

TRANSLATED REVIEW by Natalie Gielen for *Etcetera*, May 17, 2022.

The making of Berlin – BERLIN

A truthful story

In the final part of the Holocene series on fascinating cities, BERLIN pushes its signature style to the limit in an overwhelming play on genre and once again proves itself a master of storytelling.

Two older men sit on a bench in a park.

'Everyone has two lives,' one says. 'As soon as you realise you only have one life, your second begins.'

'I never started my second life,' says the other.

BERLIN

Herbert, is the name of one man. The other is Friedrich. They are sitting in the Tiergarten park, in the center of Berlin. It is the city the company named itself after and the last in the series of portraits of imaginative (world) cities in his Holocene series. As is often the case with BERLIN, which operates at the intersection of theatre and film documentary, we do not see the two men live but on a large projection screen that takes up the width of the stage.

'Within Europe, Berlin is the most impressive city, I think,' said co-founder Yves Degryse in an interview with the Theaterfestival newspaper some ten years ago. 'It unites thinking about the past and thinking forward'. In the tradition of their other Holocene productions, Degryse and his colleagues present the complex war history of the city by zooming in on a smaller story, that of Friedrich Mohr. As a young man, Mohr was orchestra director - 'the roadie of the orchestra' - at the Berliner Philharmoniker. The Philharmoniker was funded by Hitler's Ministry of Propaganda during World War II, and remained the only orchestra to play in Berlin in 1945 as Allied bombing raids laid the city in ruins and the Red Army approached.

The first half of the performance focuses on 'remembering' that intense period through interviews with Mohr, with several historians talking about the past, and during the moving conversation in the Tiergarten between Mohr and Herbert, a musician in the Berliner Philharmoniker. Mohr tells his friend about all the moments during their time in the orchestra when he wanted to stand up and protest against the decisions of the Nazi regime but in the end did not. 'And one day, you realise that you can't stand up anymore. That you have been working for the Berlin Philharmonic for too long.'

The (war) past and present come together in a storyline in which BERLIN, together with the orchestra of Opera Ballet Vlaanderen and radio station Klara, tries to help Mohr realise an old dream: an exceptional performance of Siegfried's Treurmars from Wagner's *Götterdämmerung*. As an audience, you sympathise with Mohr - will his big wish come true? - and with the team of BERLIN that spares no expense to make the undertaking a success.

THE MAKING OF

As the title suggests, this is not only a portrait of Berlin, but also a making of. This becomes immediately apparent in the opening scene. We hear a telephone ringing and then the off-screen voices of Fien Leysen and Yves Degryse. Can she film 'the making of Berlin'? And whether Degryse minds that she immediately records this telephone conversation?

The whole performance is interspersed with images in which we see the team of BERLIN at work during production meetings, in the car on the way to Berlin, WhatsApp-ing, and phoning;... This way, there is also a focus on the work process and the team's decisions. Sometimes this leads to funny moments, like when the scenographer draws his ambitious plan on the concrete stones of a parking lot with big gestures ('here will be a big curtain made of gauze'). Or when cameraman Geert De Vleeschauwer complains that he wants to stay out of the whole 'making of' as much as possible, except as a character. 'Then we'll call you Dirk', says Degryse.

The insight into discussions on choices made in terms of form and content reveals that selecting elements from reality and arranging them in a certain way by definition amounts to a distortion of that reality. Even in the best documentary project, certain things are staged to visualise reality. This is also illustrated in the opening image, in which a drone, accompanied by a soundtrack, flies over the city of Berlin and lands in an empty, concrete space where we see Mohr standing for the first time. The drone circles around the man, who is not looking into the camera (and has been instructed not to). Then the crew - by accident? - can be seen in the background, and we see how the scene is retaken. The meta-level of 'the making of' makes you as a viewer very aware of the way the documentary is constructed.

META-DOCUFICTION

Halfway through the performance, a drastic plot twist unsettles everything and completely blurs the distinction between (the making of a) documentary and fiction. But, of course, it is not new for BERLIN to explore this border area. The company already did so in the ingenious *True Copy*, or in that other Holocene episode, *Iqaluit*, in which it mixed stories of actual city inhabitants with a text by Ivo Michiels.

Interestingly, the meta-level of the making of raises substantive and formal questions about the choices made to tell a story, whether it pretends to be fiction or documentary (or both). It also demonstrates that both fiction and documentary use very similar strategies. Just think of the 'real' WhatsApp messages that many a fiction series incorporates nowadays, or the rousing soundtrack during the car journey to Berlin that could have come straight out of a thriller.

In an interview with Stoffel Debuysere in Sabzian, philosopher Jacques Rancière says about this blurred line between fiction and documentary: 'Fiction, in my opinion, does not mean inventing imaginary creatures, but creating a rational structure in which facts, characters and situations can be presented, in which we can connect events. Fiction is everywhere, even in the news we hear daily. So in general, it is fiction that creates a sense of reality.'

The different levels of the performance resonate in a complex scenography (indeed, the plan 'from the parking lot'). BERLIN is not averse to using (many) screens on stage, and the company often chooses a mix of live, music, technology and film. The innovative aspect of its approach lies precisely in the dialogue between various media and screens as characters on a stage. For the final installment of the Holocene series, however, BERLIN pulls out all the stops: three levels are created on stage via transparent screens, Degryse and De Vleeschauwer are busy with technology in the middle, next to them a horn player, and no fewer than six screens that together form an orchestra at the end. You would think this becomes too much at a certain point, but the scenographic excess is in keeping with exposing the mechanism behind the storytelling. And that is what this performance is ultimately about. By playing a game with disciplines (cinema and theatre) and genres (documentary and fiction), BERLIN raises the question of the degree to which something needs to be 'true'.

AN ODE TO THE STORY

The further the performance progresses, and the more you think about it afterward, the richer it becomes. For example, the structure of Wagner's *Götterdämmerung*, with its long intro and three acts, seems to potentially coincide with the performance's structure. Coincidence or not, one wonders. New connections and ideas present themselves long after the last round of applause has faded away. As we leave the building, yours truly hears a couple speculating about 'how it all really worked or was assembled.' A very human reflex, of course, as it is our nature to want to understand what we cannot (yet) understand. The performance celebrates our response to this - BERLIN's response to complex questions and Mohr's response to a past he cannot grasp: we tell stories. *The making of Berlin* is an overwhelming and poignant ode to the power of stories, and how they can lift people above themselves and bring them together - in a theatre, for example. It is an ode to the

multilayered, multiform, and true stories we tell ourselves to stay afloat, justify our choices, and survive.

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