

A UNIQUE PORTRAIT OF A CHERNOBYL COUPLE THAT WOULD NOT EMIGRATE
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In its series of productions *Berlin* (Antwerp) mixes film with poetry, documentary with theatre, fiction with technology. By the osmosis of visual techniques and a surprising dramaturgy *Berlin's* theatre/film makers satisfy our curiosity about our fellow humans, without us having to feel ashamed about it. Quite the opposite. What you see and hear is often very moving indeed.

In part six of Berlin's *Holocene* cycle we are shown a film about two elderly people living in Zvizdal, a village near the nuclear plant of Chernobyl. After the nuclear disaster the whole area became a Forbidden Zone. All locals were given a flat and forced to evacuate. Not so Pétro and Nadia/Baba. More than 25 years later they are still there, with a lame horse, an emaciated cow, a couple of chickens, a dog and a cat for company - without electricity, without telephone, without people nearby. The border control guard occasionally pops by, their daughter pays the odd visit. She wants her parents to move in with her, but they are adamant.

Every year on May 9th people drive up in their cars to visit their deceased relatives in the graveyard of this lost village. They chat, then leave again for another year. Pétro and Baba stay. Pétro: 'All I can say is that the people who have left are dead. If you are born somewhere you should continue to live in your natural environment. If I were to move to another area, I would die.' Baba couldn't agree more.

They mow the grass, till the land, make hay, repair wooden fences, gather kindling, sweep up leaves off the road. They invoke God, Stalin and other saints, swear at each other and watch time crawl by.

In the last years of filming death becomes more prominent. They look back. The reasons why they refused to leave after the disaster become blurred. Did their stalling stop their chances of getting a flat? Were they too late to make the move?

Berlin started filming five-odd years ago. They went and visited them a few times a year. They talked to them, agreed certain terms (no filming inside). Where on earth do they find those people, you wonder - once again - as you watch the production. This time it was Cathy Blisson who introduced them, a French former journalist who stopped working for French weekly *Télérama* in 2009, eager to explore other avenues. She obtained a writer's residency and returned to the place close to Chernobyl she had already written about. A photographer friend shows her pictures of an old man in the forbidden zone. She meets the couple, tells Berlin about them. In 2011 the latter meet Pétro and Nadia through Cathy and interpreter Olga Mitronina. Together, Yves Degryse, Bart Baele and Cathy Blisson decide to film the couple across the various seasons of five years.

The space is filled with a large double-sided screen. The audience sits on

either side, around the screen so to speak, the island of filmed images. Under the screen stand three scale models of the house, the barns, the fences. Three identical copies in the autumn, winter and summer, like some kind of no man's land under the perfectly white screen where it all starts. You hear voices, see the translation on the screen. The makers need a permit to enter the forbidden zone. A Kafkaesque quest through the administrative jungle transitions into green shots of the spot where the old couple lives. Overall pictures and close-ups alternate organically; the scale models revolve and are lit according to the seasons. Images of the scale models are integrated into the screen images. Inside the stable of the summer maquette a mini-version of the projected images is shown. When the remembrance-day visitors drive past, tiny cars suddenly stand parked in the scale model; white sculpted animals lie in the stable, the chimney smokes in winter. The scale models fill with details, as does the play between scale model and film. Fiction and reality merge into micro/macro images. Events that occurred in the couple's life but were not filmed are visualized with miniature figurines.

The film's slowness, the atmospheric soundscape, the shots of landscapes in summer, autumn, winter and the dramatic development complete the image we get of this couple. In their seeming insignificance the couple's weather-beaten faces, the limping, the toothless swearing become existentially universal.

Zvizdal comes to The Netherlands from August onwards.

- See more at:

<http://www.theaterkrant.nl/recensie/zvizdal/berlin/#sthash.ZPdij8Z.dpuf>