



CORPS DE MOTS

INTERVIEW WITH CHRISTIAN OLIVIER

You were invited with Têtes raides to close the 68th edition of the Festival d'Avignon with your show *Corps de mots* (*Body of Words*). You are first and foremost a band. What is your relationship with theatre stages?

Christian Olivier: Since the beginning, I've had the desire to bring the music of Têtes raides to different locations. Our first form of expression is of course the concert, but we always see it as a show, regardless of the venue. The idea of being on stage is central to our story, which is our first link to theatre. Whether you're presenting music or drama, I think that as soon as you stand on a stage, the fundamental elements at play are the same: a space and a number of bodies and voices. Finding a balance between those elements and the audience is part of the same research. We started playing very early in venues not meant for musical shows, we worked with circus performers, people who worked in cinema, dancers, actors. My personal experiences in those fields strengthened my conviction that we should turn our concerts into full-fledged shows. As a spectator, the history of theatre struck me, back when I first dove into literature. Back then, I went to all of Patrick Chéreau's shows in Nanterre, to Peter Brook's at the Bouffes du Nord, and to Ariane Mnouchkine's at the Cartoucherie. It was a powerful time of discovery. Before that, I'd never been an avid theatregoer, and to see those daring forms invade whole stages meant a lot to me. It still does. Literature, texts, the word itself, of course, but also those venues. I remember the first time I went to the Bouffes du Nord, to see Brook's *Mahabharata*, I left thinking, "Têtes raides will play there one day." It took us ten years, but we did it. I also wanted us to play in opera houses. We were still labelled a rock band and so, beyond what the experience could bring us as performers, I was curious to see our audience in an Italian opera house, which means that they would have to sit, for instance, which necessarily changes the way you listen to the music.

In addition to playing in different venues, how did you first think of changing your relationship to the text itself by putting the words of great authors to music?

The trigger for the creation of *Body of Words* was a show we did at the Odéon-Théâtre de l'Europe, invited by Olivier Py and Paul Rondin, a musical reading around Jen Genet for the hundredth anniversary of his birth in November 2010. That experience convinced me that we needed to create a show about poetry and great authors. That's always been the kind of work we've done with Têtes raides. On most of our albums, a writer—usually a poet, living or dead—is invited, by which I mean we put his work to music. But that night exclusively dedicated to Genet truly confirmed my intuition that we could devote more space to texts written by others, to great texts. At about the same time, Christian Schiaretti for "États du poème" ("States of the Poem") and Christian Siméon for the association Le Printemps des Poètes (The Spring of Poets) asked me to write a text around the theme of "La Voix des poèmes" ("The Voice of the Poems"). That's how the text "Body of Words" came to be; it's about the voice as a performer. In it, I define us as a sort of "drive belt." I don't read that text on stage because I think it should be read alone, but you can hear fragments in "Corps de cris" ("Body of Shouts"), which is part of the show. All that led us to the creation of *Body of Words*, which we played first in the Bouffes du Nord in December 2012, then at the Lavoir Moderne Parisien for three weeks, before going on tour.

You describe the show as a musical reading. What would the difference between a musical reading and a concert be? And how many of you are there on stage?

There are eight of us on stage. A violinist, a cellist, a trombonist, a saxophonist, a guitarist/clarinetist, a drummer, a bassist, and a singer. And carried by this musical body—because our band is a body, with distinct limbs and several heads—there is a book. As an object, the book itself says so much that it's at once a support and a hook, for us as much as for the audience. I also think that constantly returning to a text everyone can see is very important. The idea is not to perform the text, this isn't theatre, yet it still requires a sense of rhythm, of the musicality of the words. I'm always somewhere between speaking and singing, and in this play on the limit, the book is like a tool for balance. It helps us find the way. There isn't that much of a difference between this show and a more traditional concert. It might be a little surprising at first: you come see Têtes raides, and you don't hear a single note for the first few minutes. It's intriguing, something happens with this first text—Lautréamont's "Je suis sale" ("I am filthy")—like a pact that we would all sign. But in the show as a whole, music plays as big a part as in a concert—and in the room, people dance to a text by Genet! That being said, we still carry a word that isn't ours, and a powerful one at that, which requires a specific position, it requires us to pay just a little more attention to what we give the audience. Working with poetry requires a lot of finesse; music is already there, in the words. Our job is just to support it with ours.

How did you choose those texts? Were you familiar with them already? What made you decide to bring them together in this show?

Our first motivation is the desire to make people hear those authors. Those are works I've encountered throughout my career, but the works of Genet, Lautréamont, Prévert, Rimbaud of course, have always been dear to me. Then came the Surrealists, like Philippe Soupault for instance, whose texts we have a special relationship with. The first poem by Soupault that we put to music was on our album *Le Bout du toit (The Edge of the Roof)*, in 1996. It turned out his heirs were very happy with it. "L'amour tombe des nues" ("Love is Flabbergasted") became a real song. During our concerts, people would sing Soupault's text, without knowing who he was. That's the goal: to bring poetry to a somewhat more popular milieu, and to bring people to poetry. There are texts you may think are better-known because they've already been put to music—I'm thinking for instance of Genet's "Le Condamné à mort" ("The Prisoner Condemned to Death")—but that's not necessarily so. In this particular case, it's the first time you get to hear the text in its entirety, for instance. As for Apollinaire's "Le Pont Mirabeau" ("The Mirabeau Bridge"), which everyone knows, the idea is to make people hear it differently. Another example: people who read Stig Dagerman before hearing our version see his writing as very dark. To me, though, it is a song of hope, full of light. I want to make people hear the energy in it. On a more general note, my desire for people to hear those writers is also a way to pay homage to them; they've influenced me, and still do. And to put texts that may or may not be well-known under the limelight, to make people hear them slightly differently, can help highlighting aspects those who have read them hadn't seen until now. As for what they have in common, there's a search for beauty in all of them, and similar questions: What are we? What are we doing?

What is a "body of words?"

It's the text. A poem, a song, a story, it's matter, it's flesh. That's something else all the writers I chose have in common. I find that all too often, when talking about poetry, people want to start with its meaning, to interpret it. And that bores me to tears, because it's not the goal. Poetry opens up thousands of different meanings. This is exactly what we should try to preserve by making it heard. And I think we achieve that by letting the body take over, letting it become a sound box. You can't approach a poem from a purely intellectual point of view. To read Antonin Artaud, to feel what he writes, is a physical experience. Meaning comes once you've accepted to enter matter, something organic. In "Corps de langouste" ("The Body of a Lobster"), Roland Dubillard perfectly sums up the idea that the body is first and foremost a machine. Sometimes you have to let it work on its own. The body starts up, and reveals a truth, finds a path. It's only once you've let yourself get carried away by your *senses* that fragments of *sense* can begin to appear.

What about Elvis Presley, then? What has he got to do with all that?

The connection to Elvis Presley does seem a little far-fetched, doesn't it? Maybe there isn't one. Maybe it is a sign that, as a band, we never take ourselves too seriously. Elvis is an exception first and foremost because he's the only one to write in English, not that it matters all that much. "Love Me Tender" is also an actual song, and one that absolutely everyone knows. It's not exactly great poetry, either. And yet, there are very serious reasons for it to be there, among the greats. Its merit, acknowledged by collective memory, is to ask this essential question: what is this intersection between text and melody that creates poetry? To me, this is all about the words and their relationship to music.

Interview conducted by Marion Canelas.

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