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Theater

In 'Kommer,' Grief Isn't All About the Pain and Tears It's a Time to Laugh, to Cry, and to Scratch Your Head

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Taking an abstract look at sorrow, the ensemble cast members of "Kommer" -- from left, Lukas Dijkema, Esther Snelder, Mischa van Dullemen, Saskia Meulendijks and Ton Heijligers -- show mourning has a sense of humor. (By Klaas Paradies -- Kassys)

Good grief, can you sincerely offer condolences at a funeral with an uprooted plant on your head? Someone does it in "Kommer," the blissfully weird meditation on sorrow from the Dutch troupe Kassys.

The multimedia show, which wraps up its three-day engagement tonight at the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center, has the calculated look and cadence of experimental theater. The six actors graze on sandwiches and water, chat in friendly tones too low to be properly heard, then strike ritualized poses of anguish that seem borrowed from modern dance.

Soon, though, the awkwardness of sympathizing and mourning in public becomes the subject of peculiar comedy. The group gathers in a formal semicircle, silently fiddling with the CD player on the table. "Danny Boy"? Too much. Bette Midler? Nah.

And then, well, what can they say to one another? How about, "Are you okay, kind of?" Or, from the widow to a somber man (the relationships aren't crystalline, nor are they essential for keeping up), "You may cry." That turns into an exhortation to weep, which grows into bravura grieving just to show how it's done, punctuated by break dancing.

Well, we all get stuck performing upon such occasions, right? Yet the show slips away from such easy thematic reduction, in part because it keeps the audience guessing about when to laugh (kindly, never cruelly) and when the characters are in real pain. Yes, these people may nibble on the potted plants, but they're also likely to erupt with real anger. And the two opposite actions seem to come from the same place.

This might strike some viewers as too abstruse, not to mention too slow. But the group's measured transitions are fascinatingly fragile; like the audience, the characters seem to have their antennae up for permission about how to respond. For patrons, confusion is a legitimate response. So is grinning madly for 45 minutes.

It's about then that a film breaks out. (No end of surprises in this one.) A large screen descends, the cast exits and the movie picks them up in the dressing room. The actors then go their separate ways in storylines that were obviously filmed in Europe.

What follows may be a case study of the differences between stage and film: The play is highly stylized and artificial, whereas the camera follows the actors into the most mundane corners of their lives. The tight quarters of an airplane bathroom, the dark interior of a car racing down the highway at night -- it's all suddenly real, and oddly compelling. The "actors" no longer seem to be there for us, but for themselves.

And who are these people we have come to recognize playing now? Director and actress Liesbeth Gritter doesn't entirely clue us in. But to some degree, they carry their characters -- or at least the lost, confused mood -- with them from stage to screen.

It's a lonely picture, yet still offbeat enough for, say, a goat to make a meaningful appearance, or for the notion of comfort food to be taken to an extreme that's, what -- funny? Disquieting? Fascinating, for sure, and touchingly human.

Kommer, by Kassys. Directed by Liesbeth Gritter. Coordination/assistant director, Mette van der Sijs; technical director, Klaas Paradies. With Lukas Dijkema, Ton Heijligers, Saskia Meulendijks, Esther Snelder and Mischa van Dullemen. Tonight at the Clarice Smith Center's Kogod Theatre. Call 301-405-2787 or visit <http://www.claricesmithcenter.umd.edu>