

What about Christianity?

Hotel Pro Forma's exhibition is performance and exhibition rolled into one. During the day, one can visit an exhibition featuring more than twenty international contemporary artists who, using a wide variety of media, deal with the theme of Christianity and the religious. In the evening, the rooms are populated by fifty performers, who present different dramatic tableaux at various points of the exhibition. And the choice of venue is a natural one – the beautiful Nikolaj building, originally a church.

All the rooms are made use of in the evening, even the cellars and corridors which are normally closed off, which lends the edifice a strange maze-like feel. There is nowhere to sit. The public moves round the exhibition and is surprised at encountering the various performers, with some of the séances having fixed times (so check these times before starting your visit, to make sure of seeing them all). For example, a real-live army chaplain conducts communion every evening, and the dramatist Henrik Sartou does a Judas monologue in a scenography where he can only stand upright with his head bowed, while being reflected in the ceiling. It is a fascinating presentation, but it is difficult to even hear and concentrate on what the man is saying. Gritt Uldall-Jessen writes Maria Magdalena's monologue in salt on a platform above the floor. When light falls through the strokes in the salt, onlookers can attempt to read the text in the shadows on the floor. Once again, an original visual image, but one where the actual content of the words is lost. The words themselves can be had as a separate folder. The performance centres on the communion table on a dais at ground floor level, where the disciples gather round Jesus a couple of times during the evening – Jesus in the incarnation of the shy, white-haired American draughtsman Mike Diana, in loincloth and ankle-length white socks. They chat with each other and present themselves out loud to the public, but nothing happens apart from that.

The performance has been conceived by Kirsten Dehlholm, Fritt Uldall-Jessen and the Belgian artist Lawrence Malstaff. Its title has been chosen partly to mark the similarity with a website and thereby to underline the idea of treating Christianity as a theme in a contemporary, secular and constructive way, and partly to remind people of tags on luggage that do not conform to normal sizes at flight check-ins – odd size. To stress the humanist, neighbourly-love message of Christianity, all the performers are therefore 'odd size'.

Among the disciples there is a black man who speaks French, a Palestinian, a pierced and tattooed man (Muffe from 'Copenhagen Body Extremes'), a German with Down's syndrome, and then Mike Diana, who has been imprisoned for his provocative comic strips. In addition, we also meet Jesus as someone who is simultaneously a dwarf and homeless, two physically disabled performers from Germany who, reclining on skateboards, sing incredibly beautiful religious songs, as well as a whole room of chatting, grey-haired women, who are presented as the disciples' grandmothers, but who otherwise just hold their daily coffee-evenings. As a contrast to the scene of the Last Supper, there is a huge photo from the TB ward of a Russian prison, which is as gruesome as any of the concentration-camp photos we know of.

The best of the interactive elements is a black room where one can sit down alone in a chair in front of a mirror that suddenly begins to shake violently. Perhaps that is how things would seem to one if one were to have a vision.

Malstaff's many installation works are beautiful and full of meaning. A fibre-glass madonna, irradiated with light that is reflected against an opposite wall, is a simple and extremely evocative image, while Golgotha, too, with its three crucified figures in vacuum-packing is physically remarkable and something of a scoop, or a long rope that winds round a chair in front of the Judas monologue.

It is a performance that has a host of elements on offer and to think about, one that is not least certain to provoke a discussion among those present. Is it possible to stage Christianity so concretely with Jesus and all the trappings nowadays? Or does it not inevitably end up as superficial and 'tivoli'-like entertainment tableaux? Why is it that Christianity, at one and the same time, fills so little and so much in our culture – not least in the visual arts?

Neither the performance nor this reviewer provide the answer, although I can confirm that it is an interesting, important attempt which Hotel Pro Forma is making here. As far as I was concerned, the impression was too flickering, characterised by many good but unconnected ideas that seldom really grabbed hold of my unchristian soul. But go along and see for yourself – it is one of those types of works of art that will provoke as many reactions as there are visitors.

BY METTE SANDBYE