

Theatre of life and death

Festival of Wonder. Silkeborg Puppetry Festival 2019

Impressions from a variety of performances by Per Hofman Hansen



Pressefoto

Dreaming the Carnival of the Animals

Títeres Etcétera (Dukketheater Etcétera). Spain.

<http://titeresetcetera.com>

<http://www.english.titeresetcetera.com/shows/dreaming-the-carnival-of-the-animals/>

Festival of Wonder has always set the bar high and because of the wonderful experiences of previous years, expectations to this year's theme were great.

With images from the music of Saint-Saëns' *Carnival of the Animals* in their minds, the audience waited anxiously in a filled concert hall. But where were the musicians and the animals? One musician emerged from among the rows of the audience, then two, three until all eleven musicians were on stage, found their places and in wild chaos tuned their instruments while a pianist played bits from Brahms' *Hungarian Dances* and Mozart's *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* and someone on a pan flute played the prelude to Debussy's *Prélude à l'Après-midi d'un faune*.

In came the faun with a horn in its forehead, a tail, goat legs and tiptoeing hooves, like a naughty puppet that won't sleep. After a sip from a bottle the faun fell asleep and dreamt of a carnival of animals, which poured forth to Saint-Saëns' illustrative music and fantastic scenes with the lion, king of animals, lazily lying on the piano, the tortoise helplessly trying to dance a slow can-can, and the big elephant with the huge trunk waltzing slowly.

A kangaroo, joey in pouch, hopped to the rhythm of the piano keys.

And who but Saint-Saëns could compose better 'underwater' music for the night time carnival of the colorful fish?

A dance macabre on the xylophone made the bones of the gigantic dinosaur rattle.

Finally the proud white swan glided majestically over the mirror of the lake to the music of the cello and transformed like a fairy tale to the most beautiful little ballerina.

For the grand finale the musicians were also ready for the carnival, transformed with fantastic and colorful animal masks.

The dream of the carnival of the animals was a perfect opening performance of music and puppets joined in a joyous explosion. Pure enjoyment. The festival has begun. Welcome to Festival of Wonder 2019!



Pressefoto

Milo the Magnificent. Fantastic Milo

Theatre Alex & Olmsted. New York

<http://www.alexandolmsted.com>

<http://www.alexandolmsted.com/milo-the-magnificent.html>

<https://youtu.be/qX9J5j5TZS8>

A children's performance with both circus and puppet theatre. We know about all sorts of magicians, from the ridiculous clown to the most professional person who confounds and amazes us.

Milo is a sweet little magician, who probably belongs to the first group but aspires to the second. He tries with disappearing and appearing apples, balls which grow and shrink and an ingenious shadow theatre with dogs, elephants, goats and hungry baby birds being fed by their mother. He also manages the classic trick of sawing woman in half, this time sawing a mouse in half, giving the audience goose bumps with his sweet performance. Luckily the mouse is whole again!

Milo also tries his luck with a small home-made robot, who sings *O Sole Mio* like another Pavarotti.

Milo tries so hard, though his magic is probably easy for everybody to figure out. His big number, teleportation of his arm and hand, does not quite work and there is no amazing grand finale.

But it is a very sweet show, perfect for children between 5-7 years. Though the two puppeteers are dressed in “invisible” black, even their faces covered with net in front of eye holes, they do not try to be invisible on stage, being a part of the show and for example using Milo’s pants and elastic to give the adults in the audience a laugh.

Performed with precision by Alex Vernon, who masterfully manipulated Milo’s 9 different facial expressions.

The background ragtime and jazz music illustrated the perfect circus atmosphere.



PHH foto

Besuchszeit vorbei. Visiting hours are over Theater Junge Generation. Dresden.

<https://www.tjg-dresden.de>

<https://www.tjg-dresden.de/puppettheater/besuchszeit-vorbei.html>

<https://www.arieldoron.com/besuchszeit-vorbei>

https://youtu.be/sRjEaSo_dBQ

We, the chilly group of audience members, stand around for about ½ hour in the foggy, damp dusk, in front of the entrance to Museum Silkeborg where *Besuchszeit vorbei* expects us.

At last a girl (a puppet) comes out and welcomes us with the sugary sweet words, ‘*Come in, don’t be worried; the official visiting hours begin now.*’ Once inside the theatre room we are given cups of popcorn. We think ‘this is going to be fun! But we soon learn otherwise.

The room feels ice cold, lit by bright white light. No warm colors, no comfortable chairs, only a few stools for the weakest of us. There is also something that looks like tables and benches from a rest area.

Soon six identical people appear in grey uniforms. Their faces are covered with stiff stone grey masks with deep black eye holes. A small natural-sized girl puppet asks the audience to take out their cell phones and photograph her. '*Take the last picture of me*', and a few seconds later she is dropped from a scaffold by one of the masked people, and she is dead.

The mood has changed in a second. What is this about? Other puppet children are given the same treatment on the scaffold and are dragged away to a macabre pile of bodies. A Punch puppet asks the audience to sing *Frère Jacques*, but who feels like singing now? Not many. The grey uniformed puppeteers chew on apples while surrounded by dead bodies. We are also offered apples. A few accept and carefully take a bite, but the mood is dark. A nice little man has been arrested. If he can get enough money, he will not end up like the other puppets. Do we offer him money or do we pretend not to hear? We vote for the puppets who will live. Who has our sympathies? Not just humans, but also animals suffer the same demise: cats, pigs, dangerous bears. What about the good-natured person who looks like a goat? One of the audience members has to take care of him. Does she do that? Will she refuse to walk him to the scaffold or does she close her eyes? What do the rest of us do? Do we object, do I? Or do we ignore the situation? How long does it take for us to do something? Who decides their own fate?

There are connections to historical atrocities and to our day's politics. "*Besuchszeit vorbei*" touched, shocked and moved us. We left quietly with thoughts and questions to keep us occupied for a while. A strong work of theatre we will remember and unfortunately connect to reality.



Tria Fata

Compagnie La Pendue. France

<https://www.lapendue.fr/fr/index.php>

<https://www.jacksonslane.org.uk/whats-on/tria-fata>

<https://youtu.be/S8IPW3eXlIk>

"*Are you sure this is about me; are you sure my time has come?*" says a little old woman with a whimpering voice, sitting in a wheel chair while death pulls her toward him and readies his scythe.

Life and death unfold in this 'cabaret', in which the old lady is at the end of her life. Her time has come, the moment which is determined by *Tria Fata*, the three goddesses of destiny, Nona, Decima and Morta, who spin the thread of life, measure it and finally decide when it is to be cut. But the old woman can postpone the inevitable by reliving her life for Morta and to give Morta the bottoms of her legs as security.

We are sucked into a spinning kaleidoscope of the many stages of life, from birth to death, from childhood to live, play, joys, sorrows and loneliness. The old woman sees herself in the mirror, which is turned toward us. Do we also see ourselves? In a flashback of slides accompanied by sorrowful clarinet melodies, life flies by like a piece of paper which lands on the woman's lap, where the paper and life burn out. The last beat of her pulse is heard. A light is turned on. Death arrives. '*Everything went so quickly but let us come to the point.*' Darkness falls and the last *Dance Macabre* fades.



Pressefoto

Captivated and almost breathless, we wake up to reality after a very powerful performance, made in close interaction between the masterful puppeteer Estelle Charlier and musician and composer Martin Kaspar Lächl, who played clarinet, accordion and drums and also sang beautifully.



If I were asked the ridiculous question: ‘Which performance would you take with you to a deserted island?’ I would answer *Tria Fate*. I really do not like to give stars or hearts, but I make an exception with Compagnie La Pendue’s *Tria Fata* and give them five stars!



Circus on Strings. The Little Circus

Theatre Viktor Antonov. Russia

<https://youtu.be/KhYdvnvZ9Ko>

<https://youtu.be/wgLdLTMPyWs>

<https://youtu.be/i6cSo1B0MqA>

Viktor Antonov’s one-man circus and marionette theatre is easy to understand, funny and festive, silly and entertaining and even dramatic and dangerous for the youngest children. The beautiful small wooden marionettes make surprising transformations on stage and we are amazed at the virtuosity of Antonov.

We meet the musical clown as conductor with a singing bird on his nose, the strong man lifting weights, the fire spewing camel, the Arabian camel driver and the fearsome sword swallower, the seductive belly dancer, the acrobatic monkeys, the wild artistes on unicycles

and many more. Each tableau is performed to electrifying background music. Antonov has a charming ability to sustain our enthusiasm, even with the youngest. The classic Eastern European influence is clear. I saw this show in 2013 and this was a lovely reunion.



Photo by Miklos Szabo

Jernring. Ironring

Bådteatret. Danmark

<http://www.baadteatret.dk/jernring/>

<https://youtu.be/oPU6MChVc1Q>

With Shostakovich's 7th symphony from 1941 as the musical basis, Danish Bådteatret has created an awesome performance, gripping with horror and terror, but also with a glimpse of humor.

During 1 ¼ hours the symphony supports the masterful interaction between the changing moods of the music and the varying scenes: In a dusty bombed crater the thin father sits (maybe Shostakovich himself?), wearing a khaki colored military-type coat, lights a light, smokes and then directs the music of a dusty scratchy record. The drama can begin.

Marching troops are heard in the distance. Stalin appears as a cardboard figure; he fishes and catches Hitler on his hook. Hitler rages and lays a plan. People flee in panic from a Ragnarok of bombers, blitz and flames. Gas attacks causing death and destruction. But even in the middle of Hell, some comfort is found among a little group of people.

Is the little white flag a sign of surrender? Death appears as a skeleton and a morbid but ingenious interaction begins between the characters and the music in a dance macabre. We are at the limit: a dog chews on bones from a foot and an arm while Hitler rages in a spinning carousel-dance with Stalin. All fall down, either dead or exhausted. They search for any morsel of food. The father finds a bill of money, he dreams of food and a big ice cream cone, but there is nothing to buy. A loaf of bread is taken by a hungry dog while a bottle of vodka and a cigarette eases the pain for a moment. *'Are we doing fine?'*

In one sequence of quiet music Stalin returns. A refrigerator appears in a Fata Morgana, filled with delicious food, but a refrigerator with vodka is preferred: *'Life is over. Let us drink ourselves to death!'* The dead are buried with vodka. Rats are chased with forks in a tarantella

dance in hopes of catching something to eat for survival. That delicacy is prepared and eaten. The last piece is for the father. Death fetches the last survivor.

The final death cramps have taken over: Father coughs through a smoke. The dead disappear slowly and can no longer be reached. Finale: With his music Shostakovich beats Stalin and murders Hitler. The battle is over. Shostakovich (or Father) swims away, returns and directs the final notes of the symphony.

Shostakovich witnessed both Lenin and Stalin's wars and dictatorships. Therefore we can easily hear what that does to a person. The 7th symphony, called The Leningrad Symphony, was a means of concentrating his efforts against Nazism. Shostakovich said *'I do not mind that my 7th symphony is called Leningrad, but the music is not about the siege of Leningrad, but of the city which Stalin ruined and Hitler destroyed.'*

Bådteatret's *Iron Ring* is a violent experience – shocking and awful – created as puppetry, in which the four puppeteers are like acrobats, using their own arms and legs, bring the puppets to life, even in a grotesque pole dance with Stalin. The iron ring's puppet world is a bombardment of grotesque, macabre, but also touching and poetic images, which left an indelible impression of horror and evil. Excellent adult puppetry.



PHH Photo

L'Homme Cirque. The One Man Circus

David Dimitri. Switzerland

http://www.lhomme Cirque.com/The_One_Man_Circus/One_Man_Circus/Home.html

<https://youtu.be/TB0Oyl1gSNk>

We had heard about a tightrope walker, very high up outside. We could see a tightrope wire strung from the circus tent toward the large trees by Museum Silkeborg. Were puppets going to be tightrope walking up above our heads? This was a puppetry festival!

In the tent, much like a 'real' circus with cold, damp benches and no back support, we sat crammed together. Every necessary prop was there for an exciting acrobatic show: the wooden horse, springboard, some very large and heavy sacks hung up on a boom and wires

fastened high up under the tent top. There were also musical instruments such as accordion and trumpet. Only the sawdust was missing. And it did not smell like real horses.

Soon David Dimitri's new circus had begun. The 56 year old athletic and charming Dimitri, former world champion highwire walker, started with a warm up on an electric treadmill, doing all sorts of fancy acrobatics. Not 'classically serious' but charming and poetic. He stole the hearts of everyone.

Dimitri's caring hands and mild eyes managed to make the stiff wooden horse almost touching and alive. Dimitri performed some very surprising stunts with heavy and not so heavy sacks, which came crashing down on the springboard and his head to the joy and astonishment of the audience.

Now it was time for the difficult tricks: The person next to me, who had a slight mental disability, put his hands on his head and said, *'Oh no, now something bad is going to happen!'* After some jokes and tries a huge cannon blasted the Cannon King Dimitri up to the highest line and out into the sky. From there he had us all come outside so that we could watch him walk the 100 m on the tightrope, ending at a tall mast, from where he could climb down to earth.

With Dimitri nothing is fake. Everything is real. Several of his stunts are quite daring and could go very wrong. But Dimitri is unbelievably good and he succeeds again and again. Some might think it is as simple as traditional circus, but Dimitri is able to present his show in a poetic, funny and moving way. He also 'talks' to his audience, not with words, but with moves and facial expressions, magically inviting and involving his audience. I completely understand that Ulla Dengsøe, the festival's artistic leader, said, *'I simply had to bring that performance to Silkeborg!'*



Pressefoto



Chambre Noire. The Dark Room
Theatre Plexus Polaire. France

<https://www.plexuspolaire.com/chambre-noire>

<https://youtu.be/hrXdjs7a5I8>

Before the evening performance I knew nothing of the story and drama about the American author, extreme feminist and man-hater Valerie Solanas (1936-1988) and pop artist Andy Warhol (1928-1987).

In short: When Valerie Solanas was a child her father sexually abused her. As a young person she studied psychology. She hung around in New York and earned money as a prostitute, which is when she wrote 'Up Your Ass' about a man-hating prostitute. In one version the woman kills the man and in the other a mother strangles her son.

In 1967 Valerie met Andy Warhol in his atelier, gave him the manuscript of 'Up Your Ass' and hoped he would produce it as a play. That same year Solanas wrote her SCUM manifesto (Society for Cutting up Men) read by some as Valerie's impression of an ideal world, while others interpret SCUM as an angry satire of historical anti-woman texts.

Valerie did not hear from Warhol, contacted him again and demanded that he give her the manuscript. Warhol said it was missing. Valerie called him and told him to pay her. The piece was nowhere and Warhol had no intention of producing it. In 1968, disgruntled and angry, Valerie shot Andy Warhol, who survived the attack, though quite handicapped. Valerie explained that Warhol dominated her personality: *'He had too much control over my life'*.

In the words of *Chambre Noire*, *'Chambre Noire is a wild hallucination of Valerie's death at a hotel. She is the most beautiful girl in America, the talented psychology student who was in and out of psychiatric wards, the first intellectual prostitute, author, radical feminist, creator of SCUM manifesto, and the woman who shot Andy Warhol – a complex, scandalous but deep character. There are life-sized puppets, bits of songs, video projections, humor and a 'desert of loneliness'*.

The play opens on the large dark stage with a great show of sounds and video projections, which I did not completely understand until an hour later, with a feeling that we had been given an extraordinary experience from a life and a world most of us know little about. Valerie is on her death bed with pneumonia in a lousy hotel on a dirty mattress with drawn curtains while in a striking contrast, outside the window pink neon lights are blinking and hideous porn music is blaring.

Paradoxically while lying on her death bed Valerie repeats *'Never forget to shine'*. Her father's incest attacks are remembered to Cole Porter's *'My heart belongs to daddy'* (sugardaddy), sung by Marlon Monroe. In the throws of death the words *'Happy and sad endings exist'*. Valerie's mother Dorothy is her only helper in death. In a painful embrace Dorothy (both puppeteer and puppet) grabs and hugs Valerie (puppet) who moans, *'I'm afraid to die alone.'*

In a flashback *Chambre Noire* shows Valerie's madness and pain, betrayed as she was by the father of Pop Art.

With perfect coordination, Yngvild Aspeli creates human-sized symbolic characters and Ane Marthe Sørlien Holen masterfully interprets the special musical repertoire of pop and jazz from the 1950s to 1980s and electronically created sounds, superbly mirroring Valerie's psychedelically affected condition. *'The scene changes between stark realism and abstraction, in which the story constantly changes between cabaret and burlesque'*. A totally majestic theatre experience, which holds us in a sea of flashing neon lights, color and sound impressions. A gripping work of art.

P.S. Happily, Theatre Plexus Polaire has become one of *Festival of Wonder's* frequent guests. In 2015 they presented 'Opera Opaque', and I wrote *'A unique, wonderful and very unusual*

performance'. In 2017 they visited again with 'Ashes' – 'A strong piece of theatre, in which one almost forgets that puppets are puppets and not live beings'. I look forward to seeing what Plexus Polaire presents for us in 2021!



Pressefoto

Babylon

Stuffed Puppet Theatre. Holland

<http://www.stuffedpuppet.nl>
<https://youtu.be/9RpDb8g6rZw>

Neville Tranter has visited *Festival of Wonder* many times and nobody creates as topical and current performances as he does. Inspired by stories from the Bible, classical mythology, Martin Luther King and the musicals of our time, Tranter portrays with morbid humor and a frighteningly chaotic inferno, one of the great challenges of our day: The masses of refugees coming to the promised land, Paradise – no, not Babylon – but Europe of course!

In a coastal harbor of North African we hear the roar of the sea, call of the seagulls and the horns of ships, accompanied by the ominous 'Inri Corpus Christi' from the Catholic mass. A refugee with a plant and a little dog, all that he owns, tries to board an old boat bound for the promised land. Before we go any further we meet grotesque and fanciful puppets of God, the Lord himself, escorted by an angel who is his personal spin doctor. God's own son, Jesus Christ, with the goat Binky and Charon as Death, who in Greek mythology was the ferryman sailing the dead souls over the river Styx to Hades. Besides the refugee with his dog, in the confusion we meet a smuggler boss, the captain, a poor woman who tries to pay for her ferry ticket with her cooking, and an African whose father was not saved by believing in God: '*Babylon is an illusion, a Fata Morgana*'. The question is now: Who comes and who does not come on the boat?

Tranter has ingeniously found three places in the Bible which mention Babylon. The first time when people gather in their arrogance to build the Tower of Babel, which would reach up to Heaven. The second time it is the city where the Jews were sent during the Babylonian captivity during the 500s BC. The third, when judgment falls on Babylon because of its misdeeds, an angel proclaims that the city has fallen. Symbolism to our day is remarkable. Stubbornly and to no avail God, Jesus and Charon try to stop the boat from sailing, but they are not sure how to go about it, because *'Sometimes Bad can turn out Good and Good can turn out Bad.'*

The dialogue between the puppets is also wonderful and uniquely grotesque with odd humor. God: *'I had a dream. It is time for my son's second coming. He will save the world.'* Jesus: *'My time has come. Babylon is waiting. Destiny calls me. I am not alone. Binky is with me.'* *'Bless us Father. Babylon is an illusion – a final gun'.* The old woman: *'I have money, American dollars'.* *'Why are you so heartless?'* The smuggler: *'It comes with the job!'* Charon: *'Your time has come, Christ, time to die. Bye, bye!'* Charon sings: *'Some day for us. Time to care. New way of living, a way of forgiving'* (Citat from Bernstein's musical *West Side Story*).

With *Babylon* Neville Tranter succeeds once again in creating a brilliant performance. Though he is physically visible, we completely forget about him as he uses simple methods and magical powers to make us focus on the mannerisms and words of the life-like puppets. Tranter's theatre is not just fun and games, but is known for serious and absurd scenes created with disturbing effects and very dark humor. The main subject is always a question of human nature in all of its brutality and frailty.

Babylon is an absurd story about humanity and its absurd destiny.



Ivan Donchev pressphoto

I, Sisyphus.

Puppet's Lab. Bulgaria

<https://puppetslab.com/portfolio/i-sisyphus/>

https://youtu.be/P_URBszV6AQ

In Greek mythology Sisyphus was both a hero and a king. He was sentenced for all eternity to roll a stone up a mountain. Each time he almost made it to the top the stone rolled away from him and ended up at the bottom of the mountain. He was constantly starting over with his Sisyphus labors.

The myth gives indicates several reasons for Sisyphus' punishment, but the common denominator is his attempt to defy the gods in order to cheat his way back to life after his first death.

In the words of the Bulgarian theatre Puppet's Lab: 'In "I, Sisyphus" we explore the journey of man's eternal return to himself. Ever since Antiquity, philosophers have pondered the absurdity of human behavior. Whichever road one may take, whoever else one tries to become, whatever escape-routes one might venture, he always continues to return to himself. Human life is a repetition of one and the same action. Spiraling, same, predictable. And this constant action makes us meditate not on the meaning, but on the meaninglessness of human life'.

Inspired by the work 'The Myth of Sisyphus' by existentialist Albert Camus (1942), Puppet's Lab has created an innovative and ambitious absurd work of genre theatre. Sisyphus lived in an absurd situation, but so do humans in our time. Life is without meaning, therefore are the actions of humans meaningless. But humans must act. There is only one world. '*Happiness and absurdity are two sons of the same earth*', wrote Camus.

On a huge and almost totally dark stage we are met with the forceful dark monotone sounds of Sisyphus with three heads, who time after time repeats the same nimbly organic, almost ballet-like movements. In cold an naked smoke-filled lighting and with heavy breathing, Sisyphus struggles forever to move a heavy box.

15-20 minutes later the scene changes, Sisyphus is now sitting with a small doll between his feet, who is reading a book and kissing Sisyphus' feet. '*This is the way. That's the way.*'

Scene change. We encounter Sisyphus in five different identities, in easy floating movements, signaling: '*Go forth and enjoy your freedom. Breathe deeply in and out. Life is a miracle. Do everything, do nothing. Live, die.*'

Scene change. The same performer (actor, acrobat, puppeteer, puppet, alias Stoyan Doychev) split into two people, to alter egos, always joined to each other. He/they fight with and against each other. Is happiness or absurdity fighting for power?

Scene change. Stormy weather. Sisyphus is still dragging the huge box. Dancing with several skulls, as if they were bellows on an accordion and tied on strings as if they were a harp, Sisyphus dances a Zorba-like Greek dance.

With some impatience (this is meaningless absurd theatre!) we arrive at the end of the road. But we are left with much afterthought and definitely a memory of a tremendous presentation by Stoyan Doychev, who must have been completely worn out after 60 minutes of demanding ballet and acrobatics.

'I, Sisyphus' was undoubtedly a very difficult piece to make. Therefore I express my opinion, based on a quote from Peter Michael Hornung and Thomas Bredsdorff, '*I leave the performance with a feeling that I have not deciphered it all, so the myth of Sisyphus will live on in my head.*' And that is not so bad...?



Thank you

Behind the wonderful performances are many talented people whose names I have not mentioned. I should have. Therefore I will urge you to visit the theatres' often inspiring and comprehensive web pages. Many have fine video clips from their performances on YouTube.

Behind Silkeborg Puppetry Festival are cultural personalities with enormous commitment. They are of course artistic director of the festival *Ulla Dengsøe* and her husband *Poul Andreasen*. Without Ulla's knowledge, talent and nose for sniffing out the best of the best, and Poul who is the tireless leader of technique and logistics, there would be no "Festival of Wonder" in Silkeborg. Therefore, a huge thank you to both of you.

Per Hofman Hansen

