



# Review

Sun&Sea by Rugilė Barzdžiukaite, CPH STAGE 2021

# Sun&Sea by Rugilė Barzdžiukaite, CPH STAGE 2021

By Annelis Kuhlmann

## A Planetary Performance Opera

Imagine and see the earth from above! We like to think that this is a beautiful sight. Even man is beautiful. This perspective, in Rugilė Barzdžiukaite's direction, was presented to the audience who participated in this one-hour opera performance event. What I see reminds me of some collective and anonymous well-worn photo illustrations of a poor, endless summer. Plastic pollutes the stage, which we are presented by Barzdžiukaite, who also made the scenography. However, this is not a simple display of garbage produced by ignorantly happy life-lazy incognitos who are visiting *Sun&Sea*. The performance reveals a still life with plastic on the beach, in the sun, intertwined with the music, composed by Lina Lapelytė and the lyrics, written by Vaiva Grainytė in a very sophisticated performance score.

When we are presented with this helicopter perspective of a clear-cut terrarium landscape, it is as if our longing for travel freezes in mid-air. When you enter this performance space, you feel something disturbing its simulation of sun and sea. Something is not as it should be:

### YOUNG MAN FROM THE VOLCANO COUPLE

I.

I flew to a Portuguese corrido –

A short trip, just for fun.

But then the pilot had to land the plane

in London:

So I called up my friends

And stayed over for a couple of days.

And from that day on,

Linda and I never been apart.

Not a single climatologist predicted a  
scenario like this.

Maybe someone had a feeling – perhaps  
the bull?...

...perhaps the bull? ...

For *Sun&Sea* we are located in one of the exhibition halls at Copenhagen Contemporary. The spectators are seated on scaffolding, in a single row forming a square about seven metres above a playground. After one hour the audience leaves. A group of cleaners arrives to prepare the room for the next audience (this

is necessary owing to the Covid-19 restrictions). The result feels like an endless chain of participatory actions. We are only present for the time slot that we are given.

### **Compost Post-Opera**

*Sun&Sea* is an opera performance. It could be called a post-opera, or even a compost post-opera. This is a recycled truth as if there was nothing new under the sun. The thirteen singers are authentic opera singers, but they are not participating in any ordinary opera-dramatic action. They are lying on the sand, in the sun, playing by the sea, which is represented by an inflatable swimming pool for small children.

In the performance version at CPH Stage, the crew was from Lithuania, but normally the performance involves singers from the city in which they are performing. The intended sustainable solution with 100% local participants was not possible in Copenhagen. Even the live dog in the performance had come from Lithuania...

The musical material for the opera gives the impression of being played by an old, forgotten village church harmonium, playing very regular patterns of calming, monotonous, stylised music in repetitive, folk-dance, film-like figures. With a mixture of vocal passion and estrangement, the singers epically express the lyrics in postcard clips from *Sun&Sea*. This effect echoes the artificial elements of nature, which are planted in the sand. Throughout the performance, the vocal score changes several times into a collective voice like a choir, giving the audience a break from the minimalistic monotony for a moment, and allowing them to encounter the spiritual beauty of another world.

#### **VACATIONERS' CHORUS**

I.  
TODAY THEY HAVE RAISED  
THE RED AND YELLOW FLAG UP  
HIGH:  
THE WHIRLPOOLS OF THE SEA,  
DROP-OFFS,  
RIP-TIDES,  
UNDERTOWS.  
YOU'RE NOT ALLOWED  
TO WADE IN  
DEEPER THAN YOUR KNEES!



The sound is performatively sculptural, for instance when a boy and a mother play beach tennis together. The rhythm of the sound of the tennis ball being detached from the Velcro on the bat adds a certain strange, scratchy beauty to the music. Another example of embodied rhythm and sound comes from the young twin girls, who are playing the traditional, children's game of clapping hands together, mirroring a pattern. At some point, the sound becomes almost like a slowmotion spiritual, as if referring to an afro-futuristic voice. This scenic landscape is global, and the sounds fill you with empathy at the same time as you become aware of a sense of lurking danger that will crack the illusion of a pseudo-idyllic world.

"WE ARE TOGETHER" is one of the first distinguishable lines produced by the singers, who paradoxically mostly appear as singles or couples on the overcrowded beach. However, a collective state of being is claimed despite the obvious distance between the spectators and performers.

### **Dramaturgical Treatment of Time**

It is difficult to say when the performance actually begins, and the ending is also open and unfinished. When we leave the performance space, the territory is invaded by a new line of spectators who move forward like a snake to occupy the upper space in one row. This image is in an endless loop – alpha and omega. It is like a perpetual movement, framing a still life. The temporal confrontation between the moving and the stagnation of life in *Sun&Sea* is framed extremely sharply. The frame cuts the performance space as a chain saw, and what is left is a space containing no articles whatsoever. It is, ironically, the "pure" idea of *Sun&Sea*, a condensed image of our world in our own imagination. *Sun&Sea* is a distillation of life like our childhood memories of a day on the beach. The actions are trivial, primarily taking place on sun-faded towels, which have been reused before and will be again. A kind of repetition or recycling of time takes place at the same time as you get the sense that people are happily killing time by reading, surfing on their mobile phones, eating, chatting, solving crosswords, playing with balls, calming an overheated, live dog, without disturbing anybody, with bikes spread indiscriminately on the sand, finer than at the finest beaches. It is a particular kind of sand, underlining our perception that this is an artificial beach. The performers wear swimsuits or light summer clothes, and we are sweating like them. The temperature in the room is more than 45 degrees. This underlines the sense that global warming is a reality, *Sun&Sea* reveals how much we have affected the planet on which we live.

### **Co-Creative Team Behind *Sun&Sea***

In 2013, Rugilė Barzdžiukaitė, Vaiva Grainytė and Lina Lapelytė produced their first collective work, the contemporary opera *Have a Good Day!* This opera is a story about ten cashiers and their invisible lives. It was performed at many international festivals around the world and received six international awards. The climate-change opera performance *Sun&Sea* was co-created in the form of a mini version during the three artists' fellowship at the *Akademie Schloss Solitude in Stuttgart* in 2016. The full *Sun&Sea* had its premiere at Staatstheater Braunschweig in May 2017 and received the Golden Lion Award at the Venice Art Biennale in 2019.

This trio of artistic female innovators have identified a new pathway in opera and theatre performance. Their work demonstrates a level of creativity beyond that of more traditional music performances, but also reveals a particular sense of humour.

During *Sun&Sea* I had a strong sense of a feminine touch to this world. This was noticeable in the traditional women's take on the arrangement of life at the seaside in the sun. Nature does not need sun cream, but the children of the sun would burn their wings if they were not protected – as

in this example of the sense of humour in *Sun&Sea* in the following 'postcard':

**SUNSCREEN BOSSA NOVA**

I.

Hand it here, I need to rub my legs...

'Cause later they'll peel and crack,

And chap.

Hand it I will rub you...

Otherwise, you'll be red as a lobster...

Hand it I will rub you...

The critical political dimension of the allegory of Sun&Sea is expressed in the philosopher's commentary:

I.

Is it not a comical even grotesque situation:

Ancient Persia, China, India –

Some of the oldest civilizations in the world.

A thousand years went by and we are

Lying here on the beach,

Snacking on super sweet dates imported from Iran,

Playing a game of chess invented by

Indian Brahmins,

Wearing swimming suits made in the factories of China –

Is this not a parody of the Silk Road?

We were only present for the time slot, which we were given – but this performance remained in my bodily memory for far more than one hour.

---

**Annelis Kuhlmann** is a dramaturg and associate professor at the Department of Dramaturgy and Musicology, Aarhus University. Annelis teaches theatre and performance history, and is particularly interested in performances that deal with the temporality of our times.

---

*Sun&Sea* was performed from 29 May 2021 to 01 June 2021 at CPH Stage.

**Stage direction and stage design:** Rugilė Barzdžiukaite

**Libretto:** Vaiva Grainytė

**Music and sound:** Lina Lapelytė

**Singers:** Aliona Alymova, Marco Cisco, Claudia Graziadei, Arturas Miknaitis, Yates Norton, Vytautas Pastarnokas, Egle Paškevičienė, Kalliopi Petrou, Ieva Skorubskaitė, Svetlana Statkeviciene, Annapaola Trevenzuoli, Elisabetta Trevenzuoli and Nabila Dandara Vieira Santos