

In 1835, Georg Büchner, living in exile in Strasbourg, took an interest in the three weeks poet and playwright Jakob Lenz spent at the Ban de la Roche in 1777, staying with pastor Oberlin. Using this twenty-one-day parenthesis in the heart of the Vosges as a springboard, he tried to give voice to the agonies of a writer struggling with existential questions. In that village, and more precisely within the community of believers surrounding the pastor, Lenz feels welcome but slowly realises that the only answer offered to his anxieties is a faith he already rejected as a young man. If salvation exists, it cannot be this one... By adapting this very intense story and adding excerpts from plays and dramas and notes taken by pastor Oberlin himself, Cornelia Rainer draws the portrait of a suffering man unable to find peace and invites us to discover the work of a writer all too often overshadowed by his mentor Goethe. Staying as close as possible to Büchner's writing, with its alternating harmonies and disharmonies, the Austrian director has imagined a spectacular scenography, a musical theatre in which the modern score, with its percussion instruments, clashes with the religious songs Jakob Lenz may have heard during his exile in the Vosges. From the weight of religion to the power of the universe, from the violence of the elements to the hypersensitivity of the soul... Lenz opens the door to Romanticism.

CORNELIA RAINER

Born in 1982 in the Tyrol region of Austria, Cornelia Rainer studied theatre and music at the University of Vienna, at the Sorbonne Nouvelle, and at Paris 8, with professors like Georges Banu and Jean-Marc Pradier. Participating in internships and workshops throughout the world, she learnt among other things about the art of the Beijing Opera in Taipei. From 2005 to 2009, she was assistant director at the Burgtheater in Vienna, where she directed her first shows. She was then invited on national stages in Germany and Austria, among which the Thalia Theater Hamburg, the Bregenz Festival, or the Klagenfurt National Theatre. In 2012, she founded her own company, *Theater Montagnes Russes*, a reference to the scenography she came up with for her show *LENZ*, created for the Salzburg Festival. In 2014, she received the Outstanding Artist Award for her direction of *Jeanne*, an adaptation of the legend of Joan of Arc for young audiences. In 2017, she will present a new version of her adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* at the Burgtheater, called *Hamelt, Ophelia und die anderen* (*Hamlet, Ophelia, and the others*), which focuses on the points of view of the play's young protagonists.

GEORG BÜCHNER

In December 1835, Georg Büchner started a novella he would never finish, *Lenz*, in which he reimagined the time the poet and playwright Jakob Lenz spent with pastor Oberlin. An exile, just like his model, Büchner had to flee Hesse because of his political writings, not long after writing his first play, *Danton's Death*. While studying to become a doctor, he wrote *Leonce and Lena* in 1836, then *Woyzeck*, his final play, which also remains unfinished. He died on 19 February 1837 in Zurich, aged 23, of typhus.

INTERVIEW WITH CORNELIA RAINER

Why did you choose this literary text by Georg Büchner?

Cornelia Rainer: Reading that text, I immediately wanted to stage it for the theatre. I went to the Ban de la Roche in the Vosges, where the Lutheran pastor Johann Friedrich Oberlin had withdrawn to preach, and where he welcomed poet Jakob Lenz for twenty-one days. There I discovered, in the Oberlin Museum, the notes the pastor wrote during the poet's stay. Those notes became the basis of my work on Georg Büchner. I conducted historical research about that stay, but also about the work of Jakob Lenz, which is very controversial. I found it interesting to work on those various texts: the story by Georg Büchner, the texts by Lenz, and then the pastor's notes. Büchner's text is extremely dense but also very musical. It's made of harmonies and disharmonies, with very different themes that keep crossing and coming back. It's based on the musicality of the text that I developed a musical show that immerses us in the work of Jakob Lenz, but also in the personality of the writer.

Can you tell us more about the music of the show?

I think *LENZ* is a work that should be listened to rather than read. There's a sort of movement in the writing, a unique sensitivity to nature, to the powerful forces of the universe. It's that hypersensitivity that I tried to transpose with music. I came up with a musical score and called on a percussionist, who accompanies us and allows us to establish a dialogue with Lenz. I also wanted to include religious chants, such as Bach's cantatas. I found the "friction" between those chants and the modern composition interesting. Music plays a large part in all my shows; I trained as a singer and an oboist, and I was raised in a musical family: one of my sisters is a harpist, another plays the timpani, and my brother plays the trumpet. They all belong to the band *Franui*, with whom I've worked on a number of projects. We're from a small village in the Tyrol, and I spent a lot of family holidays in the Alps, where nothing much happens and where playing music is part of everyday life.

Did you use other texts for your textual montage?

Yes, among others texts by pastor Oberlin and texts by Jakob Lenz, like *The New Menozo* or *Pandæmonium Germanicum*. I also used texts by the poets of the *Sturm und Drang* ("Storm and Stress"), this great literary movement to which Jakob Lenz belonged. He defended the freedom to create, opposed literary rules, and defended an approach to art that put imagination at its centre. You don't get the same impression of Lenz whether you read Büchner or Oberlin. Georg Büchner copied entire passages from the pastor's notes that became part of his story, but he also developed a very personal vision of Jakob Lenz. I try to focus on the presence of Jakob Lenz as a stranger in the village community of Ban de la Roche, that of a lonely individual who can't ever seem to fit in. Büchner describes first and foremost an inner state. I used it as inspiration, as a compass to create our musical composition.

Will we be in the pastor's house, then?

Yes. The play is about the encounters Jakob Lenz experiences during the twenty-one days of his journey. What I'm interested in is the relationship between a small community and the stranger they welcome, and the trouble he has fitting in because of his inner state, both from a mental and emotional point of view. His arrival creates an upheaval in the community, unsettles it. The transformation the poet goes through when he comes in contact with the pastor and his community is at the heart of my work, with all the interferences that causes. I put religion at the centre of that confrontation. For Oberlin, the only cure for man is faith, while for Lenz, who's himself tormented, faith can't bring salvation. If the cure doesn't work, what could then heal Jakob Lenz of his great malaise? Oberlin has to face his own limits, while Lenz's presence leads to a real questioning, to an "updating" of ways of thinking. Helping the other thus becomes an act of redefinition of what being human means.

Can you tell us something about the scenography of the show?

Scenography plays an important part. A roller coaster symbolises the mountains, but we're also working with very realistic elements that clearly belong to Lenz's time. Even though the story is old, the questions it poses are timeless. Lenz wanders Europe without ever being accepted. He thought he could be a "European man," but he found himself surrounded by conservatives. In his work, Lenz often uses the words "Schiffbruch," or shipwreck, to express the failure of his own existence. The image shows how isolated and rejected he felt. He denied that fateful word, unwilling to surrender his own strength and will to survive, fighting to the end for his freedom.

Büchner is very critical of pastor Oberlin's religious thinking.

He's very critical, but in his story, the pastor isn't a hard man, nor is he intolerant or negative. He's a man who's mistaken but truly wants to help Jakob Lenz. Similarly, he doesn't try to "sanctify" the poet, who's entirely focused on himself and on his problems, and whose ego sure is sizable. There's a contradiction between the man and his work here, a work that claims to be open to the problems of mankind while the man, at this particular moment, is entirely unable to open up to anyone else. In that context, the question of pain is also central. How can so many people suffer throughout the world? In his radical confrontation to that theme, we can draw parallels with Holderlin, Kleist, and Robert Walser.

If Georg Büchner writes about Jakob Lenz, it's also because he feels a certain kinship with him. He's an exile, in deep psychological pain. Will that closeness be felt in your work?

Of course, although not directly. They were both very aware of the evolution of society. They fought for social justice and equality. They both saw social inequalities as unacceptable. In Büchner's *Hessische Landbote*, he argues that social revolution will only happen after the victory of the poor over the rich. Büchner and Lenz were both the victims of political repression, but Lenz also had to fight his master, Goethe, in order to be seen as a writer. Today still he remains unjustly in the shadow of the genius of Weimar. Goethe played an active part in this, he used to compare Jakob Lenz to his character Werther, comparing Werther's pain and suffering to Lenz's.

Does LENZ also illustrate Georg Büchner's disillusionment, following the failure of political and social movements?

Yes, and I chose texts by Jakob Lenz that describe that disappointment you'll also find in Georg Büchner. It's one of the reasons for the conflict between the pastor and the poet and, because of that, it had to be in the play. The only way he can hold on to his convictions is through his writing. Writing is his only way out, his only cure. He lives inside an ideal, refusing to compromise.

Lenz says: "Can't you hear that awful voice that screams all around the horizon and that we usually call silence..." Is silence important to you?

It is essential, because I think it is what best describes Lenz's world. In a way, he lived in his own utopias, but also in Goethe's silent shadow. He died in the silence of his isolation. That sentence is key if you want to see and hear his hours of solitude in that small village where nothing much happens. The past, the present, and the future are all sources of pain, and he tries to escape that pain that comes from his inability to fulfill his desires and leaves him stuck in a permanent state of hesitation, almost out of time. I'm very interested in this "nothing," on the stage and in life.

Interview conducted by Jean-François Perrier

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