

Flesh from flesh

Julie Jaffrenou's bold performance piece "Erbstück", with the Compagnie LaPerformance in the Freiburger Südufer.

(by Bettina Schulte 12/2016)



(Photo: Maurice Korbel)

Julie Jaffrenou created material that challenged her artistically; the material is also challenging for her audience. In the Freiburger Südufer, a beautiful room which is ideally suited to this type of performance, Julie Jaffrenou placed a low, square platform. On each side – wearing an archaic, skin-colored garment – sits a dancer. In between them lies a mound of flesh. Innards of all sorts from a slaughterhouse. You swallow hard. Is that really dead meat? And are these four women really going to engage with what on first glance looks like a nauseating heap of offal?

Minutes pass in a tense, uneasy silence. Then the first, Tjadke Biallowons, detaches herself from the stone on which she sits and sinks in the ground,

which appears to be concrete but is actually a foamed material. She shyly approaches. No, she's not really stirring. Not yet. The next, Olivia Maridjan-Koop, puts her feet between the entrails. She is followed by Julie Jaffrennou herself, who digs in and rummages through the flesh. The fourth, Alice Gartenschläger, throws herself with vim and vigor slapping on the pile, over and over.

Memories to be suppressed or accepted

The performance artist Jaffrennou, who studied, among others, under the mother of radical performance art Marina Abramovic, named her new production "Erbstück" ("Heirloom"). This lifts the dealings with the raw flesh to a metaphorical level. Much can occur regarding the memories - history and feelings that dredge themselves up from the past: one can reject them, accept them, delve deep within them, ride roughshod over them. One can also beat oneself up with them – which the dancers do, eventually finding four hearts of beef with attached oesophagi from the assorted pile and using them as clubs. One can also absorb the memories, as when the dancers slide the hearts under their robes. When you approach the absolutely silent, highly concentrated performance from this figurative perspective, the flesh loses some of its crude appearance and becomes almost vibrant. At times the four dancers treat the hearts almost lovingly. They massage them, carry them in their arms like a child, lay them around their necks. Perhaps one should treat one's past, with its own unique legacy in this way: with care; guarding, protecting, saving, absorbing as constant companions into one's existence the various aspects of that past.

An evening filled with strong, silent images

When memories become overwhelming, one can feel buried beneath them: as the other three physically stronger dancers begin to encumber her with their burdens, Tjadke Biallowons stares at the gruesome flesh with eyes wide open like a tragic actress from ancient times – before she is simply crushed under the load they have placed upon her. A potent image, in an evening filled with potent, silent images, during which one is urged to move freely about the room and view the proceedings from other perspectives – one does so with a mixture of resistance and fascination.

We would like to forget that we are flesh of the flesh, because this reminds us of our past. Julie Jaffrennou must be a brave woman. As an artist she is daring – as well as unsettling. And her actresses are committed to her cause with sincerity and earnestness. It cannot be easy to wade in flesh. But as becomes familiar to the viewer throughout the performance, this is precisely what the Compagnie LaPerformance does.