

Experts of illusion

Even though it has nothing to do with a lifelike representation of events, both scenography, technical effects and acting substantiates the illusion of being on a beach and that the things going on, are real, says Hilde Elisabeth Bjørk about 'The Hum' by Susie Wang.

Three persons have ended up on the wrong beach. A woman drinks sunscreen and grows claws where others grow nails. A man swims out to sea in search of coke. Another woman sits on a turtle egg which produces offspring that's half human and half turtle. Welcome to *The Hum*.

Low frequency sound

For decades, people from all over the world have reported hearing a dark humming sound and no one has been able to determine its origin. This is not the plot of a sci fi B-movie, but an actual phenomenon called The Hum. Vibrations created by sub sea level waves hitting the seafloor is now being promoted as a plausible cause of this infamous hum.

One might wish for a more extraterrestrial source, but one could also argue that our limited knowledge of it and the myths surrounding it, makes the ocean a fascinating, almost extraterrestrial phenomenon. Susie Wang it seems, has adopted the latter view in their performance 'The Hum'.

'The Hum is a sound that some are waiting for while others tan', the programme states. I take that as an invitation to listen carefully, and see what may unfold.

The ocean in the theatre

When the audience is seated, a dropdown curtain is lowered, covering a window across the room and for a moment darkness surrounds us. Then the sun slowly rises. As the warm floodlight touches our faces and we hear the sound of waves lapping, the ocean slowly comes into view. At first it looks like a gigantic inflatable mattress but then the complexity of the structure becomes apparent.

It consists of several layers of fabric in different nuances of blue to create the illusion of water in motion, and gently swings back and forth, to make us believe it is the waves of the ocean we see. The beach is coated with a material that leaves marks when walked upon, not unlike the traces created in velor when rubbed in the wrong direction. It gives the illusion of footprints on a soft and sandy beach and it works great.

A mediterranean mood is established and we're on a beach somewhere in a world where anything can happen.

A woman gets up from her seat among the audience and starts to undress. Wearing only a swimsuit, she walks slowly into the ocean before diving into the waves. That's right, she dives into the waves and disappears – obviously through a hole in the structure and she probably has a mattress to land on, but everything is executed with remarkable and illusive precision.

All these impressions – the heat from the light, the sound of the waves – confuse my brain for a moment: Suddenly it's the ocean I see in front of me and not a scenographic construction trying to imitate it. And as the actors for the most part have their backs turned towards us, the ocean is our focal point, constantly swaying, housing a world of mystery.

An egg

Barni, the German, arrives at the beach. He slumps down with his back towards us and stares into the horizon. He's crying. Eventually he sobs so heavily that he has to take off his glasses, which are then caught by the waves and disappear.

Sabine, Barni's girlfriend, makes her entrance and together they go for a refreshing swim. Their hair is wet when they emerge from the waves. The dialogue is wonderfully dry with made-up corny lines in German 'Look! A stone in the shape of a heart (...) and a shell shaped like a cloud', Sabine says enthusiastically to a rather laconic Barni. Fascinated by all the beautiful shapes of nature, Sabine also notices an egg, which Barni tells her not to touch.

After a while, they realise that they are not at the beach where the snorkeling course they have signed up for is supposed to take place. Someone must have tampered with the old sign, and made them go in the wrong direction and end up on the wrong beach.

Mysterious Swede

Sabine is not feeling well and after telling Barni that she could 'kill for a Coke' she persuades him to go and get her one by giving him an old fashioned blow job. After Barni has started his journey in search of a Coke, perhaps to the other side of the Mediterranean, even stranger things start to happen: the egg suddenly moves towards Sabine and before she knows it, it seems that supernatural powers have taken over her body, dragging her towards the egg. She sits down on it, and incubates.

Then Kim the Swede enters. She has signed up for the same snorkelling course as the couple, and like them she has ended up on the wrong beach. Kim immediately takes an interest in Sabine who on her part seems more skeptical and shows little interest in Kim's attempts on making contact. After a while Sabine gives in and ends up telling Kim that she sits on an egg.

Kim reacts as if it is the most natural thing in the world: 'This is wonderful,' she says and offers to sit on the egg while Sabine takes a dip in the refreshing sea. While she is swimming, Kim uses the opportunity to perform a dance that ends in an apparent fertilization of the egg with 'sperm.' Sabine returns and is happy to see that the egg has grown bigger. They build nests and prepare for what is going to happen.

Illusion and disillusion

All the strange things that takes place in The Hum leads my mind to the uncanny atmosphere created by strange characters in Rosemary's Baby and similar old horror movies.

You may not be outright scared by the things you see, it is just something twisted about it: Kim's claws, which she hides under patches, her drinking of sunscreen, the

egg moving seemingly all by itself, the electric shock that occurs when their hands meet for the first time, which makes me jump in my chair.

Film aesthetics seems to have been a big influence in the making of *The Hum*. The scenography, the effects and the performances of the actors all support the illusion of being on a beach, and argues that what happens is for real, without having anything to do with a lifelike representation. The almost continuous soundtrack provided by Martin Langlie also emphasizes a filmatic feel. Still, the actors never fails to remind us that we're the audience in a theatre play – like when they show up fully dressed beside the stage after having disappeared into the ocean, or when Kim openly exchanges the egg with a bigger one, after having fertilized it.

The Hum succeeds in balancing between the old rules of illusion in theater in a playful, almost ironic way, and at the same time showing the love for a form of expression that has this theatrical aspect as its foundation.

The performance ends with the hatching of the egg (which is now fastened to Sabine's genital area), and Sabine falling down a hole in the sand. She quickly pops up from the hole again and crawls terrified away from it. Then a long, half-naked figure with long white hair and claws eels up from the hole. This child crawls into Sabine's arms to suckle. Barni returns triumphantly from his journey across the ocean with a can of Coke. Everything is at it should be in *The Hum*.