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The Devil is in the Detail

(Kristiansand): Susie Wang at Kilden is like a splatter movie. Not only because of the horror, blood and black humour, but also because the performance creates an illusory universe comparable to that of the cinema. When the rupture comes, the abyss of the illusion opens.



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«Audience, find your seats, Palmesus festival continues», is heard over the loudspeakers as we leave the Susie Wang performance and enter the lobby. Kilden is arranging a hit music show simultaneously. We are in Kristiansand, the idyllic south coast with its town beach, palm trees and the happiest people in Norway. They are so happy, everything is a-okay, before some of them march in Nazi-parades through the main street, or chase the elite and Kunstsiloen to hell (which many of the southerners believe actually exists). As the voice over the loudspeakers tells us that Palmesus is on, we know that we are not only in Kristiansand, but also that the Susie Wang performance is about Kristiansand (or more accurately about the conformists who in every country create the worst conflicts with their fear of conflicts). Even though the performance is set at a holiday destination, presumably in Africa, and the main characters are German, the similarities are striking. At the scene we see a patio with palm trees in an idyllic beach town, as well as a German couple on vacation. Their fear of ruining the good ambience turns them into murderer and cannibal respectively.

Fear of Conflicts Leads to a Catastrophe

The German couple enter their holiday apartment in the exotic country, ready to enjoy paradise. With his fantastic attention to detail, the male lead actor Kim Atle Hansen limps from the entrance gate across the sand and over to the outdoor kitchen. Then he bandages his bloody foot with toilet paper, grabs a beer, lies down on a sun bed and masturbates a little under his swimming shorts. His girlfriend is a sun-burnt, horny, reserved and hungry woman who changes between swimsuit and bikini. Mona Solhaug plays the role, also with extreme precision in every detail.

The masturbation develops into a cuddly scene including predator-like biting. This is a precursor to hell, about to manifest itself into reality. Symptomatic for people with problem-free lives, the main conflict in the performance, or lack thereof, is that the gate key is missing, leaving the hungry couple unable to go out to eat in the holiday town. «Luckily» the solution is right around the corner. The hostess enters. Selome Emnetu plays her role in a cool and charismatic fashion; a stylish, flirtatious and invasive black woman wearing a short and tight party dress, coupled with a golden motorcycle helmet and matching shoes.

As a compensation for the lacking gate key, she offers to cook and spend the afternoon with them. This is when the unwillingness to enter conflicts leads to disaster. Both of them, in particular the woman, would rather be alone with her partner, and both of them, the woman in particular, do not really eat meat. Yet, none of them are able to decline the hostess' offer to barbecue and eat a goat steak with her.

Animalistic Climax

The hostess flirts with the man as the woman presses the raw and bloody piece of meat between her legs to tear off the tough hair, when the goat steak literally enters her, into her vagina, causing her to experience an animalistic climax. Stricken with fear she asks the man and hostess to pull out the red lump of meat, which turns out to be alive, from her vagina while she cries out in a strange form of post coitus. The glamorously clad hostess holds the threatening meat down as a fearless action hero and commands the cowardly tourist to kill it with the barbecue knife. But he is

so clumsy that he also kills the hostess without noticing it. Discovering that he has become a murderer causes the man to cry, more so than having killed the hostess, and his girlfriend has to take action. She finds a shovel and commands him to dig a hole in the sand, but he is so useless that she has to do most of it herself. When the job is done, she throws the dead hostess into the hole and tries to cover the dead body with sand, but the head and golden helmet is still above ground. When somebody knocks on the gate, she finishes the splatter-deed by chopping off the head with the shovel. Vigorously, as her man stares, she throws the beer cans out of the fridge and places the head with the golden helmet inside. Then she straightens her bikini and lies down sprawled next to her boyfriend on the sun bed. With a face just as bloody as his, she invites the stranger in with fake friendliness. A relative of the hostess, also played by Selome Emnetu, unknowingly enters the crime scene to deliver the happy message that she brings the gate key.

The Fourth Wall is Built

A horror slapstick gains momentum: the relative looses the key into the grill and leaves. The tourist woman burns her arm as she digs for the key. A sort of octopus rat-like creature locks its jaws on the man's already bloody foot. The sun is eclipsed and the couple ends up staying home rather than going to the restaurant. This is when the woman starts to eat from the head of the dead hostess.

Not only does the performance have the plot of a dark humour horror movie. The form also corresponds to film. By this we mean not only the blood, violence, octopus rat-like creature and supernatural brutality. The Susie Wang clan also manages to create an absolute illusion. We usually think that theatre should not even attempt at the mimetic – as movies do it much better. But even though the sun in this performance is just a floodlight, the eclipse is made by a round piece of cardboard and we sit with our feet in the scenography, we remain 100% absorbed by this story. Sucked into the action on stage we forget ourselves (and our feet). We get to eat the cake and have it too: the presence of acting bodies, the three dimensionality of the scenography, the performative here and now, but also the illusion, tension and entertainment of the film medium. Not once do the actors look us into the eye or recognize our existence. After Baktruppen, as Brecht, Handke & co before them tore down the fourth wall again with their post-dramatic theatre, the members who now constitute Susie Wang

have the opposite agenda. They experiment in building it again. And it's an absolute success! How come?

The Abyss of Normality

Susie Wang has recognised that «the devil is in the detail». Not only in the literal sense, with all the devilish details, such as the chopped off head in the golden helmet placed in the fridge, with still moving eyes etc. But, also in an almost realistic sense. The sun-burnt skin ends exactly where the swimming outfit begins, which becomes apparent when she changes into bikini, the hostess speaks Tigrinya on the phone, and the decoration tiles on the wall are cut off exactly where the wall ends. Such details are often recognizable and draw us into the play. Another factor is the melodramatic melodies, almost like film music which accompanies many scenes, with a Wagnerian crescendo as the man is about to kill the meat. Of course, the clash between the bloody event and musical pathos has a lot of comic appeal. But everything happens within the fourth wall – in the fiction. This is also true of the surprising fact that the main characters speak German, which does not make them less provincial. Rather the opposite, as the prototypical province of Southern Norway, tonight's starting point, is also found on the continent (and its African tourist enclaves), and conformism is of course just as uncanny there. Does bourgeoisie life, when portrayed without alienating breaches from the fiction and reflection contribute to establishing the bourgeoisie norm? Meeting Susie Wang this otherwise interesting thesis becomes meaningless. The strong point of this performance is just this: in watertight mimetics it portrays bourgeoisie idyll as the norm – before it with blood, splatter, horror and black humour reminds us of the abyss of normality.