H. C. Andersen Festivals 2019

The month of August is the month of festivals here in Odense, Denmark, where I live. We have several annual festivals, all of them in this particular month and usually I cover three of them, namely the Flower Festival, the H. C. Andersen Festivals and the OFF film festival. This year I only cover the H. C. Andersen Festivals, because there is hardly any flower festival anymore as it is mostly just displays and sales of green plants from nurseries and as for the film festival…

Well, it was almost impossible to get tickets for the film festival this year, but at least I got one for the winning films. That is… when I arrived at the cinema, all the winning films were so long that the festival had split them up in different programmes, so suddenly I only had tickets to some of them with no chance of getting tickets to the rest. As a reviewer I can’t just review half of the winning films, so I had to cancel my ticket and back out of the review all together. Such a shame, OFF. I hope you do better next year.

Now only the H. C. Andersen Festivals were left, and they took place during August 18.-25. As usual a huge number of concerts, theatre performances, dance performances, street performances, art exhibitions and other events and shows took place and as usual it was almost impossible to get to any of them by public transportation or even watch them if you are disabled like me as you have to stand up during most of the shows.

This year the talk of the town was the spectacular 3D-projection on the largest water fountain in the North. The show was created by We Create Magic and inspired by the Hans Christian Andersen story “The Bell”. I didn’t see it, of course, as I couldn’t stand up the entire time or catch a bus home afterwards, and despite all the wonders of the festivals, I only managed to see three events in all.

The first was Ras Bolding’s concert where he performed his “HCA” suite again. I had seen it once before at the H. C. Andersen Festivals in 2017 where it was originally performed. Back then it was during day in the light and breezy Hans Christian Andersen Museum, this time it was in the dark and very hot “Seed Storage” stage in the cultural centre “Kulturmaskinen”. Back then I hailed Ras Bolding’s performance as the highlight of the festivals, and I won’t hesitate to do it again, especially as this year’s hot, dark surroundings fitted the gothic themes of the music ever so well.

Ras Bolding’s suite consists of four compositions based on the Hans Christian Andersen fairy tales “The Snow Queen”, “The Shadow”, “The Story of a Mother” and “The Little Mermaid”. Each composition has interconnected movements with changing metres, recurring themes and hints of goth, punk, pop, waltz and industrial music, folk music, Middle Eastern music and more and Bolding is influenced by Wagner, Beethoven and Bach as well as Kate Bush, Kraftwerk, Depeche Mode and Jean-Michel Jarre among others.

The suite was professionally performed by Ras Bolding and his three female musicians; Mie Moegunge, Laerke Loemmel and Marie Makaber on synthesizers, electric guitar and bass. Bolding himself is the main attraction, though, and very entertaining, singing, acting and performing the stories while playing synthesizers and an old commodore 64. I think I compared him to Klaus Nomi the last time so this time I’ll go one step further and call him the bastard child of Klaus Nomi and David Bowie. See him, if you have the chance.

My only objection is that by now, the newest addition to the musicians, Marie Makaber, does some minimised ballet dancing to some of the songs, and I don’t think the overall performance benefits from it. On the contrary, it leads the focus away from the music and I’m pretty sure that no one except those who had seen the show before, even realised that Bolding was playing the commodore 64 during the dance. This is just a minor objection, though, so I’ll still give the show five out of five stars: \*\*\*\*\*

The second thing I experienced during the H. C. Andersen Festivals was the sound and light performance “The Elf Mound”. This could be found in the street Vintapperstraede, which was suitably decorated with full moons and trees with fairy lights and where the sound of cicadas could be heard from loudspeakers. The fairytale itself was told through a video installation and it was very accurate, very magic and mysterious and even funny. I even happened to talk to one of the creators, the Russian media artist Georg Jagunov and of course this added to the experience. “The Elf Mound” deserves four out of five stars: \*\*\*\*

The last event was the very unique theatre performance “Aamanden” which is usually incorrectly translated into “The Merman”. Aamanden is not a merman, though, but has more in common with the Neck (or Nix). In any case, he is a supernatural being said to live in Odense River, a river that runs through the entire city and even behind my house.

The play, which is written by Ursula Andkjaer Olsen, refers to an old superstition that says that if a child drowned in the river, then it was the Aamand who demanded his payment. As long as he got his payment, the river would not flood the city, but according to the Andkjaer Olsen’s play no one has believed in him for almost two hundred years now, so he is ready to take his revenge.

The Aamand superstition is not one of Hans Christian Andersen’s stories, but the Aamand is mentioned in his fairy tale “The Bell Deep”, where he is described as very old, very lonely, quiet and odd-looking with pants of eelskin, a scaly coat decorated with yellow water lilies, bulrushes in his hair, and duckweeds in his beard.

The play as such didn’t have much in common with Andersen’s Aamand anyway but resembled the kind of symbolic avantgarde theatre plays you could find in Denmark in the 1970s with lots of audience involvement.

The show was performed by four people in white waders and head torches who led us through a dark park (the Fairytale Garden), which wasn’t easy as I use crutches! Anyway, we stopped here and there for the actors to go through their motions and recite their texts to the drums of percussionist Ying-Hsueh Chen. The play ended by the river near the Bell Deep from Andersen’s fairy tale, where members of the audience had to sacrifice some of their hair before a surprise children’s choir turned up in one of the very dark shrubberies where the kids must have hid for half an hour!

The performance was not at all what I had expected, but it was so different and strange that I think it deserves four out of five stars: \*\*\*\*

Living in Odense, I also bumped into a few other events during the festivals, but as I hadn’t set out to see them and didn’t watch them fully, I won’t review them here, just mention them so you get an idea of the range of the festival programme. I caught a glimpse of the street performers The Boiler Trolls, I went past the Silent Disco on the town square, where people danced in silence to music only they could hear in their headphones, I heard a snippet of the new Danish popstar Nicklas Sahl on the Amfi Stage, I saw the thirty-six letter Happy Alphabet that people had decorated in Farvergaarden, which used to be my backyard when I was a little girl and I saw the Tinderbox fairytale that came to life through sculptures made by cardboard and plants (from the Flower Festival!) as well as the huge storytelling books from last year’s festivals

Based on what I saw, I think the contents of the H. C. Andersen Festivals 2019 is worthy of four out of five stars, but the execution is only worth one star. Despite this being the seventh year of the festivals, the powers behind it still haven’t done anything to solve their serious problems with access for disabled people and with public transportation to and especially from the events. All in all, the festivals thus end up on a disappointing 2½ stars: \*\*½.

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