



Festival Bytes

Blog of the European Festivals Association (EFA)

The hidden music theatre boom in Finland

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— (c) Martti Anttila

“How well do we really know ourselves? How confident can we be in predicting what we would or would not do in novel situations that we have never encountered? Could we like God’s favorite angel, Lucifer, ever be led into the temptation to do the unthinkable to others?”

Philip Zimbardo raises these questions in the foreword of his book entitled *The Lucifer Effect*. As the leading professor of *The Stanford Prison Experiment*, one of the much-debated and shocking researches of contemporary psychology, Zimbardo is undoubtedly not alone with his thoughts. We all are curious to know... What if I told you a murder that took place in Finland in 1881? A tragic story about Arndt Hofström, respected priest, murdered with a mallet by his brother Oskar Hofström, who was also a priest. Oskar, who acclaimed his act meant to bless his brother, remained calm at the trial and was sure that God was pleased. His blood-curling story stayed as a mystery among pages of history. The secret motivation arising from his religious vision were unveiled. Today, a century later, it became a fundamental inspiration for *Autuus (Bliss)* – an interesting and strong music theatre work, world premiered at the *Helsinki Festival*.

Unfolding as a series of reflections around what the deepest motive for the crime would be and who the criminal is, the performance dives into the darkest corridors of human mind. With its main character, a non-violent person with an irresistible impulse to overstep the existing morals codes, *Autuus* is a mind-blowing video-epic theatre-electro opera created by three highly acclaimed Finnish artists: composer Antti Auvinen, poet Harry Salmenniemi and director-video artist Teemu Mäki.

Autuus was given its world premiere at the Helsinki Festival on 16 August at the Sonore Hall of Helsinki Music Centre. It was sung by Mirjam Solomon (soprano), Jarno Lehtola (tenor), Sampo Haapaniemi (baritone). A great part of the musical success of the work – that could well be called a choir opera – comes from the virtuosity of Helsinki Chamber Choir conducted by Nils Schweckendiek. Also the accompanying Defunensemble was excellent. The electronics were designed and realised in co-operation with Sibelius Academy’s Centre for Music and Technology.

The provocative and coherent combination of live performance, video and electronics was in perfect balance thanks to the intelligent dramatic structure of work. The 4-part libretto showed the audience a poetic path into the core of the story. With an English translation projected on the screens, the performance was accessible also for somebody who does not understand Finnish.



— *Autuus* (c) Martti Anttila

The performance opened a door to the mind of a killer and pushed both the borders of ordinary ethics and the boundaries of ordinary dramaturgy. The video material with its spectacular and sometimes scary images presented strong symbols and showed the mind of the main character from many angles.

The surprising interview with a criminal psychologist in the middle of the opera presented as a part of the video screening, hit me like a slap in the face. Informing the audience

about the mechanisms of crime, violence and criminal motives, the tangible words given by the psychologist created a classical Brechtian “Verfremdung”-effect and reminded us that what we are seeing on stage is just a representation of an unspoken reality in ourselves. Although ‘Murder’, the final part with its double-death, for me felt a bit too long, in an interesting way it revealed the mental state of the killer after that act of murder.

The layers of the performance – the sound, theatre, poetry, film and electronics – superbly synchronised, brought another question to my mind. Could this be the performance showing the way to the future of music theatre in Finland? A hot topic here nowadays! This year’s Helsinki Festival hosts not only Autuus but also presents world premieres of two other music theatre works, selected out of 30 more waiting to be staged. The festival has taken a pioneering step in giving the young generation of composers visibility by organising a symposium around the theme of New Performing Arts.

On this frontier there is much going on in Finland!



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About Ceyda Berk-Söderblom

Ceyda Berk-Söderblom is an independent cultural producer currently based in Helsinki. Before settling in Finland Ceyda has worked for more than 13 years as festival coordinator for the International Izmir Festival and as programmer for the Izmir European Jazz Festival in Turkey. She obtained her Bachelor’s Degree in Journalism at the Faculty of Communication of the Ege University, and her Executive Management Diploma at London College of Management. She has an incurable passion for literature and writes for the Andante Magazine, a monthly classical music magazine in Turkey.

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