

POPPULISME-NRC

In the pitch-black satire "POPpulism," Het Filaal theatermakers traces the rise of a fascist demagogue. The terrifying entanglements are perfectly balanced by the witty puppetry and clever text.

"A fence solves everything!" The text could have come right out of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's mouth last week, but is sung in the youth theater performance *POPpulism* by a fascist mob whipped up by a power-hungry demagogue. This Barrie has tricked the residents of a valley village into believing that their neighbours atop the mountain have stolen the sun, and therefore they themselves must live in the shade. Based on this one conspiracy theory, he builds a grassroots movement to help him gain power, plunging both communities into doom.

Director Monique Corvers' smartest invention is to tell this story of mass manipulation in the form of a puppet theater performance. The amazing puppeteers interact with their puppets at various points, but leave no doubt that they are literally pulling the strings, even if their characters don't like it themselves. The performance's grimly absurd atmosphere is immediately highlighted well in the first scene by Ramses Graus, who makes his puppet say all sorts of embarrassing things when he threatens to revolt.

Eva Gouda's razor-sharp text accurately traces how a society can slide toward fascism. In a hilarious scene reminiscent of the film *Don't Look Up*, in which an approaching all-destroying comet is denied, Barrie is retorted to on an Op1-like TV talk show by an astronomer, who patiently explains that it is impossible to steal the sun and that a mountain simply produces shade. However, Barrie effortlessly sets aside her arguments by calling "shade" a conspiracy, and her knowledge about the sun based on nothing. After all, she's never been there, has she? With a fluid combination of fact-free outrage, nostalgia for a nonexistent past and the creation of a common enemy, Barrie sweeps all opposition from the table.

The pitch-black satire thus created is terrifying to mature viewers who see through the implications, but is kept in balance by the cast's infectious acting, Gábor Tarjan's nicely unsettling mix of samples, jingles and percussion, and the large amount of absurd jokes. It is simultaneously hilarious and creepy when Barrie has a statue of himself built so large that it takes the last of the sun out of the valley, but he then blames the mountain people and uses that as a *casus belli*. *POPpulism*, up to and including the final scene, is full of great finds like this, which painfully foreshadow how easily a community can be drawn into fascism.

