



Burnt Toast by and with Susie Wang. Black Box teater 2020. Photo: Alette Schei Rørvik

## Danny and Violet will make you laugh, make you wonder, make you shudder

Susie Wang repeats and exemplifies at her sharpest until only the sound of breath and pulse remains. At the same time, this slow-motion farce also contains half-hearted accents from the Deep South and generic movie dialogue.



Text: **Ole Petter Ribe**. English translation: Eivind Sæthre

Susie Wang is a newly established performance-oriented theatre company with a clear goal of finding new ways into fiction. During the last three years, they have staged a series of horror plays which examine human nature. The contributors have a shared background from the artist ensemble Baktruppen, a group with rich and varied experience across art forms. Director Trine Falch and scenographer Bo Krister Wallström have joined forces with sound designer Martin Langlie to create a theatre choreography which pays homage to French gore movies. The company sends a clear message that the cruellest and least human of our sickly vomit is what remains as utterly natural. Once more, it took a very slow and controlled turn straight into the underground.

## **Vacuumed Silence**

As the last part of their horror trilogy which started with *the Hum* (2017) and continued with *Mumiebrun* (2018), *Burnt Toast* is just as obscure and autistic as its predecessors, but definitely also a more tender version. It is saturated with the same tranquillity as the previous spectacles. A blazing absence of noise that can be read as a pre-apocalyptic silence. Even though the story starts as a perfectly ordinary story, with its simple and sexualized female service workers and modern men with migraines and nightmares, we soon discover that things are not as they should be.

Black Box's promotion of this project may seem cryptic, as they write «We find ourselves on the outskirts of the contemporary, a dement and forever young condition where the past is forgotten and the future is dangerous». It may seem like a lofty image, but this is the premise for Bo Krister Wallströms scenography of extreme kitsch architecture and an invitation to focus and presence in the ether, framed and dressed in red velvet. The scene resembles a hotel reception with a slick finish. Artificial leather beanbags and golden elevator doors. It is later explained to us that «the one goes up, the other goes down». The room is stripped of most references and a sense of time to the effect that we get a feeling of a visit to no-place or limbo. It may be argued that we find ourselves in an anonymous town in the USA, presumably in the South. But this timeless atmosphere warns us that something is slightly out of place.

This bad gut feeling is exemplified by a subtle soundscape. The multiple layers of descriptive sounds, rumbling tracks and idiotic plings from the elevator door, gives us the feeling of being in the stomach of a sleeping animal. Langlie has resurrected the very ghost.

Our fear of the unknown and of isolation is used as a premise for the scenery and the text, but at the same time, we can recognize everyday situations and interactions when the actors enter the lobby. A unique comedy manifests itself in the overlapping space between the dissected room and the nerve of life in the characters' interaction. Trine Falch has taken a firm grip on the world's balls in this last epos. Here you will find no mercy. In introducing seemingly flat characters, she creates her own mythology based on existing tropes. In the beginning, the people we meet are categorized and recognizable based on their gender, background and sexuality. This is gradually changed by play and turns. Their language and gestures are developed

independently from their social status. Thus Susie Wang turns an array of parodic devices into something consistently intellectual and critical.

### **The Linguistics of Movie Effects**

This was particularly efficient in the longer dialogues between Danny (Kim Atle Hansen), our hotel guest with shades, and Violet (Mona Solhaug), our woman dressed in laces who is reliably hanging out in the hotel lobby when the first dialogue between the two starts. The translated verbal language becomes one of the most important girders. It is in the scenes with long one-liner dialogues such as «He looks a bit like you» or «You make me feel like a queen, Danny» that this spectacle is at its best. Not one line seems misplaced. It is a sharp observation of the icebreaker exchanges of modern society.

Everything is presented in a dialect from the US South, which soon becomes a handful for the actors. This choice of language still gives the play an unexpendable nerve – without this, the genre-specifics would fail. The associations to western biotypes such as teenage body-horror and exploitation cinema are thus supported. The Lynchesque would also not have suited a Norwegian wrapping.

It is this almost military belief and trust in movie language, and the effects that follow, which changes the wine back into water in a couple of instances throughout the play. As I like certain pre-1990 camp and CGI, it feels nostalgic when Danny loses his hand in an elevator scene. Other limbs are later broken and other wounds are cut open. This is more often than necessary done with such unpolished vigour that we almost get a new layer of the anti-professional. The dialogue is also askew but in a clear and coherent way. I am reminded of Ersan Mondtag's *Tyrannis* which was shown at Theatertreffen in 2016. It had a style of play characterized by lyrical dialogue and blunt, blind motions, which gave it a blend of bad 3D animations from the Sims, with high production value for voice and sound. Both performances point to effects from games and movies that bring something uncanny.

### **The Semiotics of Horror Movies**

As movie critic James Quandt said about movie makers associated with New French Extremity, a modern movie genre comparable to what Susie Wang accentuates with her devices, they lack «the power to shock an audience into consciousness». Violent measures such as blood suckings and disappearances bring us a long way to challenge the fictitious premises of the play. In other words, the play is indeed very well performed with the devices chosen. The elements that do not come across, are the points where we have to rely on our imagination, as Susie Wang carpet bombs us with effects intended to convince the viewer beyond any doubt.

Yet the mundane and the pearls embrace the otherworldly. This is why we laughed. *Burnt Toast* is still closer to an intellectual parody than a truly frightening play. To my taste, this is top-shelf material, and if I had also cried, gasped for air and perhaps even vomited, it would have ended at the very top. (*Published 14.02.2020*).

