

The Puppet, the Puppeteer

Solace, the piece that the puppeteer Tibo Gebert performed for the first time in 2018, ends with a reversal. The puppet reveals the puppeteer. In the final scene, the puppet strokes its hand over the puppeteer's head and pulls back the hood hanging far down over his face, showing his face. The puppeteer is no longer the dark, withdrawn figure, no longer as invisible as possible, he is suddenly there, he is someone allowing himself to be seen.

Hero, the new piece, first performed in March 2022, takes this a step further, deep into the heart of the relationship between the puppet and the puppeteer. It's a piece about two who need each other in order to be themselves.

The puppet in *Hero* doesn't stand for someone else, it's not a character, it represents no one; it's no longer a child as in *Solace*, it takes a step back as a figure and comes forward as an object. It can also be there without portraying anyone and without being performed by someone. In many moments in the piece, the puppet just is, unanimated, on the stage.

The puppeteer in *Hero* is not an invisible master bound to the puppet, he's an autonomous body moving independently. He is also seen just as he is, without any direct action on the puppet.

The two of them, who are so fundamentally dependent on each other – the puppet on the puppeteer, so that they move, the puppeteer on the puppet, so that he can show himself – in *Hero* these two are by themselves and together. Sometimes they're very close to each other, sometimes they're far away from each other; sometimes they're similar to each other in their appearance, movements, manner, sometimes they're very different from each other and their individual physicality emerges distinctly.

The piece gives the puppet and the puppeteer a lot of space. The distance it provides for both of them, the visibility it gives each of them, also changes the puppetry in a direct sense. The puppeteer also doesn't disappear behind the puppet in the direct movement with it, he remains there as a body; the puppet also doesn't become a character then, it remains an object. The whole performance takes place between the two of them.

From a large distance – at the start, the puppeteer and the puppet are spaced apart across the diagonal of the stage – to closeness, touch and tenderness, in *Hero* a spatiality of feelings appears. The puppeteer and the puppet turn towards each other, they let go of each other; a rhythm of getting closer and moving back again is created. The performance is reminiscent of two people getting to know each other. The two of them are strangers to each other. They are new for each other.

One watches them motionless in various places on the stage like in a series of snapshots; one watches them moving with each other, starting slowly then faster, from careful to obsessive; lying, sitting, standing, walking, dancing each by themselves and together. The piece shows fundamental movements and encounters between two, always both reduced and affective at the same time.

The puppeteer and the puppet open up in-between spaces and, as a spectator, one starts to not just watch one of them or the other, but to watch the distance and closeness, the connections between them. One is drawn into them, the pull in this piece is spatial.

The space that the two of them share or rather, that they produce by sharing, is not a mythical, archaic world like in *Solace*; the stage in *Hero* is almost completely empty. Out of this emptiness between the puppet and the puppeteer, springs a new space of its own, here and now. This space is unknown, it doesn't already exist. It is not performed in, it takes place. That's what makes the piece so strange and mysterious in the best sense: everything is exactly what it is – the puppet is an object, the puppeteer is a body, the stage is the presence of the two of them. Everything is there and nothing else. And still, or precisely for that reason, everything appears different. This whole being different is here and now, it doesn't exist in a foreign world, it's not somewhere behind it all, it's the thing that's between us.

The simplicity and concreteness of this being there cannot be grasped immediately. One searches for the meaning of the puppet, what it represents, the character it's supposed to be, like a spectator in Paris, one asks: Qui es-tu? Who are you? and the puppet just looks back. Or one expects a story, but in this piece, time is not action, but rather the presence of the space and the synchrony of the bodies.

Also that of those in the audience. Unlike a foreign world and another time that exists in front of us and without us who are there with it now, this piece knows about our presence and needs it. The relationship between puppeteer and puppet emerges in the here and now, in front of our eyes. It is not embedded in a story. It doesn't happen anyway, independently of us. We, who watch, are in the same space and in the same time as those performing. We don't join them later on. We are in what is happening now. It relates to us. This relation isn't already there before, it is only created in the moment of watching, continually recreated anew. The synchrony of the performing and the watching changes how the audience watches, it takes them into the movement. We are not sitting facing a story, there is no safe distance. The pieces comes close to us. It shows itself, reveals itself without disguising itself.

The puppet is not hidden behind a character, the puppeteer is not concealed behind the puppet. Both of them appear on stage as those that each of them are.

And nonetheless, ever since its archaic origins as a ritual object the puppet has been a way of accessing the other, just like the mask; a complex object with which the invisible becomes visible, with which the absent can be accessed. And this original function of the puppet is also there in *Hero*, an absolutely contemporary piece purely of the present: here the other of the puppet is the puppeteer himself. By simply being there and being itself, the puppet sets the puppeteer free. In this free relation, the puppeteer isn't playing the puppet, but with it. In the playful space between him and it, he becomes visible, his face and his body appear. The puppeteer turns out to be himself.

He*she become who he*she is: becoming themselves is becoming an other. The other is the hero*the heroine of the piece.

There's a scene in *Hero* which comes out of the stage set, a large piece of fabric that hangs down to the ground slightly to the right of the centre of the stage. It looks like a narrow high tent, the material is dense and has an organic structure, it's similar to skin, but is permeable to light.

Towards the end of the piece, the puppeteer and the puppet are inside this space formed by fabric. They're enclosed in it. A video image is projected onto the fabric, it shows the outline of a body, gently moving. Behind the fabric, one can also see the vague outlines of the puppeteer and the puppet, one senses it more than one sees it: the puppeteer is changing the puppet's costume.

The two of them emerge again, the puppet is wearing a cloak, its arms, its head, its hair, previously visible, are now covered. Shortly afterwards, after a moment in complete darkness, one sees the puppeteer without the hoodie he's been wearing up until now, his arms, his head, his hair, his face are now clearly visible. The puppet is cloaked, the puppeteer is exposed.

The end blends inside and outside, curtain and cloak, projection and body, puppet and puppeteer. The change takes place, in the one and in the other at the same time, displayed and hidden.

The piece of fabric that hangs down onto the stage, behind which a piece fabric is draped around a body and in front of which a piece of fabric is laid down, like everything else in this piece, is exactly what it is. It exposes the theatre itself once more: curtain and costume. The stage is the site of transformation par excellence.

Photos, credits, performance dates for *Hero*:

<https://www.numen-company.com/repertoire/hero/>