

A lazy dog and a lively festival

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Festival of Wonder 2017 is over. The grand international puppetry festival in Silkeborg can add another successful week of artistic moments and productive meetings to the history books.

By: Carsten Jensen

** Festival of Wonder - Silkeborg Puppetry Festival November 9-12, 2017.*

International biennial festival for puppetry, object and visual theatre for audiences of all ages.

** the theme of the 2017 festival was 'Animation Theatre and live music across borders', and represented in the program were 21 theatres from Denmark, 10 from France, Canada, The Netherlands, Czech Republic, Israel, Germany and Norway. There were also workshops, exhibits, films, backstage talks and speeches.*

** In connection with the festival, shows were presented for the children of the county from Monday November 6 to Friday November 11.*

** See more about the festival at: www.festivalofwonder.dk<<http://www.festivalofwonder.dk/>>*

Read the article 'The network is everything'

<<http://www.teateravisen.dk/netvaerket-er-afgoerende.html>>

Here I am, back in Silkeborg, staying at Hotel Dania on the town square, ready for four days of Festival of Wonder. At the last festival two years ago the square was torn up in order to make an underground parking lot - and not all of the local residents were happy.

The town square is finished, with 6000 square meters of stone mosaic with images of artist Asger Jorn, though the entrance to Østergade is still a building site and causes problems for the local businesses.

The statue of Drewsen, Silkeborg's founder, is back on the square, moved from its original spot, which is also a problem for some locals who like things to be as they always are.

The square and the rest of the town are covered with campaign posters, and I never get used to those intense faces around me, some in giant size, even at Hotel Dania, one of the main festival hotels in town.

Award to Ulla Dengsøe

Posters advertising the puppetry festival, my reason for being in Silkeborg, were hard to find. They would have had trouble standing out among the sea of staring faces of candidates. Besides, most of the available tickets for the festival are already sold.

Festival of Wonder fills the town with cultural and theatrical experiences in many ways. It starts with the opening evening on Thursday evening, when local politicians, honored guests, theatre groups and ordinary onlookers fill the large auditorium of Jysk Musikteater. The mayor and the head of the cultural committee say some good words, almost synchronized, and so does the festival's artistic director Ulla Dengsøe.

The first surprise of the evening is an unexpected visit on stage by Tine Eibye, producer at Randers Egnsteater: When actor Merete Hegner had her 25th jubilee in 2006 an award was made in her name.

The award consists of the honor, plus a little clown figure of famous Charlie Rivel, presented to a person committed to the arts, especially in the field of drama/theatre. Last year's winner is now passing it on, and in the person of Ulla Dengsøe, the Merete Hegner award has found a worthy recipient.

Theatre concert

The last part of the evening was the speech by the German ambassador to Denmark, preceding the German opening performance by Schauspielhaus Bochum. Andreas Meitzner surprised with his perfect English and a comprehensive introduction to 'Moondog' (12+), which is based on music by American born Louis Thomas Hardin (with the nickname Moondog), who was blinded at age 16 in an accident but managed to have a career as a musician and composer. From 1974 he lived in Germany where he died in Münster in 1989. His move to Germany serves as the basis for the performance.

'Moondog - The Viking of 5th Avenue' is primarily a theatre concert with exciting music, played around an impressive, gigantic dog, which filled the background, sometimes moving its lazy, enormous head towards the music and musicians.

The visit to Silkeborg was its Scandinavian premiere and a spectacular opening event, with 14 musicians, 11 technicians and two puppeteers steering the show and the super dog. Festival of Wonder was on its way.

Music in focus

The event of the next evening fit the theme of 'Animation theatre and live music' perfectly; 'Glamour in the Dark' (adult), with Israeli singer Yael Rasooly and exceptional accordion player Iliya Magalnyk with their innovative renditions of music from the mid-1900s.

Yael Rasooly, also the name of her theatre, has previously been a guest at Silkeborg with exciting, dark performances - 'How Lovely' (2015) og 'The House by the Lake' (2013).

Lots of music and theatre were presented in most of the Danish and international shows of the festival.

The biggest production, the sold out Western cabaret 'Deadtown' (12+) with Czech Forman Brothers, included 18 actors, musicians, puppeteers, dancers, acrobats and an orchestra filled the large wooden building set up for the occasion at the dock.

It was modern circus, variety, huge projections, etc., in fast paced tempo. The story line got a bit overpowered sometimes: An actor, illusionist, cabaret owner's fantasy about life in the Wild West - with shoot-outs, fights, pretty women included. But only an illusion, a dream world, created by scratchy sounding technical effects.

It was great looking, full of imagination and extremely entertaining. And we could buy a drink in the bar of the set after the show.

Forman Brothers Theatre is almost a permanent feature in Silkeborg, where they have presented their gigantic new circus performance 'Obludarium', at three festivals, in their own circus tent.

Pictures in Multisalén

The many remaining performances took place in existing venues, mainly Jysk Musikteater, Kedelhuset, Medborgerhuset and Den Kreative Skole/The creative school.

The latter venue includes Multisalén, used by Canadian Theatre Magali Chouinard's 'Nomad Soul' (+12) with projected images of nature, masks and puppets, a performance based on spiritual rites of native people. Unfortunately only the first two or three rows in the packed room could see what took place on the floor, while most of the audience had to be content with the tops of the otherwise fine puppets, which were part of the story. This was a topic of discussion after the show.

We were worried about a repeat problem the next day at Multisalén but luckily the story took place on a screen high up, while the musicians were at floor level. Theatre Lichtbende from Holland with 'Tutu' (6+) took the audience back in time with their technically interesting *laterna magicas*, precursors of diaspas and film, along with live music, projected a story about styles of dance.

In spite of the nerdy set-up with abrupt visual passages, children and adults were quite infatuated.

Marionettes

Czech Theatre Alfa also played at a reasonable height in Kedelhuset when they performed traditional marionette theatre, a la Punch and Judy two meters off the floor while the musicians were below.

The theatre brought two shows. 'CHA CHA CHA' (+7) a farce based on silent movies with Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Laurel and Hardy as hand puppets was a joy. 'The Three Musketeers' (+8) based on Dumas and silent movies was performed in a constantly hectic tempo in a rowdy humoristic version of the classic.

With 24 hand puppets, 10 puppeteers and 2 musicians, it was a big show for a small stage.

The many puppeteers did a great job from the back part of the marionette stage in both shows. We had a fine demonstration of this on Saturday evening, when the many international guests from theatres and festivals mingled and networked with their Danish colleagues.

This interaction is an important part of Festival of Wonder's international approach.

Nuns, garbage dump dancing and pyromaniacs

Among the other international participants was Norwegian Kattas Figurteater's 'Katharina's Voices (+14) - about the nun Katharina von Bora, who left the monastery life and became Martin Luther's wife. The monologue was performed in the beautifully restored Silkeborg Church, with fine puppets and wonderful acting and singing by Cecilie Schilling, who also proved to be a talented ventriloquist for the characters of Luther and the Pope.

Dutch-Brazilian Duda Paiva Company impressed with 'Bastard' (adult), in which Duda Paiva was responsible for concept, choreography and dance in a humoristic and provocative show, showcasing the cruelty, fear and dreams of humankind and takes place in a futuristic dump. The puppets were very expressive and it was clear that the master Neville Tranter had been a consultant.

For me the French-Norwegian Theatre Plexus Polaire, with 'Ashes' (14+) delivered the greatest experience of Festival of Wonder 2017.

In the performance, inspired by the novel 'Before I Burn' by Gaute Heivoll, we follow parallel stories of an author with writer's block and a story about a pyromaniac who terrorized a village in the 1970s, incorporating elements of the author's own story. The drama and the interaction between actors and extremely life-like cleverly manipulated puppets are fascinating. Seriously worthwhile.

I am happy to tell that 'Ashes' will be one of the international guest performances at Aprilfestival 2018 in Syddjurs Kommune. That contract was made after the show on Saturday evening in Silkeborg.

Good Danish performances

Somewhere between the international and the Danish shows was the French Theatre Medianes 'Horizons' (+8), which as an image and sound filled installation, takes place on Fanø. It has played and toured in Denmark for almost two years - see <<http://www.teateravisen.dk/den-smukkeste-billedkunst-danser-paa-en-strand-paa-fanoe.html>> from Aprilfestival 2016 - and is performed by Catherine Sombsthay, who has also directed a number of critically praised Danish shows, including 2015 Reumert winner 'Tivoli' with Teater Nordkraft.

I was especially interested in the international performances, the artistic level of the many Danish shows was fine in every way, including a couple of Reumert award nominated children's productions such as Teater My's 'I remember everything' and ZeBU/SAUM's 'My Father and Angry Man'. All of the Danish shows have been reviewed here and have therefore received qualified critiques.

The Old Guard

Teateravisen (Theatre News) interviewed a professional musician who came from Copenhagen to her hometown Silkeborg to see what this international puppetry festival was all about, knowing nothing about the genre or its many facets. As with many others who see the possibilities of animation theatre for the first time, the musician was euphorically impressed by the artistic and experimental level and that such a great cultural event could be in her hometown, so far from Copenhagen.

Strangely enough she is not the only one who is so uninformed. Ignorance about puppetry can be found among professionals and also among locals in Silkeborg. It is not difficult to meet locals who have never heard of their own great international puppetry festival.

On the other hand it is among the locals that we find the most enthusiastic ticket buyers, who sit ready at their computers at the moment the festival tickets are available, buying entrance to 20 shows, regardless of whether the shows are for children or adults, Danish or international.

That is why there could be a sold out festival audience of 60+ adults seeing a marionette performance for 8 year olds. It makes no difference, as long as they see good theatre....

Ticket availability challenge

Apparently the extreme theatre interest and resolve of seniors is because Silkeborg is an old teachers' college town, where many retired or almost retired teachers live, a group known as frequent users of cultural activities.

The festival's artistic director Ulla Dengsøe and her extremely involved husband Poul agree that it is a kind of logistical challenge, that the older segment of the population so quickly buys all the tickets, because younger people and families traditionally find it difficult to plan so far ahead. The tickets are gone.

My suggestion to reserve some tickets until a week or so before the festival was not accepted: for the festival it is important to sell the tickets when the demand is there.

"We are so pleased with the many local people who support festival after festival. We could sell many more tickets and present many more performances at the festival, that would require more volunteers and a larger economic base", says Ulla Dengsøe. She also feels that the present size of Festival of Wonder makes it easy for participants and audiences to navigate, as well as creating a good framework for networking among festival directors and professionals.

Culture does not get enough support

It ought to be important for Silkeborg to keep this unique festival and to assure that it has good future conditions. That goes for other cultural activities that make the city attractive to present and potential citizens and tourists.

We understand that this is not self-evident when we visit one of the city's fine museums, Jorn Museum, which is a bit hidden in the outskirts of town.

'There are still people in town who have no idea there is an art museum here', says one of the museum personnel, who has also not found many local political candidates with culture as part of their party program at this election time.

It is more about more sports gyms, water parks, roads, etc., themes in the local news and on the campaign posters.

Apparently there are plans to move Jorn Museum to Sørtorvet, giving more visibility to the artist who mixed genres, worked together with others in many projects, praised collectivism and had a large network across borders.

That could almost be words to describe Festival of Wonder, which will return in two years. Hopefully with continued support from the local politicians, who should be happy about Jorn and this festival and all of the many citizens interested in culture.