



THE ЧЁРНЫЙ MÖNCH THE BLACK MONK

INTERVIEW WITH KIRILL SEREBRENNIKOV

***The Black Monk* is about madness and focuses on the following contradiction: can one want someone else's happiness while rejecting their difference? How do your directing choices and your international cast find echoes with your own situation as a Russian director in today's context?**

Kirill Serebrennikov: To be honest, I was thinking about directing this play long before the war in Ukraine started. If it resonates today, it is I believe because Anton Chekhov, like all true artists, could sense the future. Olivier Py generously invited me to stage a performance in the Cour d'honneur. I'm proud to be the first Russian director to open the Festival d'Avignon in the heart of the Palais des papes. *The Black Monk* was created as a production by the Hamburg-based Talia Theater, and it's a big international team of actors, singers, dancers and technicians. I knew some of those artists because I'd worked with them at the Gogol Center, and the others I met in the Thalia Theater. And it's the first time I'm adapting Chekhov not just in Russian but in several languages! The play will be performed in German, Russian, and English. I still believe that theatre draws us together beyond words. Moreover, theatre I practice always tries to find the new ways to approach things: I prefer a theatre which leaves space for emotions and feelings.

This short story has a unique place in Anton Chekhov's work. Your adaptation gives a voice to characters all looking for truth.

In *The Black Monk*, the characters speak a lot, and while theatre is the land of words, I decided to use dance and singing to help us overcome our addiction to words! It's a reminder that Chekhov was also looking for something beyond words. To him, words don't express the ideas. The ideas are always behind the words, between the lines. That of a rope breaking with a dull sound. The play is divided into four parts and we understand the story through the point of view of each character. The text contains different motifs as well as very diverse emotional registers – from ironical comedy to almost tragedy. We travel from one register to another. *The Black Monk* is far from monochrome. I don't think that theatre is where one should look for any sort of the truth, but rather for complicity of human existence. Truth is bigger than words, you can find it in silence, between things. The only truth in theatre—if we think that truth is necessary to man—is that the stage makes everything possible. The stage can make the invisible visible.

How did you work on this fantastical character, this apparition, that is the Black Monk? But also on this humorous and almost satirical style which isn't what we're most familiar with when it comes to Chekhov?

It has been of interest for me! If all the other characters have their own dimension—the narrative dimension for the gardener, the dramatic dimension for Pesotsky's daughter Tanya, the delusional dimension for the intellectual Kovrin—nothing was obvious for the Monk. I had to find a fourth point of view, but one that would make sense given the dramatic tools I had at my disposal. I see the Monk as embodied in a way in the dull sound of the rope breaking from *The Cherry Orchard*. And above all, it's a character who says essential things: he speaks about and to the others.

Next to the Black Monk, there are other important characters such as Kovrin, the disillusioned intellectual, or Hecate, the Moon goddess, who reigns as absolute mistress over the set...

We enter the short story by following its protagonist Kovrin. He's overworked and has to get some rest, so he finds refuge in the countryside, among his friends. In that sense, he's like us, or we're like him. He's connected to us. This deep sadness, this anxiety, it's something we know well. We live in a time of war and there aren't many reasons for hope. We're almost facing a "no future." We see ourselves in Kovrin, his torments are our torments. Next to this very real and solid character, this reflection of us, there are those massive round shapes in the sky. Are they moons or planets? or are they Kovrin's hallucinations? I redesigned the entire scenography for the Cour d'honneur, to highlight the grandeur of the walls of the Palais. As I often say: each new day is an empty stage, and each empty stage is a new day.

Interview conducted by Francis Cossu interpreted by Mary Malecek
Additional material for this interview will be published in July - Stay tuned!