

An artist's life behind the scenes

Review: RON BROUWER
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On Easter Monday the world-famous singer and musical performer Ute Lemper introduced her new programme 'Between yesterday and tomorrow' to her audience at the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam. During the past quarter century she has performed all over the globe. The acclaimed artist revealed her extensive experience with theatrical facilities to FMI.

Ute Lemper has earned worldwide acclaim as a singer, dancer, actress and painter. She dazzled audiences in Vienna, Berlin, Paris, London, New York and Las Vegas in leading roles in musicals, among which her award-winning performances in 'Cabaret' and 'Chicago.' Her solo repertoire includes compositions by Kurt Weill / Bertolt Brecht, Philip Glass, Nick Cave and Elvis Costello. Her latest CD and current programme are titled 'Between yesterday and tomorrow.' Ute Lemper lives in Manhattan with her partner Todd Turkisher and her three children Max, Stella and Julian.

Her world behind the scenes looks rather different from what Ute Lemper presents to her audiences. Her motherhood and family life come first. Besides that, Ute Lemper is a businesswoman, who single-handedly manages nearly every single aspect of her performing career. "From my office at home I make arrangements with booking agents all over the world. A performance cycle comes about organically. It starts with an invitation to perform in, let's say Amsterdam. That may coincide with an invitation from Istanbul. The other concerts are arranged around those dates."

Lemper controls all contracts and arranges all transport. "I do this for my musicians, myself and our luggage, which includes the double bass, guitars and cymbals. The fact that the band members are based on different continents only adds to the logistics' complexity. Even so, it is a challenge to create a feasible touring schedule. I manage my affairs myself; looking over an assistant's work would take just as much time as arranging everything myself."

Choice of venue

The local promotor is responsible for selecting the particular venue where Lemper performs. "I perform various genres. The promotor knows exactly what kind of audience I will have in front of me. I generally perform in symphony halls, orchestra halls or opera houses and sometimes in places that are mainly used for rock concerts. We place explicit technical demands on the sound equipment. Hiring that is contracted out to the promotor. A specialized company will provide the sound system: the monitor system, the onstage mixing desk, the microphones and so on. The concert hall itself normally provides the so-called 'backline': the grand piano, the drum set, a replacement guitar, a replacement bass, and the amplification equipment for the auditorium."

Each venue has its own specific characteristics. "The Concertgebouw has unique acoustics. This requires an adapted playing style and amplification. A balanced mix of my monitor system and the PA inside the auditorium provides the ideal dimension to project my voice into the room. To me, singing is very visual. My voice is my instrument and I need to give it free range.

Halls that have a very 'dry' sound, where I can only rely on my monitor system, make me feel as though I'm stuffed, as if you stuff a trumpet with paper."

Besides her visual appearance, including her attire and props, visibility and proximity to her audience are significant to Lemper: "At the Concertgebouw we removed the barrier that normally adorns the front of the stage. I used the front of the relatively high stage more than I normally do with a view to visibility to the people in the front rows. I prefer halls where I can be close to my audience to those with huge orchestra pits, that create a distance."

Visitors' facilities

The visitors' facilities are the venue's responsibility: "The promotor will implicitly book a venue that is suitable to accommodate my audience. That will offer sufficient and clean restrooms, people won't have to queue endlessly for drinks, the seats will be comfortable. I usually perform a set without an intermission. Consequently, people mainly use the restrooms and the bars before and after the concert."

The ambiance often incites inspiration. "Especially nice are the open air concerts, when the moon shines and the trees move in the breeze... The Herod Atticus Theatre in Athens is truly magical; the ancient Greek amphitheatre with its original marble seats and its old stage portals, that is dominated by the Acropolis. Other wonderful places are the Sydney Opera House, Carnegie Hall, the Palacio de Bellas Artes in Mexico City, Teatro alla Scala in Milano, Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris and the beautiful Concertgebouw. They all have marvellous acoustics. The heartwarming response from our audiences inspires too."

No two venues are truly comparable. Whether newly constructed or historic, aspects such as draft, air moisture, routing and the level of comfort will differ from one venue to the next. The quality of the artist facilities don't affect Lemper's performance in the least. "Onstage it may all seem glitter and glamour, but behind the scenes, apart from soundchecks, life involves airports, hotels, packing and unpacking. In the end it is a craftsmanship. Like the painter, who has paint under his fingernails, we're simply working people. The dressing rooms suffice to prepare before the performance. Sometimes I find it too bourgeois if it's very glamorous."

Spartan

Regularity and proper nourishment are essential to any artist. In that respect Lemper is something of a Spartan: "My daily programme is rather full. When I am on tour I have little time to myself. I never eat before a concert and I don't drink any alcohol either; I need to be focused. I love a glass of wine after the show, though. Often I have my cold dinner then." The promotor provides the hotel rooms, and food and beverages at the venues; Lemper provides everything else, including daily premiums for her musicians.

Catering differs from one culture to the next. "We are always especially looking forward to the fresh pasta dinners in Italy". Cultural differences also influence the repertoire that Lemper performs: "Our programme differs from one location to the next, depending on the country and venue we perform. The German repertoire traditionally forms the centerpiece of the concert. Around that I can experiment. Our approach to the songs depends on where we play. I always present a different programme from the previous time."