



DEAD SOULS

INTERVIEW WITH KIRILL SEREBRENNIKOV

Why work on a Nikolai Gogol text this time? And why choose to adapt the novel *Dead Souls* rather than direct one of his plays?

Kirill Serebrennikov: Nikolai Gogol's texts, and the myths that formed around them, represent one of the most surprising phenomena in Russian culture. You can't escape them. That's why we chose Gogol for our first foray into classical Russian literature. There's no equivalent to that literature in any other culture in the world. The "Nikolai Gogol" phenomenon is entirely unique. Lucky are those who can read him in Russian. *Dead Souls* is Gogol's major work, his masterpiece, but also the work of his life. The novel tells of how Pavel Chichikov buys the property deeds of dead serfs in Russian small towns. Thanks to that book, Nikolai Gogol enjoyed fame and success among literary circles as well as the educated elite, but the book also caused him a lot of trouble. He was accused repeatedly of hating Russia. The novel was the beginning of a difficult and contradictory journey. It led to his reflection on the role of the writer in society, and it was the beginning of the torments and errors that led to the publication of *Selected Passages from Correspondence with Friends*, in which Gogol disavowed almost everything worthwhile he'd written before.

Did you adapt the novel for it to work on the stage?

Yes, I started by writing a play. It wasn't an easy task because I had to condense and concentrate in a rather short form a very long poetic text. Furthermore, in Russia, it's considered tasteful to use the adaptation of *Dead Souls* by Mikhail Bulgakov. I decided to follow a different path, to adapt the text differently, without modernising it or changing its temporality or its setting, but by paying particular attention to its lyrical moments, to the poetic and philosophical passages that distract its protagonist or its reader from the main plot and guide him towards other horizons.

Do the many roles played by the all-male cast play a part in the way you seem to treat actors like puppets in this show, with a focus on pantomime?

I wouldn't say that I treat actors like puppets. Rather, we're talking about a kind of performance. I also wanted another famous work by Nikolai Gogol to appear through the structure of *Dead Souls*, his play *The Gamblers*. Both works tackle similar subjects. In *The Gamblers*, a cheater tries to con other cheaters, but they fool him, rob him, and leave him naked. In our version of *Dead Souls*, it's the same story: in the town of "N.," cheaters con each other and play several parts. We have ten male actors who all embody or represent—or at least take on the appearance of—old women, children, drunks, ladies, horses, dogs..., of all the characters and situations of the novel, alternating in anarchic fashion, as if the actors were going through a transformation rather than simply changing roles. This principle of game/con determines the playful structure of the show.

If all the roles are interchangeable, should we see the characters as nothing more than archetypes, or do they still have some depth?

We aren't of course talking about a psychological theatre, since the characters are masks. But if you have several actors playing different roles, at some point the audience starts to see who's hiding behind the masks... That's what creates an effect in the show. I'm not going to tell you the whole play, but to me, it's a show about the vacuousness of Russia and about its timelessness, about the void in the Buddhist sense of the word; a void that is full, intense, that can devour us, a void from which everything is born and in which everything can disappear.

Is the choral dimension of the play a sign of hope or an affirmation of a collective decline?

The choir is the voice of that void. It's neither a loss nor a hope: it's the voices of the dead. That's what Heiner Müller is talking about when he says that "the mission of the theatre is the liberation of the dead." The music of our show was written by the Russian composer Alexander Manotskov. It is based on Gogol's *Lyrical Digressions*, philosophical texts about Russian poetry, and performed by a choir made up of all the actors. It could therefore resemble the songs that punctuate the plays of Bertolt Brecht, but here the question "O Russia, what do you want from me?" remains unanswered.

Do you think the town of "N." stands for Russia, as Nikolai Gogol himself said, or for the whole world?

Nikolai Gogol speaks about Russia, but about Russia as an integral part of the world. I'm convinced that Russia, even if it remains unique as a country, is part of the civilised world in the broadest sense of the world, and that it experiences all the problems of our civilisation.

Is that why the scenography you chose seems to have no exit?

It's not exactly an impasse. Our scenography is made up of a plywood box which is indeed closed and could represent an image of the void. The ideas and meanings that are born from that space are a question of interpretation, and it's not my place to interpret my own show...

If we laugh of the absurdity that rules human relationships and the ties between men and the law, be it divine or social, how can we hope for a change, an improvement?

I don't think that the role of the theatre is to show you how to change the world, but rather to laugh of the absurdity of existence and of all those archetypal characters, both from a social and psychological point of view. All the heroes of *Dead Souls* are recognisable, because they exist in every country, they constitute Gogol's universalism. All those characters aren't typically Russian; you can find a Chichikov, a Plyushkin, a Sobakevich, a Nozdryov, or a Manilov everywhere, in every country, every culture, every mentality. Laughter creates a distance from ourselves which can save us sometimes.

Do you think that Chichikov, the protagonist of the novel, is a victim?

I see Chichikov as a smart guy, a very rational man who's looking for happiness. This aspect of the character is particularly highlighted in my direction: his attempt to reach happiness by any means necessary. All he wants is to be happy. It might be the consequence of a childhood trauma, or of his loneliness and feeling of abandonment. It's a guy who's always looking for happiness and can't ever find it. In fact, if you look at the story closely, Chichikov doesn't do anything illegal. He's just a modern manager, pretty banal, and very reasonable. But as Nikolai Gogol put it, it is because "all the Earth is a liar," because everything is but lies, that Chichikov becomes a victim of circumstances and, in the end, the victim of his own entrepreneurial spirit.

Isn't there a single noble soul among the dead souls he encounters?



In Nikolai Gogol's world, there's no ray of hope. There's not a single character who might have a noble soul, or be honest in the slightest. They're all bastards. When asked who the main character of his play *The Government Inspector* was, he said, "laughter." It's the same in *Dead Souls*. I'll answer you kind of like Gogol did. What matters most is the impression, the effect the show, the play, or text produces in the minds of the audience. That's the goal of my direction.

How can we be and try to remain living souls in a world of dead souls?

I don't have an answer to that question. You have to always remain human, try your best not to be a bastard.

Interview conducted by Marion Canelas

Translated by Gaël Schmidt-Cléach

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