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The Kummer family and their woes



MARIE-JEANNE URECH:
"Les Valets de nuit",
Edition l'Aire, Vevey, 2010.
German translation
by Lis Künzli:
"Schnitz", Bilgerverlag,
2017. 288 pages,
around CHF 26.

"The silhouette of the commission agent drew near to the icy window, suddenly his face appeared fragmented in the candlelight of a birthday cake." This opening sentence suggests that the agent is not bringing good news. The Kummer family, like many others, are in arrears with their mortgage payments. But today they are celebrating Zobeline's fifth birthday. Even her father Nathanael, who holds down five different jobs, and her mother Rose, who works tirelessly selling vitamin supplements door to door, are at home. The other family members are Zobeline's brother Yapaklu, Seraphin, who has been traumatised by war, and Philanthropie, the chubby singer. She has always lived in the house and only ever eats "Schnitz", a kind of puff pastry. Every evening she helps the family and their neighbours forget about life's troubles by performing her songs. The two children are left to their own devices and bunk off school. While wandering around deserted streets they stumble across an unusual vending machine selling French fries which conceals a secret.

The story in Marie-Jeanne Urech's book "Schnitz" does not have a specific geographical or temporal setting. It tells of a burst property bubble, the decline of the steel industry and the Kummer family. Winter and the cold predominate from start to finish. When Nathanael clears snow with the ploughshare in the dark streets at night, even the reader shudders with cold. The author paints a gloomy picture, but one which possesses a certain magical quality. This is also created by surreal characters like Philanthropie, who seems to have stepped straight out of a children's fantasy story. Humorous, never downbeat or negative, the author keeps the hope of a happy ending alive. This social drama is fairytale-like but never detached from reality. It is a delightful read.

Marie-Jeanne Urech, born in 1976, attended school and university – where she studied sociology and anthropology – in Lausanne before going to film school in London. She works as a director and freelance writer in Lausanne. This novel was published under the title of "Les Valets de nuit" back in 2010 and won the Prix Rambert. This prize has been awarded to an author from French-speaking Switzerland every three years since 1898. The translation into German by Lis Künzli was published in 2017 with the support of Pro Helvetia. She has done an outstanding job of conveying the author's poetic language in German without using flowery phrases.

RUTH VON GUNTEN

The bard from Basel-Country



FLORIAN SCHNEIDER
WITH ADAM TAUBITZ
"Schangsongs 2".
Flo Solo Duo Trio, 2017.

Florian Schneider's versatility is remarkable. He is best known for his role in the musical "The Phantom of the Opera" in which he appeared over 500 times in Basel. However, he has also sung at other major musical theatre venues in Europe and performed as a lyrical tenor on the opera stages of the German-speaking world. His repertoire also includes songs from Brecht as well as chansons in dialect, which few people are aware of. Florian Schneider is becoming increasingly passionate about this genre of music.

A few years ago, the Basel-Country-born singer released an album in dialect entitled "Schangsongs". The follow-up is now out and enjoying unexpected success. Florian Schneider's track in dialect "Alts, chalts Hus" went straight to number 1 in the chart for German-speaking artists, while his album "Schangsongs 2" was crowned "album of the month" in the same listing. This chart is not an official hit parade but rather reflects the views of independent experts and music journalists from Germany, Austria, Belgium and Switzerland and is regarded as an important benchmark.

On "Schangsongs 2", Florian Schneider's voice is resonant and at times has a gravelly edge. The similarities to Paolo Conte and Tom Waits are unmistakable in places but in the end his vocals are always softer and smoother. Many of his songs are based on a Tom Waits' melody to which Schneider has added lyrics in dialect. The lyricist sings about his rural home and universal subjects such as love, solitude and death.

His lyrics are sometimes acerbic and morbid but mainly gentle and humorous. In "Alts, chalts Hus", Florian Schneider romanticises about his haunted childhood home, while "Heb di" tells a tender tale of fleeting love. "Bhüet di Gott, du chleises Härz, s beschet vo mir blibt do bi dir... Und lachsche der morn en andre a und lüpfesche der Rock im neggschte Ma, wenn d Wält au morn scho zämmebracht, hüt bisch bi mir die ganze Nacht." (Take care sweetheart, the best of me lies here with you... and if tomorrow another man catches your eye and you lift your skirt for him or the sky falls in, today you'll spend all night with me.)

Florian Schneider plays the acoustic guitar on 14 of the album's tracks. He is accompanied by the magnificent German violinist Adam Taubitz who has made his name in classical music and jazz. This instrumentation lends a fragility to the songs in dialect which suits the lyrics wonderfully.

MARKO LEHTINEN