



LENZ

INTERVIEW WITH CORNELIA RAINER

Why did you choose this literary text by Georg Büchner?

Cornélia 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 I went to the Ban de la Roche in the Vosges, where the Lutheran pastor Johann Friedrich Oberlin had withdrawn to preach, and where he welcomed poet Jakob Lenz for twenty-one days.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 Menoza* or *Pandaemonium 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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