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„Petra“, Berit Einemo Frøysland ©Underskin Photography

Ein formbarer Körper für den voyeuristischen Blick

von Seda Nigbolu, 9. Februar 2020

A malleable body for the voyeuristic gaze

By Seda Nigbolu, 9.2.2020, Tanzschreiber.de

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Translated from German by Berit Einemo Frøysland

With the premiere of her fist solo dance performance “Petra” at DOCK 11, choreographer/dancer Berit Einemo Frøysland follows the tracks of Petra von Kant, a character from the Fassbinder-universe situated between shine and suffering.

A great hypocrite, pretending her happiness, lonely, playing games that only end up in shame and degradation. The lyrics from the song “The Great Pretender” by The Platters – which also occurs in the Fassbinder-film “Die bitteren Tränen der Petra von Kant” (“The bitter Tears of Petra von Kant”) – are the only words that escapes Berit Einemo Frøysland during her solo piece “Petra”. The words of an accepted despair, of self-pity. Sung by a performer shining in a bright red blouse, lingering in between Sad Clown-clichés. Until she starts to move restlessly, decrypting the splendid and broken world of Petra von Kant.

The Melodrama from 1972, the inspiration for this piece, is one of the Fassbinder-films with an international cult-status. The film balances along the edge of the pathetic, without ever really tipping over into the awkward or the absurd. Behind its overdramatised and long shots, tilted towards Hollywood glamour and the beauty of antique sculptures, there is more than just a mere fashionshow of suffering souls. It is not its statement on the topic of dependence in all its forms, nor the impossibility of truly possessing a person that makes the film still relevant today. It is also not the oppressive captivity of a woman in a golden cage, which rather brought with it accusations of sexism. Rather, the film interprets the power-relationships between human beings, with objects and with bodies, where the surrounding space and the internal plays a key role as symbols for each other. That is what makes this film, which is based on the theatre play by Fassbinder with the same name, still interesting for the stage today. The same goes for Berit Einemo Frøysland, representing a generation that usually tends to tell stories about empowerment rather than the claustrophobia of the soul.

“Wen du begreifst, den muss du nicht bedauern” (“The one you understand, you do not have to pity”), says Petra von Kant in one scene to her cousin, Sidonie. Similarly, Frøysland’s approach to the film seems to be driven by an attempt of comprehending. Petra von Kant’s being is the starting point from which to process how the representation of what is found beautiful and feminine, is shaped. On stage and in Frøysland’s gestures, we see various more or less evident references to the film, which takes place exclusively in Petra von Kant’s apartment. The ringing phone, the holding of the mirror, the waterbottle, the painting “Midas and Bacchus” by Poussin, printed on the blouse of the dancer, her body gesture. The piece does not follow the chronological order of the four acts in the film, nor does Frøysland retell the body-language of the film-protagonist in a narrative manner. She makes this language her own, probing further into countless variations of reducing and exaggerating, de- and reconstructing. Accompanied at times by the beat or off-beat sounds from Philipp Rhensius, at times by the film’s melancholic 60s music.

The primitive affects of Petra von Kant, wrapped up in elegant aphorisms and severe mood swings, dissolve in the endless changing of poses on the dance stage. On the rhythm of seconds, it **succeeds** the Norwegian dancer, who is also working as a model and is familiar with the inner structures of the fashionworld. She demonstrates how small gestures can trigger larger effects and how big theatrical movements can suddenly run into emptiness. Every turn of the head, every raise of the hand, every movement in her body produces a new image, a new message.

Every body part has a life of its own and rebels the mastery of their mistress. The more her body enters the passion for form, the more Frøysland removes herself from the ideal images of beauty. With her knotted arms and legs she appears more like a freak-show artist. On the tiptoes she does not seem tall, but fragile. On all fours more like an insect than a woman.

The effort of the constant representing is not revealed by her gaze, which seeks contact with the audience's. The tension in her muscles is what reveals the labour. Despite her fixed gaze, the audience does not have before them a lifeless, mannequin-doll, neither a fixed robot-body. Her body is as would it be made of a material that one can shape into new forms over and over again. Like a flexible spider, tirelessly building itself a home. It is exciting and tiring, to watch her. This fatigue, however, is worth it, when Frøysland continuously breaks more and more out of the inhabited Petra von Kant within her. However, a complete liberation from her seems impossible, because what in the film was represented by the quiet submissive Marlene as well as the director's lens, namely the loaded ever-evaluating voyeuristic gaze, is in this context the audience. Frøysland seeks the reaction of the audience, only the audience can protect her from the isolated loneliness. As it is for Marlene in the film, it is the audience who in the end, without larger consequence, can get up, go out and seek out another life/another piece. The loneliness of the dancer on stage highlights the specific importance of the complicated relationship between art and the observer, a relationship that transcends the particular destiny of the individual.