

'Legal-Illegal' Nieuwpoorttheater (21/03/07) from THE CUTTING EDGE

(translated from the Flemish)

The Capricious Border Between What Can and Cannot Be



A troop of tough soldiers marches into the bare space. "Airforce One" the American President's plane rides in with a procession and opens itself as a coffin. A soldier with a Bush-mask steps out of the coffin and hums the American National Anthem: the tone of a political piece has been set.

On 20 March it had been four years ago that America invaded Iraq and the world ended up in a preemptive strike, which degenerated in a bloody civil war. George W Bush and his allies in power in the US and its coalition partners who continue to mislead the masses to the advantage of their War on Terror. In the fight on terror the Bush government adapts laws without worrying about legal problems and takes away the rights of prisoners. The show 'Legal-Illegal' is a social charge against politicians who distort truths and laws in their advantage and by doing so play with the borders of legality. It cannot surprise us that the show takes place in a former tax building, the characteristic of corruption where we, as Belgians, feel at 'home'

For 'Legal-Illegal' Los Angeles Poverty Department (LAPD), Nieuwpoorttheater and the Union of the Zorgelozen engaged in a temporary fusion. The American John Malpede, soul-giver of LAPD, directs the social-artistic project, which is created by a mix of Belgian, Dutch and American actors and activists. Malpede, with Peter Sellars, has also shaped the theatre scene in L.A. He has directed homeless people for more than twenty years, four of which he brought to Ghent.

'Legal-Illegal' is documentary theatre with performance characteristics that incorporate you as a public. Everything has been built around historical events and facts. During the First Part the audience, provided with a school desk, a pen and a training manual, follows a lesson in CIA-interrogation techniques and learns the tricks to manipulate questioned persons. In the Second part everyone is divided into groups and taken on an excursion through the building where the players give short shows in small rooms. Important questions are asked, among others about the modern slavery, which is called 'society', and concerning the youth that is our future. Actors with an image of Bush around their neck invade the rooms to proclaim messages. Humorous but also harrowingly realistically, is the character of the Polish woman who offers coffee along with excursions to a CIA-prison organized by her sister. Also the Habeas Corpus act, the basic principle from 1679 that states that everyone has the integrity of his own body, is incorporated in the show. America abolished the act in 2006, and in this way cleared the way for torture practices among others.

During the Third and last part of the show a historical video fragment is re-enacted between the commander of the French troops during the civil war in Algeria and journalists. The emotional impact of the piece gets extra strength by chanting Pink Floyd's 'Another brick in the wall'.

'Legal-illegal' has no standard build up and is much more a collage of impressions. The performances are often a shortcoming but as a public you feel the anger and the incomprehension of the actors and activists on the skin of your neck, which is necessary in a show such as this. Most important is the message which the piece carries: a message of and for the people about political games and (ill) legality. The setting in the former tax building strikes us as cold and bureaucratic, but with music and songs the building is filled with human warmth. And that is the strength of a piece such as this: highlighting and putting humanity first, beyond all cultures.