



A GAME OF SHADOWS

INTERVIEW WITH JEAN BELLORINI

This isn't your first journey with Orpheus and Eurydice. Can you tell us about the various forms those encounters have taken throughout your career, and about this new text, a creation by Valère Novarina who—it's rare enough to be noted—accepted a commission? A text which strays far from the unique voice characteristic of Claudio Monteverdi's style, and which is but a mere echo of the opera libretto. What do you think the myth can tell us today? What story is Valère Novarina telling?

Jean Bellorini: I became interested in this story thanks to Claudio Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo*, which I adapted in 2017 for the Saint-Denis basilica, with Argentine conductor Leonardo García Alarcón and his ensemble La Capella Mediterranea. I really like this work, which is considered to be the first opera, because it perfectly illustrates the relationship between music and the history of mankind. Music heals the world. Words tear it apart. I see the myth as the story of how we've forgotten that speaking is first and foremost a sensory experience. That to speak is to sing. As if Orpheus's death gave way to words that are but concepts. As if the evils of the world were born of the use of words as a simple means of communication, devoid of poetry. Directing a baroque opera singer is fascinating, because you have to find the point of identification between feeling and music, between style and content, between sense and what can be sensed. The sung word is then in synch with the complexity of a feeling, even of an idea. The meaning isn't closed off. Valère Novarina's writing provides what is almost an extension of this notion. The word is always polyphonic, infinitely nuanced. The lushness of his writing is an answer to an absolute need for variations. Thanks to the sound of the words, to the actors and their inner singing, the meaning of a word, its power and charm, become many. Asking Valère Novarina to write his contemporary interpretation of the myth of Orpheus was a way to explore the power of words, the possibility to say that nuances are constitutive of the richness of the world, just like one colour has an infinite range of variations. Our thoughts are getting smaller because our language is becoming poorer. It's probably not a coincidence if Valère Novarina accepted to work on this after seeing, or rather hearing, our version of Alexander Pushkin's *Onegin*, which I directed at the Théâtre Gérard Philipe in Saint-Denis in 2019, based on André Markowicz's wonderful translation.

I like to defend authors who focus on the poetic form of writing: Proust, Rabelais, Pushkin, Hugo. Valère Novarina is the living author who most powerfully touches me in that regard. His *Opérette imaginaire (The Imaginary Operetta)* was a huge influence on me, and I directed its first act with Marie Ballet in 2008. It was a seminal moment for me, it determined what kind of theatre I wanted to make. His text *Le Jeu des ombres (A Game of Shadows)* is closer to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* than to the original libretto. From the first drafts, I enjoyed the insolence and humour of the writing, so intrinsically quick and lively. It's a score and the company is the orchestra. The actors are acrobats who juggle the words of the play. There is, of course, a great sense of vertigo when faced with all those words. And this vertigo becomes the driving force of the play. The need to fill the void with words, to create music.

At first, I thought about telling this story thanks to Claudio Monteverdi's music, to the character of the messenger, to the role of Musica, to Eurydice's interventions and Proserpina's supplications, as an echo or contrast to Valère Novarina's mad language. A sort of counterpoint. And then, while working on the show, we decided to focus more closely on the mystery of the myth, which can be summed up in one question: why does Orpheus look back?

For this play, the troupe with which you usually work was expanded. How did you and the actors approach this very specific language, both exhilarating and challenging? How did you work with Thierry Thieû Niang? What about your musical director, Sébastien Trouvé?

The troupe is made up of actors I've met over my various adventures. Some are actors I've worked with since the beginning, others I met abroad (at the Berliner Ensemble), others yet are from the Troupe éphémère of the Théâtre Gérard Philipe. I wanted to recreate a small community around this show. Work, as usual for me, is a collective endeavour. The path the rehearsals take is tortuous and diverse. And my collaboration with Thierry Thieû Niang is primordial. First came the meeting of the bodies. And the exploration of how we listen to the other. The organic dimension of the writing won us all over; those long lists of birds, of trees. In this show, there is an inversion of values: hell becomes heaven because species vanish from the sky and the world catches on fire, things start to go awry. The characters are all damned, a community of lost souls stuck in this hell, and they wait while reminiscing about what life once was. It's a secret and deep text, which opens the word up and allows the actors to speak the unspeakable. The ineffable here is the common quest of the bodies, of their words, of music. Sébastien Trouvé and I selected passages from Monteverdi's opera, a few refrains, sung moments that we transposed for a wind quartet made up of two trombones, a trumpet, and a euphonium. *L'Orfeo* is there in the background, personified by an opera singer, as an echo to the love story between Orpheus and Eurydice. But what we're trying to do with the music is to awaken the senses. The actors sing Novarina. The small orchestra is there, and those "unscrewed by life" sing their tune.

How did you bring that text to the stage? What is this *Orpheus*—for which you are director, scenographer, and light designer—you are bringing to the Cour d'honneur?

I would like to use the Cour d'honneur in all its purity and spontaneity to make the artifice visible. A cabaret lost among the stones of the Palais. Those stones have a memory. I thought about the work of Anselm Kiefer, and how they face the history and disasters of life. I tried to create a world of ash, lost and dark, in which souls come to bring life and enchantment back to the space. The world on fire and out of whack, great elements like fire and water, all were a source of inspiration. I like the wall of the Palais des papes. It's a human wall. It talks. It needs to be both ordinary and sacred at once. The stage could end up looking like a graveyard for smashed instruments. Yet life is coming back, the performance is reborn. Music can be heard. Imagination is never still. And there is of course an homage to the use of the understage area in theatre: we imprison the actors inside the stage thanks to trapdoors that allow for a game of appearances and disappearances. The costumes are by Macha Makeïeff. They seem to carry the hints of a previous life, or maybe several. They give an impression of beauty, they give some splendour to those characters who have been living in hell for millennia. Light is also an essential part of my work. I would almost say it's the only way I know how to direct. Working with the actors is a collective effort, I don't always have the last word. But when the troupe enters the space of the stage, I become more concrete, more direct. I get to decide what's full or empty, what needs to be focused on or not. I try to highlight opposites and grey areas. I start by shining a light on something inanimate, an object, a piece of the set, in the most subjective way possible, to create backlighting against which the bodies can stand out. Shadows at play. My role here is to shine a light on this gloomy world in a very direct link with Valère Novarina's language: in his theatre, the actors are blind, and beg for the light.

Interview conducted by Francis Cossu in February 2020 and translated by Gaël Schmidt-Cléach