

Ode to the imagination

Edelweiss - Alix Eynaudi



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Edelweiss is one of those shows that have you by the short hairs without your having to know what is at stake precisely. Just think of the work of Jonathan Burrows and Matteo Fargion or of Sara Manente. In their case it is the iron consistency with which they follow apparently absurd, self-imposed parameters - in terms of rhythm, score or movement material - that always draw me in as a spectator. As far as I'm concerned, it's preferable to experience that type of fascination in as pure a form as possible, without any introductory or dramaturgic brochure, and yes, also without a review that preconditions your gaze. Because each performance is entitled to context, I wanted to start with a warning: only read this review after the performance.

Edelweiss itself, however, surfs effortlessly over and through perspectives. This is already clear when you enter the theatre: to the front right there hangs a pen drawing on paper, vulnerable in the high space. The theme of the drawing evokes something pastoral, and later my memory reconstructs a souvenir out of it that relates to the home crafts of three women. There is no certainty, for that the drawing was too far away. Once the house lights have been dimmed, there emerges from behind a blue velvet curtain, which hangs three-quarters deep in the black box of Kaaistudio's, not a woman, but performer Mark Lorimer, bare-chested and with a cotton scarf around his neck. The portrayal of the three women has, however, already sunk its teeth into my imagination, for now too my connotations are

pastoral: I imagine him at work in the mountainous landscape to which the title refers, the Austria from which choreographer Alix Eynaudi comes.

Lorimer is the first of four performers who will appear in an uninterrupted sequence from the concealed space behind the blue curtain. Besides Lorimer, these are Alix Eynaudi, Cécile Tonizzo and Alice Chauchat. They come and go: alone, in duo, trio or quartet, always wearing different costumes. They do things, stage all sorts of actions throughout the entire performance. While their expressive register covers a limited range from robotic to emotionless and neutral, their movements are focused on each moment, outlined with extreme care and the utmost clarity. We are served up a performance with purposeful people and apparently functional movements. And yet this foursome prefers to explore precarious positions - with the instep of the foot for support, for instance, or balancing vertically on the bottom of a prostrate dancer and who, under the feet of the former, contracts and releases his or her backside staccato. Nothing in their environment is fixed either. When two performers each seduce a speaker into a wild little dance, the soundscape swirls across the stage. And we later see the light race across the stage floor, or attached to a body like a visual extension. The instability spreads to the auditorium, and by extension to my head.

Sometimes there is a hint of recognizability: a woman on a chair holds a sheet up high in front of her, a second one comes and stands before it, and traces the shadowed outline of the concealed body with her finger. But we never quite discover what their objectives are, or what world they are situated in. Why do Lorimer's movements in his alleged mountain landscape bring to mind those of a robot? What does the gymnastic duo of Eynaudi and Tonizzo have to do with the painted wood bloc they put down, on which a small boy is portrayed - or with the kiss on the mouth that they exchange upside-down beside the object? It catches the attention, like a rebus. That was in fact the subtitle of the performance at the premiere in Tanzquartier Wien one month earlier, a danced rebus, but in Brussels not even that key is given up. With each new situation sketch, we are referred back to a vulnerable, receptive position of not-knowing.

While at the same time we know everything. Because each of these inexplicably utilitarian movement sequences contains a flash of imagination, a core of beauty: the impetus lies already in the pattern on Lorimer's scarf that will form a theme throughout the performance. It crops up regularly in the form of a lighting pattern, on the floor or on a wall. At least, that is how I think I saw it. Imagination emerges out of the traditional, baroque embroideries on the otherwise minimalist costumes of the dancers, out of the fantastic, revealing hole in the tent dress in which Chauchat covers herself. At times the absurd humour strikes a chord, for instance in the scene in which Eynaudi attaches herself to Lorimer's body like a phallus in action, while he observes, deadpan, how his manly pride appears feminine (Lorimer would besides have made a great comic). And throughout there is the virtuoso, inventive craftsmanship of the dancers that sharpens the attention for what comes next. They surf on the border between inside and outside, contraction and expansion,

giving and taking, life and representation, and all that in a heightened state of awareness, because: we are looking at the art of dance.

Craft feeds art, art feeds craft, and together they feed us. This is also how you could interpret the scene in which Eynaudi executes a long drawn-out ritual around a little bronze statue of a heron feeding its young - her body can be seen as a high-tech instrument that executes subtle movements in a centuries-old temple dance. In many respects she here hosts the basics of life in her art: loving care and attention, the art of living tout court. At the same time, as the performance progresses, the performers' individual purposefulness increasingly makes way for contact and fantasy - or is it my spectator's gaze that is relaxing? In any case we can now catch a glimpse of the hotbed behind the curtain - one at a time its four pieces are briefly tied in a knot in the air. At the end of the show, the place can open up for good, in the form of a shrine with relics and attributes. What they represent exactly, and in whose honour, is something we can once more leave to our own associations.

What I myself saw in Edelweiss is a fascinating attempt at permeability between art and craft, between the spectator and life, which you can read in two directions, like a palindrome. Behind each reality lies another reality with as a common denominator the power of the imagination. Receptivity is what is at stake in this show. Alix Eynaudi has already done nice work on this subject in the past: in Exit, a collaboration with Kris Verdonck, she seduced the public for instance with cushions, blankets and a hypnotic trajectory of movement sequences until she had us where she wanted us, in a receptive state of half sleep. In Edelweiss she again succeeds wonderfully in establishing an open viewing attitude in the spectator, in this case by highlighting connecting elements - dedication, imagination - between art and, yes, life. When the news from Paris hits me as I exit the theatre, I wish everyone the wisdom of her sort of approach.

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