

***Mythobarbital* – review #1**

*Author: Wouter Hillaert.
Publication date: 30. January 2008
De Morgen, Belgian newspaper
Translation Nathalie Tabury*

Mythobarbital

Intriguing deconstruction of bored new bourgeois

Small Titans

Originally Abattoir Fermé, who recently received the Flemish Culture Prize in the category Stage, was set to create a well-made play about swingers. But little over a month before the premiere all text was swept aside and the play was renamed *Mythobarbital*: a mixture of ‘to mythologize’ and ‘barbiturates’ or tranquilizers. As a remedy against daily boredom, Tine Van den Wyngaert, Kirsten Pieters and Chiel van Berkel imagine themselves to be immortal Titans in a state of prolonged slumber.

We meet these characters in a set that is uncharacteristically realistic for Abattoir Fermé: a sober living room with a couch, glass coffee table and a shopping cart filled to the brim.

Only the cat is missing. Just as petrified as her corpse appears later on, the three occupants stare into empty space over their cigarette or their flashy magazine. Right from the start Abattoir manages to alienate the *condition moderne* of suburban bliss. The vacuum cleaner blows air, a lighter spits fire. Half comic, but more like a sinister thriller.

More than ever with Abattoir the music score of Kreng (Pepijn Caudron) determines the atmosphere. The score samples film soundtracks from the 1930’s, alludes to Titan themes like Wagner’s *Nibelungen* and even directs the movements of the actors. Van den Wyngaert slashes with an axe like a maniac while Pieters sits high up in the air like a seductive Cleopatra: death and resurrection keep linking new circles as a result of many sacrifices.

But *Mythobarbital* obtains its ritual quality in particular by the perseverance of directors Stef Lernous and Joost Vandecasteele. After *Tourniquet* they continue their search to see how long it is possible to repeat and slow down actions until they are no longer fascinating. Only once, before the necrophiliac Snow White scene, the tension is effectively lost. But the rest of the time this creation proves again that Abattoir Fermé is becoming more and more proficient in a theatre language that is yet unseen.

Rating: 4 stars

***Mythobarbital* – review #2**

*Author Daniëlle De Regt
Publication date: 30. January 2008
De Standaard, Belgian newspaper
Translation Nathalie Tabury*

Past aberration

For Mythobarbital (Fall of The Titans) Abattoir Fermé changes to a lower gear with an uncompromising celebration of slackness as result.

Red Bull doesn't give wings anymore. The coffee has lost its pep. And the nicotine fails to spread its poisonous intoxication. In *Mythobarbital* all modern day opiates to the people are consumed profusely. But the uppers seem to have mutated into downers. Neglect manifests itself as a gluttonous black hole that mercilessly sucks up every form of ecstasy before it has had a chance to develop. This is what life in a minor key looks like, with a poignant lack of imagination as basso continuo.

The characters on stage are way past the post-modern Nike-feel. They radiate 'Just done it'. Their mind has rusted into sleeping mode, their gaze is fixed into infinity. The image of Kirsten Pieters who bends over and pulls the edges of her knickers further towards her anal cleft is a striking summary: we urgently need a trip into the unknown. Please let's fantasize beyond the edges of the knickers. Let's probe further than the depth of the murky cup of coffee. Surely the bubbles in the Red Bull are not the only physical stimuli imaginable that can potentially make one feel jittery.

After the worked up succession of inflated inanities in *Hardboiled*, Abattoir Fermé sets out an engaging line in *Mythobarbital* that creates substantially more breathing space to play out the strengths of the company. As the dreary living room bursts at the seams when the hallucination manifests itself, visual tour de forces are given free reign.

This is where the 'mytho' from the title gets shape. The coffee table transforms into a shrine on a bed of flowers. Jesus, Snow White and Rapunzel are merrily associated into a glorious resurrection of coquetry. These frivolous witticisms combined with the bittersweet melodrama of the soundtrack accentuate the subcutaneous desperation even more.

Because *Mythobarbital* harbours a stifled scream that echoes into the underbelly. This living room that is a pimped variation of an imaginary Tartarus, is truly a sad, desolate realm. There is no purification. No redemption. No temptation. Only empty desires and placebo-satisfaction that falls short in every way. When the rain pours down at the end and an axe splinters the floor, the catharsis seems within reach. Lernous and his troupe rob us of this final illusion with a shocking finale. The sheer torment of Tantalus on stage will hook itself with this gesture under your skin as well.

***Mythobarbital* – review #3**

*Author: Karin Veraart.
Publication date: 08. February 2008
De Volkskrant, Dutch newspaper
Translation Nathalie Tabury*

Sweltering desolation in an intoxicating *Mythobarbital*

What does it mean? The dictionary doesn't give any answers and Google doesn't tell us anything we didn't already know: *Mythobarbital* is the title of the latest play of the theatre collective from Malines, Abattoir Fermé. Myths and barbiturates are part of the word, stories and narcotics – yes. If you let this mix take effect on you, you'll be as dazed as the characters themselves.

And what an interesting experience that is. *Mythobarbital* is the latest in a series of productions with which the company has gained a lot of fame in a relatively short timespan: productions with a very distinct personal style, evocative and bizarre, full of atmosphere (and I don't mean warm and cosy), without direct narrative or point, but beautifully executed and fascinating to look at in all its sweltering desolation.

Mythobarbital starts out in total darkness. Eventually a vacuum cleaner gives the first sign of life, with a soft humming and a small light that pops up. From the darkness, three figures emerge: a man and two women. A shopping cart holds their props: cans of soda, liquid that looks like coffee, but leaves a tar-like trace around the mouth, cat food.

The way they look out, move, interact with each other without seeing, the empty acts: everything is strange and scary. This feeling is heightened by the continuous presence of the type of music that is mainly used for horror films. The acts intensify increasingly – from quietly smoking a cigarette to a furious attempt at hacking the stage floor to pieces with an axe. There's no text involved, but the images are all the more probing: you simply have to see this.

***Mythobarbital* – review #4**

Author: Brecht Hermans
Publication date: 06. February 2008
Goddeau.com, cultural webzine
Translation Nathalie Tabury

During the rehearsal period it is possible that a company unexpectedly changes its artistic course, because what is ready to be presented has to burst out. The play that was originally announced as *Deviant* developed into *Mythobarbital*, an Abattoir-production that gives the audience a long visual orgasm again.

An introduction to Abattoir Fermé doesn't seem necessary anymore for a while now. In the approximately ten years that the company exists, director Stef Lernous has just stopped short of obtaining a cult status and his company is famous as well as infamous in- and outside of Flanders. Sometimes it seems as if there are only two kinds of people: lovers and haters. But even the latter can't help but respect the radical nature and guts of the company. The press meanwhile was full of praise after *Tourniquet*. The play was immediately deemed to be a masterpiece and was showered with prizes. But what's next?

Mythobarbital/Fall of The Titans has become a performance that is much closer to 'normal' people than we have lately become used to in the work of Abattoir Fermé. We see three characters in what could be an ordinary living room. One is looking for his cat, the other is sitting on her Ikea-couch and is leafing through a magazine and the third has returned home from the supermarket. Contrary to *Tourniquet*, which related an alienating story, it is now possible to identify with the characters, at least until a certain degree. The nightmare is still looming around the corner. This time it's not in a big, surrealistic surprise, but in the enlargement of the small tedium of life. It's creepy to see the compulsive behaviour of people engaged in their little routines and to then allow yourself to identify with them. Lernous confronts the audience with characters who drag themselves through life, not realising that they have died long ago.

By exposing the horror that lurks inside small things, *Mythobarbital* presents an overwhelming beginning that contains an enormous compressed energy. This energy bursts out as soon as the characters start looking for an escape from the drag of daily life. This quest leads them past myths and – nothing more gruesome than that – fairytales. Snow White, Rapunzel and *The Wizard of Oz* all pass the review. This is brought with a good dose of humour, without lessening the horror. Inside this fairy-like nightmare the visual genius of Abattoir comes to life completely.

The productions of Flanders' most terrifying theatre company appear to correspond better and better each season: set, lights and sound match the content and characters perfectly. Not one element is really dominant, what is presented on stage is a coherent entity that blends different

art forms. Undoubtedly the choice to create wordless theatre is a determining factor, definitely so in *Mythobarbital*.

The time that we could attribute all evils of the world to the big, bad wolf is over. Abattoir Fermé explicitly plays out our dark sentiments and thus brings out the ghosts that we had buried within ourselves as deeply as possible. Even more than its predecessors, this performance succeeds in letting the nightmare start close to ourselves and subsequently letting it derail in a long trip full of horrifying hallucinations. It is impossible to look at reality in the same way again afterwards. You have to rediscover everything like a child. This is what makes the plays by Abattoir so unique. That's why this theatre is so important.

***Mythobarbital* – review #5**

Author: Judith Blankenberg

Publication date: 11. February 2008

Theater Centraal, Dutch cultural webzine

Translation Nathalie Tabury

Abattoir Fermé fascinates with a visual trip

'For an audience that can take some rough handling.' This is how the new performance *Mythobarbital/Fall of the Titans* by Abattoir Fermé is announced. We prepare for the worst and we let ourselves be immersed in the deep, deep black. Only to reawaken from a beautiful nightmare one hour and fifteen minutes later. Without pretension or clear content, the company drags you past David Lynch, Francis Bacon, porn and the Bible. Terrifying and fascinating till the end.

The new performance by Abattoir Fermé immediately conjures up many associations. Films and visual arts dominate these associations that are triggered by the constant flow of images, that make up this performance. The theatre collective has been experimenting with their cinematic theatre language for a while. In previous performances they still used text. Now the experiment has resulted into a wordless play. By only working with images and sound, the play receives a nightmarish quality. This impression is heightened by the consequent use of black and white and only a few red accents. The use of contrast is the base line of the performance.

The play begins in total darkness. Slowly a light comes up. It is just enough to see a woman sigh and reach towards a small light that turns out to be a part of an old-fashioned, loud vacuum cleaner. Two burning cigarettes indicate that another actor is on stage. A third actor spills cornflakes out of a paper bag. She gets up with the bag over her head, she rips it to shreds and makes herself some wings. Then both actresses sit on the couch and the actor offers them cigarettes he conjures up out of nowhere. He spits fire when he blows out the lighter.

These tricks from this otherwise sober beginning refer to the spectacle that follows later on. Tons of blood, showers, masks, dead cats and naked flesh: nothing is avoided to create delicate and gruesome images. The slow pace from the beginning of the performance is maintained, which keeps the tension high. You can never predict what'll come next.

The three actors, Tine Van den Wyngaert, Kirsten Pieters and Chiel van Berkel, are directed by Stef Lernous with a strict hand and they know exactly what they should do and how. The actions are extremely precise and executed with the utmost concentration. It makes you sit at the edge of your seat the whole time. The unbridled fantasy the collective demonstrates, ensures that the play is never predictable. The music score, composed by Kreng, plays a very important part in this. The score reinforces and supports the action, but also drives it forward. The images don't only stimulate associations with other art forms, but they also produce thoughts with respect to the content. First of all, there's a reference to death when a dead cat is found between the pillows in the couch. When the animal is 'buried' and flowers are placed around the coffee table, the table turns into a coffin. When Kirsten Pieters lies under the glass tabletop, a second theme is introduced: lust. The actions that follow increase thoughts about this theme. Vulnerability and violence are central elements. One of the highlights is a nude Tine Van den Wyngaert, chopping up the floor with a big axe.

The theatremakers succeed in facinating with these kinds of images. Moreover, this performance shows that it is possible to create very probing plays without a story or a message, that yet leave no audience member untouched.

Mythobarbital – review #6

Author: unknown blogger.

Publication date: March 2008

<http://stephen.over-blog.com/article-17345412-6.html>

Translation Nathalie Tabury

Like a hallucinogenic delirium or a mass; with the latest creation of Abattoir Fermé, we should not feel as alienated as with the young New Yorkers because this collective is Belgian. It would be like denying these young actors' audacity and their desire to provoke and the original theatre language that is typical for this collective. They are often described as 'underground' and as a 'flower on a dungheap'. Abattoir Fermé has just received the 2008 Flemish Cultural prize for the stage.

The play deconstructs the daily routine, shows a caricature of our comfortable habits and excessive consumption. But there's also a different celebration of materials, in all its shapes. For once, smoke isn't intended to illustrate or underline a scene, but it is used just for its own quality. Like the other fluids and liquids, it is used with lovely abandon. Can we say that this is a 'deviant' performance? The working title of the play was 'Deviant'. Even if the set-up has changed (it was originally going to be based on wife-swapping), which justified the new title, the intentions have basically remained the same: it's still a matter of supreme and sublimated urges.

It begins (and ends) with a ferocious satire of the veneration of the different gods in the Society of boredom and consumption: an actress kneels in front of the Hoover, spillage is a sign of prosperity and a thousand and one quirks from daily life are taken really seriously and are sarcastically made sacred. To push all this to the limits of absurdity, a great folly takes over the three characters: the elegance of Kirsten Pieters deteriorates and is transformed into brittleness, the passivity of Tine Van den Wyngaert mutates into brutality and wild loss of control. To top it all off, Chiel van Berkel is a soft executioner, between Sade and Pasolini. A few myths and famous figures are evoked and reinvented in a completely original way of course!

A theatrical work in the shape of a completely silent ritual, that is executed in an impressive silence and will leave the audience amazed and shaken. Beneficial catharsis!

***Mythobarbital* – review #7**

*Author: Evelyne Coussens
Publication date: February 2008
Source: Zone09, Belgian magazine
Translation Nathalie Tabury*

Mythobarbital – Fall of The Titans

Mythobarbital unites in its title myths and barbiturates. Both ingredients have in common that they are delusional substances who transform reality into a grotesque fantasy. And this is exactly what Tine Van den Wyngaert, Kirsten Pieters and Chiel van Berkel need. Their life has sunk into a long fuddle of coffee, Red Bull, cigarettes and endless boredom. Emptiness is all around, even if the shopping cart next to the stylish black couch is overflowing, and the magazines that Kirsten Pieters is leafing through compulsively are glossy – albeit that the pages are just as black as the clothes of these living dead.

The play starts where things often start and end with *Abattoir*: in dusk. To the sound of a score that makes your stomach reverberate in tune, Kirsten Pieters sobs as she crawls towards a hissing enemy. This villain turns out to be just a vacuum cleaner, but a pretty persistent one: it multiplies into an army of buzzing enemies that Van den Wyngaert faces desperately with an axe. A metaphor for how the daily routine can be blown up to monstrous proportions in the twisted mind of a lonely person. When the hallucination unfolds itself completely, we see a grisly universe with fairytale characters like Rapunzel with her long hair, Dorothy with red shoes and Snow White, who experiences a remarkable rite of passage. The glass coffee table becomes her shrine and the place of her resurrection. These are strong images, that link sweetness to morbidity like real fairytales do. The lack of text never weighs onto the performance and more than ever the threatening sample-soundtrack of *Kreng* steers all the action. Apart from a few hysterical outbursts, the acting is languid and drawn out – as if the music were a blanket of cotton wool that tires the actors. According to Greek mythology the Titans were giant revolutionaries who were thrown into the underworld by their father Ouranos, only to be liberated centuries later by Zeus. For the characters in *Abattoir*'s nightmare all hope for this liberation seems gone.

After the speed of *Tinseltown* and the ecstasy of *Hardboiled* (2007) *Abattoir Fermé* appears to return to tranquillity, but this tranquillity is like stagnant water: death lurks within.