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Platform 0090/ Mesut Arslan/ KVS
Gilgamesh

GODS AND MONSTERS IN A POETIC PRIMEVAL STORY



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“In every age-old epic, like *Gilgamesh*, there are deliberate voids. Those voids are there for later generations to give their own ideas and thoughts a place’: with these words the performance *Gilgamesh*, a co-production of the Koninklijke Vlaamse Schouwburg (KVS) from Brussels, Platform 0090 and director Mesut Arslan, begins.

The origin of the epic is about 2100 BC. in Sumer, the earliest human civilization from 4000 BC. in the southern part of Mesopotamia. Together with archaeologist Mesut Alp, the director creates a wonderful performance, elusive, associative, poetic and visual. Gilgamesh himself is the greatest king on earth, two-thirds god and one-third human. He rules the city of Uruk.

His subjects find him too hard-hearted, which is why the gods impose all kinds of trials on him. He must fight against monsters such as the bull of heaven, against the wild man Enkidoe and against Humbaba, the demonic protector of the cedar forest. Gilgamesh endures every trial and Enkidoe even becomes his friend. The performance is performed by Daphne Agten and Layla Önlén, who play all the characters: Gilgamesh himself, his mother, Enkidoe and many more. They are dressed in voluptuous costumes, like primeval mothers or goddesses. In the opening scene, the mother (Önlén) descends to earth on a tightrope and narrates the epic. We are in a white cube, placed on the stage of the Stadsschouwburg. The language is rich and beautiful, full of references to eternity, heroism, mortality and immortality.

Gilgamesh himself lies on the floor, wrapped in plastic. With the help of the spectators – each time they are asked to take part in the action – Gilgamesh is lifted and there he stands, the greatest king of all time, but also a spoiled child. He can be driven around on top of cube-shaped plastic carts. The crowd pushes him on. It is not really a dramatic act, but rather a multidisciplinary form of theater in which performance, visual arts and literature meet. For example, spectators are asked to stretch long strips of plastic between them, so that they create space for Agten and Önlén. If they start pulling on the plastic, the spectators have to move along, and as a visitor you are a participant in the performance. Exciting is the battle

between Gilgamesh and his declared enemy Enkidoe, who prefers the wilderness to civilization. In the end, Gilgamesh is victorious and embraces Enkidoe as a friend and ally. They march against the cedar forest and cut down all the trees as a sign of victory.

The *roots* by director Arslan and archaeologist Alp are located in the Near East. I think the visual language with which they work is unprecedented in the West. In this way, the plastic cloths they work with transform from veil to shroud. The scene in which Gilgamesh locks himself in one of the transparent cubicles and the audience is asked to clean the walls with cleaning products is hilarious. In those cubes there are two men all the time, one in each cube, talking incessantly on their mobile phones. The two appear to report on the performance on Twitter. They are also the creators of the concept, Arslan and Alp. Thus, the void that exists in the beginning is filled with contemporary technologies. Where the original epic was written on clay tablets, now Twitter is the new clay tablet.

In the end, mortality overcomes Gilgamesh's desire for immortality. The two main figures disappear under the plastic that the spectators lovingly drape over them. The complexity of the performance demands a lot from the audience. Not only in terms of the text of the original epic, but also in the theatrical imagery and expression. A light-hearted element is the way in which Daphne Agten and Layla Önlén ask the audience to participate; they do so charmingly and humorously. For example, this *Gilgamesh* is an inspiring introduction to the earliest literary work in history and the performance shows how you can deal with this primal material today.