

Parsifal from Copenhagen Central Station, tracks 11 & 12 to Brøndby

By Monna Dithmer

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The other day I stood on a platform at Copenhagen Central Station and was served champagne. You have to brace yourself for the start of an expedition to the suburbs – in the wrong direction, unlike the bliss of the coastal railway going north from Copenhagen. What else but art could drive a cultural hag like me to such a place. All parades of prejudice are up. What else, when we audience members have been appointed “knights of good taste” and have travelled to *Parsifal – An Opera Crusade* with destination Brøndby. It is almost a bit of a ‘slumdog’ safari.



Photo: Søren Meisner

When director buddies Tue Biering and Jeppe Kristensen invite you to a travelling performance of Wagner, you know that this is not just another day at the office. They have previously managed to bring audiences at odds with reality by playing *Pretty Woman* in a container on Halmtorvet with a real street prostitute, performing the TV series *Friends* with rejected asylum seekers. And what better way to cross swords with reality than a high classical chivalric romance, “a pinnacle of civilisation”? Of course, it is a huge parody when, for three long hours, we have to follow at the heels of a two-metre-tall Parsifal cloaked in armour and rubber sword. We ourselves are no less ridiculous in our formal opera dress – required in the invitation – in the middle of the wasteland of civilisation.

Resolutely singing, Parsifal fights his way through the concrete landscape of grey stairwells, motley flats and extinct underground car parks – while he is quarrelling with three other accomplices. In search of the Holy Grail... with the good Danish coffee.

But it actually makes perfect sense to pair one crazy quest with another. After all, a Wagner performance like this is already a real punishment drill. So why not transplant the Grail castle and a quest full of obstacles to the concrete housing complex that towers up in impassable height and breadth? I had not in my wildest imagination pictured that the whole motley patchwork of a Wagner story – with swan, spear, saviour knight, alien maiden and more could be matched by a visit to Klitrosen! This centre for elderly, coffee-thirsty citizens is so lavishly decorated with plates, lamps, bell pulls and gold-framed landscapes that it bears witness to a peculiar uncontrolled attention to detail and unity. And in the middle of it all, a coffee table is laid for us Grail knights of good taste, surrounded by a large choir of singing residents.

I was genuinely moved by these ordinary, everyday people singing their hearts out about holy anguish. So far from pure parody. A redemptive shared moment. That is how I found the Holy Grail in Brøndby at the bottom of the coffee cup.

IT WOULD be easy to dismiss the ‘Opera Crusade’ as a harmless pointing of fingers at us cultural snobs with our silly opera cult and not least at all those from Brøndby in their concrete caves. A safe, recognisable division into us and them. You could feel a bit cross about that if you were from those parts. Pure cultural arrogance.

But the fact is that we actually live incredibly compartmentalised lives, each in our own sector. While it is obvious that people at the nice addresses go on another trip to Berlin or New York, we never set foot in such exotic places as Brøndby and environs. That is why I can only be happy to be sent out sightseeing by train. “Go see” (the title of the DSB passenger magazine *Ud og se*) with art as a pretext. Because even though the opera crusade delivers a bitter commentary on Wagner and his xenophobic ideas of pure blood, it is most of all the surroundings and the audience ourselves, with our limited horizon, that the performance directs its spotlight at. Not to romanticise how authentic it is ‘out there’, but to use the theatre to shed light on reality and all the other crusades you can have going on. In Brøndby as well as in Østerbro. “Have thanks!”, Wagner & Co. sing. I am just saying: Thank you for the coffee grounds!

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