

The European Slaughterhouse

Odense Theatre

By Erik Exe Christoffersen

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The European Slaughterhouse at Odense Theatre is a power machine in five parts by director and concept creator Tue Biering. It is a five-and-a-half-hour-long performance about war as a chronic condition. Biering freely rewrites Shakespeare's cycle *The Wars of the Roses* under the impression of the war in Ukraine, and along with lines from the kings, sound the voices of Biden, Putin and Zelenskyj.



Photo: Emilia Therese

Biering is the artistic director of FIX&FOXY, but also a freelance director at Odense Theatre. With *The European Slaughterhouse*, Biering continues a theme that he turned and twisted at Aalborg Theatre in 2019 with the play *Good vs. Evil*. One of the points is that this simple dichotomy is both real and at the same time a distortion of the complex reality where the poles of good/evil

can be turned and twisted depending on the social context and situation. It is a dichotomy that is important in classical drama and well suited to creating a simplification and often a moral discussion. This, however, is not Biering's intention. It goes deeper and is more of an ethical reflection on the actuality of the Shakespearean fiction. Everyone wants peace but ends up in the violence of war to protect themselves from the enemy.

The production is a rewrite of Shakespeare's eight royal dramas, from *Richard II* to *Richard III*, which deal with the War of the Roses and unfold in a brutal universe of earth, water and mud. The 14 actors in the cast are on stage throughout the performance, playing several different characters from the fictional universe, but also with a number of references to actual people, symbols and speeches. For the first couple of hours, the stage is largely empty except for the royal chair, which is moved around. The characters are in costumes that denote the hybrid: shorts, sports equipment and t-shirts combined with fur, swords, wigs and royal crowns.

It is Meaningless

The narrator begins the performance with a warning as the team stands at the back getting ready:

"It's pointless. There may be an occasional connection that can be pointed out, a cause and effect. But there is no deeper meaning. The great mill wheel is constantly grinding, drawing the circular path of history. And if it becomes too moralising, it's unintentional, because there is no morality beyond what the individuals represents".

It all begins in the large, bare theatre space. Every now and then, we see the door at the back open out to the real Odense, like a flash of light in the darkness. In the second part, a set is built that is a white modern minimalist space that gradually becomes more and more messy, and along the way, several characters become aggressive and punch a fist through the wall. Finally, several people jump in and out of new openings or throw dead bodies out in body bags through the holes.

The theme is the perpetual cycle of violence, but it is not an anti-war or pacifist performance. On the contrary, it is a recognition that we all have a fascination with, and cultivate, violence – not least in film. In this way, the performance has quite a lot in common with film director Quentin Tarantino's portrayal of violence as a visual art form as for instance in *Kill Bill*. The performance moves towards an ethical discourse on why violence can be justified?

Fragments of Reality: Making England Great Again

The performance uses a number of devices that concern varying degrees of theatricality. From a real horse and a big dog to the touchingly authentic chorus of senior citizens in their underpants, shoulders and bellies sagging as they step in as conscripted reserves for the next war. Underlying the entire performance is a dark and melancholic musical composition.

As one of the prominent real-life characters, the *QAnon Shaman* from the attack on Capitol of 2021 appears. He shouts: *"I no longer want to be the cozy teddy bear, a little stupid, a little funny, a little on the margin. So you can laugh at him or think 'what an idiot'"*. He is threatening and drags a group of young spectators on stage and forces them to drink beer and cheer him, while one of them gets his phone smashed because it suddenly starts ringing. He beats the youngsters with a plastic pipe, so you almost think the performance is cancelled and that the man is acting in real life. Other actors try to stop him: *"Stop it. You're nothing. You just want to cause a lot of trouble and ruin it for the rest of us because you have nothing to say. Now go away so we can move on. Get lost!"*

But the *QAnon Shaman* continues: “We start with academics and lawyers, because the swamp must be drained of government officials, the upper class and of parasites. Burn all bridges and burn the Tower. Tear down the mansions. Burn the libraries. I am the one who will drain the swamp”. The Trump reference is clear. Significant Putin lines also mean that the performance jumps between West and East without it making much of a difference.

In *The slaughterhouse* stagehands also participate who sweep the floor in the middle of a scene, and several times the actors step out of character and address the audience more or less directly: “This is a meaningless mess, and you must try to make sense of it when you get home”, just as there are meta-lines directed at the cast: “How many female roles are there really in this play?”

My Horse

The performance ends with a longer sequence based on text from *Richard III*. The actor is right at the front of the stage and speaks directly to the audience. He is tired of his role as “ugly”, and you almost think it is the actor, Kristoffer Helmuth, confessing his disgust at the situation when a person sneaks out from the wings and puts in a cardboard sign with the handwritten message: “Fuck you, Kristoffer Helmuth”. The actor is also humiliated and belittled by his mother (in the fiction), who regrets that he was ever born, and you cannot help but sympathise with the character as he becomes increasingly desperate.

In the final scene, Richard runs around backstage in the theatre’s storeroom looking for the horse that was previously on stage. He is filmed on video, and the image of the desperate man is projected onto a giant screen at the end, with a *close-up* of his desperate eyes. *Richard III* concludes the whole war machine and is the drama that gets to take up the most space in the dramaturgical totality of the performance.

The Game of Thrones Generation

The actors at Odense Theatre are really good at moving from the credible, intimate and personal confession to the overly theatrical role. In a strange way, it is as if these degrees of different forms of authenticity and theatricality rub off on each other, so that we see and feel the difference between fiction and meta-fiction, but the meta-level enhances the experience of the performance. The ensemble at Odense Theatre has something to tell us and lets us know that we are in the middle of a Shakespearean chaos in a world that is *out of joint*, like Hamlet. He may not be in the performance, but his story and his diagnosis of society, reflecting the violent wheel of forces and history, are mirrored in the royal dramas. The point is that the actors and the theatre itself are part of this chaos, and they too are affected by the doubt and desperation.

Richard III is killed and someone new takes the crown, promising that the time of war is over: “Now we shall all live in peace. I believe in the possibility of change. The only constant in human history is change”.

This is how the new king speaks through a video projection, with blood already trickling from the crown and down his forehead.

It is a magnificent staging, with the theatre ensemble making a huge effort in this orgy of violence, where the actors walk around with buckets of blood and, with a brush stroke across the neck, mark the killing of one traitor or liar after the other – only to be crowned a little later and suffer the same fate. After the interval, the killings are marked in a new way, now they are executed offstage with a shot or two, and in this way the changeability of history is represented.

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An extra dimension of the daytime performance on 28 September was that the audience was largely made up of young high school students. They were audibly involved from start to finish. In this staging, Shakespeare was just the thing for the *Game of Thrones*-generation.

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Script: William Shakespeare.

Staging and adaptation: Tue Biering.

Dramaturg: Mathias Rosenkrands Bech.

Set and costume design: Nicolaj Spangaa and Marie Rosendahl Chemnitz. Composer: Daniel Fogh.

Sound design: Kim Malmose.

Lighting design: Simon Holmgren.

Cast: Frank Thiel, Kristoffer Helmuth, Benjamin Kitter, Klaus T. Søndergaard, Freja Klint Sandberg, Natalí Vallespir Sand, Anders Gjellerup Koch, Nicolai Jandorf, Louise Davidsen, Malene Melsen, Mikkel Bay Mortensen, Githa Lehrmann, Niels Skovgaard Andersen, Cecilie Gerberg and others.

<https://iscene.dk/2022/09/01/tue-biering-det-er-er-mit-personlige-waterloo/>



Sex and violence. Photo: Rebecca Arthy



The Best Show In The World