

October 03, 2010

Superemas at the MCA: The contradictions of art, war and politics

THEATER REVIEW: "SUPEREMAS: EMPIRE (Art & Politics)" ★★★★★

SPECIAL ALERT! ONLY ONE MORE PERFORMANCE SUNDAY NIGHT!

In the Napoleonic battle of Apern-Essling in 1809, wherein the avaricious dude tried and failed to cross the River Danube, there were over 40,000 casualties. All the death took just two days.

The first part of “Empire (Art & Politics),” the reflective, reflexive and wholly fascinating theater piece from the audacious European collective Superemas (which is based in France, Belgium and Austria and visits Chicago for the first time this weekend at the Museum of Contemporary Art) is a re-creation of scenes from that battle.

These vistas—they’re staged like moving snapshots—depict the complexities of this war, all wars really: heroism stands next to cowardice; violence next to sex; honor next to manipulation; freedom next to death.

So you start to think about that stuff—Napoleon is a good metaphor for military complexity, being as he is known for tyranny, the Napoleonic code and an active sex life. Then a camera shows up like an anachronistic time-machine, and you start to ponder not just the war, but the writing of the history of a war and, particularly, who gets to declare victory for all time.

Superemas, you come to see, is exploring not just what happens in war but in the subsequent recording and organizing of what happens. It’s a riff, really, on the old saw that the winners get to write everything up. And then, bam! All of that goes away, and you’re suddenly watching a post-show reception for a show exactly like the one you’re watching.

A French ambassador shows up and yaks self-servingly about his support of culture—especially delicious since the visit of Superemas to the MCA is supported, in part, by the French and Belgian governments. All of a sudden the topic of the show is not much war and politics, Iraq and Afghanistan, but the artistic response to war and politics, and that tricky old question of how do artists make what they are doing powerful and authentic. Even as they schmooze the funders, the ensemble fights, creates and tries to worry about how it can possibly do justice to its own themes. It finds, of course, that it contains the very same internal contradictions that you could find in the people on and around that 1809 battlefield. War. Art. All is marked by human failing.

Even though the show—which is repeated Sunday night only, so shut off the computer and make your plan for tonight—is just 80 minutes, there are further frames to come, not the least of which the dissolving of the show into a movie. But there is enough here for quite the head-rush of self-awareness and, for sure, a window into both how European creative types view Americans—which here, as is so often the case, strikes me as disappointingly reductive—and the way the struggles of historians to be fair mirror the struggles of artists to be true. Unlike a lot of work of this type, Superemas puts its own insecurities and vulnerabilities on full display. And the style—agitated, funny, shocking, wry, physical—is rich and varied.

In one of the most amusing moments of one of the most intellectually provocative shows this fall, the group fights back with a response they attribute lovingly to the American director David Lynch. “Why do people always ask if art has a meaning, when their lives have no meaning.”

Touche, as Napoleon might (or might not) have said.

Posted at 10:45:23 AM in [Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago](#)

http://leisureblogs.chicagotribune.com/the_theater_loop/2010/10/superemas-at-the-mca-the-contradictions-of-art-war-and-politics.html#more