



MY EXALTED YOUTH

INTERVIEW WITH OLIVIER PY

Your last few creations for the Festival d'Avignon have taken various forms: a dramatic series with *Hamlet in the imperative*, an operetta for younger audiences with *Love Triumphant*, a triptych inspired by Aeschylus with *Pure Present*... At what point do you decide on the shape of a show?

Olivier Py: Form comes first. Obviously I don't write the same way for a ten-hour text or a shorter form, because the literary ambition and dramaturgy behind them are different. When you write over an extended period of time, at some point you have to let go. I write every day. I'm always paying attention to what the project I'm working on is telling me, often to take me in unexpected directions. The impetus for *My Exalted Youth* was my desire to return to the kind of epic show I'd been known for earlier in my career. If you remember, it was with *La Servante* in 1995 that I began my adventure with Avignon. That particular epic was made up of four great plays and several small dramas. For my last edition as director of the Festival, I wanted to return to the gymnasium in Lycée Aubanel, with a creation reminiscent of *La Servante* that would nonetheless not be a sequel, repetition, or adaptation.

If *My Exalted Youth* brings to mind *La Servante*, its main character Harlequin is a mythical figure from the history of theatre.

Harlequin wasn't there at first. Then, little by little, he found his way into the play as the representative of youth. How do the young see things? How can they make theirs the models and symbols that will allow them to master their fate instead of letting previous generations control it? If, biologically speaking, I'm no longer a young man, I'm still writing about youth. In all my plays, the hero is a young man fighting the violence of the world. In *La Servante*, the paradigmatic character of theatre, the one who gave the most complete representation of it, was Matamore, an old actor. In *My Exalted Youth*, Harlequin is the symbol of theatre, without all its strength: he needs the help of an old poet to define himself and to be able to fight his battles.

In *La Servante*, four young people shared a secret. *My Exalted Youth* is based on four pranks. It seems more disillusioned.

La Servante is a lamp whose mystical incandescence illuminated the characters. *My Exalted Youth* offers, through Harlequin, more irony. I see him not as a direct character, but rather as a flexible and playful one. He's playing because he's impatient to reach a form of transcendence. Harlequin wears a multi-coloured, patched costume which those around him find fascinating. When the play opens, he works as a pizza delivery man: social mobility has passed him by, if it's even still a thing. When he meets Alcandre, a forgotten poet, the latter encourages him to rebel against the new forms of capitalism. If both plays share a similar structure, with four parts making up a whole epic, *My Exalted Youth* is like an amused synthesis of *La Servante*; Harlequin plays along.

The first part of this tetralogy tackles Harlequin's early years. There's mention of *The Spiritual Hunt*, a fake poem attributed to Arthur Rimbaud.

The fake poem truly exists. In the late 1940s was published *A Spiritual Hunt*, attributed to Arthur Rimbaud. Back then, Paul Claudel and André Breton were the only ones not to be fooled. I'm obsessed with Rimbaud, and it's a passion I've had little opportunity to express up until now. Arthur Rimbaud is the embodiment of youth and of the absolute in literature. And so the story of *The Spiritual Hunt* revolves around a forgery. Actually, it's a real poem which hides behind Rimbaud's name out of modesty. The poetic question is what drives that first part. Are there still poets around? Will there still be a part of youth convinced of the power of poetry? What does poetry mean today? Does it still have a political value to let us imagine a better future?

The second part, *Harlequin's Betrayal*, is about faith, the sacred, and religion.

Harlequin's Betrayal deals with God, with the mystical. The mixture of farce and tragedy creates a more serious tone. I like the character of Soeur Victoire very much. Nowadays, no one has a nun appear on stage if she's not a caricature. Soeur Victoire may seem like a parody at first, but when she starts speaking as a feminist, she becomes a tragic character—not to be confused with a tragedian. In all four plays, pranks create truth, something real. So Esther is a fake saint who believes she doesn't believe but who would like to believe. Her theological discourse

is more credible than the Vatican's catechism. She faces inquisitive mystics as well as a very cynical bishop. I've grown very fond of the bad guys, the *Pantalone* and *Pulcinella* of *commedia dell'arte*. After spending several months with them, I grew to love them. Harlequin himself can sometimes be insufferable due to his lack of empathy. Everybody loves him and everybody wants to kill him. My characters are intellectuals, they're not idiots. When I worked on *Hamlet in the imperative*, which was an entirely discursive show, I realised how much performative energy the intellectual dispute can produce. I wanted to keep exploring it.

In the next part, Harlequin tackles politics and politicians.

Harlequin's Death is revolutionary. It's about a fake cannibal restaurant that leads to the collapse of the powers that be. Alex, our main character, is obsessed with identifying the new forms of our capitalism 2.0. He hopes to unmask the will of this mercantile world, the attempt to falsify the way we approach the real to make it more consumable and profitable. Harlequin comes in because he embodies Theatre and the virtues of the real. He reminds us that the only being is being and that the violence of power is and will always remain a falsification. But is it still possible to plan a revolution when power no longer has a face?

We end with *Harlequin's Triumph*, which opens with the hero's descent into hell.

I return regularly to catabasis, to hell at the theatre; I wrote *Le Visage d'Orphée* for the Cour d'honneur du Palais des papes in 1997. Harlequin wards off death by making those around him laugh, in part thanks to a sonnet about excrements. Actor Pierre Vial, who was one of my teachers, once told me that it as in my jokes he found depth. I always try to keep developing my thoughts, even through the most trivial puns or jokes. I think comedy is still the best way to bring an audience to the theatre. Writing is demanding, I have to be immersed in it always and fully. But comic writing is where I'm the most deeply French. I can write noble, serious texts, but if I put on Harlequin's costume, it sticks to my skin and I can't take it off.

With your long-time scenographer Pierre-André Weitz, you wanted to return to the Aubanel gymnasium, where you created *La Servante*.

We wanted to start with the set, and in particular the varnished wood proscenium we used for *La Servante*: to cut it up, to unfold it, to rotate it, to reshape it... Combining and recombining is at the heart of Pierre-André Weitz's work. We've worked together for thirty-two years now. I believe in a theatre of trestles, which is a protection against its opposite, bourgeois theatre. The more precarious the trestle, the more the words are great, intelligent, spiritual. We'd never worked on the character of Harlequin, and we learnt a lot. His costume is made of silk, a fabric conducive to meditation. But it's full of holes and patched up, it's a poor person's costume. It's a symbol for theatre, but also for the revolt of those at the bottom against the powerful. Harlequin wears a black mask, most likely because he is a porter, or maybe an African. His dancing and his beauty hold up a mirror to a world that ignores the poor. That's why all the other costumes are contemporary. From Carlo Goldoni to Marivaux, Harlequin has always been used to question contemporary societies.

With *My Exalted Youth*, you're working both with faithful companions and with a new generation.

Yes, Céline Chéenne was on the original "*Servante* ship." I wanted to have this intergenerational dialogue to have this conflict between the old Pantalones, at once stupid and aware of their own downfall, and the young, with their irritating bombast and constant need. Bertrand de Roffignac, who was my assistant and played Horatio in *Hamlet in the imperative*, was my inspiration for Harlequin. Harlequin is the fate of any actor with aspirations to nobleness and tragedy, and who ends up having to face who he really is. Harlequin has a body, an energy, and a relationship to the world that are almost pathological. And Bertrand is a Harlequin in the sense that something of his own story is celebrated through that link to another generation. There is of course the pleasure of reconnecting with actors like Xavier Gallais, Olivier Balazuc, or Emilian Diard Detoëuf, but for this pilgrimage to the Aubanel gymnasium, almost thirty years later, I wanted to give the main roles to newcomers.

What pictures were on your desk as you worked on *My exalted youth*?

I read or re-read almost everything that's been written about Harlequin. I looked at the many ways he's been represented, in particular by Pablo Picasso. Picasso understood that Harlequin is the quintessence of the artist. His Harlequins are almost always like exultant and melancholy self-portraits, filled to the brim with immanence and artistic legacies. To relieve my writings cramps, I drew many Harlequins, did so many crosspiece drawings. One of the usual shortcomings of juvenile writing is the desire to put absolutely everything in one work. It's a failing I've never managed to shake off. I wanted to put everything in that play, including the state of my thoughts, of my life. In that sense, *My Exalted Youth* is a systemic play which covers my adventure in Avignon and the projected situation of having to leave. Which will be the greatest heartbreak.

Interview conducted by Michel Flandrin

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