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Dance that pushes against the Norwegian bedrock

A fascinating performance about reconciliation, created by Sami artists and Carte Blanche.



The dancers are wearing transparent tops sewn in pastel-coloured woven plastic. In the background, the words of politicians are projected onto worn-out tarpaulins. *Photo: Øystein Haara*

Sidsel Pape

It's no coincidence that a premiere about Norway's indigenous peoples took place at Oslo Opera House the same week as the Sami National Day. The performance 'BIRGET' deals with difficult themes such as the climate for reconciliation after the Norwegianisation policy.

The Norwegian Truth and Reconciliation Commission is now investigating injustices committed against the Sami, and Kven/Norwegian Finnish peoples. At the same time, the dance company Carte Blanche invited the Sami artists Elle Sofe Sara and Joar Nango to create a performance. It's obvious the two have previously worked together and the result is a coherence of dance, soundscape, scenography and costume that are in perfect synthesis.

Artikkelen fortsetter under annonsen

Backdrop of babble

'BIRGET' starts in the foyer where a reindeer sleigh stands packed with everything the dancers need on their journey through the performance. From a portable loudspeaker we hear the king lament the injustice against indigenous people, while the sled is pulled into the Opera's Second House and the audience follows.

The king is drowned out by politicians' hollow monologues about starving reindeer, the threats to indigenous peoples' health and the illegal development of wind power at the expense of reindeer husbandry. A backdrop of babble is translated into English and projected onto worn-out tarpaulins hung on the back wall of the stage.

It illustrates today's poor climate for reconciliation. The babbling transforms into solitary drumbeats before techno music, right on trend, breaks out.

Facts

'BIRGET; ways to deal, ways to heal'





The dancers build bonfires out of feed bags and costumes, and everything made out of plastic is thrown on. *Photo: Øystein Haara*

Plastic junk food

Sixteen dancers perform, first dressed in modern gym wear, aka Adidas, then in transparent tops sewn using pastel-coloured woven plastic.

The dance builds up from small steps and crooked walking to leaping and stomping. But one guy goes against the current. He holds his fur tight, plays guitar with a Sami knife and determinedly beats out the rhythm with red plastic snow stakes.

Huge bags used to carry reindeer feed out to the animals are sent by the audience's helping hands through the auditorium and onto the stage, which is filling up with signal-yellow plastic.

The set is surprisingly colourful and reveals prejudices about indigenous peoples and natural materials.

The opera encourages audiences to prepare for performances, and when it comes to 'BIRGET', that's good advice.

We learn during a conversation with the artists that they've worked with stories they've been told first-hand by people who've physically felt the effects of Norwegianization. This is literally how the dancers have let themselves be moved, and they express themselves through more and less distinct characters.

What they convey is erased and absorbed into the ensuing energy of the dancers swirling

together in a circular stream, as if they were a sea of reindeer. At the centre of the stage, they build a huge bonfire out of feed bags and costumes, which are thrown into the flames.

The verb 'birget' can be described as to get by. In this context, it can also be understood as a belief that a culture will survive, despite massive resistance. There is a primordial force in the word and the title that is reflected in the dancers' deep, strong cries towards the end.



The dance builds up from small steps and crooked walking in colourful costumes. *Photo: Øystein Haara*

The notion of 'birget' can be put to good use when performing arts are renewed, created and purposed. However, it's thanks to Carte Blanche that the reindeer Sami can be at the centre of a state-sponsored performance about state injustices against all Norwegian minorities.

The article continues after the advert

With 'BIRGET's' dynamic force, the artists push against the Norwegian bedrock. They hasten the investigation into the terrible truths that the wider society knows all too well. They take a stand against the babbling and pave the way towards the essential reconciliatory movement.

- **Playing until Sunday 12 February.**

