

The British Theatre Guide

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The Kunstenfestivaldesarts Diary (3)

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Brussels has a long and interesting history at the heart of European culture from the middle ages onwards. Its architecture reflects the peaks of prosperity, commercial aspiration and communal pride, as well as the devastation and divisions of wars, religious strife, cultural factionalism and economic slumps. Many of its old buildings still lie derelict, many are being or have recently been renovated, transformed for community purposes, for arts centres, as well as hotels and private housing.

The Place des Martyrs is a charming and elegant cobbled square of Georgian-style facades built by the Hapsburgs in the 1770s. Besides being the collective grave of the 466 Belgians who died in September 1830 in rebellion against the Dutch, the government of Flanders has its seat here and flags flutter in the breeze. It is a delightful place to sit and rest. The architecture itself is so very peaceful in spite of the square's bloody history. Most of the buildings have now been restored and include private housing, an arts organisation and a bookshop. On one corner a magnificent façade, just the shell of a once splendid edifice is now being refurbished.

On Saturday 10th May, at 22.00 Belgian video artist Koen Theys created a one-off installation for the opening of the festival entitled *Vive le roi! Vive le republique!* On a barmy spring evening as the sun set, it would have been a welcome addition to the opening festivities. However, I was so riveted to *End*, that I opted to stay in the Kaai Theater for a post-performance discussion with Kris Verdonck, his dramaturg Marianne van Kerkhoven and the cast. Theys's installation was created with the help of thirty actors, dogs, horses and a mass of props with the original buildings framing the action.

That is one of the downsides to a festival. With so much to do and see, a bod can't be in two places at once and one is always left wondering what one has missed.

Another building worth visiting is Les Brigittines, a beautiful old brick church which has been restored to function as a performance space and arts centre. The front-of-house and administrative spaces are contained in a stylish, spacious and luminous glass structure adjacent. Inside the church, the structure has been scrupulously cleaned, but left in a state of disrepair, scrubbed, but pock-marked bricks, damaged plaster cornices, worn stone give

the church a character it would lack if it had been given an complete make-over and the wear and tear of its age patched up. The wooden roof is a marvel. Before the start of the performance, the original church bell, now placed in the entrance way on a stone plinth, is struck with resounding effect calling those who worship at the altar of the arts to take their seats.

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Ayden Teker

Les Brigittines

9-15 May 2008

The Turkish choreograph Ayden Teker graduated from the Tisch School of Art in New York and held a Fulbright scholarship for investigation into somatic theory. A dance instructor at Minar Sinan Fine Arts University, Istanbul, as well as a choreographer of international status, she is more interested in researching the relationship between the body and objects than product-oriented dance projects. The creative process is more important than the end result. Her collaborator in this particular process, Ayse Orhon, is a dancer and musician who learned to play the harp as a child, before abandoning it to train in choreography.

The third part of the triangle is a harp. Huge, black, sculptural, it dominates the stage and stubbornly refuses to enter into a movement-based relationship with a dancer. Why should it? It is, after all, not made to dance, but to sing out its sounds when its strings are played, plucked, stroked, whatever. It is not made to move but to make sound.

Teker and Orhon have insisted in demanding collaboration from this instrument on their own terms. Orhon wants to manipulate it, move it, play with it, blend with it, and it refuses point blank.

Teker likes a problem or an obstacle to tackle in her works. She doesn't deal with social issues, the body in society, emotions, desire, sexuality; she deals with the obstructions imposed on physicality by objects which should, in principle, become extensions of the body. After creating a piece with a counter bass, and a pair of high heeled shoes, the harp is the object that will be transformed or transform the body.

Orhan's body is slender and graceful, belying its physical strength and virtuosity. She needs that strength to work with this unwieldy partner, and in the absence of music (except some unmelodious sounds made by unconventional use of the strings) and evidence of emotional engagement with the object, the piece quickly becomes cold, an exercise in movement rather than something fleshed out.

The dancer is graceful, sitting on the harp, sliding down it, wrapping herself around it, draping herself over it, pushing it around, but never do I sense that she has a genuine relationship with it. In the programme notes, she speaks of a rivalry with the instrument, but I never could see that she was enticing or cajoling it, seducing or persuading it, asking it for any compliance or

collaboration at all. Only towards the end when she inserted her legs in the hollow frame, almost up to the hips, something started to happen. Moving her legs around, up and down, tilting the harp, she was a mermaid with a harp for a tail. But mermaids flick their tails to show that it is an extension of themselves, not only manageable, but an essential part of the equipment of motion. Orhan was still saddled with a tail too heavy to liberate and she was restricted. Finally, she grasped it to her pelvis, like a giant phallus, and swung it around and around, circling and becoming, very briefly, one with the instrument as the lights dimmed to blackout.

Perhaps, this was a final moment of triumph and motion, and a female dancer requires considerable physical prowess to accomplish such a feat, but this is not sufficient to render a performance engaging. I appreciate the concept, and the investigation, but maybe we should have seen more of the process in the final product. I also wonder whether or not Teker and Orhan's cultural background is intrinsic to this piece and as an outsider I cannot read the signs. After all, that's what a festival is about, learning from other cultures and I don't want to impose any prejudices I might have on a reading of modern dance in Turkey.

Perhaps, I should ask them? Questions! Challenges! That's what it is all about: opening dialogues.

Jackie Fletcher