

Review

Amateur and Meat are Playing Live at the Milky Way

The audience is invited in what looks as a usual concert setting: a small stage, no seats, a bar, t-shirts are sold at a small stand. Two performers come on the stage and play a loud rock piece. The first sequence is quite lively, Amateur and Meat (Anja Müller and Taavet Jansen) are obviously having fun, not trying to be technically perfect or in control. Their stage names perfectly introduce their performance – Amateur approaches the drums and the small synthesizer in an amateurish way, and Meat energetically plays the guitar. The songs gradually transform into a series of narrative micro-episodes, which Amateur and Meat perform in a dialogue while struggling in a cheerful way with the instruments. This is obviously not a dance performance, at least not the usual sense of the term. The movement is not polished or technically controlled; it resembles a little clumsy and ecstatic child play. As if two people are just having tremendous fun trying to play the instruments and making (quite funny) jokes. Amateur and Meat act out their personal mythologies, tell us about their love story, including an entirely invented species of the “wurst-wormen(?)”- little creatures that have no arms, or legs, only eyes and actually no eyelids. The wurst-wormen appear on the t-shirts they sell in various colors and with various wurst-wormen scenes.

Gradually small “cracks” appear in the performance – details that reveal another, more serious layer. Through series of phrases and gestures the two performers think the conditions of their piece, and let that to be shown to the audience. Apart from challenging the distinction between a dance performance and a concert they problematize the very notion of performance, and the standard conditions which guarantee its fictional status. The very title “Amateur and Meat are Playing Live at the Milky Way” describes exactly what the performance is about. That exhaustively descriptive mode, including the literal translation of the name of the location they perform in “Melkweg”, does not tell anything about the “theme” of the piece. In fact, it is the first signal that this piece is about ... *this*

piece. Part of the story told on stage, concerns the process of its making. Thus the piece, the story, and its performance coincide, the finished version is the same as the making of the piece. This opens all sorts of questions: what is a finished piece, where the process of making stops, is the audience supposed to see the making, what constitutes the difference between performing and making, showing and doing? Thus, next to testing the flexibility of the borders between dance performance and a concert, as it is stated in the program notes, Müller and Jansen give their “Amateur and Meat are Playing Live” a conceptual edge by asking what does it mean “to perform”. They show and tell that an important ingredient of their piece is their everyday life and creative struggles. Seen in such a perspective the piece becomes a cheerful experiment aiming at exploring the micro-texture of performance as an event that happens off-stage, to all of us, when we play, and create worlds, which are not destined to be seen by the precise, demanding and sometimes capricious eye of an audience.

The self-reflexive mode of the piece gives birth to a personage performed by both Amateur and Meat – the dilettante, or the amateur, the true lover of art who would persistently fail to be perfectly professional. The dilettante constantly experiences the resistance of objects, which never work according to her expectations. Amateur sings: “I want to be taller!” at a microphone, which is initially set higher than her, then after she takes a chair to step on, she herself sets it even higher. For the amateur-performer there will be always a dose of a lack of self-confidence, and of an expected failure. But in this case the failure is turned into a theme of the performance itself: “I am not sure I have enough space in my head...” This is the way the dilettante performs, her true field of mastery. At some point the sound starts to betray, or rather to resist, the performers. Their own voice caught and repeated in the looper goes contra them, becomes a counter-movement, a counter-voice. This echo does not stop, it becomes sticky, and finally it takes over. The sound-loop itself becomes the performance. It resists the two actors and creates a dissociation between the life action and the supposed effect. Amateur and Meat just leave the instruments while the sound goes on. That effect of play-back also reminds of the performer that presents herself

as a cool, in control and technically good, but who at some moments fails to keep the illusion and exposes herself as failing, as a cheater. The failure performs itself.

A funny intervention at the end of the piece constitutes another self-reflexive moment, this time formulating a question concerning the relationship between performer and audience. After not very long applause Amateur announces that if we are so desperate, there is another song. And there we, the supposedly ecstatic audience, have it! The song has a refrain “I want my money back!” The disarming statement mirrors the supposed discontent of the audience, who after paying to see a dance piece is confronted with a mixture of performed moments whose central theme is the performance itself. However, “I want my money back!” - a preemptive self-criticism as a strategy, actually gives the piece a critical edge because it articulates a certain notion of audience. An audience who is incarnation of the mainstream and who will always want its expectations fulfilled.

Alena Alexandrova, Amsterdam, 8 December, 2007