

Ghost from the past

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'The Lac of Signs', a new work of the American, Brussels-based choreographer Andros Zins-Browne, is an intriguing experience. You meet Chrysa Parkinson very closely, and yet you don't. You understand the title, and yet you don't...

Obviously, the title is a pun: the translation in English of the French 'Le Lac des Cygnes' takes phonetic resemblances between words for a correspondence in meaning. This funny mistake could make one think the piece will be a semiotic interpretation of the famous ballet? But then also not: the pun only goes halfway. It is neither a 'lack of signs', nor a 'lake of signs' and swans are lacking altogether.

Initially, having read Walter Benjamin's lament on the death of storytelling, Zins-Browne was wondering, why and how that art was excluded from dance after modernism. 'Swan Lake' seemed to provide the perfect example of a ballet piece that was still confidently telling a story.

Being no expert in ballet history, he set out to do a quick Google-search. To his surprise, the information he begot belied the hypothesis that 'Swan Lake' tells a clear-cut story. There are indeed many versions of the libretto as well as of the music and the choreography itself. The story in itself was derived from many sources too.

The program notes to 'The Lac of Signs' reflect these messy antecedents: it is a pile of text bribes that essentially boil down to: 'A bird of prey (and sorcerer) has turned a bunch of girls into swans and their parents' tears have formed a lake. '

This confusion became the actual starting point for the choreography. Zins-Browne discarded the idea to compile yet another version of the story or to show 'telling' highlights of this ballet. That would have been awkward anyhow, as only one dancer, Parkinson, was available. Instead, he asked her to try to embody all the strange plot turns and bizarre characters that appear in some version of the plot.

Parkinson went out of her way to achieve this. She is in turn Rothbart, the white and black swan, the prince and his mother and anyone else in the story. Her dance is compelling if puzzling. She continuously changes between performance modes. Now she looks like some expressionist freak character, then again she embodies the elegant ballerina imitating a swan. These shifts always seem to come out of the blue, as sudden fits of inspiration or hallucination. In the process, the plot got lost however. You can enter the piece at almost any point.

Zins-Browne describes her action as 'voices' that come to her while performing. As if performing in this way were akin to lunacy: hearing and seeing things that are not there but are nevertheless experienced as utterly real. Which, if you think of it, is also the essence of good storytelling as Benjamin understood it: conjuring up absent –deceased- persons.

This is all of a piece with the eerie experience the audience has. Spectators enters the pitch-dark space one by one. They are seated right in front of a frame that is slightly cantilevered to the back. Behind it, Parkinson is dancing in a pale light. You can hear her breathe and sigh clearly. Her sound is even uncannily loud. She is wearing a grey shirt, tight silver-colored leggings and silver sneakers.

Almost at once, you are aware that something is 'wrong' with what you see. The image is slightly out of focus and shimmering, as if you didn't see a real person, but one who is only virtually present, as a mirage. The closeness and loudness of the sound add to this impression. As she suddenly disappears and reappears, you know for sure that you must be watching some hologram. Actually, Zins-Browne uses a much simpler technology, but to the same effect that Parkinson is hovering in the air like a ghost.

In that way, Zins-Browne achieved what he set out to do. Finding an equivalent in dance to storytelling as a way to conjure up a long gone past. It ends up like a phantom ballet with a messy story, full of messy, ghostlike characters. But somehow it conjures up the past of ballet in a more convincing or real way than an actual reconstruction of 'Swan Lake' would. Even if all you see is a virtual image. That is an impressive paradox.

Pieter T'Jonck