THE HUMANS
INTERVIEW WITH ALEXANDRE SINGH

***The Humans* is a parable about the creation of the world. Can you quickly sum up its main events and present its characters?**

Alexandre Singh: The play begins before the creation of the world. During a storm, which acts as a Big Bang of sorts, an island rose out of nothingness. It is divided into two parts: an Apollonian world, governed by Charles Ray, an authoritative father close to the figures of Sarastro in *The Magic Flute* or Prospero in *The Tempest*, and a Dionysian world ruled by the queen N, the Nesquick® Bunny. Each of them has a child: Pantalingua is N's daughter, Tophole Charles Ray's son. Those two poles are charaterised by different visual languages, different clothes and colours: whites and blues for the Apollonian world, organic browns and reds for the Dionysian one. All of them, though, receive esoteric and confused messages from an entity called Vox Dei. The audience soon comes to understand that it is most likely nothing but an ordinary cat. The one topic that brings all those people together is the creation of the world, and more precisely the creation of humanity, already present as statues that form a Greek chorus. Pantalingua, who foresees the hardships humanity will have to face, is against animating those statues. In spite of her efforts, though, the statues are eventually turned into humans, and discover they are mortal. They become hedonists, acquire a lust for power, sex, and money. The character of Vernon, previously known as Statue 31, manipulates them, becomes a tyrant, and leads a revolt against Charles Ray. In the end, it looks a lot like the story of a generational conflict!

Why make Charles Ray a sculptor?

In both art and religion, God is often described as a sculptor. Think of the figure of the artisan or architect in Plato. Almost all mythologies have God creating humans and the rest of the universe out of clay, mud, dust, or stone. The various literary variations on this theme have fed my research, from the myth of Pygmalion to Frankenstein and Pinocchio. The relationship between Gepetto and Pinocchio is particularly interesting. The story of those beings who, as they are given a soul, start showing signs of humanity, with all the joys, pains, and dangers it entails, is universal. It is for instance at the heart of many Disney and, more recently, Pixar movies, like *Wall-E*. This theme of initiation is also present, in more realistic forms, throughout literature. Proust describes children as moving though a wonderful world peopled by gods, namely, their parents, who enact moral laws, until they are revealed to be faillible.

You appear here as a demiurge. Is that symbolic of how you see artistic creation?

My project is to create a world that works like a dream or a mirror, that allows for projections and speculations. I think a good story revolves around the opposition between two or three forces, be they characters or ideologies. I approach dramatic creation a little like Prokofiev in *Peter and the Wolf*, with one instrument for each character or dramatic line. It probably has something to do with my love for the opera. The dichotomy that underlies *The Humans* is the same one that does works like *The Magic Flute* or *The Tempest*. The point is to play on the oppositions between masculine and feminine, rational and irrational, knowledge and madness, to create an unexpected form.

Aren't you afraid of using too many references, too many different materials?

The play is indeed full of references, to *commedia dell'arte*, Woody Allen, Greek theatre, Molière, Mozart, Shakespeare, *kabuki*, etc. It's a little like a cake made up of everything I love. But that has also a lot to do with my inspirations for the play, such as the plays of Aristophanes, with their aesthetics of excessiveness: too many jokes—often very vulgar ones at that—too many masks, too much dancing, too much singing. I love this fantastical and excessive theatre. I am proud of this visual, narrative, musical, and linguistic maximalism. It might not be a very high-brow form of theatre, but there are nonetheless multiple layers of language and meaning. It probably has a lot to do with my character: I rarely ask myself "why do this?", but rather "why not do it?" Maybe I did give in to the temptation of putting everything I wanted into this first play. I did the same thing with my first book, after all. But if I am run over by a bus tomorrow, at least I'll have put everything I wanted into *The Humans*.

You mentioned Aristophanes earlier. It seems you also borrowed his sense of derision, of comedy.

If I used Aristophanes as a model, it is also in large part for his humour, and his position compared to Euripides's tragedies. Their relationship reminds me of the one between the cinema of Woody Allen and that of Fellini or Bergman. Aristophanes and Woody Allen have both suffered from a certain denigration of comedy, especially compared to tragedy, which is often overvalued. In many of Allen's works, you'll find references to Fellini or Kierkegaard, that you won't necessarily find in the films of other comedians, like Will Ferrell for instance. I was also inspired by satirical literature and drawing, and by what one could call scatological and carnivalesque humour. In the play, the grotesque arises mainly from humanity, whose look was very inspired by the work of the sculptor and caricaturist Honoré Daumier.

Can you describe your creative process?

I gather a lot of material, which I then show to the people I'm working with. Images and references help make sure we're all on the same wavelength, but also to share our visions. That being said, I usually already have a clear picture of what I want before we start rehearsing. It isn't exactly a collective creation, more a collaborative work based on a number of inspirations. For instance, for the chorus, I thought about Rudolf Steiner's eurythmic dances, those images of dancers wearing tunics standing in a circle in a field.

You showed in London a number of works related to this play. Are the story and universe of *The Humans* the basis for other creative projects?

Some works created within the framework of the play have indeed been shown. They're mostly photographs of some of the characters, sculptures, and bronzes we made for the play, as well as what I call "alpha prototypes" of some of the props. All the props are works of art in their own right. The alpha prototype is a unique, very detailed version. However, the play remains the central work of art, the place of communication with the audience. The creation of the play led to a burst of ideas, some of which then became works. This is possible partly because our approach is more visual, more cinematographic than theatrical: we pay extreme attention to every single object. For instance, the character of Vernon is at some point seen playing with a small bag of money. He takes out a coin and says, "This coin makes the world go round, and it is my face you can see on it." We actually minted our own coins, with a picture of his mask on them.

Do you think there is a hierarchy, a difference between your work as a visual artist, a writer, and a director?

Most of the artists I love worked in different fields, had different jobs. Woody Allen is a comedian, an actor, a director, a playwright. Every medium has its own rules, its own levers you can pull and buttons you can push. To learn a job is to learn what those different buttons are and what they do. With time and practice, you come to learn most of the buttons. You don't have to push them all, but you know where they are. Most jobs have ten main buttons that you can learn.

Interview conducted by Renan Benyamina.