

A Year Without Summer

FLORENTINA HOLZINGER

Empresses Without Clothes?



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Florentina Holzinger's latest performance includes all the hallmarks of her celebrated artistic oeuvre. As the pre-show disclaimer at DeSingel in Antwerp warns: 'This performance contains scenes of self-harm, blood and other body fluids, and explicit depictions of sexual acts.' So yes, the so-called 'Holzinger system' (as Anna Leon aptly put it in *Etcetera* magazine) is still in full bloom. There will be blood, faeces, masturbation, needles, surgical procedures, and empowered naked women all around. And one thing is guaranteed: Holzinger's dense and hybrid aesthetic – a mélange of low and high art, of women of all ages and abilities, of ironic creation and exalted destruction – is unmissable, box-office entertainment.

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Yet 'A Year Without Summer' aspires to much more than shock and bold statements. Taking Mary Shelley's Frankenstein as the departure point, Holzinger traces the *longue durée* of our relationships to our bodies from patriarchal and pseudo-scientific medical abuses to posthuman dreams of eternal life. To refresh such a large, well-trodden path is a task that requires a level of nuance and conceptual daring that, unfortunately, Holzinger's much-celebrated stylistic excess is ill-suited to. The result is a colourful dish of platitudes.

A new show from Holzinger promises spectacular transgression and controversy. Still, from the intimacy of the early 28-woman orgy scene to the 'ultimate facelift' suspending one of the performers from meat hooks pushed through her face, the sex, body horror, gore, and the general fluid-soaked chaos are all easily digestible, bathing in serene lighting and set to a soothingly cinematic score. There is no perceptible discomfort or scandal among the mostly grey-haired audience, well-off audience. What does this once-radical

performance vocabulary really mean in the 21st century, when the provocation of physical theatre is as familiar as worn-out magicians' tricks?

The risk of making provocation the point rather than the method is that once the controversy dies down, very little else remains. For all the strong imagery and narrative leaps, the overarching message is impossible to misinterpret, and surprisingly conventional. At no point are we left uncertain; at no point are we enticed to think of this performance as anything but a brash retelling of an old tale. The villains assemble like a roll call of the tried and tested bad guys in the history of misogyny, ableism, and racism. Yes, we have Freud, we have Dr. Mengele, we have eugenics (and so on). Bold and simple, the many sketches that fill out the performance are undeniably funny in a variety-show way. Yet as satire, they leave little room for ambiguity. There is no sense of danger, no risk of conventions being overturned or worldviews challenged. As the hours passed, I felt my imagination held captive by Holzinger's choreographic compulsion to always keep the audience's attention held at full stretch. It is an oddly patronising feeling: to be kept busy like this, for such a long time, with so little space to breathe and let the mind wander.

Is it tastelessly exploitative or boldly ingenious to cast a terminally ill woman in your performance about eternal life?

Even the cast of dancers seems instrumentalised for clarity: there are older women, younger women, thin women, and heavy women. Achan Malonda, the one Black woman in the cast, performs the leading role in the section denouncing colonial racist eugenics. Saioa Alvarez Ruiz, an actress of short stature, plays the leading role in the section denouncing Nazi experiments on people with disabilities. Holzinger's affinity for the bold and simple can strike gold: Her final cast member, Beatrice "Bixie" Cordua, is by this point only with us on audio tape. A former ballerina, she died earlier this year, at 82, from cancer. Now she tells us how 'banal' death is. Is it tastelessly exploitative or boldly ingenious to cast a terminally ill woman in your performance about eternal life? In Holzinger's case, it seems the answer is always both.

The scenes build to emotional or sensory peaks, sometimes intertwined with intimate anecdotes, and they can trigger empathy and sadness among other things. Yet they remain side notes, affects easily mistaken for true depth.

For all the chaos and banality, there are remarkable passages in the piece. Beneath the noise and disorder, 'A Year Without Summer' reminds us that care and empathy are crucial in difficult times. It suggests this through an idea of intergenerational female solidarity: from the opening's quiet gestures of care to a final scene in a nursing home that dissolves into a chaotic storm of excrement and bodily fluids, hinting that the obsession with eternal life might not be as enviable as imagined.

Perhaps this is Holzinger's paradox: the work refuses restraint while longing to speak of care. It shows everything yet leaves little room to see. It triggers powerful emotions yet lacks emotional depth. Like the bodies onstage, it is unshielded, audacious and, in the end, curiously hollow.