

Esther Severi on Immerwahr

Pieter De Buysser is the author of *Immerwahr*: a story whose title refers to the historical figure Clara Immerwahr, wife of the German chemist Fritz Haber. But the story is about Ellen, Midas and their son Levi, a modern family with a loft in Brussels and a beach house in northern France. It starts with Ellen, who comes home after an evening of theatre: she has seen 'Immerwahr', and finds it appalling. She finds the title alone pretentious: as if you're going to tell the eternal truth in the span of one and a half hours. The actress who played Clara and the dramatic, classical performance – as if the avant-garde never existed – puts her in a defiant mood. Midas hears her story and in the meantime is reading e-mails: into his mailbox flow congratulations on an imminent and highly successful business deal.

The tragic fate of Clara Immerwahr hangs like a spectre in the mind of Ellen, 'like she left black ink inside me, and I can't remove it anymore ... or is it milk?' Immerwahr, herself a scientist, committed suicide in 1915, on the night her husband was being celebrated by the German glitterati for the use of his invention – chlorine gas – in the trenches of WWI. For Ellen, with a master's in social sciences, the confrontation with Immerwahr is a breaking point: a moment of insight that makes 'today' the endpoint of history. Change thus has unavoidably been put in motion.

The life of the family will change drastically. Conversations are had; choices are made. The outside world increasingly penetrates the closed, mental space of the couple on stage, like an ever-increasing echo in which resounds the consequences of their revolution. Their story is that of today: that of the major crises and challenges our world is facing, and how you, as individual, must cope with them, in relationship with those around you. And also: how you must physically place yourself in a world of new ideas in the here and now. Because, ideology and intention notwithstanding, human nature does not change and will always and inevitably remain 'ambiguous'.

Pieter De Buysser explains like no other how history is a part of the now, as a collective memory that make us think and drives us. He uses historical references as motifs that give the story a distinctive mood. In the daily life of Ellen and Midas, Immerwahr looms ever present as an eternal truth. It makes Ellen and Midas actors on the stage: the story of Clara, Fritz, and their son Hermann becomes a dark game that they repeatedly replay, in which they fully embody the painful fate that has determined these lives. The tragic story of Clara Immerwahr – who could not live with the moral awareness of the atrocities of her husband, and who eventually died in the arms of her son Hermann – appears to announce a potential tragedy in the story of Ellen and Midas.

On stage are Brussels writer/actor Pieter De Buysser and Maike Lond, performance artist from Estonia, two makers with very different backgrounds and practices. The combination creates an interesting tension. The piece is a balancing act between the acted reality and real 'artificiality' of their presence on stage. What unites them is a shared commitment: the belief that we live in times that are handed down to us, more than that we invent them ourselves. That the history handed down may not become an automatism and must be questioned, and that every human being has the right to create their own life, their own conditions. In this piece, both are saying that today is the last day of history. Therein lies a utopian power, against which the notion persists that history inevitably repeats itself. Also repeated in this repetition of history, as an eternal truth, however, is the real possibility to start over.