

Happy Island (2018)

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by Dançando com a Diferença, directed by La Ribot.

Review by Cristina Morales

Dançando com a Diferença is an inclusive dance company based in Madeira (the “happy island” of the title), made up almost exclusively of dancers with disabilities. The direction and choreography of the piece are realized by La Ribot, and those who bring it to the stage are nothing but enthusiastic professionals. Putting aside all the institutional and institutionalizing messages about integration through art, the objective of the Portuguese company is to carry through an aesthetically impeccable show. They have no interest in instructing us with drivel about democratic coaching and diverse societies. *Happy Island* is a contemporary dance piece in line with its time. It is inserted within the best tradition of dance-theater and this is how we should treat it – not otherwise.

The images that are projected on the screen at the beginning of the show catapult us into the heart of a forest mired in mist. It seems like autumn, or perhaps the dawn of any other day. While a dancer dressed in gold tights (Bárbara Matos) poses – static, illuminated exclusively by the light of the projector – the silence is guillotined by a devilish piano solo. At some point, the sound slightly slows down and the dancer, as if in a ritual, offers the feather headdress that she is holding reverently to the second dancer to appear on the scene (Maria João Pereira). Arriving in a wheelchair at the center of the stage, wearing snakeskin attire, she does not seem to pay attention to the feather headdress that is offered to her. She moves with a tremor that is both light and incisive, as hypnotic as the rhythm set by the piano (Francesco Tristano's work). Meanwhile, behind her, on the screen, the Atlantic forest begins to come to life. The trees, caressed by a light breeze, are recorded from very different perspectives. It reminds me of some scenes from

Kubrick's film *Barry Lyndon*, in which nature imposes itself, indifferent and sovereign, as a determining part of the work (Raquel Freire directed the beautiful video). The music, the images, and, above all, the movements of the dancer transmit a great restlessness, which reaches its climax when the performer undertakes a very personal fight against the wheelchair. She doesn't want it; she has to get off. She has decided to renounce it and return to a primordial state, so as to move as nature imposes: like an august serpent. Immediately afterwards, she studies the crown of feathers and, bravely overcoming an initial fear, she puts it on herself, which gives her and those of us in the audience a bit of respite.

The piano, which until now has never gotten quiet, stops, and a deafening silence invades the room. A new performer (Joana Caetano) enters the scene. She is wearing shimmering silver knickers and approaches the snake woman. Another piano composition, this time by Jeff Mills, with insistent bass combined with round bell sounds, accompanies the duo. The snake woman is now very busy painting the naked skin of the newcomer on the scene with a black marker, who, martially, repeats the same choreography over and over again through space, endowed with an excellent geometric obsession. We see the dancer in the golden tights pass in the background, as she indicates with one finger the sky and the earth, alternately. A new performer (Pedro Aleixandre Silva) also appears, jumping with a photographic reflector in his hands as if it were a parachute. And, finally, our last protagonist (Sofia Marote) crosses the scene as if she were going to put out a fire by grabbing the bottom of a voluminous red dress. The mechanical emergencies push our gaze to the screen. Among the trees and

the mist, human beings emerge, frolicking. It seems that they are back from a spree; by now it's dawn. The images resemble those of a horror B-movie, apparently heralding a catastrophe. The film takes more and more prominence, to the point of completely conquering the stage. The audiovisual part of the piece is, without any doubt, one more character in the work. It brings with it serenity after half an hour of stormy movements. The piano now playing is warm and rhythmic and accompanies the only performer left on stage: the one who (as we discover right away) wasn't going to put out a fire, but carried the fire inside her. The unmistakable saxophone of Archie Shepp, master of free jazz and champion of the fight for the emancipation of African-Americans, starts playing. The air in the theater suddenly changes. The power of Sofia Marote's music and interpretation turns the restlessness that had reigned until now into pride and desire. The desire for freedom and self-determination can be read in the defiant movements of the performer, who, again in a scrupulously geometric solo, licks her hand and slaps her genitals, following the flourishes of the saxophone with her hands and legs. She emphasizes with her dance the "Set me free!" message that the singer (Jeanne Lee in the song *Blasé*) repeats ad infinitum. We are in the most intimate moment of the show, which is followed by the dancers taking the floor, a must in dance-theater, and they do it on the screen, in that humid forest in after-hours costume (so well chosen, by the director herself). They tell us about how they experience dance, having come to it from the non-normativity of their being in the world, but also about their unsatisfied sexual desire and their will to do things – and lack thereof. We return to the happily confused situation between fighting and lubricity, and there are more and more characters that, at

times, remind us of the zombies of the filmmaker Lucio Fulci; their wandering is slow but the course is clear; they are about to start an orgy. The dancers on stage become infected by what the images propose and roll around seriously on the linoleum.

The last part of the show emerges from the atmosphere that until now has characterized the piece. The music has stopped determining the action. The stage space is dark and on the screen we see a sequence of a road that runs through an endless tunnel. Only when Pedro Alexandre Silva puts his reflector into action does the darkness vanish. The emanated glow chases another dancer, the golden Bárbara Matos, who at first tries to escape the light by looking for hiding places in the stalls, but who later, either tired of the chase, or perhaps because she has taken a liking to it, stops, falls within range of the beam directed by his partner and, finally, poses for him. Hypnotically, we see Madeiran landscapes on the screen, shot from a car driving along a winding road. All the performers of the piece have returned to the stage, each with a reflector like Silva's in their hands. They are not in a hurry. Little by little, they sit, glued to the screen, illuminated by its light, and remain silent. Thus ends the one-hour ritual that is *Happy Island*.

Anyone seeking a political message or a lesson on disability in this staging is in danger of misinterpreting the piece. Restlessness, anger, laughing about oneself, and desiring personal sovereignty are the truly universal themes. The Portuguese company puts on stage a passionate and successful show that merges dance with other artistic forms that, far from distorting the former or the latter, enrich them and make them more complex.