

THE FESTIVAL OF LAUGHTER AND FORGETTING



I is Another – Rimbaud in Africa

Language: English/ Norwegian

Playwright: Lars Onyo

Director: Lars Onyo

Company: Grusomhetens Teater, Norway

We do not seek to represent realistic reality so it can be recognized but to tell the core of life inherent in every genuine experience.

- Grusomhetens Theatre

The twelfth edition of the International Theatre Festival of Kerala saw Norwegian troupe Grusomhetens Theatre perform their piece on poet Arthur Rimbaud's life as a businessman titled *I is Another – Rimbaud in Africa*. I must admit that it took me two viewings to *begin* to understand Lars Onyo's piece and I still cannot claim to have understood most of the piece. Yet, I write this review because in my experience of watching plays, this proved to be the most unique one yet.

In my first watching of the play, I carried no more information about Rimbaud other than that he was French, and that he was a poet – a happy mistake in retrospect. This performance was completely lost to me in this viewing in terms of content, and thus, I had to fix my focus on the form of the play. It is not often that I watch a play where I can make no connection between form and content – what is the point of such a play? In this particular piece, the movements were repetitive too. By the end of the first performance, I had a few words and images in my head – market place, businessmen, angels, death, a belt and two large canvases on either side of the stage where each actor would run and hit throughout the performance. However, I couldn't for the life of me connect these to the life of Rimbaud even after doing my research on him or connect these symbols to each other. Looking back at the play now, I am glad that my first viewing of this play happened this way. When I now try to rewind the play in my head, I can remember each scene distinctly as all my attention was focused on making sense of the movements in the play.

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Grusomhetens Theatre practices Theatre of Cruelty which is extremely physical in form and uses the body as a tool to communicate with the audience. Watching this play, without Rimbaud's context was almost like engaging in a semiotic study where signs, symbols and movements were made familiar to an audience. A discussion the following day provided the tools necessary to decode the symbols. It probably seems at this juncture that two viewings of the play, one with and one without context is essential to this play. I firmly believe so.

The play is extremely minimalistic in terms of its use of props; but these props are crucial in understanding the play. With a play like *I is Another*, it is almost too easy to get swept up by the movements that the actors engage in and the meaning behind these movements and gestures that the props get reduced to the background. Take for instance the belt that continuously circulates between the actors in the play. At first, the fact that it continuously changes hands was confusing and it could have been brushed aside as just another repetitive movement on stage. However, in the interactive session, Onyo stated that this particular prop was inspired by a gold belt that Rimbaud fashioned for himself. In my second viewing of the play, I noticed that the belt first makes its appearance in the second scene of the play, to symbolise that Rimbaud was being played by all eight actors on stage. It was from this moment that began to understand how the play had crafted Rimbaud's life with utmost attention to the details. Another instance is that of the canvases on either side of the stage. This was inspired by Rimbaud's hundred line verse titled *The Drunken Ship*. The actor running and getting themselves hit on the canvases was Onyo's interpretation of the poem through movement.

Perhaps where the play fails is in assuming that their audience will have an understanding of Arthur Rimbaud. Furthermore, what it demands is an in depth knowledge of Rimbaud's life as a poet, his personal life and surrealist nature of him as a person and of his work. What would greatly help in making this play communicate with the audience is a brief introduction of Rimbaud; else the performance is lost on an uninitiated spectator. Onyo has managed to invent a surreal language to portray the life of an extremely unusual human being and his ensemble has done a remarkable job making the language their own. The question comes down to how they can make their performance accessible to an audience, without compromising on the subtleties of the play. Until then, two viewings is necessary to be able to comfortably grapple with Rimbaud and Onyo's world.