

Brave in its simplicity, revolutionary in its conservatism

On stage is a large black casket. The music starts and suddenly Pieter De Buysser jumps into sight from behind the casket. Pieter's wearing a suit and gives a very clean-cut appearance, with the exception of the cat's tail hanging from one of his ears. He jumps around, touches the stage with his hands and smiles ingeniously at the audience before starting to speak.

"Book Burning" is about the scientist and activist Sebastian, who spreads so much knowledge and enlightenment that he has actually started to glow from within, and his daughter Thilde, whose entire persona and future life has been divined from her DNA and written down in a book. The parallel story line focuses on some of the largest democracy movements of our time, Wikileaks and Occupy, and the state of affairs that these movements disseminate information about and protest against. The first storyline resembles the folk tales of bygone days and is an absurd and surrealistic myth about family, escape and love in true H.C. Andersen style, while the parts about Wikileaks and Occupy bring to mind a political and inflammatory speech.

The two storylines might seem hard to integrate but De Buysser's script fully succeeds in joining the two, creating a performance where the political includes the personal and the personal includes the political. The myth explains the society and the society explains the myth. De Buysser has embraced the theatrical storytelling style of bygone days and prances around on stage in a manner almost bordering on parody but which fits the story extraordinarily well. De Buysser's style results in a lot of laughter and is a source of energy for the performance, which together has the effect of never making it seem drawn out despite being almost two hours long and solely consisting of De Buysser standing on a stage telling the story while dressed completely in black. De Buysser also understands how to vary his story telling techniques. In the parts relating to the terrifying truths uncovered by Wikileaks or the disheartening facts that Occupy protest against all drama disappears from his voice which instead becomes as driven and full of indignation as that of any good politician.

However, it's not just De Buysser's storytelling art and well thought-out script that makes "Book Burning" a fascinating experience. The black coffin present on stage forms a large part of the whole experience and is an impressive piece of stage design. As De Buysser tells his tale the coffin slowly unfolds – the lid opens up to show a picture of a windswept garden, half a doll-house appears, a road is drawn up and a mountain is cranked up. Stools, lamps, still lives – it all seems to fit in the coffin and when the tale is over De Buysser has built up an entire world from the coffin, all in stylish light grey. It's a stage design that does not require any specific techniques and reminds the viewer as much of the theatrical arts of bygone days as De Buysser's storytelling style itself. It's incredibly beautiful.

In a stage design environment where everyone constantly chases after the latest of everything – the latest techniques, ideas, stage language, the most shocking and the most provoking – it's very unusual to see a production which could have been performed in exactly the same way a hundred years ago. "Book Burning" is brave in its simplicity and revolutionary in its conservatism; in addition to being an incredibly refreshing performance that not only touches on political issues by stating the parameters, symbolising and hiding behind advanced theoretical discussions but which actually talks of the issues in plain terms in an educational manner that is easy to understand and inspiringly engaged.

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