

Paprika Steen - Lauritzen Prize 2010

The world's most famous sentence spoken by the world's most famous Dane says in all its complicated simplicity: "To be or not to be - that is the question."

If one were bold enough to extend the sentence, it could however become: To be or not to be PRESENT - that is the question.

For in presenting this year's Lauritzen Prize 2010 to an actress, one can perfectly well allow oneself to ask: IS the prize winner present or not?

The answer is both yes and no. For this year's female prize winner IS present, just not physically. Filming commitments mean that she is at the moment in Buenos Aires. So since you cannot be present basically, I should like to ask your old friend and colleague, Sofie Gråbøl - who is also a previous Lauritzen Prize winner - to come up on the stage to accept the prize on your behalf.

Dear Paprika, Dear Sofie, Ladies and gentleman. It is an honour, a privilege and a longstanding wish on the part of the Prize Committee that I now on behalf of the Foundation present you with this prestigious award. We are proud that today you, as the first to do so, will get the recently increased Lauritzen Prize of DKK 250,000 tax-free, and especially since the Lauritzen Prize and its predecessor, the Henkel Prize, is in fact one of the world's oldest, still active awards. A prize and honour that you deserve.

I think I owe you all an explanation of how Paprika Steen reacted when I telephoned you on behalf of the Lauritzen Foundation and the Prize Committee to tell you that the Prize Committee had without the slightest hesitation decided on you as this year's female prize-winner.

You were in the middle of a Spanish lesson but took the telephone even so - you have always been inquisitive - and with presence of mind but with a slightly ill-tempered undertone, politely asked what I wanted. And when I gave you the message, something suddenly happened that many would otherwise not have believed.

You began to cry and became quite little girlish and exclaimed: "The Lauritzen Prize, it is also you with the old Henkel Prize - only the best of the best get it - so finally I have been noticed." And THEN you cried.

This emotional reaction did NOT totally surprise me. But when I mentioned this in advance at the Committee's final meeting on the prizes, another committee member, the chairman of Denmark's Radio, Michael Christiansen, felt quite differently. He said right out: "Paprika would never dream of doing that. She would never dream of breaking down in tears. She is far too much of a control freak for that". So we wagered two bottles of good red wine on it and - the good Lord be praised - you began to cry. So I should just like to remind Michael that he now owes me two bottles of red wine.

But back to being or not being present. For if there is something that characterizes your artistic performances, it is precisely presence in a given character. In short, we believe in you. You seduce us even though your characters do not always want the best for us. We know it but go for the forbidden fruit even so. And it is that form of presence that makes you so wonderful but also a form that purely character-wise, makes you a man-eater on stage and on screen.

One of the most recent examples is in the film "Applause", in which you play a deranged, footlight-diva, who following a rehab session is confronted with the ghosts of her own past. A meeting that does not go entirely well.

The performance was astoundingly good and deeply shaking. So good in fact that some people actually mistook your performance and believed that you were playing yourself and your own character, which you naturally were not.

Some might call your approach as good plain acting but it was not. Because in your approach and in the overall result, you really understand how to RAISE the level of ordinary acting and make it into genuine art. No easy solutions, no kind of habitual or routine acting, no form of repetition. In brief, you raise the art of acting to a higher power. I would actually risk saying that not all acting is art. Often it is just good work.

We saw the same international standard in your role of Tea in "Applause", in your interpretation of the role as Martha in Edward Albee's play "Who is afraid of Virginia Wolf" at Østre Gasværk two years ago - a magnificent performance that almost etched itself into the soul.

Then there has been a whole series of other excellent stage performances such as the part of Sally Bowles in "Cabaret" at Gladsaxe Theatre; Lucretia in Holberg's "The Waverer", the seductive "Henriette" in "Skyld and skyld" (Blame & Guilt) - the two latter at the Royal Theatre - and in "Hedda" at the Betty Nansen Theatre's free stage version of the Henrik Ibsen drama "Hedda Gabler". All roles that you have played and interpreted famously right from the time you left theatre school at Odense Theatre in 1992.

You have been in more than 20 films, including such gems as "Open Hearts", "Mifune's Last Song", "The One and Only", "Rembrandt", "Okay" and "The Substitute" - all of them films in which you certainly set an incredibly high standard.

Then there is the fact that Paprika Steen can also be extremely amusing. As we saw for example in the film "Hannibal and Jerry", and in the TV satirical series "Lex & Klatten" - here in the company of Hella Joof, Peter Frödin and Martin Brygmann - definitely one to see.

So on stage and on screen, you are definitely a primadonna. - and YES, I know you hate the term but now I am having my say and YOU are sitting on the other side of the world.

Because like most primadonnas, you know what you want to do with a given character and as such you expect your colleagues - preferably in advance - to have given the same consideration to their parts. But not everyone is quite like you and so you often catch them fumbling or working themselves up to what their characters should actually be. Neither are you backward in correcting your fellow actors if you feel, often rightly, that they are not doing their work well enough. You prefer to ignore a director if you do not agree with the interpretation of what you are acting in and neither do you avoid a brisk argument with dramatists and theatre management.

And all of this because you are actually an artistic idealist, borne up by unintended diva-like qualities even though this kind of idealist often has to suffer from those in their artistic environment wishing to knife them in the back when they can get to do so.

Maybe that is the reason why in our telephone meeting you said: "I never believed that I would ever get to be considered for anything like a theatrical award. That is why I generally say no to all invitations like this because ages ago I came to terms with the fact that I won't get that kind of award even though I might be nominated or recommended for one."

Neither are there any such prizes on your CV that immediately spring to mind. But now you have one, and one of the world's oldest theatre and film prizes.

But what is it you can do with a role?

You distil and nurture it so that it becomes at one and the same time recognisable, credible but above all also universal and all at the highest power.

From time to time we hear on the radio reports that drug addicts in such and such an area need to take care because a pure form of some drug or other is in circulation and dangerous. Perhaps we should do the same in your case. Perhaps we should tell theatre and film freaks that a Paprika premiere is now approaching and if they do not wish to go out with a bang, they will need to be careful with their dose.

Because dangerous IS what you are.

The downside is that you also carry around a great deal of uncertainty in your baggage. A thin skin which on the other hand you turn to your advantage by standing by it, acknowledging it and using it purely artistically.

An approach which is not all in all fundamentally Danish. Your approach is actually more British, which takes us back to Shakespeare - and to be or not to be. So on behalf of the Lauritzen Foundation and the Prize Committee, I should like to say: "To be or not to be a great actress - there is no doubt about it. Because you are.

Dear Paprika Steen. Congratulations on this year's female Lauritzen Prize 2010.

And so I shall - with Paprika's approval - permit myself to supplement my congratulations with a hug for your stand-in, Sofie Gråbøl. Congratulations.

Lars Wredstrøm,