

A game of mirrors in a dream vision

I only appear to be dead – words written every evening by Hans Christian Andersen for fear of being buried alive – is the title of a performance that presents in images the stories and life of the famous author. Andersen was a Dane, but also a nomad – as is the theatre company Hotel Pro Forma, which gave the performance during the Biennale in Venice.

I only appear to be dead, the performance inspired by Hans Christian Andersen and given by the Danish theatre company Hotel Pro Forma, was one of the most beautiful and unsettling experiences to be had during the Theatre Festival at the Biennale in Venice, managed by Romeo Castellucci. Andersen, whose bicentenary is being celebrated this year, is especially well known as a writer of fairytales for children, but he also wrote numerous novels, travel accounts and plays. First and foremost, though, he was a tormented person, one who experienced fiascos and serious material difficulties before gaining success. And it is this side of his personality that has inspired the producer Kirsten Dehlholm to create a dreamlike and suggestive work, whose very title anticipates the obsessions and demons that tortured Andersen: 'I only appear to be dead' are in fact the words he used to write on a piece of paper before going to bed, for fear of dying in his sleep and being buried alive. *I only appear to be dead* is a work with music by Manos Tsangaris, electronically modified by Simon Stockhausen and interpreted by 14 singers from the Danish national choir, a choir conductor and an actress, Ninna Steen, who 'becomes' Andersen solely with the aid of her facial gestures, make-up and a few movements of her small body, which is encased in a travelling coat. The singers, who are dressed and made-up completely in white, move like pieces in some strange chess game in the stage space, which is dominated by a kind of diorama, a landscape painted on 52 glass plates that the unsettling, white-clad figures constantly move around without the landscape changing. It is a card game for children on a gigantic scale, reminiscent of the animated books that Andersen loved to construct. Perhaps, too, it also refers to the numerous journeys the author made through Europe or, as suggested in the staging notes, to a journey through life. From the day Andersen

arrived in Copenhagen, 14 years old and without a penny to his name, he also lived his entire life as a travelling nomad: He never acquired a real home of his own, he slept at hotels or at the homes of his friends and patrons, who housed him for long periods. All of this, however, remains enigmatic and only implied – no explicit explanations are given. Even when one seems to be able to recognise characters from some of Andersen's best-known tales (is the dead girl borne onto the stage at one point perhaps the little matchstick girl?), one soon discovers in reality that what one sees is more the images that inspired Andersen to write about them. First, the yellow plastic duck, which finally moves in onto the empty stage, suddenly providing a key to a possible interpretation of the single, mysterious female figure who, even though she like the others is clad in white, is wearing a yellow wig. The ugly duckling, the outsider who everyone makes fun of, is Andersen, and the narrative has to do with his hard times as a child and adolescent and his success as an adult. The desperation in Andersen/Ninna Steen, who is finally left alone on the stage, thus becomes a painful image of the unsuccessful ambitions of the later writer, who as a young man wanted to be an actor and a singer. The choice of this performance, which would have fitted in just as well into the programme of the music biennale, accords completely with the extended, interdisciplinary concept of theatre that Castellucci has wished to express by means of this festival, aptly called after Pompeii. The novel of ashes. For Hotel Pro Forma is an artistic community that comprises architects, musicians and visual artists, and their works – often shown at museums in the form of exhibitions and installations – are always characterised by a particularly keen awareness of the space and architecture of the location. Kirsten Dehlholm, who founded the company in 1985, explains its name as follows: 'A hotel is a place of transition, where one stays for a brief period, where one is free of obligations, and where others take care of and feed one. Hotel Pro Forma is a place where one takes care of the form.' This is confirmed by the sophisticated perfection of *I only appear to be dead*.