

# The British Theatre Guide

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## The Kunstenfestivaldesarts Diary (7)

*Dateline: 19th May, 2008*

### *Bonanza*

#### Berlin

Beurschouwburg

17, 18 May 16.00 and 20.00

19 May 20.00

English with Dutch and French subtitles

"You can only believe half of what you see and nothing you hear" is the opening gambit of *Bonanza*, spoken by Mark, a pleasant, reasonable young man and one of the town's solitary inhabitants.

*Bonanza* is set in the former gold-rush town of the same name in Colorado, USA. Since its heyday in the 19th century, when individual prospectors and mining corporations flooded the area and the town could count between 15,000 and 40,000 inhabitants, as well as a vast array of salons and brothels, it has shrunk to a permanent population of just seven, supplemented in the summer by a handful of people with holiday homes there.

I confess I came to the show with some prejudices and in expectation of being introduced to the type of white-trash, trailer-park folk who are trotted out for us so often in documentaries that aim to reinforce our attitudes to the good ol' US of A. I came away from the show my expectations utterly confounded, but equally completely flummoxed and wondering about humankind in general, myself included.

Why do we exhibit a general inability to co-habit peacefully? What is a healthy balance between human interaction and solitude? Are our territorial instincts doomed to be at war with our need to build communities? And why do we all seem to have an uncanny knack for seeking out a pristine earthly paradise only to sully it with our all-to-human flaws?

Berlin is a collective of documentary filmmakers (Bart Baele, Yves Degryse, Caroline Rochlitz) from Antwerp. In 2003 they started a series called *Holocene*, which refers to the current geological era. The point of departure is always a city or region. The pilot episode *Holocene 1 - Jerusalem* was presented in 2004. Subsequently, *Holocene 2 - Iqaluit* (2005) was filmed entirely in the isolated Inuit capital in the Arctic Circle. Their latest project,

*Moscow*, was originally planned for the festival, but was replaced by *Bonanza* due to technical problems.

I haven't seen anything of theirs before, so the replacement was fine with me. Having seen *Bonanza*, I'm eager to see more, because unlike most documentary filmmakers, they don't have an agenda which is grindingly obvious. They don't go into a location to get the inhabitants to give them sound-bites. Berlin arrives in a community and stays there long enough to give inhabitants the time to build trust and to risk saying what they think. They also present their work as theatre-film events, so that the audience are also a community, watching together, at a set time and in a set place, with no access to a remote control to zap to another channel and faced with a staging that reinforces the work on-screen and provokes reflection.

*Bonanza* consists of five small screens, one for each house in which the inhabitants reside, and above the screens is a model of the town with each house just above the screen on which its owner will have his/her say. In this way, we become very aware of the actual proximity of these dwellings and of these people to each other.

Having expected white-trash trapped in their trailers, I was surprised to discover that these are all people who live in such a remote place, 'far from the madding crowd', by preference, because they value their leisure and the wonders of Nature. These are not losers, at least not in the conventional sense of the word. They live in recently-constructed wooden houses, comfortable and spacious, containing books, ornaments, plants and pets. It's all very homely.

Gail paints water colours; her husband lovingly restores an ancient Fiat 500 to full working condition; Mary tells us she is an artist and writer with a counselling business she conducts over the phone. A Reverend Minister spends his time reading books on art and history and just about everything, except religion which he has left behind in Santa Fe. Mark, a single and still youngish man leads an active and self-sufficient life, chopping logs, walking the region, climbing the mountains. The newest inhabitants are a domesticated couple of women who seem to be middle-class and middle-aged and of independent income.

One starts to wonder though, why these people who live in such close proximity to each other, with the nearest petrol pump and shop 70 kilometres away, have no contact at all. Do they invite each other over for coffee, stop to exchange congenial small-talk or send the neighbour a slice of the fresh-baked cake? Not at all, in fact they don't talk to each other and five of the seven have been involved in some sort of police business or litigation concerning the town or the other inhabitants. In fact, one starts to wonder if these people have moved to a remote region because they are in love with the environment and the peace it brings or are they really living in self-

imposed solitary confinement because they find communication with their fellow humans difficult or even onerous.

*Bonanza* is fascinating and raises questions about the ways in which humans project their own irrational fears onto others: the ways in which we entertain prejudices about the Other that justify our barriers and boundaries and walls. The five screens are a device giving each inhabitant their own say, but equally reinforcing their isolation and their need to maintain distance. One asks oneself where positive qualities such as personal strength and self-reliance cross over into the negative qualities, the stubbornness born of fear that one's convictions might succumb when confronted with alternative viewpoints. Is this the pioneering spirit or the need to escape for self-protection?

*Jackie Fletcher*