

**KLASSEKAMPEN - reviewed by Ida Lou Larsen, 07 dec 2009**

**Chilling swan song**

## **Theatre of Cruelty: Last Song**

Director: Lars Øyno

Actors: Odile Heftye Blehr, Lars Brunborg and Rita Lindanger.

Costume designer: Gjøril Bjercke Sæther

Our notion of theatre as art is expanded as *Theatre of Cruelty* succeeds with *Last Song*.

Lars Øyno is one of our most original theatre directors, producing his first show some twenty years ago at Trøndelag Theatre, where he was employed as an actor. His company, *Theatre of Cruelty*, has been running for seventeen years. Citing Antonin Artaud, who coined the phrase *Theatre of Cruelty*, as his main inspiration, Øyno seeks to create *a theatre based on the musicality of the body, its breath and poetry the impetus of action*.

Fridays premiere performance of *Comte de Lautréamon's Last Song*, sees Lars Øyno taking his inspiration from French poet Isidore Ducasse for the second time, his first outing was *Poesies* (2000).

Twenty-four years old, Ducasse dies in a Parisian hotel room in 1870. Ducasse had by then published *The Songs of Maldoror*, but he remained largely unnoticed during his lifetime. Fifty years later the surrealist movement would rediscover his writings, firmly putting him on a path to be hailed by contemporary critics as one of the 19<sup>th</sup> century's most important writers.

A worn out pupil's desk and a chair is placed in the middle of the stage. A character dressed in a suit enters, lying on its knees, it struggles to reach an old organ, but slowly and persistently seats itself in front of it meticulously.

Now a middle aged man appears, casually dressed he could resemble a hotel clerk, but his cane is more reminiscent of a school master's. His virtuoso performance is full of flair and acrobatics, sharply contrasting the youth's horrid plight to his instrument.

Cracks do appear, our schoolmaster must avert invisible threats with his outstretched hands, as he also has to carry around another suited character, the organ player's alter ego.

As the whip is cracked one last time, the youth finds himself alone at his desk, his torment accompanied by organ music.

The pupil beckons man's affinity for birds, fish and insects, and ultimately acknowledges his hidden self. A glistening black beetle glides forth as an angel of death, and a spectacular eagle acutely peers down from above. Death appears as a gentle unification, a ritualistic dance towards a peaceful all consuming darkness.

I perceived *Last Song* as an intense and almost frightening tale of youthful yearning and despair, against adulthood's certainty.

His ability to evoke a multitude of reactions to his work is a testament to Lars Øyno's individuality and strength as a director. He stays true to Artaud's idea that theatre should not be *the enactment of written plays, but rather give a sort of material expression to all of man's dormant and hidden thoughts*, as this experience will translate differently to every audience member.

Through slow invoking movements and enervating repetitions, the three actors radiate a total physical presence emitting fear and discomfort that resonates from the set design and lightning. The format of this article does not permit me to go into details about the latter.

When Lars Øyno succeeds, he radically expands the notion of theatre as art. You can't say that about too many these days.

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As the format of *Klassekampen* does not allow me to go into details about set design and costumes, it pleases me that its website allows me to do this.

Gjøril Bjercke Sæther created the fantastic costumes for *Fjeldfuglen*, *Theatre of Cruelty*'s former production. Here, she manages to convey a precise reflection of the characters personality through minute and up to date details, most evidently in the scene where Odile Blehr convincingly performs a sexual transformation.

The program notes do not say who is responsible for the set design, but its desolate presence, broken only by some old fashioned anatomy charts and merry depictions of animals, fascinate. A window, facing Parisian rooftops against a soft and dark blue night sky, adds ambiance.

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## The transformation of death

Death enters the final scene in Last Song at the Theatre of Cruelty, incarnated as a beetle, it ushers the twenty-four year old, unknown writer Isidore Ducasse away. Bedridden and isolated, he continually writes. The ordeal has been painful. Striving towards good hurts, when you've learned that you are evil.

Very little is known about the author who died in 1870. His appearance can barely be made out from a blurred photography. His legacy and his work remained unknown after his death. The emergence of surrealism forty years later saw artists such as André Breton and Salvador Dali praising Ducasse. He is now seen as the father of surrealism.

Last song depicts the last days of Ducasse, who wrote under the pseudonym Comte de Lautreamont, leaving us mainly two works. At twenty-two he wrote a collection of prose poems, *The Songs of Maldoror*. His writings, inspired by gothic and romantic poets, portray mostly cruelty and pain, are set around the misanthropic protagonist Maldoror. Full of violent images, life is portrayed in awful colours. Lautreamont commenced on a contrasting work, seeking hope and inspiration instead of the misery prevalent in *Songs of Maldoror*. Ducasse did not set out to falsify his first book, but to acknowledge the co-existence of good and evil. This work was never finished; we are left with a collection of poems known as *Poesies*.

### Black and barren

The stage area is black and barren. A beautiful small wooden organ is set against the wall. A desk and a simple chair is found in the middle of the stage. Charts depicting animals, plants and human organs are found along the walls.

A character portraying Lautreamont enters the stage, confronting his instrument, the organ. As an animal, he coolly, but intensely seizes his opponent. Crouched like a bird with arms behind his back, the musician wheezes towards the organ. Barely exposing his face, he's dance is accompanied by loud screeches. As he settles, the fluorescent light flickers and Lautreamont's teacher enters. Grim and stern, Lautreamont's teacher is repulsed by his writings. Sickened by what he reads, he performs an acrobatic dance routine, flapping like a bird against the sky and waving his cane. Exposed to this violent literature, the old man faces a familiar dilemma. Is he to uphold to his age old knowledge, or choose to recognize the young Lautreamont? He knows old must give way to new expressions.

When he speaks, his voice is dreamy, as if he's speaking backwards. He says: *Youth listens to the advice of maturity, and has unlimited confidence in itself.*

The teacher does recognize that the young man knows his references. Ducasse drew on influences from Poe, Goethe and Milton in his works and that with a swagger that amazed his contemporaries. The teachers dance is merely a reaction to the new impulses, brought forward by the twenty-two year old author of *Songs of Maldoror*.

Dressed in a nice suit, but with messy hair, a new incarnation of Lautreamont enters through a window. He settles on the teachers shoulders, carried around, he pronounces: *To childhood and old age, to all that lives and all that's dead, they showed reverence.*

Slowly, varying between whispers and high pitched voice, Lautreamont depicts mankind in a passage from *Poesies* (the goodness of mankind). The latter passage is an excerpt from *Songs*

of *Maldoror* (describing the evil in Man), this fact might explain the ambivalence of the painful repetitions.

## Angry turkey

While persistently writing at night, Lautreamont attacks the organ, trampling on the keyboard. He scratches and claws like a little animal, monotonously repeating his writing. Lautreamont wheezes like an angry turkey, accompanied by the horror soundtrack from the organ. No progress is made as his nature remains constant. His solitary existence is of his own will.

*Who opens the door to my tomb?*, he asks, continuing: *I shall allow no-one to enter!* This sequence escalates. He screams, slamming his body on the desk, expressing enormous pain like a man possessed. His horrid cries are a contrast to the silence prevalent in the show; his pain transmits to the audience.

Lautreamont trembles when he gets up on his desk, a transformation is about to take place, he turns around and around. It's the transformation of death. Odille Heftye Blehr fits perfectly in the role of Lautreamont, who's now being stripped, piece by piece flying to the floor. Finally, a change is taking place. Suddenly, a naked woman is standing in front of us, adjusting the desk, lying down to rest. Woman's clothes are found underneath the lid, with her teeth she picks up panties, stockings and a corset. Her fingers are crooked; they tremble as she slowly attaches the girdle to the stockings. Mechanically, she puts on her make up. As she removes her wig she is surprised to find a hairpin for her long hair. Digging herself into a dress, she clumsily poses in high heels. Now, death appears, climbing down from the gallery, much bigger than her. Her attempt to tease it fails, it waits. She engages the organ player in a staccato dance, they giggle and line up against the wall. As darkness falls, the black beetle comes to collect its prey. As Egyptian mythology cites the scarab as a symbol of rebirth, one could say that the play ends on a hopeful note.

## Chaos

*Theatre of Cruelty* and its founder, Lars Øyno, is on a mission. They see Antonin Artauds principles of an *Anatomic Theatre* as a means to reject text based theatre. Instead of a script we find; body, movement, human sounds, dance, posture and repeated sequences of movement. The array of expressions creates an intimacy rare in conventional plays. Seeing a show by *Theatre of Cruelty* is to be confronted with chaos. The risk of taking this approach is that one can alienate the audience.

This is by no means accessible theatre, as a friend who accompanied me experienced. Having no previous knowledge of *Theatre of Cruelty* or Lautreamont, she was left speechless by the show. She struggled to relate the characters to each other, feeling sidelined by the shows cryptic references. My objection to the show is that it relies too heavily on literary references to the author's life. Although I have great respect for the director, I often feel he fails to connect with the audience. One is left with the solitary artist's horrid plight, as

depicted by *Theatre of Cruelty*. His last days a desperate cry that leaves you with the shivers.

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MORGENBLADET reviewed by Torbjørn Oppedal 11 dec 2009

## Horrific romantic surrealism

### A powerhouse performance with too many elements.

Lars Øyno has been the *enfant terrible* of Norwegian theatre since *Theatre of Cruelty*'s first performance twenty years ago. Taking his cue from Antonin Artaud, he has developed a physical and ritual language for the stage.

*Last Song* depicts Uruguayan borne Isidore Ducasse (1846-1870), who despite his short life managed to make an impression in literature as the forerunner of surrealism.

His main body of work, *Les Chants de Maldoror* (published 1869), is an odd entry in world literature. Six fragmented chapters rail against God and mankind, with images spanning from high poetry to repulsive obscenities.

(He's unfinished work *Poésies*, was the textual basis for a show by *Theatre of Cruelty* in 2000.)

**Visions.** *Last Song* is more concerned with Lautréamont's little known life and death, rather than his writings. The play describes the poet in his death chamber, a room in *Faubourg Montmartre*. This death chamber has strong resemblances to a class room, as we can spot a desk, anatomy charts and a stuffed eagle.

The show sets off on a strong note. An androgynous character (Rita Lindanger) dressed in an old 18<sup>th</sup> century suit, fights his way to an organ standing in a corner, he begins to play.

A man (Lars Brunborg) enters, throwing himself about in manic, paranoid movements. He seems to guard himself from some invisible threat, a menace so apparent he feels the need to swing his cane against it. Out of the shadows, Lautréamont (Odille Heftye Blehr) enters, clinging to his shoulders like a parasitic spirit.

**Horror.** The danger of choosing such stark material is that it can have the effect of pure horror, as opposed to Artaud's existential chill. Most of the ingredients of the show are horror effects: ghostlike organ music, paranoid gestures, 18<sup>th</sup> century costumes and anatomy charts. Visually stirring, it fails to keep you on your toes. When Lautreamont repeats a set of desperate gestures (writing, fingers crawling as if of free will, throwing himself on his desk), it loses intensity. In contrast to previous shows (*Fjeldfuglen*, *Teateret & Vitenskapen*), *Last Song* suffers

from a lack of poetry, its images too specific and mundane.

Still, the show's roughness is as close to being brilliant as a flawed show can be.

Øyno and his actors continue to risk it all in every performance. That's why he'll prove this critic wrong in their next show!