



GUMMI

BRONKS / BALLET
DOMMAGE & SUZE
MILIUS

Blissful boredom



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A barren, bleak landscape of grey rocks sloping down from a crater, a tall, pointed menhir and a human cast of one: Dina, a woman with long, blonde, nylon hair, a sleek Barbie physique and to-die-for shiny silver boots. Despite appearances, she is 304 years old and not alone. Five soft, voluminous mounds of velvety, vegetal flesh are her living companions. The GUMMI are the protagonists of the show of the same name by Ballet Dommage, company-in-residence at BRONKS.

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The performance's premise is that the world as we know it is defunct, gone. Dina (Katrien Valckenaers) is the last remaining human, having hung around for the past three centuries as the victor of a game show whose dubious prize was eternal life.

Happy everafter

The GUMMI share the planet with her. Neither human nor mineral, they are not quite plant or animal either. They don't give birth or die. They are peaceful, content with their lot, and even though no two look quite alike, they live together without conflict. Some have moon-shaped jowls, others pointy, mandible-like headgear, but all are giant-sized, wonky pyramid-shaped and rich in colour: deep green, shiny turquoise, sky blue and jet black. They sport red, decorative appendages and variously functional tendrils and tentacles. Their mode of movement is to jiggle and bounce, giving them a permanently jolly allure.

They are bobbing, blissful blobs: whole heaps of softness.

The GUMMI do not speak a language recognisable to us humans. They communicate with each other through creaks, chirrups, squeaks and singsong. They are bobbing, blissful blobs: whole heaps of softness.

Katrien Valckenaers and Maxim Storms of Ballet Dommage teamed up with director Suze Milius and costume designer Rachid Laachir to "look beyond human conflict and ask the question: what possibilities reveal themselves when bliss is taken for granted?" *Wat hebben we het goed hier* — "We've got it so good here" — is the first thing the GUMMI utter, at least according to the subtitles.

Thank goodness Dina is there to stir things up a little. The eternal 'it-girl', with her transparent bag of accoutrements, including an aerosol antiperspirant and a game of Magic Catch, exudes such exuberant, playful energy that even the placid GUMMI become curious and want a share of the fun. Dina offers the Velcro-covered bat to one who seems both delighted and baffled by the idea of even the simplest form of entertainment.

A similar fascination takes hold when Dina shares her *smos* sandwich (akin to a club sandwich, for any non-Belgian readers). As the GUMMI have no digestive tract, the *smos* becomes another object of bewildered curiosity, something to be toyed with rather than eaten.

Dildo

Time passes — centuries perhaps — signalled by a beam of light sweeping across the stage. At one point, smoke billows from the crater. Maybe the Earth is still burning deep beneath its lacklustre crust.

Dina continues to sing and dance, rant and rave. At one point, she drops her transparent handbag, spilling its contents across the stage. The GUMMI bumble over to investigate, and Dina swoops down to remonstrate. "That's mine, and that's mine, and that's mine," she insists, repacking her belongings.

The GUMMI shrug off her fury and continue their metaphysical musings about death. "Death is somewhere else!" says one. "Death is made up," says another. An even bigger subject of contemplation is birth. "Did you give birth to something yet?" "No," comes the answer, but the question still runs throughout the work.

Seen through some eyes (mine), the GUMMI could resemble giant, cosy vulvas. And what about that huge menhir and smouldering crater? Dina also conspicuously stuffs a dildo back into her bag after the GUMMI have left off fingering its contents. Your reviewer is somewhat older than the 12+ target audience, but in that barren setting, the GUMMI are clearly looking for a spark.

Perhaps the seemingly desire-free GUMMI do set an example, or act as a warning.

A single word in the GUMMI language is subtitled with a whole list of feelings: disappointment, pain, frustration, fear, anger, confusion. "You get used to it," comes the kindly reply. And so sweet are the GUMMI with each other that when one admits a desire to be alone, they all follow, to be alone together.

The absurd and the abstract, the laconic and the comic recalled my adult experiences of *Waiting for Godot* or the work of Philippe Quesne. But my inner 12-year-old craved more: more build-up in the action, more wit and more satisfying resolutions. Stepping out of the theatre into a freakishly stormy night, I was

confronted with the climate havoc wrought by precisely that insatiable human quest for more. Perhaps the seemingly desire-free GUMMI do set an example, or act as a warning, and we should all be learning their language.