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Review of première Nocturnes for a Society, 23 May 2023

https://www.pzazz.theater/nl/recensies/muziektheater/gecureerde-stad
translation: Myriam Van Imschoot

'Nocturnes for a Society' appears at first glance to be an extremely simple performance: in group one composes one's own sleep music over the course of two exercises. Miryam (sic) Van Imschoot and Lucas van Haesbroeck looked after every detail so carefully, however, that the people present gradually form a community and thus become part of the city. And all while sleeping.

'Nocturnes for a Society' lasts no less than eleven and a half hours. It begins small and secure in K1, a two-story wooden party venue along the canal, across from the former Citroën garage. In a soft voice, someone escorts you to the upper floor and there asks you to take off your shoes. In return, you are given slippers.

There are still many clues, but on paper. A first sheet invites you to first explore the rooms for half an hour at your own discretion. The elongated upper room is bathed in light and open. Along the side are inflatable mattresses. In the center of the room, nearly seventy presents await visitors. They are wrapped in colourful fabrics and bear somewhat mysterious names like "Captain Hook Visits Swiss Farm," "End of Summer" or "Dancing Eyeball. The ground floor is a lot warmer and also darker. Thick woolen cloths are suspended from the ceiling with strings. The floor is filled with thick foam mattresses.

The visitors soon discover their presents. They are play sets made of household instruments. Baking beads accompanied by a bowl and saucer, for example. Or a metal plate with some beads. They come with instructions, but they are not prescriptive. 'Play with your object, or better, let your object dictate to you what to do. Listen carefully to the sound you can make. How does the sound sound in another space? How does the sound sound with another body? How does it sound with another?' The different sizes of beads, saucers, bowls, plates, pans, glasses and other utensils make each instrument sound slightly different. But the consonance never becomes a cacophony.

In an almost magical way, Van Imschoot and Van Haesbroeck succeed in gradually creating a sense of community among the visitors. Whereas at first you are still fascinated by the sound possibilities of your own instrument, you soon, and as a matter of course, form duos and trios with people you do not know, nor have had a word with. Before you know it, you even form an entire orchestra together. The concert lasts so long that after a while, even with your eyes closed, you recognize people by the sound of their instruments.

Meanwhile, Van Imschoot comes by with a microphone and two headphones. While she records the sound, you two get to listen to the instruments. This is an alienating experience, because both the instruments and the ambient sound sound clearer through the headphones. It's similar to the way a photograph focuses on a chosen object and blurs the rest. Similarly, the recording tunnels your hearing.

I notice other things, too. When you make noise on the upper floor it sounds louder and harder. The sound of sirens penetrates it from outside, the sound of shuffling slippers mixes with that of the instruments. Downstairs, the cloths and mattresses muffle the sound much more.

A final letter asks you to gather upstairs after the soup. White wool cloths are now hanging there as well, both on the ceiling and in front of the street-side windows. This keeps out the bright street light and noise, but also draws your attention to the surroundings outside the little building. A breeze blows at you through the cracks of the canal-side windows. Around K1, the quay is being rebuilt. The works are in full swing. Two bright lights from the wharf of the Citroën garage

across the canal reflect in the water. Their reflection produces whimsical drawings on the ceiling. Suddenly the play area of the show seems to extend to the other side.
Here we were instructed to sing vowels. As in the first game, each first discovers his own voice. While doing so, the visitors wander through the room, yet form two concentric circles, every one holding a note and a vowel. A few begin to experiment: changing tone, vowel, voice strength faster or modulating by waving their hands, beating their chests or shaking their heads rapidly. Some hum shyly, others reverberate like a practiced opera singer. Fascinatingly, the collective sound again sounds far from out of tune. Each voice automatically adjusts to produce natural harmonies. Van Imschoot and Van Haesbroeck had carefully planned all these "windfalls".

It is therefore no coincidence that Myriam Van Imschoot mentions American composer Pauline Oliveros in the program booklet. She developed the term Sonic Awareness which consists of people not only being aware of the music, of tone, volume, rhythm, etc. but also of environmental sounds. Oliveros also developed the Deep Listening technique that teaches both practiced and non-practiced performers how to balance one's own sounds and (ambient) sounds in improvisation.

Here it is remarkable that the audience sings differently in each space. In the large room, the choir hums softly. Everyone there is still searching for their own voice, and through the cloths all sounds sound rounder, softer. In the stairwell, the ensemble is already getting brighter. Everyone is singing to each other and many are experimenting.

In the end, the group moves and sings as one mass. A strange solidarity even emerges: when someone takes a breath, someone else often temporarily takes over their tone for a moment. This could be impressive enough as a performance. Once downstairs, sound artists Christophe Albertijn and Léa Roger add sound recordings, in which you soon recognize an arrangement of the music that first arose on the improvised instruments. When recordings of our own singing also appear on the soundtrack, the live singing gradually fades out. When the last real singer falls silent, everyone lies down under a blanket on the foam mattresses. The instruments and voices continue to echo. Here and there you recognize a special moment, such as a single tinkling bell or a striking vocal fragment. At other moments, the recording zooms out and you hear sounds from outside the building. From loud, industrial tinkling the music mutates to softer rustling, like a rain sound machine with just recognizable notes. Any sense of time disappears. A few return to their inflatable mattresses upstairs, but most fall asleep on the spot. Throughout the night a delayed mix of the two concerts plays, until you are shaken up again in the early morning by some louder and colder sound.

You might think the performance leaves such a strong impression because of many windfalls, such as the presence of enthusiastic participants who are a bit more daring in experimenting with the instruments or their voices. The enchanting reflection of the yard light on the water also seems to be such a windfall.

When we have breakfast the next morning across the canal, however, I discover that Van Imschoot and Van Haesbroeck had carefully planned all these "windfalls". It was Van Imschoot herself who turned on many of the experiments with singing tones. Nor was it a coincidence that the wake-up music began at 6 a.m., because just then the environmental construction around K1 resumed. The lights that shone on the water were installed by the team. They do not belong to the construction site at all. But these interventions are done so subtly that you hardly notice them. The works around the building and across the canal, the bright street lights and even the man who crawled into his tent across the canal at night all seem to become part of the performance, and vice versa.