

On „Vierfusser“ (Four-legged) by Petra Zanki and Britta Wirthmüller, presented at ZPC

The Art of Tensed Stillness

In their second joint project, Petra Zanki and Britta Wirthmüller have been exploring the various aspects of four-legged existence on stage. The corporeality of “Four-legged”, a performance presented at the Zagreb Dance Centre (ZPC), seeks to achieve and preserve the knees and hands as its centre. It is conceived in a highly meditative manner, as if it were a spiritual practice of the “pre-human” condition, devoted to animalism, rather than merely an artistic one.

Apparently, being on all four touches upon the space of archaic prayer, or at least focuses on the inward being of the performers, at the same time probing the very purified, sublimated zone of animalism, in which the body of the scenic “animal” twitches at the slightest sound from the audience. From the moment in which Petra Zanki and Britta Wirthmüller step onto the stage (standing up from the audience) and through their continuous choreographic parallelisms, to the point of changing their T-shirts on stage at the same time, their seriousness and perfect coordination indicate their great interest in the formal aspect of movement and in achieving the greatest possible precision of their “double gesture”.

Corporeal deceleration

If one defines contemporary theatre as experimenting with spectatorship or as questioning the traditional division and the one-channel viewing of the stage by returning the gaze from the stage to the audience or actively exchanging it with the spectators, the most intriguing aspect of “Four-legged” is the situation in which the performers, utterly focused, catch the very fine frequencies and “oscillations” from the audience and the vibration of voiceless mutual correlations, suddenly turning their heads, in complete silence, towards the source of one or the other sensation, only to calm down again until they are completely “merged” with their immobile surroundings. In that sharpened animalism and raised awareness of the body, one feels, however, that they are utterly separated from the audience, not only owing to a new micro-virtuosity that is at play here, but also because of the way in which Zanki and Wirthmüller treat the body as an “object” that is halted, frozen, and repetitive in stillness, as well as the sculptural character of the exposed bodies as such.

All these practices, in which corporeal deceleration is intentionally brought to the point of becoming a static exhibit, have been present within the repertory of various performances for quite a while. And yet, “Four-legged” is not only a performance about the body as an object, or the extinction of the animal in humans; it also tests the vitality of the animal instinct by using a very peculiar choreography of tensed lurking and sudden twitches, followed by long periods of stillness and calm.

Lack of additional materials

It is unfortunate that towards the end of the show one barely discerns the text spoken offstage, or that the two performers seem unwilling to share more information about their aestheticism with the audience (there is only a very basic programme booklet and no materials that would reveal

something about the process of creating the performance). Thus, paradoxically, “Four-legged” functions as a demonstration of the skill of tensed stillness, offering the elucidation of a field of perception that is similar to observing any perfected corporeal discipline, yet insufficiently taking into account the audience as a two-channel, open, and potentially co-creative partner in performance as such.

Which is all the more surprising since Petra Zanki and Britta Wirthmüller keep pursuing their interest in the body as a post-human or pre-human organism, positively attracted by other, parallel organisms in the immobile audience.

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