, while others built around the soldier and the woman may hint at a Western European context. The whole performance is saturated with a gloomy atmosphere with the boxing glove, the woman’s suit, and the clown like soldier’s nose being the only objects - symbolic messengers of trauma - that are glowing red in the darkness. Playing with the relativity of time (and in some cases with the expectations and patience of the viewer), the choreography gradually and patiently builds up images with silhouettes shaking, dancing in spasmodic, seemingly unconscious movements. In the segment that depicts the Middle Eastern women running from one point of the stage to another, it feels at times as the length of this movement was a bit exaggerated, in my opinion, if less was shown it would already be quite sufficient and understood.

The bodies become carriers of signs of traumatic events in the confined, authentic soundscape of tiny screams or within the music of a gothic silent movie; they move like puppets in an almost meditative pace until the message of the particular scene comes through and the spectator - just like in an often fragmented and illogical dream - flows into an other reality.

Despite its political connotations, the unique, minimalistic piece cannot be labelled as political theatre - at least it was not the intention of its creators. Nor can it be called a purely existentialist play. It does not criticize society directly or tell the audience what and how to think, it merely makes an attempt at taking a glance at the world today, the crude and bloody reality of our present communities, in the form of a metaphorical dance essay that combines text fragments, music, silence, images with physical movements, absurdity with solemnity: in its mirror our cultural past and present looks back at us. The realm of *Pillars of Blood* might be pessimistic, but the rest of the task - to find their individual answers to one's most pressing and significant question marks - is up to the viewer.

Judit Katalin Hollós