



# THE ЧЁРНЫЙ MÖNCH THE BLACK MONK

## INTERVIEW WITH KIRILL SEREBRENNIKOV

**The Black Monk juxtaposes different points of view. That of Pesotsky, the owner of the garden, then of his daughter Tanya, then of Kovrin, whom he considers his adopted son, and finally of the character of the Black Monk himself. The play uses the same narrative device as your film Petrov's Flu, in which the audience shared the perception first of an illustrator, then of his librarian wife.**

**Kirill Serebrennikov:** What matters to me is to have the audience experience the inner life of the characters. I'm not interested in the kind of theatre that studies characters like so many small "figurines" while making sure to maintain a distance between them and the audience—the kind of theatre that refuses to commit—because life is a cascade of clashes and conflicts. If it limits itself to aseptic or abstract spectacle, theatre doesn't impress anymore. In my work, the spectator enters the inner life of Pesotsky, then Tanya, then Kovrin, and finally becomes the Black Monk. It's a type of exercise that is possible on stage today. We can alternate points of view and shifts perceptions. Here, it's a way to portray Kovrin's altered state of lucidity. He watches the others but remains unaware of what's happening inside him. He feels people around him becoming hostile, incomprehensible. He thinks that the world is tipping into madness when he's actually the one going mad. This back-and-forth between points of view is a form that truly fascinates me.

**You also play with time. In the second part of The Black Monk, we encounter Tanya again, but this time in the twilight of her life**

Yes, it coincides with the first change in point of view. The change in Tanya's age projects us into the future. We suddenly find ourselves faced with an old woman reminiscing about her past. She dwells on the trauma inflicted by Kovrin. Her tragic love determined the rest of her existence. After that, nothing happened in her life. In ancient theatre, the chorus was the voice of Fate. That concept of *Fatum* rears its head in the third part, with each apparition of the Black Monk in Kovrin's unbalanced psyche.

**While Chekhov's The Black Monk is a short story, your adaptation turns it into an 80-page play, and the show should last two and a half hours...**

My vision is extremely dense and complex. While working on this adaptation, I felt like I was walking along an abyss, like I was experiencing constant electric shocks. From all that, a show started to emerge. At first, it was a real mess. For the Festival d'Avignon, I reworked and shortened my first version, so as not to put the spectators through too much. On stage will be three greenhouses, against a backdrop of crowd and nature noises and musical phrases. Based on those elements, this lavish garden should take form in the minds of the audience. Of course, given the location and the fact that we're performing outside, the Avignon garden will be very different from the one in Hamburg, where I presented a first version. This garden is Pesotsky and his daughter Tanya's entire life. She says herself that all she has is the garden. In Kovrin's mind, there's an opposition between small trees with deep roots and tall stems which have to struggle against the wind. He sees himself as a great tree strong enough to withstand the worst gusts. His is a radical position, but I understand and share it.

**Differences between the characters, differences between the points of view, and differences within an international cast... How did you bring those actors from many different countries together?**

Casting is the hardest part for me. Choosing an actor is a long, painful, and absolutely decisive process when it comes to the development of a creation. If someone else than Gurgen Tsaturyan had played Kovrin, everything would have been different. A show is closely linked to those who perform it, which is why I'm so meticulous when it comes to choosing actors. Moreover, *The Black Monk* is a European production by a Russian director. It's a production by the Hamburg-based Talia Theater, and it's a French artist, Olivier Py, who generously invited me to put on a show in the Cour d'honneur. It's very important to me. It's my first truly international and European project. It's an international team, with Russian and German technicians, Latvian actors, singers and dancers from very diverse backgrounds. Working on a European project was really challenging. It's all the more precious because it's the first time I'm adapting Chekhov not just in Russian but in several languages! Adapting the short story mostly meant finding a universal language of mutual understanding. The play will be performed in German, Russian, and English. I still believe that theatre draws us together beyond words.

**How did you approach the depiction of the Black Monk who is like a ghost, an apparition?**

The Cour of the Palais des papes is like the heavens. The most challenging part isn't the last one, in which the vision of the monk materialises, but the opening, during which the audience has to feel within the greenhouses Pesotsky's warm and welcoming mood, and the empathy characteristic of those modest people. At the Festival, what is at stake in those moments is part of the cosmos. The audience must be able to understand the characters and then to fly off, to escape, to rise above it. Fantasy and phantasmagoria are like second nature to me. I'm not particularly interested in realism, be it in theatre or cinema. Ever since I was a child, I've been fascinated by the Dadaists, by the movement led by poets Kars and Vegensky, and of course by the Surrealists. But personally I see my work as belonging not to realism, but to "a realism." Without realism, nothing can exist, but it all depends on how you use it.

**Did the invasion of Ukraine by the Russian army have an effect on this version of *The Black Monk*?**

The show existed long before. And the madness described in *The Black Monk* swallows the whole world. You can feel it in vibrations, in actions, within the people themselves. But taken at face value, the play isn't about politics but about the fragility of beings. Generally speaking, I hate politics because it doesn't care about the human. Theatre and cinema remain the last means of expression that try to explore and study the nature of men. Kovrin describes himself as sick with happiness, because he is touched by the imperfection of the world.

**Outside, which played at the Festival d'Avignon in 2019 in your absence, was a hugely claustrophobic play. Your film *Petrov's Flu* and now *The Black Monk* bring down walls, shatter stories, erase temporalities. Are those narrative explosions connected to your experience in Russia, where you were deprived of your freedom?**

There is probably a subconscious link with those long months I spent under house arrest. That being said, I've often worked on large stages. The first time I was asked to create something for a small space threw me off so much I became claustrophobic. Of course, I've always been interested in the Cour d'honneur of the Palais des papes. Putting on a show in the Cour is a decisive and crucial step. It's a very serious and challenging place which goes back to the very roots of theatre. On stage, you're always addressing the audience, yet at the same time you're also questioning the heavens. It's the kind of sensations that probably existed in ancient times during those very first performances of which we are the descendants. Putting on *The Black Monk* at the Festival d'Avignon is a challenge to which I have to rise and which makes me extremely nervous. I'm all the more worried because after the Cour, I don't know what there is left for me to tackle.

Interview conducted by Michel Flandrin and translated by Macha Zonina