



MISS KNIFE AND HER SISTERS

INTERVIEW

Would it be accurate to say that Miss Knife was born at the Festival d'Avignon?

Olivier Py: Absolutely, Miss Knife came out of *The Servant's* womb in 1995. In the basement of the Aubanel gymnasium, between each play, with the actors of the tetralogy, we would host a sort of cabaret show for the audience. One evening, Bernard Faivre d'Arcier, then director of the Festival, came. He didn't even recognise me with my wigs, mascara, and rhinestones. The year after, he gave us another gymnasium, this time in the Lycée Saint-Joseph. There, we performed *Miss Knife et sa baraque chantante* (Miss Knife's Singing Shack). Actually, Miss Knife was the beginning of the Festival's Bar, which is still active today.

Stéphane Leach, as the composer and arranger for Miss Knife, would you say that there is a Miss Knife repertoire?

Stéphane Leach: Yes, although nothing is fixed with Miss Knife. She's welcoming, and she likes to barge into other pieces. I wrote the music for some of Olivier Py's shows, including *L'Apocalypse joyeuse*, *Les Contes de Grimm*, and *Les Vainqueurs*. Some of Miss Knife's songs were taken from those plays, others are performed with a jazz quartet. They're more lyrical cabaret than little ditties. In 2021, I composed an expanded version for symphonic orchestra. In terms of tones and counterpoints, the colours are more refined. As for the 26 July show, I wrote all the music except for *Le Tango du suicide*, which was composed by Jean-Yves Rivaud.

In almost 30 years, how has Miss Knife evolved?

Olivier Py: I'd say she's grown. She tried other repertoires, met new musicians. She toured a lot in France and abroad, often in venues that weren't theatres. When, too busy, I neglected her, Julien Jolly—who, with Antoni Sykopoulos, composed the music for *My Exalted Youth*—convinced me to return to the character. In the end, Miss Knife is like a double or a mask stuck to my face.

What are the prerequisites to enter Miss Knife's sisterhood?

Olivier Py: You have to love music, extravagance, and to share the stage, which is the core principle of cabaret. Friendship is also very important. In addition to her voice and her talent, Angélique Kidjo also has this amazing vital force which always transports me. Following the Russian invasion, we wanted to invite Ukrainian artists. Dakh Daughters and their cabaret were the obvious choice. In 2021, Miss Knife performed with the Radio France Philharmonic Orchestra, but without an audience. Thanks to the Orchestre national Avignon-Provence, the 26 July concert is also a symphonic one. Going through Miss Knife's repertoire, I chose the most popular songs. A sort of greatest hits.

Dakh Daughters, would it be right to say that Miss Knife has given you carte blanche to perform with the Orchestre Avignon-Provence as you see fit?

Dakh Daughters: Yes, we'll be free to express our personality fully. The idea for our make-up come from Vlad Troitsky, artistic director of the Dakh Theatre. We then each added our personality. Our faces are white, free from all clichés. And for the 26 July show, we're continuing our collaboration with the Orchestre national Avignon-Provence, which began in January. Pierre Thillooy chose and reorchestrated the songs that inspired him. We trust him completely and followed his lead. Since then, as you know, the situation in Ukraine has worsened. We're here at the Festival because we are artists. Our show is a hymn to our defenders and to the Ukrainian people, who are courageously fighting against evil. It's crucial for us to feel the support for and solidarity with Ukraine. To the fronts of war, we have to oppose the front of art. The Ukrainian people is the victim of Russian aggression, but also the hero of resistance. Because slaves cannot defeat free people.

Samuel Jean: It's important for classical musicians to experience other musical cultures. Dakh Daughters' talent leads us into a world of poetic cabaret, grating and sometimes violent. On stage, they perform their songs, swathed in the orchestral colours composed by Pierre Thilloy. We'd worked together before on a project based on Indian music. He's very comfortable when it comes to bringing together different inspirations. My role as conductor is to stay as close as possible to the performance: Dakh Daughters play their songs, and the goal is neither to overwhelm them nor to stand to the side, but to play together. The orchestra has to adapt so that they can keep their freedom. Beyond just the sound, a symphonic orchestra also brings a sheer number of people, making the show more spectacular, something that can't be easily disregarded. Dakh Daughters songs are often based on an ascending chromatic scale. It keeps growing and growing, and accompanied by 40 musicians, they reach a whole new dimension.

Angélique Kidjo, the idea of freedom and openness must particularly speak to you.

Angélique Kidjo: Yes, and Olivier Py and Miss Knife embody it completely. A few years ago, we had lunch together to prepare the concert with Manu Dibango, programmed in 2017 in the Cour d'honneur of the Palais des papes. We had a lot of fun. I loved his imagination and intelligence. I think machismo feeds on an exaggeration of masculinity, but with Miss Knife, Olivier speaks of a desire to be. He establishes a sisterhood with femininity and feminism.

How would you define Miss Knife's voice?

A. K.: She has a cabaret voice, she's able to sing many things while still listening and sharing, which is absolutely necessary for what we're doing here. Together, we sing *Hallelujah*, immortalised by Leonard Cohen. I didn't want to touch it, but during a concert in New York, Olivier told me: "Let's do it." It's a dialogue between the human and the heavens. In *Hallelujah*, each of us sings his or her god, outside of all religion. *Malaïka* is a love song that has been a part of me since I was 9 years old. It's a reference to my mother, who passed away last year. Since then, I've used it to celebrate the richness of her character, between sorrow and joy.

As for opening the stage and sharing it with Dakh Daughters and their Orchestre national Avignon-Provence?

A. K.: Dakh Daughters are proof that one can keep on living during a conflict, that there is an alternative to simple warlike representations. With the Orchestre, we'll lay the groundwork for a concert we're planning for next season. I like this kind of upstream work, which then allows you to go faster and further. With a symphonic orchestra, the voice becomes but another instrument among the stands. Here too you need to be able to listen and to share.

The concert will take place during Olivier Py's very last day as director of the Festival d'Avignon. Is it a way to end on a twist?

Olivier Py: It's first and foremost a happy, joyful way to say goodbye to Avignon and its audience.

Interview conducted by Michel Flandrin