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VILLA SALÓ – POWER AND POWERLESSNESS

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Much has been written about the recent theatre drama Villa Saló. Before the desolated villa in classy Østerbro opened to the public, many were appalled by the Danish-Austrian performance ensemble SIGNA's nerve to adapt the horrors of violent perversion in Marquis de Sade's novel *120 Days of Sodom* (1785) and Pier Paolo Pasolini's film *Saló – or the 120 Days of Sodom* (1975). The adaptation happened through an intense non-stop performance lasting from January 27th to March 14th 2010, where audience were invited to join the Magistrate, the Duke, the Bishop, and the President, the masters, in a fictive brothel. And where teen boys and girls, the children, were exploited in a celebration of libertinage and debauchery.

Dramatizing a brutal hierarchy with whipping and sexual violation as a code of conduct, SIGNA wished to state how injustice and perverted power is a present and prevailing problem in society: Porn, trafficking, child molestation, etc. are examples of how we consume and destroy each other. The drama showed how one person's satisfaction of needs can lead to the abuse of other human beings. As SIGNA asked on Villa Saló's website: "The things we usually call 'in-

humane' – are they really fundamentally human?"

Though terrified we decided to visit the Villa. What we thought would be a onetime experience of a theatre event evolved, so that we visited Villa Saló three times and spend some fifteen thought-provoking hours here – still curious for more. Thoughts and reflections rose from the transgressive experiences in Villa Saló, which vividly displayed ultimate power and deterministic powerlessness: In the Villa we were directly faced with the unjust brutality, which we usually only would encounter in the media, but this apparent option for action did not transform us into salvaging Superwomen. Instead Villa Saló's portrayal of perverted power inevitably caused us to feel as powerless as the victims inside – and outside – the house.

THE HORSE AND THE FUCKERS
Anxious we ring the doorbell at the Villa an evening in February. The door is opened by the maid Bernadina. She greets us politely with a Russian accent, and guides us to the hall where an armed guard searches us in a quite shameless manner. The main madam of the house, Madame Vaccari, casts a lazy glance at us from her seat in the sofa. She is intimidating.

Like most first-timers we are insecure where to go and how to act in the house. We enter the dining room, where this week's theme, 'shit', is enacted in an absurd setting. The children are naked and forced to

sing and dance in a circle showing their full night pots to the masters. Finally the Magistrate physically forces them to eat the faeces. The loud gagging sounds coming from the crying children makes us leave the room shocked and nauseated.

Searching for a refuge we end up in the basement where the guards, the 'fuckers', live. One of the children, Michette, is on the floor surrounded by fuckers and guests, anxiously hugging a three legged plastic horse. The fuckers tear it from her and throw it back and forth between them, laughing contemptuously. She pleads to have it back. The aggressive fucker, Maurizio, says: "You're so stupid. Do something stupid – then you can have you stupid horse." Michette is in despair. "I don't know what to do," she replies whispering. Maurizio increasingly aggressive keeps commanding her to act stupid, while Michette discouraged repeats the same sentence. We feel unpleasant observing the intensification of this asymmetrical discussion, without knowing how to interfere. One of us seizes the opportunity to challenge Maurizio as he, directed at the guests, says "Ok, Michette, then ask the guests what stupid people do," and bursts out: "Stupid people make other people do stupid things." We are content that someone finally had the wit to confront the provocative fuckers. The situation is turned, and we feel triumphant – briefly.

Without blinking Maurizio grabs our point and uses it at

his benefit: "Ok, Michette, then make your guests do something stupid". Once again he has the upper hand. We did not foresee this, though in retrospect it is obvious that nothing in Villa Saló can be changed with a smart reply. We are hit by a feeling of powerlessness and hopelessness.

Michette gets her horse after stupidly banging her head into the wall, as we leave the basement.

ABSOLUTE POWER

The President is a short man, yet he is certain that no one would ever harm him. His power is absolute and has nothing to do with physical power.

We are invited for a drink and a seat in his decadent room decorated in black and red satin, velvet and fur, now hoping to get to know the President and to understand his libertine motives – maybe even to change them? Confidently we believe that he will recognize our moral arguments as exceeding his, since he can be nothing but a simpleminded molester.

Critically we discuss the unethical brutality of the Masters. The President is unaffected and accounts for his actions referring to the libertine logic in which fulfilment of sexual and other needs – pleasure in all thinkable forms – is the only valid motive: "I do as I please, why shouldn't I – I have no restraints." In an attempt to offend us he describes his affection with human faeces as a development in his exploration

of pleasure. He is not a simple brute, though. With reference to philosophers such as Nietzsche, he expatiates on the concept of libertinage and the entitlement to dominate naturally bestowed upon the Masters. They are powerful and beyond the restraints of civil socialisation.

Cunningly we ask about the importance of psychical power. By referring to his stature and the fact that the masters are severely outnumbered should the house's remaining groups decide to revolt, we suggest that their power is only skin-deep. This does not concern him. He tells us how a guest wanted him to stop molesting a child. The President handed him his gun: "then make me stop!" Terrified the child screamed: "No, please don't hurt my Master!" The children know what serves them best: to please their masters. And they know no other reality, he explains.

We get ready to leave certain that we gave him something to think about. We acted and perhaps we changed something? Seconds after we cross the threshold, the President grabs his whip and an oversize dildo. He storms to the children's room, attacks the girl Augustine and starts raping her ruthlessly. Once again we freeze, shocked. We made no difference. Our morality and appeal to humanity is perceived as simple and naive. And maybe it is, inside the Villa at least.

I AM MY MASTER'S TOILET

Our last visit is towards the

end of Villa Saló. This evening we instantly sense an aggressive and restless energy. Except for us there are only a few guests – we are outnumbered by the house’s occupants. And we are expected.

Michette is called to take care of us. She greets us with shy politeness. The Magistrate enters and without hesitating walks straight to Michette and pushes her to the ground. She curls up at our feet aware that the Magistrate will not stop at this. He yells and kicks her and then finally pulls out his penis. It takes a while before anything happens. We sit frozen trying not to look, waiting for him to leave. The urine starts pouring down her back and onto the floor. He finishes and wipes himself in her blouse. Michette, still on the ground, whispers: “thank you, Master.” He kicks her and she replies: “I am my Master’s toilet, thank you, Master.” He leaves the hall shouting: “Now take care of your guests, lazy girl!”

We are stunned. As several times before we are met with the extremity of the cruel libertine logic of the house. Here the Magistrate is an authority that you fear to such an extent that you let him piss on a girl

lying helpless just in front of you. An incident as this is exactly what is common and startling in Villa Saló. What is frightening though is not necessarily the brutality displayed in front of you. In an odd way you learn to cope or avoid the violence and humiliation simply by leaving, when someone is molested. Just as you zap away from unpleasant pictures on the TV. But Villa Saló is not TV. It is a distorted reality where your presence affects the people in the house, and where you inevitably become a part of it. What daunts you is the fact that you have the obvious possibility to act and prevent the violence – but in most cases you do not. Whether this is caused by awareness of being in a theatrical universe, or if the action you take or do not take inside the house is similar to the action you would or would not take outside the house, is what Villa Saló forces you to reflect upon.

LASTING REFLECTIONS

Villa Saló offers no simple answers or solutions. The complexity of the Villa’s libertine logic is as extensive as the numerous torture methods used

on the children. The complexity of the performance forces us to perceive what we see as real; distorted and fictive, yes, but real. On one hand, Villa Saló is a display of human evil personified by the Masters. A display so brutal, that we can distance ourselves from it. And we can leave – zap away – when it is too much. On the other hand, we are confronted with the victims, and though they are actors, they feel pain, when their bare backs are whipped. This calls for the audience’s humanity, because how can you ignore this pain? In this perspective Villa Saló is an experience of oneself; of one’s actions and reflections as much as it is an experience of a theatre performance. The point in depicting such harshness is to make us reflect, act and feel compassion. Not just for those in the house, but for the victims outside this strange reality. So did we feel pity and compassion? Did we reflect after the leaving the villa? Yes. Did we change anything? No.

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