
PUSHWAGNER – THREE ESSAYS ON AN ARTIST

by Fredrik Strömberg





Mejløender, Petter. *Pushwagner* (English Edition). Oslo, Magikon, 2008. ISBN: 978-82-92863-07-7. 58 pages.

Hariton Pushwagner is a phenomenon. The Norwegian artist is one of the earliest creators of graphic novels in the world, working with surprisingly, almost anachronistically artistic, silent, multi-layered, allegorical visual stories as early as the late 1960s. His work did not garner much publicity until the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, though. A mere decade ago he was totally down and out, homeless and on drugs, selling his whole artistic estate to survive. Now, in 2012, the 70-plus-year-old Pushwagner is one of the most highly celebrated Norwegian artists: he exhibits internationally, his art has been acquired by the world's most prestigious museums, and his magnum opus *Soft City* is not only unanimously hailed as a masterpiece by the critics, but is also quickly becoming the best-selling Norwegian graphic novel of all times, despite it being between three and four decades old.

There is no doubt that Pushwagner is an enigma, and the buzz around him is increasing day by day. Born in Oslo in 1940 as Terje Brofos, early on he embarked on a career as an artist. It was not until he met celebrated Norwegian author Axel Jensen in 1968 that everything clicked, though. They embarked on a journey together to create a new form of adult comics, visual stories that would combine the iconic simplicity of pop art with a genuine will to tell stories – stories that were aimed at making a difference politically, raising the consciousness of the readers on various political issues. Jensen's and Pushwagner's relationship lasted many years, but for several reasons not much of what they produced was ever published or even finished.

Fast-forward to the twenty-first century when Pushwagner, after numerous more or less fruitful escapades around the world, had ended up back in Norway destitute, homeless and a drug addict. Against all odds, and like a Phoenix, he was (re)discovered as an artist, *Soft City* was published for the first time to great public acclaim (by the Norwegian alternative comics publisher No Comprendo Press in 2008), he won a major case against his former business partner who had swindled him out of most of his art, and he exhibited in Oslo, Berlin, and Sydney, among other places, in a dizzyingly accelerating speed. Right now he is producing more art than ever before and there is even talk of a Pushwagner museum in Oslo. Not bad for someone who only a few years ago was set on a course of self-destruction.

Petter Mejløender has written the first, and so far only biography of Pushwagner, and he is very well suited to do just that. Mejløender is an experienced author and has written several biographies before, including one on Axel Jensen, and he seems to actually be able to understand



the rather strange and erratic Pushwagner, both as an artist and as a person. Mejløender gives a very personal view of Pushwagner, having been given access not only to his art but also to the person himself in a series of interviews. Mejløender has not written a straight biography, even though the basic facts of Pushwagner's life are there, but rather more philosophically discusses the work and the artist concurrently. It becomes evident that Pushwagner is very well read and takes more inspiration from literature than from art, and Mejløender underlines this in his use of a plethora of literary quotes when analyzing Pushwagner's art and comics, breathing life into what otherwise could have been either a very dry account of the artist's life, or a purely academic analysis of his art. As the text stands, it is both enlightening and entertaining, and gives a good first insight into the mind of Pushwagner.

All is not golden, though. *Pushwagner* is a rather slim volume of a mere 58 pages, which basically consists of three short essays (some of them also published in the Norwegian press) on Pushwagner's life and work, and a large proportion of the pages are used for reproductions of his art and his comics. Thus, it is neither the big, end-all biography of Pushwagner or the much needed, oversized coffee table book with reproductions of all his major works (his intricate, almost obsessively detailed art just screams for a book much, much bigger than this almost novel sized volume). But it is a good start, and in terms of writing still the best way to get to know this extremely interesting artist.

One thing is for certain: reading *Pushwagner* will inevitably make you want to read the graphic novel *Soft City* – and reading them together certainly enhances the experience of both books. Having said this, there is still a need for both a much more substantive biography and a really lavish art book with as much of Pushwagner's art as possible. I for one will buy both when they appear.