

Behind The Pair, Lurking Ghosts

Mittelbayerische Zeitung (Munich) MICHAELA SCHABEL, MZ Thursday, June 19, 2014

Translated by Birgit Schreyer Duarte from the original German text

Stan Douglas' "Helen Lawrence" in Munich is an interesting synthesis of film and theatre. Meanwhile, the museum Haus der Kunst shows his photographic cycles.

A dozen actors, two, three chairs, two cameras - and the movie "Helen Lawrence" can run. Or should we say: the play? Exactly at the intersection of live stage and film sits the Canadian photo artist Stan Douglas. The on-stage drama is projected onto the scrim and intensified with video overlays, film opening and closing credits. The result is a production of unusual expressive power, because the large projections show the smallest facial movements that would otherwise disappear into the stage distance.

Throughout the production, the play is dramatized on stage with maximum cinematic means, seamless changes of perspective and a detailed recreation of the city even detailing the wallpaper patterns. Behind the black and white of the film, the characters on stage shine color as emotional centers in miniature behind the giant two-dimensional shadow beings of themselves. The figures emancipate themselves and become themselves a film noir, a thrilling mystery that they themselves see through only gradually; that behind a murder lays the social situation, with all its corruption scandals, discrimination and criminal entanglements of right and wrong.

A metaphor for our times

Helen Lawrence is a widow; a seductively elegant lady looking for her ex-lover in post-war Vancouver, for the man who killed her husband and lay the blame for the murder on her. The train rolls into the station and she begins her search for clues around digital reconstructions of two historical sites. In the depraved Old Hotel Vancouver, where returning war veterans find a shelter and hiding place. In the red light district Hogan's Alley, the black proprietors bribe white establishment to stay in business.

Relationships expand as the web of fatal dependencies force figures to take on megalomaniacal sizes. The old crime leads to more violence.

There is hardly room for poetic moments, or for morality. Too hard is the struggle for existence. Too deep are the wounds of the unresolved past. All that remains of the war are "just sad sack stories," and there has been no change to the existing moral hierarchies. In the lust for possessions and power, regardless of social status, skin color, and system of government, we are still in the "Wild West". Will there be another revenge killing - or will old love triumph? The conclusion remains to be seen.

Apart from the fact that, depending on one's proficiency in English, looking at the surtitles can be very distracting and exhausting, it is highly interesting to experience theatre and film simultaneously. The eye has little chance to focus on the action on stage. Attention is drawn to the cinematic images in the foreground, accompanied by the melancholy saxophone music of an American bar.

Stan Douglas' "Helen Lawrence" is a metaphor of our time in two ways. The digital world of images showered upon us determine our emotions, and at the same time, these images are an expression of psychotic actions caused by social relations, and more, of individuals without social responsibility.

Great photos in the Haus der Kunst

"Helen Lawrence" is another building block in Douglas' great theme of mass and individual, and so the presentation of Kammerspiele informs the Haus der Kunst's current Stan Douglas exhibition "Mise en scène", a coproduction of the Carré d'Art in Nîmes and the Irish Museum of Modern Art in Dublin. Douglas' large-format photographic series and famous video installations are on display, including some beautifully arranged photographs. In them the absurdity of individual action lights up in the crowd.

