

Uitgelicht

Door Jaap Twiest / 8 november 2022

Zorgvuldig gecomponeerde chaos

Er verscheen een toneelbewerking van Willem Frederik Hermans' 'Paranoia'. Jaap Twiest kwam een kijkje nemen - hoe verhoudt het zich tot het boek?

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Carefully Composed Chaos

A stage adaptation of Willem Frederik Hermans's "Paranoia."

Jaap Twiest went to take a look—how does it compare to the novella?

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There are few authors more preoccupied with a single worldview than Willem Frederik Hermans. In his works—*Beyond Sleep*, *The Darkroom of Damocles*, *I Am Always Right*—one constantly finds characters projecting a singular logic onto the world, creating a reality that justifies their existence. But, although we humans like to see order in everything around us, the world hardly presents a coherent narrative. In the "Preamble" to his short story collection *Paranoia*, Hermans writes: "There is only one true word: chaos."

It is this loyalty to a central theme that grounds my fascination with modern classics. We see the same thing occur, for example, with Ferdinand Bordewijk or Franz Kafka. As these writers develop their craft, the techniques, subtleties, and nuances with which this central theme is expressed also develop—like the lifelong exploration of an idea.



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So, I was very pleased to hear about this stage adaptation—Inge-Vera Lipsius’s directorial debut—of “Paranoia,” a story from the eponymous collection of W.F. Hermans. The performance took place at The Merchant House in Amsterdam. In a small theaterroom of the canal house stood a bed covered with discolored newspapers, an old radio, a lamp, and a rotary phone. On both sides, level with the stageset, there were two rows of IKEA folding chairs: classical with an ironic twist, I thought, as I studied the room’s ceiling painting.

Plot summary

“Paranoia” takes place shortly after WWII and tells the story of Arnold Cleever. After seeing a wanted notice in the newspaper, Arnold becomes convinced that he is a runaway SS man (member of the Nazi Party). He is suspicious, antisocial—schizophrenic, I would say in modern terms. Hermans himself did not go so far: “I am not a psychiatrist, I am not making a diagnosis.” Arnold also receives a summons: Gorraay, an archetypal slum landlord, wants to kick him out to get more money from the next tenant. As the plot progresses, Arnold becomes convinced of more and more conspiracies: people are watching him from the roof and gossiping under the window about his war crimes, Gorraay sneaks into his room despite the seven safety locks on his door. He stops going out to keep a low profile. And, of course, he is furious with his girlfriend, Anna, when she tells him that she has asked a lawyer about his tenant rights: now they know where to find him.

Groping in the dark

Lipsius’s stage adaptation remained faithful to the novella, but in a pared-down form. Unraveling a story without losing its essence requires skill and insight. It takes ingenuity to make the audience an integral part of the theme. That is what happened here. The arrangement of seats meant that the eyes of the viewers encircled Arnold (played by Valentijn de Jonge). His paranoia seemed to be fed by it, without it being made explicit. He seemed to sense our presence more and more, becoming more and more aware of the audience’s eyes on him.



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W.F. Hermans deliberately leads his readers astray in *Paranoia*. “A human life is a collection, a vast accumulation of movements and ideas. Most of it is lost forever, and memory must make the choice of what to keep and what to lose, a desperate arbitrariness.” Because of this arbitrariness we can never know the full truth. In “Paranoia” this reaches its full expression in the use of space. One of the most important spatial elements in the story is the alternation between light and darkness—between seeing and not seeing, knowing and not knowing—and Lipsius made excellent use of this.

The audience was unable (partly due to the staging) to see the action in its entirety. Right from the start, in fact: the play began, and everything was dark. There was only the sound of someone walking up the stairs and opening a number of locks. In this way, everyone became Arnold. We were all groping in the dark, afraid to miss something, to not know everything... In short, Lipsius really captured the core of Hermans's work. On multiple levels.

Willem Frederik Hermans, in my view, shares the traits of an early postmodernist. He opposed the stubborn belief in political, religious or other convictions, which presuppose the world as an orderly whole. As I watched the show, I came to terms with the fact that I, as a spectator, would not get to see everything. Perhaps that was what it was—an ode to not-knowing. Perhaps this story is so timeless because it pierces the illusion of knowledge. Perhaps. But I do not know everything, I am not making a diagnosis.

Direction/concept and adaptation: **Inge-Vera Lipsius**

Cast: **Valentijn de Jonge, Guusje te Pas, Jasper van der Pijl, Frans Limburg**

Sound: **Neeltje van der Vlugt, Willem van Erven Dorens**

Production: **Inge-Vera Lipsius**

Poster: **Dinara Vasilevskaia**

Photography: **Arjen Veldt**

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