Realistic war among sprigs of parsley

Kester Freriks, NRC Handelsblad

In the southwestern corner of Flanders, Belgium, they still say: 'In wintertime it quakes and shudders under the ground.' Rectangular swaths of thousands of white crosses mark the last resting place of the dead. This is where The Great War, the trench war, was fought between 1914 and 1918.

Hotel Modern recreates this unfathomable event as a war in miniature. A digital video camera films a small mound of potting soil with plastic soldiers in it - just like any young boy's game; bunches of parsley become a forbidding forest of death, with treacherous mines and snipers among the idyllic greenery. Spluttering sparklers, that most innocent of fireworks, are used to create realistic illusions of exploding grenades and bombs. What the tiny camera sees is projected lifesize on a film screen. The International Film Festival Rotterdam is taking place elsewhere in the same building. This performance, The Great War, is a stunning example of drama employing both film and theater.

The stage is crammed to overflowing with equipment, cables and wires. On first impression it looks like this is going to be an evening out for technofiles only. But the intensity and the precision of the interplay between these toy soldiers and miniature tanks bespeaks not only technical ingenuity but also an understanding of drama. From the side of the stage the composer provided sound effects in a manner similar to old radio plays. A voice reads extracts from letters from French, Belgian, Canadian and English soldiers. There is literature in the form of All Quiet on the Western Front (1926) by Erich Maria Remarque. Horrific passages are read out unemotionally by a girl: about the bomb hidden in a wine bottle in a captured German bunker, about the glutinous mud in which corpses lie, rotting. Meanwhile, the actors, using this lifelike raree show, provide accompanying images.

What is truly astounding is that the gap between animation and reality gradually diminishes. The high point for me was the passenger ship torpedoed by Germans on a misty morning. It takes place in an auqarium. A black silhouette against a hazy silhouette, against an even hazier background. The tiny U-boat is a shark hunting its prey. The foley artist provides a deafening torpedo explosion.

It is just like the real thing. It is both art and art form, perhaps even fiction. Mustard gas hisses like the striking of a match. This is the only way of making the unimaginable bearable. The girl's voice reads a letter from the soldier Prospert, a recurring theme in the performance: 'If you have already died ten times, you live more intensely.' Meanwhile a machine gun opens fire in the broom-bristle scrub. This performance makes unprecedented demands on the imagination, and stills the audience.

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