



# MOBY DICK

## INTERVIEW WITH YNGVILD ASPELI

### Why adapt Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* for the stage?

**Yngvild Aspeli:** Up until now, my work has mostly been based on contemporary Scandinavian writers, and tackling *Moby Dick* is a way to start working in a new direction. It is a more intimate journey, with a text that's always been important to me. It's also, from the point of view of theatre, a real challenge. When I first read *Moby Dick*, I discovered Melville's voice, carried by his joy for storytelling. I share this pleasure at telling stories, but on the stage. From the point of view of dramaturgy, the challenge was to bring an 800-page story down to about 100, so it could unfold on the stage. By telling us about this whale hunt, Melville actually leads us on a journey through the depths of what it means to be human. He explores a number of existential questions: What is Good? What is Evil? What is Evil for each of the protagonists? What is Providence? Throughout the text there is this great metaphysical quest, this second possible interpretation of the story. I like the metaphor of the porthole, through which we're looking to enter an unknown or inaccessible place: what lies at the deepest of the human being. What drives me even more, in terms of creation, is the question of madness. Herman Melville creates, in the space-time continuum that is the ship, a whole microcosm; a society of men driven by the obsession of one of them, their captain. His senseless quest is his great strength, but also his weakness. The question I'm asking is: how is Ahab's monomania transmitted? What drives his entire crew to follow him? Asking those questions led me to realise they apply to the world I live in as well. Though we are all individuals in our own right, we all live within systems of interdependence. It's like a system of counterweights we would all be responsible for. Rereading the text again and again also allowed me to think in terms of the border, the point of equilibrium between reason and madness, to feel what the characters feel, identify with them, and accept to dive with them into this ocean. I also find the reflection on nature very touching. It's like a clash of perspectives: on the one hand the immeasurably small of the human psyche, and on the other the mysterious space of the greatest ecosystem with which we cohabit. I believe that the story of the sea is something that belongs to all of us. Like a shared water. Or a skin.

### You mentioned questions of scale: of man against the oceans, man against matter, man against the unfathomable. In the art of puppetry, the notion of scale is always part of the reflection, of the work. How did you tackle this question for this story?

We created over fifty puppets for this show. They represent the main characters of the book in six different sizes. Those relationships of scale allow us to create a whole system of points of view (that of the human, of God, of the Devil, even of the whale). What is huge for one of them is tiny for the other; we're constantly zooming in. Video is an integral part of the scenography, and allows us to capture the dynamics of the sea, to blur the line between what is true and what isn't. Herman Melville was inspired by two different events to write *Moby Dick*: an albino whale which was killed after sinking several ships, and the destruction of the *Essex* by a sperm whale. I like to think that it's all a little confused and murky. Which fragments are truth, which are fantasy? Doubt is a recurring theme in my work. To let that question inhabit you means to let it forever stay unresolved, faced with a reality we can never stop questioning. That's what Ahab's whale stands for. Herman Melville spends all this time dissecting it, analysing it, but in the end it remains a mystery. It leads us towards this other world we don't know. It's absent, yet it takes up more and more space as time goes on. I want to make it appear in its non-presence, its white colour, its mythology. It is this obsession which swallows the society of the *Pequod* whole, which gives the captain's life meaning. Even though we know how the story ends, we can't help but hope that things won't get out of hands, that the crew will change their minds. It's something I think about a lot anyway. I've always been a plastic artist, you know. I do sculpture, modelling. I see the intersection between physical creation and theatre as a way to create a larger language. It's a way to interpret what I hear, what I feel. A story isn't just about what's said. If you want to grasp the entirety of a narrative prism, you have to leave some space for things, for the unfathomable...

**Could you tell us a little more about your collective, your crew, so to speak, both the puppeteers and their puppets?**

There's a lot of back-and-forth with the workshop that builds the puppets. I create the faces, the overall form, and Polina Borisova and three other creators complete them. The conception and fabrication of the puppets is intrinsically tied to the research we do onstage, where we work on the scenes through improvisation sessions before settling on a fixed version. It's a work that happens step by step, the writing gets denser and denser. There will be six actor-puppeteers onstage, along with a French actor, who plays the narrator, Ishmael. He's the only "human being," to create a link with the audience. Working with puppets allows us not to remain centered on ourselves, to go outside of ourselves—it's the real key to the dramaturgy of the show—whereas the character of Ishamel connects us back to the narrative. Thanks to him, we move forward within the story. There's a sort of balance between the actor and the puppets, which are all connected one to the other and can't help but lead each other to their doom. What I mean is that this interconnectedness between things and beings goes beyond the narrative. Captain Ahab's madness is also the symptom of our society: a man leads others towards destruction, and no one does anything to stop him...

**Next to the dramaturgy and the very plastic world of the show, there's the music.**

Music can touch bodies directly, bypassing understanding, and I wanted to use an octobass, the lowest of all string instruments, so that the audience could feel the vibrations of what we can't say any other way. It's always there on the stage, but at different levels. It's once again a question of focus. I like it when all the elements of the show are always on the stage and appear or disappear based on narrative developments. There's another musicality to this show as well: the coexistence of different languages within the team. I work on a floating Babel.

Interview conducted by Marion Guilloux the 22<sup>nd</sup> December 2019 and translated by Gaël Schmidt-Cléach