

Berlin - The making of Berlin

AN OVERWHELMING TWILIGHT OF THE GODS

[critic's choice label]

Tuur Devens for *Theaterkrant*, May 16, 2022.

Berlin writes that after a performance of *Zvizdal* at the Berliner Festspiele it met an older man who told the company an improbable *Götterdämmerung* story that took place at the end of the war, in 1945. After a few conversations, BERLIN decided to make him and his story the core of their final city portrait.

When Berlin started with their unique approach to blending film and theatre in 2003, the makers had already agreed that the series on cities and special places would end with a portrait of Berlin, a city with a loaded history and a living intensity. Hence their name. We are now 17 years and two corona years further.

The series, with the overarching title 'Holocene,' began with the intriguing *Jerusalem* (2003, and a new version in 2013), in which, on two or three large screens simultaneously, people spoke about the past, present and future of the city. *Iqaluit* was a project on the North Pole, followed by *Bonanza* (2006), which, in addition to the film and video images, also included a scale model of the village in question. Finally, *Zvizdal* (2016) is a production we'll never forget. Recently, the war in Ukraine and the bombings around Kiev have repeatedly made me think of this production which is about an old couple who have continued to live peacefully and without comfort in the forbidden zone around Chernobyl.

The 'Holocene' cycle was fascinating, and it concludes just as fascinatingly with the sixth production, *The making of Berlin*, which premiered two years later than planned due to the corona crisis. Like the others in the series, this production provides a fascinating portrait of a place through a story but also ties in with the other series Berlin has made in recent years.

'Horror Vacui' is the series in which Berlin stages true stories, also in the typical Berlin design of a symbiosis between documentary, film, and theatre. This series blurs the boundary between 'reality' and 'fiction'. So many times, as a spectator, you ask yourself what is true and what is not, only to conclude that this question does not matter. Instead, it is a search for the - or an - explanation of an actual event. And in that quest, imagination can play an important role.

True Copy (2019) was the last installment in the series thus far and dealt with forgery in art, with master forger Geert Jan Jansen as the protagonist (character?). The production takes a surprising and astonishing turn, dealing a sobering blow to the viewer, who got sucked into the story. Anyone who has seen *True Copy* knows what I mean, and you can maybe expect the same - who knows? - to happen in *The Making of Berlin*.

True Copy is said to have been created after an earlier performance of Berlin that Geert Jan Janssen saw. In *The making of Berlin*, the company portrays Friedrich Mohr's Berlin story, after meeting him. They also add a making-of to the mix. Fien Leysen reports on how Yves Degryse and his team want to realise Mohr's dream after so many years. The making-of scenes slide over into the 'real' film scenes.

In the opening scene, we zoom in on a building from a city view to travel through that building. Next, you hear the stage directions, and 'cut' is shouted when the crew comes into view. Then you get the 'real' film scene with a voice-over. Friedrich Mohr talks about the Berlin Philharmonic, where he worked as an orchestra director during the war years. We gradually find out that in the last month of the war, when the city of Berlin was anxiously awaiting the Russian invasion, Mohr was involved in planning a performance of Siegfrieds Tod from Wagner's *Götterdämmerung* for a live radio broadcast. A performance for which the orchestra could not get together but was forced to spread out over six bunkers. Technically, however, something went wrong.

Mohr's story and a sentence from his diary - 'More than the words of my enemies, I will remember the silence of my friends' - convinced BERLIN to realise Mohr's dream after all these years. The orchestra of Opera Ballet Vlaanderen helps to make things happen. They will play together, outside of the concert hall, without actually being together. Radio station Klara, the NPO Radio 4 of Flanders, is also involved. It is a beautiful and exciting quest, captured in striking atmospheric images with a smooth montage, further enhanced by scenes from the making-of.

The projection on the gauze screen in front shifts to the back wall, and on the stage, between the gauze and the canvas, sits the oboist Rozanne Descheemaker. In a separate 'room', Yves Degryse sits at the controls (I think) and sends app messages we see appearing on the front screen. The wind instruments that play a big part in Wagner's composition about the end of the world and of the gods, about blowing away evil and good, are now condensed on stage to the sound of the oboe. With accompanying impressive images.

A shift in the story follows. And then it becomes a wonderfully fascinating game between real and not real, between theatre and film, between documentary and dream, between dream and fiction, between pretending and 'finally being able to pretend'. Berlin portrays it all in a refined way. This is not about fakes and facts, not about unreal or real, but rather about almost real. And this times two.

All of this is executed with a disarming playfulness, at a slow pace without action scenes, in a calmness that slowly sucks you into it, paired with images and scenes that move you. I will reveal one thing: never before have I been so captivated by the music of *Götterdämmerung*

as I was in this work of film theatre. An overwhelming experience. Wonderful how beauty can turn everything upside down.

source: <https://www.theaterkrant.nl/recensie/the-making-of-berlin/berlin/>

translation by BERLIN