

Adventures for Two – Alone:

Felix Ruckert's
HAUTNAH



HAUTNAH, Chor(e)ography: Felix Ruckert; Photo: Cathy Peylan

In a dimly lit back courtyard endowed with that uniquely Berlin-style of charm possessed by houses which, despite their dilapidation, have survived in glorious disrepair, one opens a nondescript door, climbs two flights of stairs, and finds oneself inside a bar. Lonesome companionship. „Dock 11“ is the name of the venue, which is located on Kastanienallee near the Prater. Inside, one finds ten panels hung on the wall, and notices that love notes are pinned to each panel: „Arthur, I love you“ or „Laura, I'll be back“. Ten panels for ten dancers. With ten hooks to accept ten key-rings. If only one of those key-rings was actually hanging on its hook now ... As we chat, our nervous glances continually return to the panels and their still-empty hooks. From time to time, a tall man with dark eyes stalks about the room. The theater director, someone tells me. It's Felix Ruckert, looking very much like an omnipotent superintendent. Hardly has he disappeared, when the woman who had been chatting amiably with me suddenly rises without a word, snatches the key-ring that Ruckert had just returned to its hook, and hurries out of the bar and down the stairs. „Laura's still hanging there“, someone whispers to me. Our gazes settle on the „Laura, I'll be back“ panel. I grab the key-ring, rush down the stairs and enter a room furnished with hard wooden pews. It's called „The Café“. Across from me three or four people are sitting: waiting, watching me. Is Laura among them? She rises calmly. Curly hair, huge eyes, undoubtedly Italian. She silently extends her open palm. „How much?“ I ask. „Fifteen“, she says. I pay. We'll go to her room. A man buys a woman for half an hour. The parallels to „the oldest profession“ are deliberate, but the effect is entirely different. As I follow her down the stairs, I think to myself, „With that perfectly vertical spine, she must be a dancer“. She leads me across the courtyard and into a construction that resembles a Bedouin's tent. A labyrinthine architecture out of which I hear shuffling feet, a piercing shriek, and nothing else but silence, oppressive silence. Somewhere behind those tent walls, solo dancers are each dancing for an audience of one. I'm supposed to take off my shoes. Laura takes my hand, leads me again, never lets go of my hand. Suddenly she turns, stares into my eyes, perhaps pondering whether to trust me, perhaps marshalling her own commitment. Then, bending deeply forward, she rams her head into my palm. I gasp for breath. My hands resist. Mute and determined, again and again, she rams her skull into my hand: a pas de deux with one spectator. I'm aware of the risky situation she's put herself into. She's all alone with me. At any moment, I could intervene in her prepared dance. As if I had been thinking aloud, she retreats from me. (What should I do with my hands now?) A small bench stands beside the wall. She sits down beside me, begins to ball up pages torn from a catalogue of women's underwear. There's a flowerpot in the middle of the room. „Whoever hits the mark first ...“ „What then?“ I ask in a whisper. My ball of paper is the first to land inside the pot. She jumps up, dances, pulls me towards her, stops abruptly, paints her cheek with mas-

cara while she watches me fixedly. Then she lies at my feet, stretches and twists like a woman dreaming an unquiet dream. My gaze narrows. She's so close, near enough to reach out and touch. So vulnerable, stretching, rolling, moaning softly: she hasn't forgotten to moan. Finally she opens her eyes. Almost inaudibly she whispers, „Thank you“.

I return to the lounge. The theater, 38-year-old Felix Ruckert quips, is a site for voyeurism, but voyeurism comes to an abrupt end in the intimacy of the séparées. No one crosses his arms in front of his chest while another person „struts and frets“ in front of him here. Ruckert has been touring with this performance since 1995, especially through France, and almost always playing to desperately overcrowded houses. In France, he says, spectators stand in long lines in front of the key-ring panels. Each dance lasts about thirty minutes, so the person who is fourth in the line is obliged to wait about two hours.

In Berlin, on the other hand, there are fewer people in the audience. We chat calmly at the bar. My gaze discovers the key-ring assigned to Dutch performance artist Arthur Kuggelyn. I rise, approach the panel, take the key. Kuggelyn is already covered with perspiration as he leads me through the tent labyrinth and out to a small, brightly-lit dance floor which has been set up outdoors beneath a few trees. He points to a stool and squats opposite me. Suddenly he jumps up and begins to tell me about the art of the shamans. His eyes fix mine in a penetrating stare. All of a sudden, he throws off his clothes, jumps up and down in front of me, his private parts jiggling. The intimacy is neither seductive nor repulsive, but has an entirely different effect: it addicts me to this closeness, to the privilege of being one-on-one with an artist; and it makes me curious about the other eight dancers. Afterwards, I have no questions to ask, but simply nod my head in a silent farewell. Until tomorrow evening, when I'll again be drawn to this place where doubts are born: is this en face between actor and spectator really theater at all? The fourth wall has been torn down. The stage space has been subdivided into four small segments, each of which is no more than a few meters in size. The boundary between dancer and spectator is gone. The aloofness – at least, the spatial distance – is lacking. The beholder cannot but intervene in the dancer's work. Laura rammed her head into my hand and, for a split second, the theatrical space shrank to a miniature, as tiny and as personal as the five square inches of skin on my own palm. If I had pulled my hand away, refused to accept her offer of partnership, the theatrical space would have disappeared entirely. Laura would have tried a second time, but that would have meant resurrecting the theater itself, painstakingly rebuilding the entire theater with her every new attempt.

I don't know why I became aware that there was no longer any dark space between spectator and dancer, no margin to protect the dancer – or the spectator –

from being punched or touched. The direct payment which the dancer receives is no guarantee: neither for the dancer nor for the spectator. The black hole which Richard Wagner long ago installed in the auditorium is absent here: dancer and spectator are both in the same boat, in the same embarrassing situation that continually tempts Laura and every other good dancer to push themselves to (and beyond) their limits. They are touched, bound, gagged (all this actually takes place) as the theater is transformed into a space where the spectator paradoxically aspires towards his or her own personal worldview.

The canvas cloth, thin as skin, which divides one séparée from another also delimits the boundaries of a perceptual prison. Nothing exists unless its spectator exists. The theatrical adventure thus becomes more or less „endophysical“. In the physical world, and in the world of the theater, elementary particles act in mutually contradictory forms of possibility. Because of their dual nature, because they are able to appear as particles and as waves, they switch identities abruptly, instantaneously, without transition. And they wreak havoc upon the observer-dependent notion of „now“. This is precisely what occurs in Felix Ruckert's work. Which of the two people inside this „endotheater“ is the performer? Roles can be swapped smoothly and seamlessly. Ruckert's experimental space clarifies Werner Heisenberg's discovery: unless the spectator and the performer both act as equals, as particles and as waves, the performance will surely be disturbed. Just how severely a spectator can interfere with the artificial world of the theater is readily apparent: the instant one tries merely to observe Ruckert's theater, one has already disrupted it.

In a conventional theater, one would immediately be able to see that the stage, for one reason or another, had grown smaller. That change would be impossible to detect in Ruckert's theater. In 1755, a certain Mr. Boskovich asked the following rhetorical question: if a person and his or her environment both shrank simultaneously, would the shrinkage be perceptible? According to Boskovich, there would be no way to notice the change. Only if there were a shift in the time factor would the observer possibly be able to detect the shrinkage. That temporal shift would mean that there could be another „now“, a moment other than the instant during which everything grows smaller. The only person who would be able to notice the shrinkage would be the one whose perceptions had drifted apart from the perceptions of the individuals inside the theater. Only this person could possibly realize that „everything is growing smaller simultaneously“. And that realization would also be the only conceivable escape from our perceptual prison. But we live in the midst of that prison; in a manner of speaking, we are on rather than in front of the theatrical stage. By putting us up onto that stage, Felix Ruckert accepts this modern physics. In front of the stage, the world of physical appearance still prevails, but Ruckert allows us to stride into the midst of that appearance.