

The British Theatre Guide

Kunstenfestivaldesarts 2010

Dateline: 16th May, 2010

Vamos sentir falta de tudo aquilo de que nao precisamos

We are going to miss everything we don't need

Vera Mantero

This performance originated in the awareness that material possessions are not a source of happiness and that our consumer-capitalist societies have reached levels of excess that are damaging for mankind and the environment. The programme notes cite the example of Bhutan, the remote Himalayan *shangri-la* where GNP (Gross National Product) is not used as a measure of the citizens' wealth but GNH (Gross National Happiness). The index of measurement is based on the four requirements of sustainable development: responsible economic growth and development; conservation and promotion of Bhutanese culture; protection of the environment and responsible good governance. Coca-Cola and Pepsi advertisements are banned as is MTV as they make no contribution to promoting happiness. So far so good. We could import some of that over here, along with some of their invigorating, clean mountain air.



The programme also tells us that during the performance an 'inversion of the everyday world' (the world of production, consumption and waste) will occur and we will stop missing everything we don't need. That's a very tall order for any performing arts event. But Vera Mantera has impeccable credentials in her native Portugal and beyond and the use of dummy's heads to conceal and reveal these superfluous objects seems apposite, after all, our materialism has gone beyond the fulfilment of life's necessities and now seeks to satisfy inadequacies that are all in the mind.

However, such projects come with imbedded problems. Firstly, there are the objects themselves. They were extracted from dummy's heads, some of them too small to be seen properly from certain parts of the seating. The tiny cars were recognisable, and the military airplanes could just about be seen, the diamonds and rubies, the credit cards and wads of cash, the coins, yes, but what were those small grey-green things? And the small shiny red things that were scattered in abundance all over the stage? There were so many of them they must have been significant, so what were they? They looked like sweets in red wrappers.

Then there was the white powder (cocaine?) and the greyish gritty stuff? I think I got the gold dust and the oil, but the long white thing, was that just a piece of string or a string of pearls?

However, simply stepping on stage and pulling a small object out of a plastic head and throwing it onto the floor is a demonstration rather than a performance. And these objects are cliches; the majority of middle-class spenders aren't drowning in pearls and diamonds. What is cluttering up this world and wasting resources is the junk and the excess of (electrical) goods and gadgets: MP3 players, gameboys, electric breadknives and all the other domestic paraphernalia that gathers dust in cupboards; the plastic toys that are thrown away after a week; clothes consigned to the wardrobe after a single outing; the cycling machine that dad intended to get fit on but is now at the back of the garage; the piles of celebrity lifestyle magazines that are decimating our forests; faddish ring tones for mobile phones; vacuum cleaners for crumbs; vacuum cleaners for cars; DVDs and

games galore; electric screwdrivers and drills and attachments that live in the garage with dad's cycling machine; useless gizmos for this and gizmos for that; creams and lotions and pills and potions for slimming and cellulite and facial hair and sleepless nights and spring fatigue and after-Christmas detoxes; chipboard furniture; plastic bags; supermarket packaging; tea in bags in paper sachets in boxes wrapped in cellophane; individual portion yoghurt cartons...surely, something witty can be done with all of this, because popping money and diamonds out of a hat (or head) is pretty much stating the obvious.

The second problem is the message: what exactly does one want to say about over-consumption? This show simply seemed to be saying that we are piling up stuff and it will drive us crazy. This is risky as it can easily fall into bland platitudes.

The third problem lay in the dummy's heads themselves. The metaphor wasn't clear. Objects appeared from heads, so does this mean that the objects exist as ideas in people's heads? Or was the point that we have to get the idea of consumption out of our minds? The heads weren't humanised enough to show that the objects won't be missed. The heads could have been put to more use.

This show was very well-meaning and entertaining in places, but also very naive in spite of the eloquence of the programme notes that spoke of objects vibrating and short-circuiting. There were some lovely moments and, with more thought and investigation, the show could have taken off. The lady with a golden face pack who wanted around howling with misery was very funny as well as the same lady trying to follow instructions to relax and let everything go -- that was a lovely piece of movement. The woman reading an absurd appliance instruction manual was hilarious and all too recognisable, which is what one needs to engage the audience. And there was the woman gleefully scrubbing out a head with soap and brush and another pulling rags out of one, but this didn't go anywhere significant but the individualised moments were demonstrations that didn't link together.

To paint a head in gold and another in black (oil), to pull two tiny cars out of heads isn't sufficient to lead us somewhere meaningful. If the expenditure of the military on war and aircraft is problematic, then this needs to be developed further than a couple of plastic planes thrown onto a heap.

This is a show that needs more work, development of material to engage an audience, as some people might easily take umbrage at being told their heads are full of trash and trivia. It needs to raise questions rather than demonstrate.

I'm disappointed, but I hope they keep improvising and developing the work, because we need to broach these issues.

Jackie Fletcher