

METRO PICTURES

Smith, Roberta. "Performance Art That Looks a Lot Like Theater," *The New York Times* (November 16, 2013): C1.

The New York Times



The Humans at the Brooklyn Academy of Music is part of the Performa 13 festival.

Alexandre Singh's "The Humans" has its ups and downs, but it is still one of the outstanding achievements of the Performa 13 performance art biennial. Commissioned in collaboration with the Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art in the Netherlands, it is less performance art than classical theater with all the benefits of a highly skilled, well-rehearsed cast.

Mr. Singh, a young British artist, is known for arcane installations, but here he embraces accessibility, carefully timed slapstick and amusing wordplay as he explores his talent as a writer-director. And he is certainly not afraid to appropriate.

Inspired by Aristophanes — whose “The Birds” its title echoes — the work melds numerous creation myths, starting out as Greek drama and segueing to commedia dell’arte and Mozartian opera, with a great deal of lubrication from Milton, Shakespeare, the Bible, Rabelais and Oscar Wilde. Mime and choreography (by Flora Sans) figure in, as well as a Greek chorus that turns increasingly musical. The composers working with Mr. Singh, the lyricist, are Gerry Arling, Rik Elstgeest and Bo Koek (in collaboration with Robbert Klein, Annelinde Bruijs and Amir Vahidi).

There is even a cat goddess (Simona Bitmaté), who speaks and meows with equal effectiveness, and a sculptural set, by Mr. Singh and Jessica Tankard, that adds its own sense of play.

“The Humans” is an extremely ambitious undertaking, built on the faith that older culture is always part of the new. It begins slowly, gains speed and vividness and then spins a bit out of control toward the end, at which point you begin to wish for a copy of the script, and lyrics, so you can keep up with the jokes and linguistic pyrotechnics.

The complicated plot centers on a godlike figure named Charles Ray (after the American sculptor, and played by Phillip Edgerley) who often speaks in rhyming couplets and is tasked with creating humans in an Edenic studio. His plans for maintaining the new species in a state of eternal, if strictly dictated, reason (and also in togas), are wrecked by his apprentice and son, a fretful Woody-Allen type named Tophole (Sam Crane) conspiring with Tophole’s love interest, the funny, wordy and Wildean Pantalingua (Elizabeth Cadwallader).

Inspired by N, Pantalingua’s mother and an instinct-is-all rabbit queen (Ms. Sans), they set out to free the humans, or more accurately, facilitate their fall from grace. To their horror, they end up with an irrational, mercurial mob subject to all the imperfections of human nature — hunger, lust, greed, power and, worst of all, death. While this transpires, the costumes (by Holly Waddington) mutate into hilarious ensembles redolent of Breughel, Hogarth and Otto Dix that make much use of Cindy Shermanesque prosthetic body parts. In the end, everyone realizes that it is better to be than not to be.