

## **Review of Oktoberdans 2016 by Lisa Nøttseter**

### **“Utopia in a Black Box” (extract)**

**Norsk Shakespeare- og Teatertidsskrift**

**Edition 4, 2016**

#### **Immersive art**

I was moved in a variety of ways. Ingri Fiksdal and Jonas Corell Petersen have created the work *State* which through its persistent presence penetrates the nervous system visually, kinaesthetically and aurally. Lasse Marhaug’s music is not only present in the audience’s ears and in the room itself, it has a physical impact. Vibrations from the music go through the floor and right into the body. The rhythm that went through me matched the one to which the dancers moved. I was physically present in the work and literally moved by it.

*State* is a totally immersive experience where the central elements – costume, sound and movement – build and support one another, ably aided by the lighting. The elements are woven together so skilfully that it is almost impossible to differentiate between them in order to describe them.

From the programme we learn that the title *State* refers to the state in a sociological sense and the English word ‘state’, meaning condition. The production explores rituals, myths and social hierarchy. I interpreted it as drawing parallels by looking back in time to tribal communities and primitive people; while other aspects, possibly the costumes and the lighting in particular, gave it a futuristic feel. Five dancers make up a precise and close-knit ensemble. Many of the movements are synchronised and presented in a range of repetitive phrases. Several times the performers gather below a circular lighting rig (a futuristic campfire, perhaps) at the centre of the room. Rotating on its own axis – a feature of many folk dances and of ritual dancing – is a recurrent theme. In several sequences the movements are built up through interaction with the costumes. The graphic and geometric costumes are reminiscent of Martha Graham, Bauhaus and the playful futuristic aesthetique of the 1960s.

The audience is seated in a kind of circle surrounding the stage. Technicians and musicians are standing along the shorter wall. They, too, are in costume. On two occasions

they serve schnapps to the audience. I wondered if the act of drinking together was linked to the ritualistic theme of the performance by involving your taste buds in the overall experience, however, to me it came across mostly as an extraneous and intrusive element.

A more successful feature was that occasionally a cast member would appear on stage with a smoke machine and cover the performance and the room in fog. This effect simultaneously both enhanced and demolished the stage illusion. It worked well visually and supported the impression that the room had now become a different place that enabled the creation of new dimensions. At the same time this obviously staged trick breaks down the illusion by highlighting that what we see is merely a stage effect; a ritual, if you like.

Alongside the hypnotic and absorbing effect of *State*, is the analytical and explorative aspect of the work where the creators reference different ideas linked to the theme. Various types of interactions recur between the dancers highlighting how society is both animal and machine. The dancers go through a succession of different patterns or scenes with some overlaps and references to each other. For me the strongest part was the contrast between two such scenes: In one sequence, roughly halfway through the piece after a short pause, the dancers move within an incredibly exact and repetitive choreography. It consists of geometric gestures to rhythm, and I was reminded both of well-oiled engines and of North Korean military aesthetic. The dancers move mainly in synchronicity, with a few previously agreed, individual diversions. There is a sense of a clockwork toy that has been wound up before taking on and being powered by the rhythm of the music. In strong contrast to this is a later sequence in a quieter, more listening landscape. Again the dancers work together, but they don't proceed in parallel or systematically as they have done until now; they touch one another in a choreography which is organic rather than mechanical and geometric. They follow each other's movements, in synchronicity and collaboration based on listening rather than executing predetermined patterns of actions and goals.

For me this was the highlight of the festival's theme to show what utopia could mean for us today. The society in which we live operates like a machine. We subject our lives to clocks and diaries, rules and regulations. In the work of Fiksdal and her fellow creators, we catch a glimpse of something that might be a new utopia – a society that is not governed by rules, goals or clocks. A society where the interaction between people is based on listening, respect and cooperation; where what matters is the nature of the process rather than some arbitrary deadline.