

Gisela Cremer

The Snarling Spectator

*The woman who beats
and whips senses her strength
and power. She senses life.
Ilse Koch is my sister. It is
vulnerable territory.
The spectator starts to snarl.
In good performances
The Bitch of Buchenwald is
like a dance to me. A dance
for life, not against it. A dance
that doesn't talk about
the guilty or the non guilty,
doesn't talk about being
or not being German or Jewish,
but talks about you and me,
under the surface.*

Many times after performing *Die Kommandeuse - The Bitch of Buchenwald* we offer public discussions. The most frequent question is: "Mrs Cremer, how do you feel being that evil Nazi-woman Ilse Koch? What does this performance do to you personally?"

The question is always asked in a certain tone of voice, a tone that only allows one answer. "I am *not* Ilse Koch!" I feel myself screaming silently. No, not at all, of course, yes, certainly not!

Private ground: mine? Ilse Koch's? The spectator's? Don't step on it!

"How do you feel being Ilse Koch?"

I had dreams at night. They weren't sweet. I yelled at my children with words I know from my performance. During the rehearsal period I took more baths than ever before. I wanted to quit this project so many times. The spectators love answers like this. That's exactly what they want to hear. The more I emphasise my negative feelings the better it is: "Oh, you can't imagine how awful it is to play Ilse Koch! Unbearable! Painful! After the performance I feel like running away, like hiding! I'm so ashamed and all I want to do is throw up! Puke it all out again!" ... as if the spectator needs to get the world in balance after the performance. Please, let's make it comfortable again! There is a rejection of everything that has just been exposed in the performance. It is too close - a forbidden landscape. Don't step on our fragile system of morality! An actress *must* feel awful and dirty after having played Ilse Koch!

In the beginning I actually gave the above answers - they were true in a way, and people were satisfied. But I felt lousy afterwards, like a traitor, as if I denied history, and myself. There's never just *one* truth.

What did the spectator see in the performance? A simple minded, ambitious woman, who wanted to be admired, respected and loved. In the concentration camp, Buchenwald, she experiences the possibility of acting out all the facets of human behaviour without being punished at



Gisela Cremer in *Die Kommandeuse*.
Photo: Arno Declair

any time. She carries out her everyday duties as a mother as well as walking through the camp insulting and beating up prisoners. It took me two years to present Ilse Koch not as a monster, but to investigate her real threat: her casualness, her banality. Fifty years after the Holocaust, after mountains of literature and reports on victims and perpetrators, at times in which torture and violence still exist - in cellars or camps, hidden or in front of the cameras - a desperate spectator tries to put this paradoxical world back into a homely, neat and tidy little box. Categorically, there shall be good and bad people, the sweeties and the monsters. And whoever gets close to a monster, even if it is in a play on stage, must at least feel sick afterwards.

“How do you feel being Ilse Koch?”

So many answers to this one question;

so many landscapes to enter. Let's take the answer that the spectator likes the least. It is very attractive to have permission to be completely unrestrained, to be sweet and destructive, co-operative and arrogant, sexy and murderous - all at the same time. It is fun to jump playfully from the lovely Snow White to her evil stepmother. It is a joy pretending to feast in luxury and extravagance, to be spoiled, to celebrate and to kill. The woman who beats and whips senses her strength and power. She senses life. Ilse Koch is my sister. It is vulnerable territory. The spectator starts to snarl.

In good performances *The Bitch of Buchenwald* is like a dance to me. A dance for life, not against it. A dance that doesn't talk about the guilty or the non guilty, doesn't talk about being or not being German or Jewish, but talks about you and me, under the surface. It is a dance around a concrete historical ground and yet to me it is timeless. It is not a loud dance with wild stamping movements, but a gentle one. It doesn't demand big exterior muscles, but it exhausts the muscular fibre deep below and the muscles of the heart. It is a loving look into the abyss where at the bottom we discover traces of our own faces: laughing, provocative, ugly.

This is frightening at first. But it is even more frightening to moan, to accuse, to look away or hide when we recognise ourselves. If we accept the grimace we catch sight of, it may become a good friend on our journey. A friend, a guardian angel: together with this companion we might dance in a better way through life. More painfully, yes, more dangerously, yes. But hopefully, also more honestly, more closely connected to all the possibilities of human behaviour. More sensually maybe. Uncomfortable in a positive way, because we still have to decide in which direction we want to dance, and with whom.

Now the snarling starts: "Do you mean we are all monsters? Cruel animals? Do you want to say we're all like Ilse Koch?" No! Yes! No! Yes! And then we argue about the difference between animals and human beings, and between 1938 and 1998, and between Ilse Koch and Gilla Cremer, and this and that and the other ... until I'm all confused.

It is exhausting not to know if you are doing the right thing or not. And I feel like this when I start to think or write about this performance. What does it do to me when people say I play Ilse Koch so very convincingly? That I *am* Ilse Koch in their eyes? Sometimes I'm really proud. Sometimes I'm really embarrassed and hurt. What does it mean to me that I feed my family by doing a performance about a concentration camp? Sometimes I earn good money from that story ...

There is one single place where I find the right answer in this labyrinth of questions: the stage. Maybe that's why I love my profession so much. The moment I perform all doubts are resolved. In each word, each action, in this elevated state of utmost

concentration it seems as if there is *one* answer, *one* truth for disorder, contradiction, dissonance. Then I know - even if it is just for one and a half hours that I am in the right spot in this world. This state is completely amoral. Then I'm happy to perform *The Bitch of Buchenwald*. Really happy.

GISELA CREMER (Germany) is an actress who conceives and performs her own solo productions. Founder of Theater Tilbut in 1981, since 1986 she has worked independently. Her first solo performance *Odyssée Embryonale - ein Fotodram* was performed more than 250 times for German speaking audiences. Her recent work includes *Morrison Hotel* and *Die Kommandeuse*, both of which she plays in English as well as German.