



# The Haunted Hotel

By Monna Dithmer

There is something about the bodies at Hotel Pro Forma, something mysteriously elusive and unassailable. They appear with a cool remoteness and an insistent presence. They look directly at us, and they confront us. Serene go-betweens.

Once the human body enters Kirsten Dehlholm's stage, it becomes an alien body. It seems not so much created of flesh and blood as of time and space. Like everything else at Hotel Pro Forma, the inhabitants are first and foremost a matter of form – not just form as a question of aesthetics, but as an existential format. It is a charged form, cleansed, cut and condensed to its sculptural essence, its human fabric, so every figure has its own aura. The figures on the stage radiate presence, while much of what usually signals human presence – action, emotion and interaction - is strangely absent.

These creatures, in all their inscrutability, have given rise to wonder, fascination and irritation during the 30 years of Pro Forma's existence, but, tellingly, have also escaped closer reflection in the numerous articles that have been written about Kirsten Dehlholm's work. The writer Per Aage Brandt's characterization of her working method, however, gives us a lead to how we can understand them: 'She works with the precision of a sleepwalker.' The sleepwalking duality between being present and yet being somewhere else characterizes all the existences in Hotel Pro Forma: in essence, they can be categorized as ghosts.

The anniversary exhibition *Today's Cake is a Log* left no doubt that Hotel Pro Forma is a haunted place. In the exhibits from the selected performances - *I Only Appear to be Dead*, *War Sum Up* and *The One Who Whispers* - ghostlike figures appeared in all their in-betweenness. And in the so-called Machine Room at the heart of it all, you could find none other than The White Lady! In a room that was as dark and narrow as a coffin, a figure in a long white dress seemed to be walking towards you. The dress fluttered slightly so that you could not help wondering: is she alive?

## Figures of in-betweenness

It is striking how many of the performances are explicitly set in the transitional zone between life and death as an exploration of another form of existence. Hotel Pro Forma is populated by a multitude of living dead, apparently dead, or dreamlike existences, none of which would seem to belong either here or in the beyond, but which insist on haunting the stage. The crowned spiritual figures on the staircase to infinity in *Operation:Orfeo* are a classic example. In the Hans Christian Andersen performance *I Only Appear to be Dead* a ghostly-white figure sets off with his survival rope, in *Monkey Business Class* two medieval figures Death and Everyman meet, and two twin seraphs stand guard over *Fact-Arte-Fact*, while a luminous figure circles round the coffin in *The One Who Whispers*. As is said in *Dust [Wow!] Dust* about this form of in-betweenness: 'Someone else was

*Carpe, Carpe, Carpe 1990 (Roberto Fortuna)*

dreaming him.’ The existence is displaced; the perspective on the world is dislocated, and the figures are in transit, halfway between presence and absence. The ghost’s form of in-betweenness can be compared with the pause between breathing in and breathing out. What form of life is found here? With her own kind of morbid gaiety, Dehlholm points this out in *The One Who Whispers* where the transfiguration of a girl to a glowing spectre is accompanied by the thunderous breathing of a wind-machine at full speed. We are blown over by the breath of in-between life.

The existential questions at the core of the Hotel sound radically challenging from the perspective of the ghost: ‘Are you who you say you are?’ is asked in *Monkey Business Class*. ‘What sort of a person are you?’ is a question in *War Sum Up*, while *Site Seeing Zoom* confronts us with the classical: ‘What does it mean to be a human being?’

### **Paradoxical bodies**

The Pro Forma creatures are stylized beings on the border between human and art figure, both sensuously concrete and artificial. They have the character of an installation, living sculptures controlled by invisible forces of space: subject to its atmosphere, geometric lines, laws of gravity and light. They seem to carry their own time, ‘a living being consists of time’ as was said in *Fact-Arte-Fact*. With measured movements, the statuesque figures walk through space with a ritual, trance-like slowness, as if stepping out of a mythical infinity. Rather than being individual entities, they are more like collective creatures. Their human noise has been greatly reduced. The figures are depersonalized, purged of psychology, emotionality, will, sensuality, and eroticism – and equipped with a minimum of action, movement and expression. No one twerks at Hotel Pro Forma.

The expression of each individual has been condensed, so a single gesture can be more eloquent than ten, and the face is no longer privileged compared to the rest of the body. The figure becomes an overall expression, like a statue, and the bodies takes on the nature of signs that can embody cultural prototypes such as the sailor, the geisha and the cowboy in *Monkey Business Class*, or archetypal figures from Orpheus and Snow White to Judas.

Here one can distinguish between two basic types of ghosts. There are the ready-mades, i.e. authentic humans, who appear as they are – mainly defined by the distinctiveness of their body. They can be the dwarfs in *The Picture of Snow White* who tell their personal stories, the children who recite Per Aage Brandt’s poems in *Carpe Carpe Carpe*, the disabled figures in *The Shadow’s Quadrant*, the grandmothers in *jesus\_c\_odd\_size*. In this context, the twin is an exemplary figure, as can be seen in *Fact-Arte-Fact*, *The Picture of Snow White* and *The One Who Whispers*. The twin is his or her own ghost – they are two and yet one and the same.

There is also another form of ready-mades haunting Hotel Pro Forma, defined by their professional skills. This applies to the rowers in *Navigare*, the archers, dog-trainers, and policemen etc. in The Ship Bridge and professor Per Øhrgaard in *Calling Clavigo*. The other and by far the larger main group of ghosts is made up of unadulterated art figures, comprising singers, dancers, performers, and actors. They are anonymous, statuesque, uniform figures that tend to move in crowds, like the yellow-wigged children in *Chinese Compass* and the white-powdered beings in *I Only Appear to be Dead* who move in ghostlike processions.

No matter which type of ghost we are talking about, all of them stand in front of us

without any form of progressive story making them develop as individuals. However, they are installed in a space of transformation, characterized by a progression of music, sound, and images in constant metamorphosis. They themselves transform, fluctuating between concrete and abstract, physical and immaterial. At the speed of light, they can change from physical bodies to flat shadows, luminous images, abstract signs or spherical visions – like the glowing abstract skeletons in *Calling Clavigo* and *Enigma of the Late Afternoon*.

The general focus is on the pattern and configurations of which they are a part rather than on the individual figures. You see them through their surroundings. Defocusing is a fundamental Dehlholm technique used to concentrate awareness on what it means to be a human being. If one gets too close to things, one stares blindly. All we have to relate to as an audience is the body as it stands in the space, in the image, in the installation, in the world. It does not so much point at itself and its individual nature as at the space around it and its function in a larger context.

### **The body is delegated**

The strange thing about Hotel Pro Forma's performances is that they may seem to be disembodied, because the figures become so much a part of the image and the space, and yet there is body all over the place. For the body becomes delegated, as the sensing is left to the audience. Your own body experiences the darkness of the blind figures in *Laughter in the Dark* or the final drowning in green light in *Operation: Orfeo*.

The performances confront us with how we unconsciously sense things via optical illusions, repressions, and blind spots. These tricks of perception are needed to keep us on our feet as demarcated individuals in the world. In *Why Does Night Come Mother?* the audience stood above and looked down from a bird's eye perspective, while our senses swooned. The ability to find one's bearings according to what is up and what is down, living or dead, a three-dimensional body or a flat sign was completely short-circuited. Here it was absolutely clear how Hotel Pro Forma manipulates and destabilizes our normal way of sensing the outside world. In the performance machinery, our senses are given a twist, and we are able to experience our own sensations as unreal, since the deceits of perception are laid bare. Pro Forma confronts us with the fragility of the basis upon which we construct our reality.

It is not only the bodies on the stage that seem to be alien bodies. For brief moments, the spectators become alien to themselves. For what does it mean to be a human being who just for once really senses the world and in doing so loses her foothold? This is where the bodies at Hotel Pro Forma unequivocally point beyond themselves, straight out at the spectators watching them.

### **Metaphysics in great and small**

What, more precisely, are the ghosts of Hotel Pro Forma pointing towards? With reference to the philosopher Jacques Derrida as the ghostwriter behind these ideas about the spectre and its in-between existence – in his book *Specters of Marx* – it can be said that ghosts are characterized by haunting us with existentially marginalized material that modern culture has repressed. Hotel Pro Forma's creatures remind us that we are also spiritual beings with a metaphysical dimension. What makes the bodies so spellbinding in their appearance is that they are not only physically concrete and abstractly immaterial, they are also bearers of

a spiritual force as part of a larger universe. When Otto & Otto in *The One Who Whispers* hold up a small fluorescent stick in front of their eyes, they obviously see something totally different. This indicates that it is not a question of some great metaphysical space that lies behind everything. It is here and now. Spirit can be present in the tiniest detail, concrete or abstract, depending on how you choose to focus on reality.

The formal Hotel Pro Forma techniques not only involve stylization but also spectralization. They pare down what is immediately human to such an extent that something else emerges, as the Bauhaus choreographer Oskar Schlemmer said about his formalized art-figures. How else is one to understand the whole stream of shadows and light-figures, the fan-shaped luminous beings in *Theremin*, the neon-glowing skeletons in *Calling Clavigo* or the weightless, supine beings on the heavenly ladder in *Operation: Orfeo*?

There is something absolutely magical about the bodies' metamorphoses, the ability of the figures to change from physical material into two-dimensional images or immaterial beings. The very effortlessness with which they can alternate between a third and a second dimension indicates that they can of course shift to a fifth or seventh dimension, in the realm of metaphysics. Just as Hotel Pro Forma's ghosts conjure up the immaterially spiritual, they also move to the opposite extreme and dig into matter -in the exploration of the ready-mades and materials of reality and in the use of banal everyday objects: a balloon, knitting needles, a stuffed bird. Consequently, the everyday objects and figures gain a similarly mysterious aura. As is said in *Fact-Arte-Fact*: 'The ordinary always takes us by surprise.'

The confrontation between the metaphysical and the daily, the artificial and the concrete, can make figures and objects spectralize and acquire an aura of something mysterious and self-evidently real. They seem to turn into themselves, as if we are seeing them properly for the first time. Dehlholm's ghosts explore the extremes of existence in search of an answer to what it means to be a human being. It is the friction between something enigmatically metaphysical and something recognizably everyday that generates the haunting on the Pro Forma stage.

### **The ritual – the return of the repressed**

What is at stake in the performances cannot simply be understood as stylization and spectralization, but also as a form of ritualization. The performances have the nature of a ritual form that opens up a metaphysical dimension – a spiritual side of the theater that has otherwise been expelled from the late-modern consciousness. Hotel Pro Forma naturally includes a performance about the greatest ghost of Western culture: Jesus Christ. The archetypal resurrection story of the man-god who is both dead and alive becomes in *jesus\_c\_odd size* an interactively inclusive performance that ranges from the most ordinary coffee table with knitting grandmothers to the iconic Last Supper tableau. The reaching out to the audience as an interactive part of the story is the crucial thing about the ritual nature of the performances.

The ritual is an inclusive form, which involves a shift of focus. The vital thing is not what happens to the figures on the stage but what happens to us in the auditorium. A shared, unified act, just like the sensing and corporeality that, as already suggested, was delegated to the spectators. The figures are catalysts in the larger game being played with

us. They can change form, but they do not develop and change from a then to a now. We can do so, however, during the performance.

The ghosts point beyond themselves, bearers of what has been spiritually repressed. The fragment points to the whole from which it has been separated. The fascinating thing is that by pointing at us, the ghosts are pointing at a larger picture, a greater space, of which we are a part. As was written on the ramp on the roof of the multi-storey car park in Holstebro, where *The Ship Bridge* took place with its motley array of local ready-mades – dog trainers, sports dancers, police constables etc. – ‘The whole is greater’. A quotation from Euclid that encapsulates the haunting of Hotel Pro Forma: ‘The whole is greater than the sum of its parts.’



*I only appear to be dead, 2005 (Roberto Fortuna)*