

Subtle and intimate, with delightful touches of humour

Worlds merge, portraits are created. *Portraits* by Side-Show invites the viewer into an artist's studio where two very different circus artists have their portrait made.

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The stage is a mess. Or so it appears. Here reigns the intriguing chaos of an artist's studio in full flow. At the front, left-hand side of the stage, juggler Sander de Cuyper sits on a stool. He is working with plaster which he is pouring into a mould. His fellow circus artist Camille Paycha and visual artist Aline Breucker move something here, prepare something there. Hanging against the inky blue back wall is a swarm of trapezes. To the left, a few beams on legs demarcate the scene. Standing on top of them are a multitude of classic black desk lamps. Their diverse positions make them look like spectators eagerly surveying the scene. The worlds depicted here already merge with the scenography, and the extent to which this is the case becomes apparent later in the performance, when the trapezes turn into supports upon which Aline's large monoprints are hung.

Elsewhere on stage, you also see a black cabinet on wheels, a pair of scissors with a floating black balloon attached, a vase with flowers, a small white sofa, also on wheels, all manner of painter's easels, plaster sculptures, a skateboard, a ladder, a large plank (on wheels, of course) once again with a mishmash of things on it - a coffee machine, a radio, flowerpots, a face mask, bottles, a putty knife, a candle... Over the course of the performance, these are set in motion one by one and assigned their role. Now they wait their turn whilst the performers calmly do their thing. The performance requires (and is given) time to get going, just as creativity does. And so above all it allows its audience to filter into the studio in a relaxed way.

Atmosphere

'We wanted an intimate performance for a small audience', explains Aline Breucker. To this end, Side-Show had a special grandstand made for a maximum of 100 spectators. The grandstand offers outstanding sight lines. 'This performance does not work on a level floor, we do too much close to the ground for that.' What's more, in *Portraits* there is also simply too much going on, too subtly and too simultaneously for a poor view of the stage to be acceptable. Essential to the performance is the relaxed atmosphere on stage, which must be optimally discernible in the hall.

The action begins when Camille Paycha exchanges her black crocs for the more formal beige lace-ups that Aline Breucker hands her. She takes up position on a stool in the rolling cabinet, which now stands with its open side towards the audience. She sits, poses somewhat awkwardly, looks out at the auditorium. She soon finds that her body is starting to hurt. Sitting still is more uncomfortable for her than the loops of the straps around her wrists. Aerial straps, a form of aerial acrobatics on two long straps, are her speciality in the circus. While artist Aline Breucker draws her, Camille talks a little more about herself, her background, how she feels at this moment. She is 29, we hear, was born in Paris, but has been living in Ostend for a while now. 'I've put on some mascara to be "beautiful", but that wasn't a good idea, it's bothering me.'

Portrait of an artistic practice

'The performance came about in different stages', explains director Quintijn Ketels, who is himself from a circus background. 'A plastic investigation into large-scale monotypes - the printing technique that we are using in *Portraits* - was the first of these.' Aline Breucker: 'At the

same time we started writing. Because of the lockdowns at that point, we were unable to work in an auditorium, so we were looking for something else. This became a written portrait of our practice. So, by pooling both investigations we came up with the idea of making portraits of circus artists.' Dramaturge Vincent Focquet joined in. Circus artists Camille Paycha and Sander De Cuyper were approached. Vincent: 'We chose them for their specific profiles. They have a very different background and a completely different circus practice.'

On stage Aline Breucker makes one portrait after another. Sometimes she draws a face, a hand, a body in motion. But more often she captures the movements themselves. Camille swings, turns and tumbles on the straps, Aline follows the lines that her body draws in the air. Sander juggles with clubs, Aline follows the rhythm of his hands: with board wipers she drums paint onto a large, white sheet of paper. If the juggler drops a club, she determinedly picks up a potato stamp and makes a print with it: 'Missed!' The stamps become caesurae in the rhythm of the artwork.

Professional conviviality

That search for common ground between visual art and circus is the reason for Side-Show's existence, and in *Portraits* this is pursued in minute detail. Aline: 'It is a quest for ways to share practices. All three of us are strong in our own practice. But to what extent can we share this with the other two, and ultimately also with the audience? How can we afford others an insight into what we do without ever being able to bring them up to our own level of expertise? We needed a long process for that, in which I had them practice with the monotype technique, and in which I tried to the best of my ability to understand how Camille moves with her straps, how Sander manipulates his clubs. From there we wanted to develop something that came from all three of us, and so a performance emerged which could only have been created by this team.'

The concept sounds complex, but led to a creative process in which mutual consultation was indispensable, hierarchy had no place, and everyone's contribution counted, from director to performers and dramaturge to composer and lighting technician. Call it professional casualness: this is implanted deep in the core of the performance. The sympathetic hodgepodge of French and Dutch is a small but typical example of this. It spontaneously became the language of the rehearsal floor ('Est-ce que ce n'est pas te veel gedoe comme ça?', 'Mais non, c'est ideaal, zo!') and is reflected on stage.

Searching but certain

Do not expect *Portraits* to be a grand spectacle. From start to finish the performance babbles searchingly but certainly on, without ever losing its arc of suspense. Something is always going on, somewhere on the crowded stage. One spectator will always see something faster than, or differently to their neighbour. From *Portraits* you should expect subtlety, your curiosity to be piqued, a growing feeling of sympathy, and delightful touches of humour. But above all you should perhaps expect a persistent, encroaching itch to try something out for yourself, to make something. The unique exodus of the audience from the auditorium only serves to enhance this. Indeed once the applause has died down, the makers invite the spectators onto the stage, which instantaneously transforms the performance into an exhibition. A smart intervention, because this allows you to view the freshly made prints up close, one by one. Only then are they detached from the scenography and do they become stand-alone works.