

OLAF JOHANNESSEN - Lauritzen Prize 2010

Right now in this place and right now when you have actually come back, it is perfectly alright to say it aloud: That there is a before and after the Royal Theatre in Olaf Johannessen's career, and it is especially for the "after" that he is today receiving the Lauritzen Prize 2010. Because it was only when Olaf Johannessen stopped at the National that he really showed, as it turned out, his enormous potential as an actor. The first performances after leaving The Royal almost made one do a double take and gape a bit. Excuse me but was it him? He looked like Olaf Johannessen well enough but ...it was as if it was a totally different actor. One for whom nothing was impossible, nothing should go untried.

And that is also as it has turned out - luckily. From the first time at the Royal Theatre, we mostly knew Olaf Johannessen from highly theatrical, often national romantic roles and abracadabra: this was suddenly the opposite. A hyper-modern actor who could still deal with the classical but also the physical theatre, the absurd, the abstract modern drama and most recently it has turned out that his abilities quite extraordinarily also apply to elegant comedy.

It is a mixture of the latter and the abstract that we see Olaf Johannessen in right now and right here, on this stage, in Astrid Saalbach's "Red and Green". The critics unequivocally loved him as the cynical manager posted to an aid project. What are the poor to do with him now when he has hurt his jaw and the blood loss is definitely threatening to be the end of him, And what is worse, he won't be able to play tennis for ages and because of the bad breath, it is so long to flirting with the naive young trainee. Just how much misfortune can one suffer? It is so elegant, so stinging and decadent, so evil and so compelling that you just sit and wait for when he comes back on stage again. For then things really happen!

Everyone who saw Noel Coward's "Private lives" at Grønnegårds Theatre two summers ago had no doubt that he masters elegant comedy. Here, Olaf Johannessen was an Eliot who was just so incredibly indifferent and lofty as he was entitled to be in his silk kimono and tailored morning coat, and as demanded by the role. Attractive, flirtatious, quite definitely a man who would offer you a cocktail.

But again: not a role in which ten years ago many would have believed that Olaf Johannessen would be so excellent. That was not the way he was going.

In its way, theatre has always beckoned. For Olaf Johannessen was born to the art form with director and theatre director Eyon Johannessen as his father and actress Tove Jacobsen as his mother, and a sister, Annika, who was also at the Royal Theatre for several years. He was no more than 19 when he started at theatre school and after graduating, he started his career at Odense Theatre and went on to Aarhus Theatre before the next natural step to the Royal Theatre where he remained until 2004, and where he reached what he called in an interview, the nadir of his career. "Oh no" he thought on stage, and his feeling of being really bad clearly rubbed off on the audience. Because so many left in the interval. He had lost confidence in the roles he was playing and indeed many of them were actually not that interesting! But the good thing about a nadir - in any case one you can talk about later

in interviews - is that they lead to change. Or you give up. And Olaf Johannessen is not someone who does that. You could indirectly read about it in the papers five years later when in a review of the season, Berlingske's theatre editor Jakob Steen Olsen wrote that: "Intense Olaf Johannessen is an example of an actor who has been set free and does something that we do not often see in Danish theatre: He grows from role to role."

And that is absolutely how it felt. Especially in the modern, tough roles on the small stages in Copenhagen such as Café Theatre and Plan B. Men that are cool, intellectual, fascinating, dangerous and especially and most importantly, enormously interesting. You can always be bothered to see them regardless of who they are. Because they have something about them, something exciting, worth investigating, that always gives the desire to know more. But not everything. For heaven's sake not everything. Because if there is something you always get a feeling of with those men, it is that deep inside there is something hidden that you should preferably not uncover. Something very dark that can be extremely dangerous to get into. You know you need to watch out and even so you fall: For this man has his ways and means. He can appear so real, so absolutely honest that you would believe him the saviour of the whole world, and he can be the most dangerous, sexiest seducer. A strong presence not least due to his highly physical acting, his strong physical awareness, as fully and precisely demonstrated in Katrine Wledemann's "A Dream Play" at the Betty Nansen. It is difficult ever to forget the picture of Olaf Johannessen's attractive and disillusioned lawyer sitting with his legs almost vertically up in the air at the table that was aslant and a chair that was tipped back so it was almost lying down. Or in this season in the many small but always intensely present roles as executioner and men in "Richard III". To do so little on stage and even so to be able to attract attention demands an incredibly strong, disciplined actor.

The Lauritzen Prize is awarded for a performance in theater, film and TV. And here I should like to reveal that the first time I became aware that Olaf Johannessen was actually something more than a strange actor from the past in old knightly dramas at the Royal Theatre, was in his small but important role in the Morten Korch series "For Quiet Brooks" when he played a young, solid farmer who married and slowly fell in love with Annette Støvelbæk.

Even so, I cannot help, on behalf of an art form that may sometimes feel as if it is being outcompeted by the upstarts in the class - film and TV - to thank you for being so much of a man of the theatre. Certainly there have been two film and TV roles, for example a minor role as a journalist in Christoffer Broe's "Everything will be fine", but Olaf Johannessen is definitely a theatre man. With diction that could even give Poul Reumert hope for the youth and something of a secret, that routine realism is not exactly what best suits Olaf Johannessen. Thank goodness!

Review by Rikke Rottensten