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Review: BIRGET; 'Ways to Deal, Ways to Heal', Carte Blanche/Bergen International Festival: A true national treasure!

Dagbladet-Scene

27 May 20:21

By: Hedda Fred

'BIRGET; Ways to Deal, Ways to Heal' is like a healthy celebration and trauma treatment all at once. A triumph for Carte Blanche, Elle Sofe Sara and Joar Nango.

THEATRE/DANCE: In less than a week, the report on Norwegianisation policy and its effects on the Sami, the Kvens/Norwegian Finns and the forest Finns will be delivered. Right afterwards, the report's 700 pages will be read aloud in their entirety from the National Theatre's main stage and be broadcast live on NRK.

The point is that it is an account of how the Norwegian government has systematically oppressed its national minorities.

In parallel with the commission's work, the choreographer and director Elle Sofe Sara and the artist and architect Joar Nango, in collaboration with the dance company Carte Blanche, have created a work where there are no words to which to listen. Instead, they allow us to actually and physically take part in Sami experiences.

'BIRGET; Ways to Deal, Ways to Heal' is simultaneously a moving, upsetting and uplifting performance, in which reconciliation between the Sami and the majority population becomes imaginable.

The King's Speech

The first premiere took place in Oslo during the same week as the Sami National Day on 6 February, that is, before the historic demonstrations and protests this winter against the wind farm at Fosen. That makes the new premiere at the Bergen International Festival even more topical, and the consequent debate has also been elegantly incorporated into the performance.

At the beginning, we hear footage of the King's speech at the opening of the Sami Parliament, where he both apologises to and acknowledges the Sami people. The speech emanates from a small loudspeaker that is carried around the stage where the dancers are engaged in a series of seemingly mundane, practical tasks. Gradually, the soundscape switches to quotes from Question Time at the Norwegian Parliament, where politicians say that 'the

Sami's mental health is taken seriously' and that nothing can be done about anything until hearings

and inquiries have commenced.

When these quotes are played in a loop, they can easily be perceived as babble. It brings a sense of despair and is also slightly comical.

Thrown together

Birget's scenic landscape resembles those typical of post-apocalyptic films and performances: The costumes are a mix of synthetic sportswear, ponchos of worn out plastic materials, details in leather and fur, and a mix of crocks and cowboy boots.

Large plastic sheets are nonchalantly placed on the back wall of the stage, a debarked birch trunk stands in the centre of the stage, along the sidewalls bright red snow stakes. A heavily loaded sleigh is pushed around by the dancers. They eventually unload it and build a kind of altar out of the sleigh and bits of plastic, rope, a TV screen, bark and snow stakes.

In this sort of 'cobbled together' and sprawling visual scene - which one could say is generally characteristic - a number of brilliantly choreographed moments emerge, woven into an enchanting totality. The fourteen dancers move organically around the entire stage, taking it in turns to seek the audience's attention. It feels amicable and unpretentious.

But a greater degree of seriousness will soon seep in.

To get by

Birget is a Sami expression meaning 'to get by with what one has'. This philosophy of living and surviving was a principle used when working on the performance. The choreographer Sara took the multicultural dance team home to Kautokeino to get a bodily experience, and not least a bodily understanding, of the Sami culture: to feel with their bodies the earth, the cold, the people and the polar night.

The materials used in the performance were also collected while they were in Kautokeino, allowing Nango's scenography to create a direct connection to practical work on the plains. When the audience is at one point asked to pass worn out plastic sacks that are placed under their seats down from the auditorium, we happily oblige. Slowly, the stage completely fills up

with these bright yellow pieces of plastic. It's like a ceremonious ritual that binds everyone in the room together in the narrative.

This is just one of several interactions that allow us, the audience, to make a physical connection to what is taking place.

Softness and despair

At the start of the performance, the choreography is characterised by gentle walking, as if the individual performers are treading outside the paths and gently treading down a soft surface. Little by little, more dancers arrive and join the monotonous treading, before it becomes more stylised and rhythmical - and slowly builds up to the dancers running around the stage. They begin swirling around with tremendous power, as if they were a flock of reindeer. The movement creates a wind that blows out over the audience.

Towards the end, there are sections in which the dancers abruptly throw themselves to the floor, stand in strange and twisted positions, kick the stage walls, and all the while a suggestive siren-like soundscape takes over from the babbling politicians. This is perhaps the embodiment of all the suffering and injustice to which many Sami people have been exposed throughout history.

This exquisitely balances pain, openness, despair and a fighting spirit in a way that is heart-breaking.

Not surprisingly, many people actually want the Truth and Reconciliation Commission report to lead to more reconciliation between the majority population and the Sami/Kven population. So how can this be achieved?

The ritualistic way in which 'Birget' allows us to approach the experiences of this vulnerable group is at least a good attempt. In the final scene, the audience is again invited in a beautiful way to join in with the performers, like a friendly insistence that fellowship and reconciliation are possible.

I consider Carte Blanche – Norwegian national company of contemporary dance – a true national treasure. The collaboration between Sara and Nango does not harm this position, in fact, quite the opposite.

'BIRGET; Ways to Deal, Ways to Heal' will be the opening performance at the Arctic Arts Festival in June, and will also be performed during Heddadagene in Oslo, before touring in Norway and internationally.

