

Henry David Thoreau is still challenging

"Freigeist - Visionen des Henry David Thoreau" by Ilona Zindler

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Munich - "Freigeist - Visionen des Henry David Thoreau" directed by Ilona Zindler dealt with the inner world of the 19th century American Philosopher H.D Thoreau. Not only was he a philosopher, he was also a poet and original thinker whose writings contributed to movements by political and philosophical leaders later in history. His visions about disobedience towards unjust authorities, simple living in natural surroundings and adaptation of Hindu customs inspired great leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King. Moreover, his texts and research in ecology have also inspired modern day environmentalism.

Based on his original texts, Ilona Zindler has written the texts for this production, in which the audience was lead through his thoughts, his dilemmas regarding the progressive choices he took, and other important life events.

On an empty stage, the audience was confronted with a female dancer (Juliana Lorenzi Barreto) wearing an overlong white skirt spreading over the floor. With her back turned towards us, the frozen picture was suddenly interrupted by an intense whispering voice-over of H.D Thoreau, delivering a starting monologue, summing up his life, opinions and visions. At the same time the dancer slowly sank into the floor accompanied by deep vibrating tones of an exotic instrument.

After a while the dancer continued into a solo, displaying excellent technique and beautiful body control, the scenario slowly shifting to the dancer leaving the stage, simultaneously dragging the lead male actor onto the stage, clinging onto her long white dress. Which brought us face to face with the main character Thoreau (played by Martin Weidmann), leading a story-telling monologue taking us into his inner world, his reflections upon the choices he made in life and views on his contemporary society.

After what seemed like quite a promising beginning which definitely woke my curiosity, the scenarios changed more frequently across the stage. With the snap of Thoreau's fingers, the audience was lead forwards and backwards in time and space through important happenings and different scenarios in his life.

We witnessed the meeting between him and Emma (played by Gabriele Weller), the development of their friendship/romance, his brother's tragic death, the moment in which he decided to leave conventional life behind and retreat to a the solitary circumstances in the woods and so on.

At the same time, a handful of short films and appearances by the female dancer were intertwined into the performance. Short films, which in a rather absurd style displayed themes such as excessive modern consumerism and pollution, which concerned Thoreau's mind already back then. One of the short films had a scene shot in a restaurant, showing a woman gorging herself on a salad consisting of euro-bills, subsequently throwing them up again. Another one involved a dancer clad in cheap looking foil wrap, surrounded with vaste amounts of thrash with Björk's track "Venus as a boy" playing in the background.

Although we had scenarios on both stage and screen which had the dramatic potential and political relevance to form a great piece of theatre, the directing of the actors and the transition between the medias were not crafted well enough in order for them to be fully enjoyable.

With all respect, juggling with different medias in performing arts is always challenging, but the contemporary dance material created by the dancer was not integrated well enough into the whole performance in order for it to have a function on stage, some of it was danced with the background music of indigenous people, strengthening the underlying theme of Thoreau's fascination with more exotic and foreign philosophies, but the transitions were too flat and happening out the blue, giving a lack of esthetic totality to the piece.

Especially the acting lacked proper directing. The two main characters were upstaged the whole time in a very stiff and un-naturalistic way, targeting their dialogues and interactions towards the audience instead of each other. Because of this, there was no real sense of the environment, the relationship between the characters, their inner lives, nor their intentions. At the same time, the actors had to force their acting a lot, making moments of high emotional intensity rather cringy.

However, the contrast between the intentional bad-taste style of the video installations and more serious and pensive portrayal of Thoreau, provoked an initial irritation, but on the other hand, it also lead me to think of just how absurd modern excessive consumption is. The paradox of a growing world population being raised to consume materials as if they were boundless on a planet with limited resources is indeed an absurd fact which we all undeniable participate in whether we are aware of it or not.

Thoreau was definitely someone who found it hard to fit into society, he refused to pay taxes to a system which practised slavery, causing him conflicts with bureaucratic authorities. In many ways his choices lead to a life in solitude and also suffering to the degree that death must have seen like a relief to him. However, the solitude also seemed to result in a close sense of belonging with the forest in which he spent his last years. At the end of FREIGEIST, a beautifully written voice-over monologue about death and letting go was channeled through the speakers, with Thoreau's face bathed in light in front of fast-forward moving images from the forest, propelling him into the forever and beyond. In this moment I simply chose to close my eyes and enjoy the well written text, revelling in the green images of the forest, ignoring the fact that the female dancer and actress had been awkwardly choreographed to stomp around in circles in this heightened poetic moment.

It was small moments like these which fed me throughout the piece. We had a story about a remarkable individual who lead a dramatic life and whose thoughts and ideas are more relevant than ever. The content had the potential to form a very strong piece, thumbs up and kudos for that! But unfortunately this piece didn't reach its potential.

Búi Rouch



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