

THAT'S ENTERTAINMANTE!

YOUDREAM – SUPERAMAS

MIA VAERMAN

Maybe the Superamas will save performing arts. That great is the fun that splashes from the stage, without giving in to so-called demands of the audience. Pretty girls, Hollywood glamour, unbridled imagination, technological high tension and loads of madness, definitely. At the same time their work is interweaved with (French) philosophical thought. Much to their own and the audience's delight.

The Superamas are six artists with diverse backgrounds; visual arts, theater, industrial design and music. In 2002 they started in Kortrijk as a reaction against 'theatre with a message'. They only want to ask questions, not give answers. They put together productions of which it is hard to judge if they originally start from either contents or form. They tinker with film, television, internet, audio tapes, microphones and cameras. They toy with the actor and the spectator; fool with men and women in sexy outfits. They mock our European identity and steal a march on (images of) reality. Their engineer's eye looks at reality as manipulable fiction. Narrative structures are skillfully dismantled as well and then put together again faultily. Until we no longer understand anything and our heads are swimming. Visible reality separates before our very eyes and our self-consciousness is staggering.

The collective holds office in Brussels and their shows hive off in Europe and beyond. The makers and actors of this French–Austrian company come from many different countries as well. This must result in quite some muddling with the European English they probably speak amongst each other. At least that's the idea you get from the stage: alongside dialogs in English; French, Italian and even Dutch and Danish lines pop up – much to the delight of those who happen to understand the dirty talk. Together the Superamas make an impossible mix of (culturally determined) languages, opinions and habits. Release some deconstructive thinking on this and what you end up with is a complete cacophony. Or ingenious entertainment. Entertainmante, as the French pronounce it. Enterteinment, when a Flemish says it.

DREAMS ON STAGE

Youdream opens with a virtual chat session. Eight Europeans tell each other their dreams, alternately shown on a screen that's been divided in four. They chitchat, seduce, fake. They nag as well, but only when the opposite sex is not present. The Belgian pretends to be a sportsman, the Frenchman poses as an Italian. The Polish girl feigns naïveté, the Danish one prudishness. Stereotypes. When the screen is raised after a while, everything is revealed to have been registered live on stage. Playing with things that happens here or elsewhere: yet another of Superamas' tricks. On www.youdream.com you can watch the rest of their hilarious chat sessions – one day they want to turn it into an actual TV-show.

The spectacle then shifts to the auditorium. Anyone who wants can share their dream; actors will then depict it live on stage. The spectators hesitate: dreams are

intimate, embarrassing, fragmentary or too complex to tell. For a moment the show comes to an awkward halt. Someone grabs the mike, but no dream emerges from his thoughts. Dreamer's block. A second one relates something incomprehensible in English, repeats it just as unintelligibly in French – the actors mime something vague. Finally a third spectator describes a carefully constructed dream with all the classic ingredients: a family setting, sex, inappropriate actions, impermissible intimacies, aggression. Momentarily the audience is afraid that the man will tell them how he rapes his mother, but all ends well. He will just be glad when she's dead, he concludes. Again scenes are depicted on stage, somewhat more intriguing this time. Only they're not convincing, however hard the actors were trained for this. It's the one part of the show that turns out lame – which is difficult with this title. Probably the right approach is still to be discovered. Or more people should upload their dreams to the Youdream-site. The company promises to depict the best ones in their next show. It's cool however that the Superamas set up a constant interaction with the audience through this website, which will last for the full run of shows. It's called audience participation, without using the word. If it were up to them, in some years we would determine the plot of their pieces by cell phone.

MISE-EN-ABÎME

After the dream session the bottle is properly uncorked. One last dream narrator sketches a picture which subsequently appears on a big screen: a Polish princess saves her country by delivering herself to Napoleon. But halfway through the scene her character turns out to be a role in yet another drama piece, which takes place on and next to a theatre stage during World War II. The emperor's sweetheart is actually a member of the resistance. In the ridge of the theatre where she performs the Napoleon play, she is transmitting messages to the Allies. Theatre in film in a film within a play. This war movie in black-and-white was shot in the Plateaustraat in Ghent: personal reality is also seeping into the plot. At the end the real actress, the Polish Agata Maszkiewics, comes to greet the audience. Then you suddenly see her seated between the other spectators as well. The princess clothes are the only thing to go by, the rest of the set staggers continuously. The story keeps spinning to the extent that you, as a (real) spectator, go insane from the constant jumping between story lines. Your brain can no longer follow and is screaming for help. Clarity now! Please! It is a powerful moment in the show: on the one hand there is the awareness of the game, of the constant 'mise-en-abîme'; but on the other hand you just can't keep up. Of course that is the way of dreams as well.

Back on the stage of the Kaaithheater film images and theatrical sketches keep running. You recognize Napoleon and his frail mistress, exactly as they are on the set, but also figures from different Coen brothers' movies (No Country for Old Men, Fargo, and The Big Lebowski). The Danish prude loses herself completely in pole-dancing, the benign Swiss throws himself on a chainsaw and the clumsy Belgian becomes a Texan sheriff. No one is who they were before, the way they were before. Characters perform their opposites. But are they performing film, theatre or TV? Or a dream? Were the characters in the chat box the real actors? Who are they really? What is real? And who are we? Is this deconstruction? Is this postmodernism? Is this where we enter philosophy?

UNION DREAM

Reality does not exist, postmodern thinking tells us. So-called reality is fiction, puzzled together by our rectilinear brains. Get rid of it. Stories are broken up, identities fall to pieces. This is not a new discourse. It characterizes the philosophy and art of the last quarter of the previous century. From the eighties onwards post-dramatic theatre also systematically deconstructed classical pieces. This post-era seems to have ended. Nevertheless, what is fascinating about *Youdream* is your almost literal experience of this deconstruction as a spectator. Because it is impossible to handle incoherent facts de facto, even in the fictional world of film and theatre. Yearningly you try to find some consistence on this split trail. That is exactly what the *Superamas* toy with. The slyboots. Your need for meaning drags you so far as a spectator that you would rather take the bend with faulty, silly Hollywood fiction than to lose the thread of the story.

But there is more going on. For the last part of *Youdream* has everything to do with dreams. For one. The excessive final scene, in which everything intermingles, refers just as much to the unruliness of actual nighttime dreams. In dreams anything is possible. A real rainbow on stage is possible too. Secondly. The actor donning the skin of the cool sheriff and the actress in the pole dancer's red bikini might be fulfilling their own dreams: those of a character they are not (or don't dare to be) in real life. Our nighttime fantasies as personal remakes are movie scenes that have moved us before. Thirdly and lastly. The way the *Superamas* work with clichés about Europeans, says something about the semi-conscious European identity shared by Europeans. After all, our culture is made up of facts that we have voluntarily or involuntarily fictionalized into a coherent history. Napoleon and World War II, for instance. The bad guys and the good guys. Much of our cultural past nowadays we really get to know through cinema and television. Thus Western identity is marked in its profoundest core by movies, series, fictionalized biographies... In that sense the European sentiment of unity has more to do with shared fiction – ranging from Jesus Christ Superstar to Harry Potter VII – than with a conscious ideology of community.

Seen on December 10th 2010 in Kaaitheater, Brussels.