

Meteor Festival, Bergen

A lovesong in the dark: Alice Saville writes on the mystical magic of Norway's biannual performance festival.

ALICE SAVILLE



'A Teenage Songbook of Love and Sex'. Photograph: Laimonas Puisys / BIT Teatergarasjen

It's pitch dark and all I can hear is a love song, hymned out in harmony by clear young voices. Somehow it's incredibly emotional sitting in silence, with strangers, in a strange country, listening to the kind of teenage heartsick melody that's powered a century of pop music. The lights go up to reveal horde of

teenagers, dressed in vaguely retro clothes like the cast of Sex Education, but somehow shinier and younger and more hopeful than TV can ever capture. They take it in turns to sing solos they've written – about heartbreak, yes, but also about coming out, about the anger of being trapped in an abusive relationship. The songs that don't make it to the radio.

A Teenage Songbook of Love and Sex feels organic, but that's a sign of how artfully it's been facilitated by Ásrún Magnúsdóttir (Iceland) and Alexander Roberts (UK), who've already collaborated on participatory dance projects like The Great Gathering and Danceoke.

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The cast are so confident and so completely committed. In moments between songs, their bodies combine into a giant circle, or a long line that coils across the massive stage like a flung rope. I wish I could fit the pieces of this article

as tightly together as their shoulders and hips lock into each other, joint to joint. But two days at an arts festival in another culture and another context are hard to wrap up.

It's pitch dark again and another song is ringing through the darkness. Scrap that. It's ripping both the darkness and whatever fragile arrangements of skin and cartilage normally allow me to hear out of my left ear (my fault, should have taken the earplugs). This is *Phurpa*, a gig by Alexi Tegin, and it's as full of centuries-old doom as *Teenage Songbook* was of fresh new hope.



Phurpa. Photograph: Laimonas Puisys / BIT Teatergarasjen

Three performers are sitting like medieval warlocks, surrounded by ritualistic paraphernalia; they make deep gargling throat sounds drawn from Tibetan Buddhist traditions, inhale the smoke from small fires, then blow horns into

microphones to create an ear-splitting, death metal-esque drone. What does it mean, to appropriate Tibetan rituals wholesale, and to have them performed in a secular context by three shaven headed white men? I guess it's something about drawing lines between continents, about the way that stillness and overwhelming sound put us in touch with something ancient and transcendent, make time feel irrelevant. But it also sends me off on mind spirals, back to the [reconstructed Viking church](#) I saw earlier that day, rebuilt after it was burnt down by members of the Norwegian death metal scene – there are dark forces being gestured at here, and I wonder a bit about the deeper meaning behind this pageantry.

The performances I see at Meteor all sit on a line of extremes, between deep-forest gloom and sunny optimism, tenderness and aggression, accessibility and impenetrability. Most of them are housed in what used to be a sardine factory and is now Studio USF, a multi-arts venue perched by the harbour. It includes Bergen's only black box theatre – because every arts scene has its own set of pressures, and this city's relate to space. Meteor Festival is run by BIT Teatergarasjen, a nomadic company that lost its theatre in 2008. I find myself

thinking of [a piece that Deborah Pearson wrote](#), after moving on from the solid bricks and mortar of Ovalhouse – it's full of hope and optimism for the possibilities of porousness, of new relationships between artists and audiences and space. But it still sort of ends with a longing for a building to do all this in; itinerancy is a much more exciting adventure when it's a choice.

Still, this is a fascinating programme by any standards, packed with an international, interdisciplinary collection of performances and bolstered by the Radical Failure strands of theoretical talks, book launches and workshops. I arrive towards the start of the festival, and end up focusing neatly on one of several strands; Feel the Beat, which focuses on music and performance. None of it looks anything like the gig theatre I've seen in the UK. Especially not the uncategorisable *Yoga for Theatres*. Its songs have a kind of sleepy Ivor Cutler feel, rippling out and circling ideas of self-improvement, the act of watching theatre, and the oneness of humanity. Four performers in evening dress amble genially across the stage, singing their lyrics as if sleep-walking.



Yoga for Theatres. Photo: Redigert

“Here I am, trying to say ‘I’ without shame” – they sing.

Afterwards, I read in the programme that one of the performers, Hans Petter, had a Nazi grandfather who’d pick blueberries with him as a child – gentleness and brutal politics colliding. This piece is a navigation of that shame, perhaps, but more strongly it’s an exploration of the self, and what happens to identity when set against chaos and crisis.

Apparently, concentration camp guards were encouraged to unwind by practising yoga. The programme describes this piece as a ‘virtual swastika’, drawing bended lines between today’s mode of ecological crisis and the way that Nazis used transcendent ideas to subdue and inspire its footsoldiers. But what are the real connections, exactly?

“Doing yoga makes you passive and accepting”, the performers sing, in a vaguely reactionary-feeling satire of 21st century mores, “don’t say we, but they/ not allowed in the economy of self-/realisation”.

This piece is flooded with ideas but the words used to express them are wayward, slipping in all sorts of strange directions – not careful enough. Certain reactionary sections of the media are quite keen to equate climate change campaigners with Nazis. “Hitler was a vegetarian”, they crow. I don’t think this piece is quite saying that, but it does allow Nazism to become just another casually-wielded metaphor in its chaotic linguistic arsenal. It says so much that you could read it as saying pretty much anything. And when you slip out of the endless mental gymnastics it makes you perform, you’re left with uncomfortable aesthetics; the hyper-sexualised presentation of the three female performers makes them writhe, then pant like dogs in their five-inch heels, as the male performer sits indulgently in a chair, gazing at them. Sometimes images speak louder than words.

I want to go back to when I compared the art here to the performance-with-music I’ve seen in the UK, because there’s

something about the quality of the relationship between the artists and audiences here that feels so different. The artists make room for liveness, yes. *Yoga for Theatres* has The Most Adorable Little Dog on stage throughout, bribed liberally with treats so that he hops about on his hind legs, his paws outstretched as if for a dance partner that never arrives.

But what there isn't is a quality of reaching out, either literally (there's none of the audience participation that's pretty much standard in UK music-based performance) or in a more abstract sense. Maybe it's the Scandinavian reserve that people occasionally write under-researched thinkpieces on (sorry) or maybe it's something else, but there's more distance, more comfort with silence, more of a sense of stillness and communion.



Penelope Sleeps

Penelope Sleeps takes this to an extreme. It's a collaboration by two women who lie down on the vast grey carpet of a gallery space, as still as two sheep. Mette Edvardsen supplies the text; an essay made of interlinked parts. She starts out with a gentle anecdote about how her father removes spiders from her bedroom, about the tender rituals that evoke much stronger emotions in her than the arachnids she's mostly learned not to fear. Then she weaves together other stories; of a horrendously awkward one night stand, of natural history, of myths. Each moment is drawn out and extended in a trickle of song composed by Matteo Fargion, shiver-inducing as a spider crawling into an unreachable recess. Somehow, Angela Hicks manages to produce these cascading sounds while lying down, itemising the colours that Penelope weaves with a naturalness that echoes the peal of urine into a bucket – ready for the dyeing pot.

I could listen to it lying down, too, and the pillows on the carpeted floor feel like an invitation – but after a 6am start to get my flight to Bergen, I make myself resist.

Penelope Sleeps feels like dream learning, like an exercise in passivity, in letting ideas and images creep through your eyelids with only half your awareness.

Footnote number 12 feels entirely different; engaged in a different way, with an unusual intensity, because it's about heated intergenerational conversations that the whole audience has a stake in. It's a collaboration between Spreafico Eckly (Norway) and Theatre Replacement (Canada). A lecturer stands on stage. There's an annotated collection of works by David Foster Wallace on each seat. What follows is a bit like a lecture – but also a bit like a sermon, or a seance. It's performed by James Long, who's genial and clued-up enough to know that David Foster Wallace has fuelled a thousand memes about women being told what to read by their pretentious boyfriends.



Footnote number 12

He focuses on one essay in particular; [Roger Federer as Religious Experience](#). And then he encourages the audience to engage with it in all sorts of ways. We read it aloud together – at another point, we

chant it like liturgy. As he reads each page, Long screws them up and aims them at a mark on the stage, like golf balls. What's so special about this text?

“It's sophisticated... but in a mystical way.”

This piece is preoccupied with the idea of mysticism, with the sacred relationship between reader and text and idea. And gentle as it is, it's also embattled, operating in heated dialogue with the present cultural moment. Long describes Twitter as a “space age racket for opinions”, able to propel hot takes on tiny passages of text. David Foster Wallace recessed his biggest points in footnotes within footnotes – now, ideas are picked out and flung wide.

There's a constant threat of fogenism hanging over Long's narration, seductive as it is. His co-performer, the sound designer Nancy Tan, dismantles it. As he laments the way that social media makes us all accountable – makes his identity as a privileged white man suspect – she distorts his words, making them muffled and ridiculous.

I wish there were more of those moments; although it's described as a "monolog for two people", Tan's presence is inevitably sidelined. Still, I left the room buzzing, feeling engaged. Wanting to talk about what I'd seen, and also hyper aware of what it means to have a platform (this article!) to do so.

I said that *Footnote number 12* felt different, but somewhere in it there is a strand of mysticism that floated through every work I saw at Meteor Festival; the idea of art as being something that works through presence. Something that's not interested in being 'relevant', or in holding your hand through every step of the narrative – it lets you sit back and observe it and wait for the pieces to slot together in your mind unguided.

BIT Teatergarasjen is finally getting its own venue: a former public swimming pool that'll also house dance company Carte Blanche. There's a controversy swirling around the move, about the multimillions of public money involved, about what it means to give this space over to artists, whether it'll still be for everyone. I found myself thinking back to Long's word, "accountability". The UK's theatres (not all of them) have responded to demands for accountability by making work that's ever more accessible, more

lucid, more direct in its conversations with the world around them. Is that a good thing? I'm genuinely not sure. It's so rare to come out of a British performance of any kind with a sense of deep uncertainty about what you've seen and what it meant.

The mysticism that attaches itself to slower, less editorialised art shouldn't be a cop-out, a way of escaping from demands to be representative of society, from justified requests that minority voices be heard. From thinking about what it means to make the art your making.

But there's also something hugely beneficial about performance that lets you sit with difficulty, that doesn't tie its loose ends up in a bow. It's exciting to sit there in the darkness and unknowing, to let a strange song send shivers down your spine.

Meteor is a biannual arts festival in Bergen, Norway. It ran from 17th-26th October 2019.

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ALICE SAVILLE

Alice is editor of Exeunt, as well as working as a freelance arts journalist for publications including Time Out, Fest and Auditorium magazine. Follow her on Twitter @Raddington_B

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