

EVERY INSIDE HAS AN OUTSIDE

Review of *Letters from Attica* by Pieter T'Jonck at pzazz, 05.09.2020

Translated from Dutch: pzazz.theater/recensies/performance/every-inside-has-an-outside

Every Inside has an outside is the title of the first series of performances presented by the Kunstenfestivaldesarts after the lockdown. Many of them have an unusual format. The action 'En quête des marges fluctuantes' by Guy Woueté or 'Letters from Attica' by Begüm Erciyas, for example. Each in its own way goes some way towards explaining the somewhat cryptic title of this mini-festival.

(...)

Letters from Attica by Begüm Erciyas starts from a totally different premise: how to communicate from a position of total isolation. She takes a small group of people to a park. It is an alternative connection over the steep hill between Poststraat and Groenstraat. It is very popular as a neighbourhood park, even though it is hidden behind ugly office buildings on Poststraat. However, it is closed after seven o'clock in the evening - for security reasons perhaps. That's why I didn't see the performance in ideal conditions: while at the performances before 7pm it was crowded, at my 7pm showing, there was no one left. That certainly had an impact on the experience of the work.

Letters from Attica is, after all, based on a simple principle. People guide you to a position in the park that is marked with a number on the ground. The distance between those positions is the obligatory one and a half meters. The visitors form a chain along a zigzag retaining wall in the park. As a result, no one sees the whole group: you only see about seven people in a group of about 20 people each time.

Once in position you get a sheet with the following text:

'Although vulnerable, the most sure way to leave no trace of a message is to convey it from person to person. Discretion ensures that the message only reaches the next person. Even if the members of the chain do not know each other, or the recipient of the message, the care for the message is what all members share'.

It is the 'score' of what will follow. From top to bottom, word by word, sometimes sentence by sentence, verbal messages come in and you have to pass them on to the next person in the queue. Sometimes the order reverses when there is an answer to a message. It is exactly the same as children's game of 'telephoning'.

The messages that come through, however, have nothing in common with a children's game. They are letters that Sam Melville, born Grossman, wrote between 1969 and 1971 in the Attica prison. He was locked up there because of bombings he committed on public buildings in New York in protest against the Vietnam War. He managed to unite the rival eth-

nic groups from the prison for an uprising against the inhuman prison regime. During that uprising, in 1971, like many others, he was brutally shot and killed.

It is a strange experience: more than an hour of passing messages whose meaning is only slowly revealed, word-by-word. The overall effort of Melville's struggle is only disclosed at the very end. He wants a world in which everyone is taken care of. But before that happens, you get a sense of the terrible isolation he was in.

The 'game' should convey that sensation. The showing I followed didn't quite succeed in this. It became a somewhat giggly, social affair, if you didn't fully understand a word or if a sentence came through so fragmented that you had to say the same word three or four times. Of course, all the participants started whispering as well. But still: everyone tried their best to pass on the message as best they could. This created a remarkable bond.

It must be completely different if you are surrounded by screaming children and people are constantly passing by your post. It is quite an achievement if you can make yourself understood to the next participant. It also isolates the participants more strongly. They are more alone, in the sight of the life around them. But perhaps the bond between the participants will become stronger as well. The feeling that something is at stake, although you don't know what.

Still, *Letters from Attica* is never a trivial exercise. The work shows what it means when members of a group, and by extension society, are divided. How difficult thoughts and desires then find their way out. How trust and secrecy suddenly play a role again. This makes the work the mirror image of the tragedy of Guy Woueté's attempt to address an audience. Here the audience is absent, but a group is fought over. So that thoughts and desires can find a way out. This also chimes in with the motto 'Every inside has an outside'.

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