



CUANDO PASES SOBRE MI TUMBA WHEN YOU WALK OVER MY GRAVE

INTERVIEW WITH SERGIO BLANCO

For the past few years, you've worked on autobiographical fiction. How would you describe that genre? And how did you work on it in this play?

Sergio Blanco: Autobiographical fiction is a mixture of real and fictional data. Where autobiography is built on an oath of truth, here we have an oath of lies. I start with the real to free myself from it and betray it, and autobiographical fiction is born of this process of transformation, of this projection of a real "I" into fiction. For that reason, it's a genre that's been subjected to a lot of criticism. It's seen as self-centered, yet the goal is never to wallow in this "I". If it serves as a starting point, it's always to go looking for the other. I start with my tear, but I always try to find the deluge. It's a very generous prospect, which begins with Socrates and his "know thyself," and echoed what Walt Whitman said: "*What I assume you shall assume, for every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.*" Autobiographical fiction is now booming in literature, particularly in France. Why not use it in theatre as well? For the past few years, I've written a series of plays whose main character is a man named Sergio. It's a version of myself that's different every time. I think that no one is ever a single "me" but a kaleidoscope made up of many such "me," a puzzle made up of a thousand ill-fitting pieces. In that sense, autobiographical fiction is political: it opposes the very idea of identity. Every new play therefore begins with the choice of a new alter ego, or avatar, which goes hand in hand with choosing an actor. Here, I wanted to work with Alfonso Tort, a very famous Uruguayan actor who also had a career as a footballer, which I kept in the show by having him wear a football jersey. I wanted to explore with him a form of almost heroic masculinity, which led us to create a sort of grandiose and romantic figure—a gothic Lord Byron drawn to death and eternal life. And through him, I'm probably showing the most romantic version of me out of all my plays.

How specifically did you write *When you walk over my grave*?

It all began with a desire to write about death. And I realised that to do so, I had to use a different process from what I'd done until now. I wanted to enter a different time of writing and reproduce an ancient gesture—that of Shakespeare, Corneille, or Racine. So I decided to write by hand. I took calligraphy lessons, I tried out different quills; and then I had the idea of writing using not ink, but blood. It was an idea that came from both an intellectual and an instinctive place, like one of Georges Perec's or Italo Calvino's writing games. For two months, my office turned into a painter's workshop; in the morning, I'd prepare the blood and quills before starting to write. Every word had to be drawn, so I had to write more slowly than usual, which also forced me to enter a different time of thought. I probably would never have been able to say what is in this text, to talk that way about death and its attraction, if I'd written it on a computer. The way the play was written and what it is about are inseparable.

This play deals with two themes it may seem disturbing to bring together: necrophilia and assisted suicide. Why connect a desire for death and eroticism?

I wanted to talk about the eroticism of death. But not the way Sade would: the spirit here is that of romanticism, closer to Baudelaire and his *Fleurs du Mal*. Necrophilia and assisted suicide are very sensitive subjects; it would have been easy to fall into the macabre or into provocation, which is precisely what I wanted to avoid. Throughout rehearsals, I would tell the actors: let's look for lightness, beauty, and grace. Those are the three words that served as the show's through-line. Where there's horror, let's try to find beauty. What is beautiful or desirable in death? When we think of necrophilia, the first image that comes up is the most violent and macabre: a body mating with a corpse. But it's a much larger concept. Necrophilia is the attraction to all things dying; in that sense, it's something that's familiar to us ever since childhood, through fairy tales and literature, but also through the way we celebrate our dead.

We all experience this eroticism of death, because it's an appointment none of us can avoid. I therefore imagined an alter ego for whom this attraction is particularly powerful—something that's very different from me, but which I respect and with which I can identify. I wanted to find a different way of dying, more peaceful and calm than the one I'd imagined for myself in a previous play, in which my character was brutally murdered. Here, he isn't ill or going through a depression; he simply wants to cease existing, and so he decides to plan out his death. Through him, it's an entire aspect of philosophy that's talking, echoing the ultimate dramatic reference, the famous "to be or not to be." As the character of Sergio says in the play, if we can't do anything about our birth, we can at least decide how we want to die. Which is why he chooses to prepare it the way he wants, and to die where he would have wanted to be born: in London.

Alongside Sergio are two other characters, two men he puts in charge of his death. What is the dynamic of this essentially male trio?

I wanted to work on the symbolism of those characters: a doctor, who in a way embodies modern science; and a young necrophiliac of Iranian descent obsessed with medieval weaponry, Khaled—or "eternal life" in Old Persian. Those two men never meet, but they both contribute to Sergio's future by preparing his death for the former and what comes after for the latter. With him, they represent three forms of masculinity and three religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In that sense, *When you walk over my grave* is a political play. It's about the deep crisis all three monotheistic religions as well as masculinity are currently going through. In this play, which tackles the eroticism of men, with characters who quote William Shakespeare, William Tell, Jean-Luc Godard, or Charles Dickens, it seemed to me essential to show the death of this absurd phallocracy, which is on its last legs. Which is why the reference to Mary Shelley is so important to me. She's everywhere in the text, from Dr Godwin as an echo of her maiden name to the play's two main locations: London, where Khaled is a patient in a mental health institution; and Switzerland, with the doctor's clinic being located not far from where she wrote *Frankenstein*. I like the idea that the play open with a reference to a 19th-century woman and ends with another writer, a young woman from the 21st century to whom I/Sergio donates my/his heart. Men can't keep writing the story of humanity on their own. After the 20th century and its totalitarian horrors, the time has come for women to tell the story of the world—hence those two female writers bracketing this very masculine play, like its two poles.

The show uses different media: text, video, music... what is the meaning of this protean form?

I try never to forget that our art, theatre, comes from the Greek *teatrôn*, which means "a place for viewing." How do we look at things nowadays? If you take a closer look at the eye, you'll see it's been changed by the process of the breaking up of the gaze characteristic of the past few years. The eye no longer sees the world in a linear and continuous fashion, from left to right; today, it has been trained to perceive and decode multiple realities at once. The stage must respond to this demand, it must listen to the eye and provide it with diverse elements it can then superimpose and connect, as if they were Internet links. That's why my shows always use screens and music, to be continuously opening up new windows for the audience according to a rhythm defined by the writing. We're at a crucial point in history: the century of the gaze. More than ever, the 21st century is therefore that of theatre, and I have high hopes for this amazing resurgence.

Interview conducted by Marie Lobrichon the 1st March 2020 and translated by Gaël Schmidt-Cléach