

The performance 'De vissen komen, mild' at the Sevagram care home.
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REVIEW

Cultura Nova: from fanfare to total silence

A packed and very diverse Cultura Nova programme also means, of course, that the calibre of the performances may be variable. This point was made by our theatre critic during the opening weekend of the 29th edition.

BY JOS PROP | HEERLEN

For the spectacular opening performance of Cultura Nova, the Maastricht Theatre Company kissed Shakespeare awake and asked him if they could cut down the script of Romeo and Juliet to just a few lines. And whether they could then conjure up around those cherry-picked lines from the great love poem a tsunami of dynamic images and dancers and acrobats and hundreds of singing men, accomplished soloists and musicians and larger-than-life projections, light shows, hot-air balloons and crackling pyrotechnics. England's celebrated Bard had no qualms whatsoever. He said that love not only sets the protagonists on fire, but also ignites in the theatre-makers a powerful craving: their passion for theatre. And indeed, the flames even billowed out of the theatre building. And so the two loves became entwined.....

Adolescent bodies

Big stick-on heads had the effect of 'shrinking' the bodies of Romeo and Juliet to those of adolescents while also emphasizing that these lovers are prototypes, personifications of all couples who are in love. The two solo singers (Sef Thissen and Antonello Palombi) passionately echoed the emotions of the two lovers. Romeo (Michel Sluysmans) and Juliet (Judith Pol) had to communicate over large distances, so had to rely on exaggerated gestures. The projection screen zoomed in on the more intimate details. And for their final journey to the eternal heaven of lovers, they dangled from a big hot-air balloon, their story floating away above the heads of the audience and the opening spectacle. All while Shakespeare looked on. He saw that his plot, sparse as it was, had stood the test of time and that the over-the-top treatment had done it no harm. He smiled and slept contentedly on.

Therapy

At Sevagram, the care home in Heerlerheide, elderly women and one man demonstrated that an amateur performance by and about them can be an enjoyable way to pass the time. They felt right at home with this display of movement, shaking off the widespread notion among their peers that life doesn't have many more challenges in store for the elderly. This theatre-as-therapy immersed them in a newly-discovered hobby, encouraging them to set aside their ailments and look for their strengths. Undulating plastic water, a fierce wind and colourful bouquets of flowers were the props used to perform the play, resulting in a wonderful piece of amateur theatre which they and the audience in the care home could enjoy.

Museum of Stillness

In the Schunck institute building, the visual theatre of Hoge Fronten/Lieke Benders had transformed the basement into a museum of stillness, for a journey through the senses. Visitors had to leave all their bags in a locker, including their watches, and refrain from talking. The sense of touch was indulged in two compartments, one of which felt warm, the other pleasantly soft. Next, attention was turned to eyes and vision. Two dancers, one blind, one sighted (with his eyes shut) guided and sculpted each other. In a claustrophobic dark room, the sense of hearing became heightened. Noise and rustling could be heard, along with the breathing of the people around.

During the final performance, the audience observed a painter who was working on a blue mural, and we listened to her brush strokes through headphones. In silence (of course), dessert was served. A delicious drink in a small glass engaged our taste buds and our sense of smell. The museum of stillness made one thing clear: that you can more or less isolate your senses but you can't constrain your thoughts. They run wild along associative paths which cannot be controlled. And because of this, this performance - like any other, however many people you share it with - remains a highly individual experience.

Romeo & Juliet

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