

## *Life as we know it* – an earthy sci-fi fantasy about an indefinite future

A text by Satu Herrala

As theatres and festivals are cautiously opening again I go back to watching the last performance I saw in a theater before the spread of Covid-19 closed performing arts venues everywhere in Finland in November 2020: *Life as we know it* by Maija Hirvanen ja Juha Valkeapää, which premiered at Espoo City Theater as the opening act of Baltic Circle International Theater Festival. This is the first collaboration of Hirvanen and Valkeapää, two Finnish performing artists with an international following, who both have a versatile and expansive body of work. Hirvanen's work compasses choreography and performance for stage, public spaces and galleries as well as writing, facilitating, curating and teaching theory and practice. Valkeapää is a vocal artist and performance maker who creates performances, installations, radio pieces and soundscapes. He has also worked as a curator and organiser. They began working on *Life as we know it* in 2018 when expectations of how life would be in 2020 were still unimaginable for most of us.

The stage is lit in dim purple light and the backdrop glimmers with a complex pattern, like the surface of a sea glimmering with possibility. Hirvanen and Valkeapää collaborate with the light and stage designer Jenni Pystynen and sound designer and musician Ville Kabrell for the piece. Both Pystynen and Kabrell contribute to the work with subtle design practices that occasionally grow into monumental depths and heights. Their work brings a sci-fi atmosphere to Hirvanen and Valkeapää's text and movement-based story telling.

The two artists enter the stage. Hirvanen begins. "Let's imagine I spend a lot of time with dogs..." *Life as we know it* is a kind of adults' play of imagining the possible futures, starting from near future and moving towards a distant one. She performs a monologue in which she talks about growing up with dogs and growing dogs, breeding them into life-partners for humans with a similar life expectancy. The monologue turns into an imaginative contact improvisation dance with a dog. She is clearly very trained in sharing weight with another body so that even when the other (dog) body is imagined I can see how her body responds to the weight of the fictional dance partner. Not small, not big but a middle sized dog. She is a brilliant performer who holds the attention of the audience from one moment to another with subtle shifts and crisp clear gestures.

Valkeapää joins off stage impersonating an instructor who invites Hirvanen to open her nasal cavities and find a good scent. There's something dog-like in Hirvanen. The more I look at her the more she becomes like a hybrid between canine and human mammal. Her logic, her timing, her attention are not human only. She identifies herself in the piece as a mutant. Next she is sent off to look for the scent of the future. Here I remember FutureFest, a festival I visited in London in 2016 that displayed a strange mix of contemporary art and social and technological innovations spiced up with forced positive entrepreneurial spirit. Every festival guest entering the venue got a small glass bottle containing the scent of the future: faint citrus. Hirvanen doubts that the future really has a distinct scent but the closest she can imagine is the scent that stays on the hand that has held a hand of a child.

It's Valkeapää's turn to take over the stage. He is a contemporary story-teller whose voice encompasses an exceptional range of possibilities. "Let's imagine I'm on a sandy beach..." He imagines life-style brands from a dystopian future where basic human functions and interactions are packaged into technological innovations, capitalised and sold back to us:

Slow-Time Registered Trademark. Touch Registered Trademark. Hirvanen joins, holding his head. A look at Great Thunberg's left eye. A square full of people. A group of people linking arms, making a wall, stopping traffic on a busy street. A group of people dressing in cement bags, breaking into a concrete factory... His brain melting into her hands, becoming part of the group's brain.

Lights dim. The backdrop turns from blue to golden and then to turquoise green. Hirvanen continues. "Let's imagine a strange feeling..." Her body and voice morph again into another character who feels fungi in the fingertips and who dances the rain down. Through Ville Kabrell's sound design Hirvanen's breathing and her spells turn into something like a cry of an eagle screaming in the thunder storm, and then into electronic music combining Daft Punk and galactic symphony. *Life as we know it. Life as we don't know it.*

The backdrop is glimmering with shades of purples and blues, with a touch of turquoise and gold every now and then. We travel from funghi to soil to plants to reptiles to birds to mammals to human bodies. We move between micro and macro scales. How to evoke the imagination for the future on stage in the middle of global pandemic? What could it be? Is there grief? Despair? Is there any way out? Some hope? Is there yelling or whispering? Which forces are pulling them? Hirvanen and Valkeapää position themselves somewhere between critical cynicism and sincerity. They take a vigilant distance to the looming catastrophes; they are not emotional about what mounts ahead, at least not yet. What is pulling them is a retreat back to soil: the disintegration and decay of the human.

Towards the end of the piece the two artists meet on stage. There is tenderness in the meeting and a sense of acting out something inevitable. There is proximity, softness, vulnerability. Bodies always carry a vulnerability within; it shows up the moment one gives in to gravity and leaves verticality. They drag and accompany each others bodies across the floor. They yield into each other's hands in turns. *Let's imagine...* continues, now at the beach somewhere in a fictional future. Then in the forest, where the body is left to die, as agreed, to be left as food for others, to decompose, to transform into a birch tree over years, with a moss growing on its branches. The artists embrace the end with observance and acceptance.

There is a desire to live, to act, to halt an emerging disaster. It blends with a desire to let go of human form and history, to disappear. The grip holding on to life as we know it loosens. Hirvanen and Valkeapää are looking for a portal to begin a new era where humans have decomposed and transformed into interspecies parliament meeting on a stone wall at the edge of town – as moss. Yet the same questions remain. How to keep things together? How to keep life together? What does the bird think about? How to continue?

I remember very well the feeling of care and safety I had in the theater back in November 2020. We sat in every second seat wearing masks, our hands disinfected. We waited patiently to enter and exit one row at the time. We said hello and congratulation without hugs and kisses. We left for home early. I felt cared for. I had a heartening sense of theater as a devoted, regardful, even sacred fellowship. We are (always) at the threshold of the unknown and we may acknowledge we are there together when we gather in a live performance. Nobody actually knows what happens next. May it unfold here and now as we witness it with reverence.

Perhaps one important role of art in society is to expand our scope of imagination of what could be so we could be more ready to resist or embrace what is on its way. *Life as we*

*know it* is not at all representing life as we know it but opening possible imaginable directions towards the unknown future that, as we have recently witnessed, can change its course tremendously quickly.