

Thursday, May 19, 2011

Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights



"Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights" has the hand of its creator, Gerturde Stein, all over it. The title alone sums up her two obsessions: power and repetitive language. On the one hand there is the doctor who bargains dangerously with Mephisto, not, in Stein's retelling of the legend, for the love of Marguerite, but to master electric light. On the other is the kind of sing-songy word play that made the self-proclaimed mother of Modernism's reputation as a different sort of "illuminée".

Director Ludovic Lagarde confronts both features of her work in his version of Stein's opera libretto (1938) of the Faust legend. The terrain is well-traveled; even if Stein's work never found the audience she hoped for in her lifetime, her Faustus remake has tempted theater visionaries the Wooster Group, Richard Foreman and Robert Wilson. Where these others explored rather more her ontological theories regarding consciousness or their own theater aesthetic, Lagarde's production concentrates on her seemingly irrepressible repetition of ordinary words and phrases, what she called "insistencies", and shows that if Stein were alive today, she'd finally find fame as a pop music lyricist.

The show is indeed more concert than play, with a set that looks like it came from La Cigale down the road instead of the Bouffes du Nord: a raised backstage with keyboards and drums, center-front solo mike, neons, strobes... The lights come up on Faustus in a Mick Jagger pose and Mephisto excels at Keith Richards-style jumps and leaps across the stage. Stein challenged herself in her libretto to write a recognizable narrative but the audience is soon wondering who exactly are the strange pairs that join them through the smoke swirls and blue and yellow flashes. First, Boy and Dog, here a British schoolboy with a Nintendo-generated companion, followed by the always popular Marguerite Ida/Helena Annabel, who is herself the very embodiment of one of Stein's insistencies.

As always with Stein however, content takes a back seat to form, something Lagarde recognizes in his embracing of rock opera's clichés, which are like an open book in which Stein's phrases write their hypnotic and teasing musicality. Rodolph Burger's score throws rap and rock beats and pop's tonal angst at Stein's text, which embraces them all and loses 70 years of dust in the process. Playing further on the rock genre motifs, Lagarde's direction gives free reign to the sexual metaphors of Marguerite (etc.)'s predicament: stung (or bitten, the distinction is important) by a serpent between the legs.

Stein's theme of modern man's fear of progress is not obviously present among everything else happening on stage, except for the lonely figure of Dr. Faust and the glowing electric candles that form the stage's backdrop. Lagarde's attention falls more on the love story between Marguerite (etc.) and her Mr. Overseas Man. They are backed up by an eclectic cast of many contrasts and doublings, from the diminutive Annabelle Garcia as the sweet-faced Boy with troublingly confusing gender attributes, Stéfany Ganachaud's controlled and enigmatic Dog, whose canine features are made possible by a kind of futuristic Roller Ball costume, and Joan Cocho's monkey-like Mephisto in black t-shirt and jeans. Samuel Réhault's anomic Faust is the least interesting in his leather trenchcoat weighed down by Faust's arrogance.

As Marguerite Ida/Helena Annabel sang her name for the hundredth time at the performance I attended, audience members started to mildly panic, clutching at programs and watches: proof that, taken as literature, Stein's circular experiments can still challenge Cartesian order. Lagarde's production has the merit of hinting very strongly however that Stein's concerns are not so different than those of many a Grammy winner or MTV star: it's the music that matters.

To May 22, Tues-Sat, 9 pm, Sun, 4 pm, Théâtre des Bouffes du Nord, 37 bis, boulevard de la Chapelle, 10e, Métro La Chapelle, 14 euros-28 euros, tel: 01.46.07.34.50.

Photo Credit: Guillaume Gellert

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