

Laguna Beach – Frankie / Campo

A cure for intellectual snobbism

Laguna Beach, a play by a young collective called ‘Frankie’, raises a number of questions. For example, whether it is actually a play at all. And if so, what it is supposed to ‘mean’. Or if not, why, in this performing arts sector, do we so soon feel ill at ease when something is simply extremely pleasant to watch.

You could already feel the storm coming in the interview that Vincent and Simon Lynen, Jef Staut, Timo Fannoy and Brecht Hayen – the five ‘Frankies’ – gave just before the first night of *Laguna Beach*. With their backgrounds in animated films, graphic design and photography, they didn’t feel much like attaching a lot of ‘meaning’ or ‘message’ to their stage debut. It was more about the pleasure of making music together, the beauty of making things themselves, and the nonchalant ‘Frankie vibe’ that they wanted to make palpable in both the animation and the music. It was not a good idea to irritate these gents with serious questions of content – they made it clear that they prefer *doing* to discourse.

Laguna Beach is a confirmation of this resolve: it is a blistering, testosterone-fuelled medley of visual and musical numbers that fires a sharp boost of energy into the audience. The performance begins with an atmospheric overture. All that can be seen in the darkness of the theatre is the gleam of the lights on the keyboards and amplifiers; a spacey tune builds up while the members of the band are gradually lit up by the first spotlights. A record deck with four silly little palm trees starts turning somewhere at the front of the stage – we have landed in the world of *Laguna Beach*.

The musicians sit centre stage, turned to face each other, so that the drummer has his back to the audience. Around them and their instruments they have built a world of small scenes populated by puppets and figures of various sizes. In some cases an installation consists of a single puppet (e.g. the pervert with the binoculars), and sometimes they are miniature scenes created in detail (e.g. the sunbathing girl on whom he is spying). The figures are rough and unfinished and are visibly manipulated by means of their strings – there is no attempt at beguilement.

Three of the five ‘Frankies’ studied animation at the KASK in Ghent and in *Laguna Beach* you can see that they are showing off a range of their abilities. The manipulation of the figures is supplemented by video and live recording and all this interacts with the music, which requires some fairly cool-headed time management. In one scene, a couple is playing volleyball on the beach: at each beat on the snare the puppets throw the ball over the net, until the drummer raises the tempo so much that they go berserk. The music and the animation are related quite straightforwardly: the musical rhythms direct and match the figures’ actions exactly, it’s as simple as that.

Each scene is set in a separate frame, but ‘secondary storylines’ unfold sporadically across the various platforms, as for example between the pervert and his victim, and a female hitchhiker and a crashing car. The common thread in these narrative scenes is a grim humour that gives an uncanny feel to the potentially charming aura of the exotic beach. On *Laguna*

Beach, a dirty little man masturbates while behind him a volcano spews lava, and a barber shaves off his customer's ear – that's the sort of gory joke we get. There's a lot of *Beavis and Butthead* about it, and the sequence of rock, punk, jazz and trash à la Sonic Youth clearly links it to the nineties. Like their puppets, the 'Frankies' don't seem to finish off any of their numbers properly either, as if they were too impatient and wanted to get on.

Chances of success

What distinguishes theatre from art? The delineation by time, of course, and together with this the dramaturgy of its content: theatre usually develops from point A to point Z, building up tension along the way – call it a story, even if there is no storyline in any literal sense. In this light, one might ask oneself whether *Laguna Beach* isn't more of an exhibition of moving installations: the figures can in theory endlessly continue their repetitive and destructive actions; it is only the thrust of the music that determines their time-frame. If these 'Frankie musicians' never tired, *Laguna Beach* could go on forever.

The odd thing is that by viewing it this way, the sense of unease regarding its 'lack of content' also disappears. As if 'speaking' theatre had (in recent years?) become more closely entwined with the demand for a message than the visual arts, which are judged less for their formal quality. In the case of *Laguna Beach*, I can of course analyse the inventive use of animation, but after that I'm in a panic: after all, how do I have to interpret all this, what does it mean? In a recent letter in *rekto:verso*, the author Gaea Schoeters observed something similar in literature – and now I'm paraphrasing: that nowadays the subject and 'urgency of the content' of a book determine its chances of success more than its style or fictional nature. In short, that today we are perhaps all slightly too fixated on 'meaningful content'.

And then there is the matter of pleasure. A theatre critic is a walking head, he distrusts everything that stirs the body (sensory theatre, ugh!) and definitely the intoxicating effect of an explosive musical bomb like *Laguna Beach*. Intoxication equals bad, that's what we have always been taught since the realisation became generally accepted that theatre is only an intellectual construction that has to be unmasked with a condescending smile. Experiencing pleasure means that you are being misled, that you are falling into the trap. If *Laguna Beach* has one merit, it is that it liberated me from intellectual snobbism for a full three-quarters of an hour.

Evelyne Coussens, 6.4.2019

Evelyne Coussens is a freelance cultural journalist who works for *De Morgen* and several cultural publications, including *Ons Erfdeel*, *rekto:verso* and *Staalkaart*. She is a member of the broad editorial staff of *Etcetera*.