

The power of minimal means

An essay by Ellen Segeren about *Doodleuk*

I write about music. So I listen to music and watch staged productions. Some of them are dazzling. Some of them I just don't understand. Some of them don't impress me and I forget easily. But some of them remain with me for a long time. They have an impact.

When I saw this call for an essay about an innovative opera production, I reflected on the performances that I had recently seen and that impressed me. I thought of *La Cenerentola* at the Nationale Reisopera, that I enjoyed immensely. Was it innovative? I don't think it was. But as far as I know, it did not intend or pretend to be. No problem, I will be looking back on it as one of the funniest and most delightful operas that I have ever seen. This was all due to the singers with their strong acting qualities, but even more so to the director who had a strong imagination and a good sense of humour, and to the stage designer and costume designer who had great qualities too. They must have had a good budget to create a living room expanding to a ballroom with moving walls, multiplied in size. Inventive and very exciting to watch. A production that impressed me.

However, to tell the truth, I was more impressed by a performance by just one singer, who was also the director of his own 'opera': *Doodleuk*, by Marc Pantus. I was impressed for several reasons, mainly because of the layers that he succeeded in applying.

First I will draw a picture of what I saw and heard.

At the beginning of the performance, the curtain remains closed, while a voice (Pantus' voice) reads out a part from a story by author and playwright Thomas Bernhard about an actor who is hidden on the balcony with a machine gun, shooting at the people in the audience who dare to laugh at the wrong moment. This sets the tone for what is to come.

After the curtain opens, an old woman – Pantus dressed in a pleated skirt, cape, sensible shoes and wig – inches forward towards a pile of yellow feathers in a beam of light, singing Telemann's cantata '*O weh, mein Kanarienvogel ist tot*', very tastefully translated into Dutch.

I feel compassion for this bent figure who is so sad about her loss, but I can't help laughing. Shameful! The man with the machinegun must be around somewhere while I am aware of my mixed emotions. The fact that the lyrics are translated into Dutch does not irritate at all. On the contrary, it adds up to understanding what goes on in the woman's head. Laugh, this is tragic! But when she strokes the bird and lays it in a cigar box while singing 'Goedenacht', I am sincerely moved, thanks to Pantus' beautiful singing, his convincing acting skills and Telemann's beautiful music. Fifteen minutes have gone by and I have been watching one man with a fake bird, doing hardly anything, with nothing on stage but a dressed up man, a bunch of yellow feathers, an empty birdcage and a door. And I've been captured by it from the very first moment until the last.

Immediately after the last notes, played by the fantastic little baroque ensemble I Piccoli Olandesi, Pantus tears the wig from his head and starts to speak. The audience is shaken and drawn into a completely different atmosphere. While telling an extended story about the treacherousness of theatre, he takes off his female clothes, dresses himself in a dressing gown and starts applying white paint to his face. The monologue revolves around the question: are you watching a comedy or a tragedy?

He leaves the stage, while the orchestra starts playing Bach's cantata *Ich habe genug*. When the curtain opens a clown appears, with long shoes and red nose and all. He takes long slow-motion steps and makes funny slow-motion movements, in sharp contrast with the sad music. He sings in Dutch about longing for death. A screen rises and reveals a coffin – which appeared as the door in the first scene. With very slow, very clownish movements, he pushes the coffin forward. He takes out a machine gun, loads it and points it at the audience while singing the phrase *Schlummert ein*.

After this, he hangs the machine gun in the stand of the birdcage, lies down on the coffin and waits for the gun to go off. He waits and sings, opens the coffin, takes out a rag doll and dances with it, while finishing Bach's difficult solo cantata. Once again I have been watching a man who was doing very little, but kept intriguing me all the time.

After the break the door a. k. a. coffin appears as a fridge in a short comical opera by Conti: *Mammalucca, Bagatella & Pattatocco*. Hilarious, not pretentious, very well acted and sung. In itself a great production and a fantastic counterpart for *Doodleuk*, the piece before the break.

Why was I so fascinated?

One of the reasons, I think, is the curious effect of humour combined with tragedy in this fashion. Everyone knows the effect of tragicomic scenes, films and plays, but in this case, the emphasis on this contradiction was strong and so strange that it gave the play much more impact. The audacity of making a clown sing *Ich habe genug* with a machine gun in his hands! It surely was a courageous twist. I have never had such an uncomfortable feeling at an opera. Thomas Bernhard's words put everything into perspective, in addition to the power of the comical tragedy. And the combination of this tragicomedy with the straightforward comedy after the break made me reflect even more on what I'd been watching.

The other reason is the absence of material means. It enforces the performance even more. All attention goes to the performance of the singer, who with his mimics and movements is capable of captivating me by just raising an eyebrow. Doing hardly anything with almost nothing, while still creating such an emotion, is simply outstanding. No moving walls, no extravagant costumes, no riding carriages, no dancing extras on stage. Just a man with his idea of comedy and tragedy, expressed in an excellent choice of music that is very well performed.

Innovative? I should say so. I have never seen anything like it before. Maybe the sparseness arose from necessity; small budgets tend to make people very creative. Nevertheless, even the smallest budget could have permitted some props from a second-hand shop. No, I suppose this was minimal means by choice. And it worked. It showed me what a great actor and singer Marc Pantus is, and it made me question what humour actually is, and it made me listen more intensely to Telemann's and Bach's cantatas, and experience the true sense of music theatre. And it sent me home puzzled. Which is more than most performances do.

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