

COMMUNE

Can opera start a revolution? Polish-Dutch performance artist Maria Magdalena Kozłowska asks this question through an eclectic work full of irony and criticism. The hour-long piece *COMMUNE*, seen on 11 November at Frascati as part of the programme *Frascati Issues: The Gathering*, dives into a surreal realm while treating very real topics.

Upon entering, we see three performers leaning on a cylinder covered in red velvet fabric. Almost immediately, a fourth performer joins them. All performers wear black leotards and stockings and balaclava hoods with colourful hair extensions attached below the eyes. Artificial flowers decorate their heads and lower bodies (costumes and set designed by Jan Tomza-Osiecki).

On the right-hand side of the stage are a xylophone and other percussion instruments, and on the floor, a circular tin drum, illuminated from above. One of the performers walks towards this instrument that looks like a wishing well and starts to strike chords. We hear water sounds mixed in with the chords as if they played them underwater. The sounds are gently repeated in a low-volume echo.

On the left side of the stage hang two panels made of something like soft plastic or resin. There is a pocket of water in their centre, and two performers shine flashlights through these, creating a beautiful shimmer on the opposite wall. In the background, more of this particular material is hanging horizontally, reminiscent of banners like in a march or demonstration. Right in the centre, the simple drawing of a curvy body presides over the space.

Kozłowska herself is one of the performers. She opens this operatic journey by narrating a dream about the end of the world and talking about her rebellious tendencies as a young thinker.

When she was young, she found her grandmother's journals, a woman ahead of her time who had loads to say on the political reality in Eastern Europe. "She simply said: we marched singing", the artist quotes, pointing ahead to the performance that follows.

As the grandmother is invoked, an opening in the backdrop reveals a figure, its face hidden by a wide-brimmed hat with hair extensions hanging down from

all sides. This histrionic character starts to sing in Italian about how to succeed in a protest, while the other performers watch from underneath, dancing and cheering to the belcanto. As the grandmother shows its face, we see a male-passing body, wearing sequined red shorts. Energetic and young, Maayan Licht gives an impressive contralto performance throughout the whole piece. These over-the-top images and atmosphere to me correlated to absurd political measures that happened in the last year, for instance, the backwards law reforms on women's reproductive rights or the growing anti-LGBTQ movement in Poland.

The scenes are sprinkled with ironically overdramatized moments, long pauses and stretched vibratos. Two flutists play their instruments upside-down, from between their legs. The red cylinder turns out to be a trampoline, the grandmother's ghost does a headstand, lights keep blinking, and the audience sings along... It's hectic but also sharp in making an analogy to current times. Playfully challenging gender binaries but still from a clear female perspective, COMMUNE asks us to think communally and uses pantomimic humour to address severe matters. Kozłowska gets away with the bombastic environment, eccentric aesthetic and opera gimmicks because of the high quality of the musicians. It was ambitious to make the musicians use their bodies in atypical ways, and refreshing to see all the cast is used to play music and move and dance with the same importance. The physical performance could use some work, but it does not take away the impressive craft of each performer and overall intelligent commentary and tribute to the feminist movements in Poland.

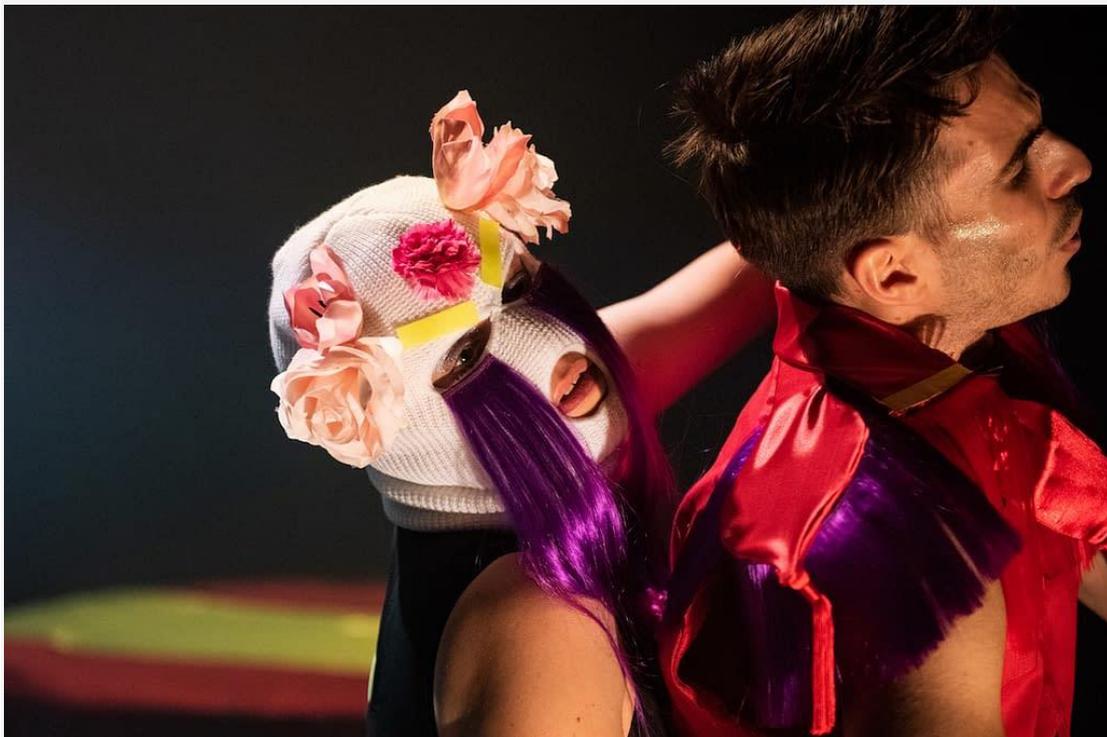


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