

Kaltio 6/2023

These vaults are filled with decadent dreams

Flow Productions: Nighttown. Performances in Oulun Taidetalo Kulttuuripankki November 17-19, 2023. Director: Pirjo Yli-Maunula. Light design and videos: Jukka Huitila. Sound design: Anssi Laiho. Costume design: Sylvi Siltavirta. Set design: Heidi Kesti. Metal works: Sakari Matinlauri. Rigging; Skipe Oivo. Photographs: Janne-Pekka Manninen. Performers: Milla Virtanen, Nina Bulgakova, Henna-Maria Hanhineva, Katariina & Jared Van Earle, Ben Collis, Elisabeth Künkele, Emma Langmoen, Nikke Launonen.

Director **Pirjo Yi-Maunula's** *Nighttown* took place in Oulu on November 17-19. The performance was situated at the intersection of two culture projects. From an Oulu-based perspective, the piece was commissioned by the Lumo Light Festival, which was founded in 2013. *Nighttown* was also a part of the international project 'Ulysses – European Odyssey'. **James Joyce's** modernist masterpiece from 1922, *Ulysses*, had its centennial celebration last year.

To celebrate the occasion, 18 European cities created a cultural event of their own, each dedicated to a chapter of *Ulysses*. Oulu took on the most expansive chapter in the book, chapter 15, also known as 'Circe'.

Known for her vast immersive performances, Yli-Maunula has again created a new world through circus, dance, light and sound for the audience to roam in. The title, *Nighttown*, refers to the Red Lights district of Dublin, where the novel's surrealistic episode takes place. A wall-sized video projected in the foyer of the Kulttuuripankki does glow red, but it is more ominous than inviting.

This former branch of the Bank of Finland is a fascinating deluxe bunker with shiny, opulent granite walls. Bars and the absurdly hefty vault doors remind you tantalizingly that you are in a restricted area. However, many rooms are nondescript, black–or green, or white–boxes like in a theater setting. This asceticism is an exception to Yli-Maunula's many other immersive performances, which have had deliciously decayed interiors and overwhelming set design.

In these pared-down surroundings, one's focus is turned completely to the performers. Fluorescent lights glow brightly. Masks, ropes, petals all become significant as details that are waiting for their turn, or tell a story of moments that have already concluded. The depraved visions of **Janne-Pekka Manninen's** photographs also have their place to shine: a blind dog, a salivating mouth, a fly on an eyeball.

There is a delirious logic to **Heidi Kesti's** set design. Bathtubs float from room to room, a bed has found its place on a wall, a table and a chair on the ceiling, upside down.

In the novel, Stephen Dedals and Leopold Bloom take to the brothel alleys and so *Nighttown* is rich with straightforward and yet nuanced sexual imagery. **Emma Langmoen** seduces

passers-by with grapes. **Henna-Maria Hanhineva** offers rose petals and may invite one to her private corner. Glistening with oil, **Milla Virtanen** performs a slow, heavy dance which brings to mind a sex worker in a display window.

Ben Collis levitates in a rapture, suspended by shibari; the sensual partner acrobatics of Collis and **Elisabeth Künkele** take elements of BDSM and lift them to almost spiritual heights. The opposite end of the spectrum, the fleshy and earthy extreme is represented in the next room by **Katariina** and **Jared Van Earle**'s dog characters, who sniff and hump each other without restrain.

The couple explores the more complex dimensions in a relationship when they proceed to enter the upside down room. One is sitting on the ceiling chair while the other is sprawled on the floor, reaching for one another, changing their roles, inviting other players to enter the scene.

Künkele's hair-hanging and Langmoen's elevator shaft choreography are other gravity-defying scenes, which make clever use of the bank's architectural idiosyncrasies. Later, Langmoen's explosive wall run combines aerial and floor acrobatics in a striking fashion. She portrays a desperate, tethered character who does all in her power to release herself.

Sylvi Siltavirta's costume design brings to mind the novel's era with corsets and garter belts, but it remains subtly referential, supporting the physicality of the performers. Stylized terrier heads create humor while a deathly bird character adds to the horror elements.

Sometimes skulking around as a bird, sound designer **Anssi Laiho** mixes threatening rumbles with notes of spiritual devotion in his versatile soundscapes. Subtle local touches appear now and again, such as in the use of tin whistle. Dissonant church bells erupt at the end to signify the conclusion of the tour.

The circular floor plan made it easy to avoid the sensation of walking back and forth between spaces. At every rotation, something had changed. Scenes morphed to other scenes in gentle waves.

In the invitation-only pre-premiere one could wander around in these vision-filled city blocks for two hours, but in actual performances the tours were limited to 30 minutes each. Did visitors feel like they missed things?

One hopes not, and it seems unlikely. Even with unlimited time it would be impossible to physically be everywhere. Once again, a large part of the attraction is exactly in the fact that the world of the piece continues so far beyond the scope of a single viewer experience.

Tenka Issakainen