

Lincoln Center

October 2012



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Hearing the Silence



MARIO DEL CURTO

German composer Heiner Goebbels meditates on life in his theatrical concert *I went to the house but did not enter*

By Stan Schwartz

OVER THE YEARS, MANY DIFFERENT ADJECTIVES HAVE BEEN USED to describe the work of famed German composer and theater director Heiner Goebbels, the 2012 winner of the prestigious International Ibsen Award. “Experimental” heads the list, and although accurate in the most general sense, the “E” word’s broadness doesn’t do justice to the richness and complexity of Goebbels’ work. Then there’s the usual litany of “strange,” “surreal,” “dream-like,” “haunting”—all pretty accurate as well, but I prefer the “M” word—meditative.

There is no question that Goebbels’ idiosyncratic and painstakingly precise fusion of sound, image and movement taken together achieves an intense and poetic quality of meditation. And

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New York audiences will find these qualities in abundant display when his music theater piece *I went to the house but did not enter* is presented on November 13 and 14 as part of Lincoln Center's *White Light Festival*.

It is hardly an accident that *I went to the house* would find its way into the *White Light Festival*. The piece fits perfectly into the Festival's perspective on what the artistic experience can and should be. "Art is, in its essence, an act of contemplation," explains Jane Moss, Lincoln Center's Ehrenkranz Artistic Director. "It is about an encounter, and you can only have that encounter if you are receptive to and participating in your interior life."

Lately, introspection has become an increasingly rare commodity, given today's obsession with digital technologies and social media. Moss argues that being connected via smart phones and iPads does not necessarily make people happier. "I really do feel that people are searching for a deeper experience and a deeper connection," she insists. Great artistic experiences are extraordinary not just in their aesthetic achievement, but also "in how they make you feel larger. They so dramatically expand who you are in a way that's quite mysterious."

Enter Heiner Goebbels and *I went to the house but did not enter*. Billed as a staged concert in three tableaux, the work features Goebbels' settings of texts by T. S. Eliot (*The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*), Maurice Blanchot (*The Madness of the Day*), Franz Kafka (*Excursion into the Mountains*) and Samuel Beckett (*Worstward Ho*), performed by the famed British vocal quartet the Hilliard Ensemble, and staged by the composer/director with his usual eye towards expressive choreography and striking imagery. The set and lighting design are by Goebbels' long-time collaborator, Klaus Grünberg. The choice of texts alone—favorite authors of Goebbels—immediately ensures that the focus will be upon decidedly interior vistas.

Mind you, that does not discount the formidable role played by the exterior vistas which theatergoers will actually see in the Rose Theater: eerily flat yet luminous tableaux reminiscent of Magritte and Edward Hopper. And of course, there is the Hilliard Ensemble itself—Rogers Covey-Crump, David James, Gordon Jones, and Steven Harrold—renowned for both early and contemporary music. The minimalist strategies common to both ends of the music spectrum are pitch perfect for evoking the interior states of the Goebbels universe. And the exquisite precision with which the singers execute Goebbels' close and occasionally dissonant harmonies is not just one of the major pleasures of the evening, but the pure a cappella sonority is crucial to achieving a heightened dream-like quality.

Originally produced by Théâtre Vidy-Lausanne, with whom Goebbels enjoys an ongoing relationship, *I went to the house but did not enter* premiered at the 2008 Edinburgh Festival and has subsequently toured worldwide. I caught up with it last June at the Ingmar Bergman

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International Theatre Festival at Stockholm's Royal Dramatic Theatre. At the time, Goebbels explained how the piece continued his exploration of absence which he examined in his previous work *Eraritjaritjaka* and *Stifters Dinge*, seen at *Lincoln Center Festival* and *Great Performers* respectively.

Goebbels fans will recall the striking moment in *Eraritjaritjaka* when the protagonist exits the stage, then the theater, and hails a taxi to a nearby apartment, leaving the rest of his monologue to be viewed by the audience via live video. ("That was quite an unusual step," Goebbels said with more than a little understatement.) *Stifters Dinge* did away with human beings entirely, in favor of a huge, kinetic multimedia sculpture that seemed to have a life of its own. *I went to the house* continues the composer/director's minimalist explorations by considering the quartet members' abilities "to reduce their own individual voices for the sake of one common voice. And this goes very beautifully together with the texts which I chose about questions of the ego."

I went to the house also continues the composer/director's struggle against "the tyranny of meaning," in that Goebbels refuses to dictate a neat explanation of what a work means. His art tends to function like a Rorschach ink blot, whereby viewers can free associate and create their own, private artistic experiences. It's a logical aesthetic reaction against a society in which we are deluged by meaning by the media, by advertisements, by education, by politics, and in general by what Goebbels calls "the society of spectacle." As he puts it, "We desperately need a space for our own selves, to make up our mind, to make up our own experiences."

Goebbels does admit to sometimes being a little nervous about audience reaction. "Especially this piece," he confides. "It's maybe more risky than any other...because it is one of my most quiet pieces, with long moments of silence, which you will hear. You will hear the silence."

It's a delicious and quintessentially Goebbels-esque contradiction that elicits a chuckle from him. But hearing silence—and its corresponding visual analog of seeing the invisible—goes to the very heart of *White Light's* ambition to reclaim the meditative dimension of the artistic experience and celebrate the profoundly human commonality of it all.

Stan Schwartz is a freelance arts journalist based in New York City with a particular interest in European theatre and film. He has written for The New York Times, The Village Voice, Time Out New York and BAMBill, as well as Dagens Nyheter and Expressen in Sweden

INFORMATION

White Light Festival is a presentation of Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts. For tickets and information, call CenterCharge, 212.721.6500 or visit WhiteLightFestival.org