

Seeing is (not) believing

by Filip Tielens, deStandaard, 18 November 2018

THEATRE

With 'True Copy', BERLIN makes extremely interesting documentary theatre about Geert Jan Jansen, 'the greatest master forger of the century'.



photo: Koen Broos

BERLIN - 'True Copy'

'It doesn't matter whether something is real or not, as long as it is of good quality.' With this motto, the Dutchman Geert Jan Jansen could justify years of art forgery to himself. For a quarter of a century he fooled the art market with forgeries from the entire 20th-century painter's alphabet until he was arrested in 1994 in his French castle. He still paints 'in the style of', but now without fraudulent certificates (dS 10/11).

In the theatre performance 'True Copy', BERLIN reconstructs the man's turbulent life. It starts with an interview with Jansen himself, in whose face time has dug some furrows. On

stage, a large wall is filled with painters' frames, in which well-known artworks, newspaper clippings and backstage images appear. Behind it, BERLIN built three studios: for Jansen's own creations and for copying Picasso and Matisse. Live video allows us to peek inside.

Dust bag

'True Copy' draws eagerly on Jansen's memoirs and gives him carte blanche to tell his story. This provides an interesting insight into his book of tricks. For instance, he emptied out the dust bag of a vacuum cleaner over his works to make them look older, or created a *craquelé* effect by using his works as a doormat. These little anecdotes mercilessly ridicule the art world, which he had outsmarted for so long.

Jansen himself, however, gets little critical headwind – a downside to an otherwise extremely interesting play. This doesn't really do any harm: 'True Copy' is in essence not a biography, but an exploration of the overlap between reality and fiction, between veracity and deceit. Because what determines the value of a painting? Is it its intrinsic quality or the signature below it? Who is the real forger and who is the expert, since art dealers played along with his game, out of profit or out of ignorance? And do we really get to hear the real Geert Jan Jansen or are we getting set up?

After some side excursions – a Romanian hoax, a real (?) auction of a counterfeit – 'True Copy' ultimately turns out to be a real thriller. But revealing too much of the plot would spoil your viewing pleasure. As Jansen said, 'Sometimes it's just delightful to be deceived.'

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http://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20181118_03956266.