



# BLUEBEARD'S WIVES

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## INTERVIEW WITH LISA GUEZ

**Can you tell us about how *Bluebeard's Wives* came to be, and why you chose to adapt this folktale?**

**Lisa Guez:** We were originally working on Normand Chaurette's *The Queens*. One of the actresses ended up being unavailable, but I wanted to keep working with the same team on a new project during the residency we had planned. This chance event gave us the opportunity to create a show based entirely on a very personal desire and vision. I was at the time teaching scenic practice in Lille, and I had my students work on adapting a literary text for the stage, including *Bluebeard*. I was obsessed with that story as a child, my grandfather would read it to me, it had left me with many images and even more questions. I couldn't understand what drove those characters to act, or not to act: women who open a door they've been forbidden to behind which are hidden slaughtered bodies, and who then tell the character of Bluebeard what they did and apologise instead of fleeing. Was it the result of a trap? Seduction? Some sort of dependence? Those behaviours are difficult to understand as a child, and become clearer as an adult, once you've had some experience with love. I'm talking about situations in which one person is under someone else's influence and can't find the strength to break free. My childish terror turned to passion for this subject. Charles Perrault's tale is a great object to explore those questions, with its structure full of ellipses and narrative jumps, and characters whose psychology remains mysterious. It's a space open to imagination, to all kinds of possibilities. The reader is left with a troubled feeling, and transposing the story to the stage turns it into a playground for actors. We're here to explore the many folds and silences of this story.

**The women in the play are named after the actresses portraying them. How did you write *Bluebeard's Wives*?**

I presented the actresses with the tale as a series of questions. I wanted each of them to respond to the ambiguities of the text in their own way to build the story of one of Bluebeard's wives. My idea was to explore the points of view of modern young women, focusing on questions such as "What do you find attractive in that disturbing man?", or "Why are you moving forward with this in spite of all those clear, threatening signs?" Each actress came up with her own story, and we worked on the play during workshops and rehearsals, based on their exchanges and propositions. Those monologues became the show's primary source. When we open the forbidden door, instead of finding corpses, we give the audience the opportunity to meet a number of women telling their stories, as in a group therapy session. They explain what led them there and help each other rewrite the story to try to understand if things could have turned out any differently. As in a role-play session, I tried to establish some distance between them and their stories to add moments of levity, of quiet. Even though the experiences we're told about are modern ones, the dreamlike dimension of the tale remains. Realism doesn't conquer all, some things stubbornly remain in the shadows. This isn't your average tabloid tragedy. The main symbols of the tale are still there: the key, the mystery of what the women did, the larger-than-life quality of the characters, the figure of this fascinating and disturbing man... We kept the name of the male character but gave it different forms, with always a reference to this fascinating, unhealthy blue: Bluebeard, Mister Blue, or B. B. And they all share the same initiatory journey: a woman finds herself with a man who gives her a key but tells her not to use it. All of that helps us keep the pathos of realism at arm's length, and I tried to subvert those symbols. The idea was to turn the key into a positive element and to deconstruct our self-conditioning.

**You've decided to turn the tale on its head to give the murdered wives a chance to speak for themselves.**

Exactly. We offer a range of possible and plausible stories. The testimonies are consistent with the personality of each of the women. What ties them together is the fact that they're all locked up, and their desire to escape together. Of course, they tell us about their experiences from beyond the grave, as they've all already been killed, as in the Perrault tale. They replay their stories and perform them for one another in order to better understand all the ins and outs of what happened, in a way similar to some psychiatric techniques. We watch four dead women locked in Bluebeard's "cabinet" while a fifth one, still alive, listens to her "sisters." She's already "disobeyed" and is waiting anxiously for her husband's return. Long after the creation of the show, we met journalist Laurène Daycard, who's worked on violence against women; talking to her was shocking and enlightening. It allowed us to draw a parallel with the stories of very real women, and with the feminicide statistics in France...

**Can you say more about the possible interpretations of the tale, and their connection to our modern world?**

Charles Perrault ends his tale with two morals, a rather misogynistic one telling women that curiosity is dangerous, and another telling his contemporaries that this is a very old tale and that men now "toe the line" when dealing with their wives... For fairy tale psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim, the key is a symbolic image of adultery, for which the woman would be to blame. I was much more interested in Clarissa Pinkola Estés's interpretation, based on a Scandinavian version of the tale, on which I based the whole dramaturgy of the show. In *Women Who Run with the Wolves*, she explains that the predator is a castrating instance which prevents us, as women, to tap into our full power. She talks about the self-conditioning of women in our patriarchal societies. This idea is particularly relevant in our world in which relationships of domination are both concrete and interiorised; it's the predator within we must learn to deconstruct. What really struck me in that analysis is the idea of curiosity as beneficial, driving the woman to get out of the rut, to open the door and discover the murdered wives who, according to Clarissa Pinkola Estés, are the expressions of repressed desires. The female characters that appear on stage are super-powerful. The first is a stereotypical American schoolgirl from the 1970s or 80s, pretty and perfect, but also deeply bored. To fight this boredom, Jordane decides to solve a stalled investigation, putting herself in danger. The second, Nelly, is a naïve preteen who, ignored by her parents, leaves on her own to pick blueberries in the mountains. Her story more closely follows the structure of fairy tales, bringing to mind *Alice in Wonderland*, or even contemporary news stories. She ends up prisoner of a man she sees not as a jailer, but as her husband. It's only later that she starts worrying; the episode with the key becomes a moment of liberation, the opportunity to discover who she is, what she wants. They all share their experience under the hold of this man, and they explore female desire in all possible ways, in particular the problem of the castration of female desire by man, be it real or insidious. It's this desire to control female pleasure to "own" it that I see as the source of misogyny.

**With such a powerful tale, what choices did you make regarding the scenography?**

The stage is almost empty, with five chairs as the main props. This pared-down aesthetics is due in part to a lack of budget. We had literally no budget when we started rehearsing, either in my apartment or in squats. This economical scenography is the show's strength, the chairs represent the space of the cabinet. When we open the door, we discover the women, sitting, talking, helping each other. It's the lights that create the space around them, there's a veil to split the space in two and play with effects of transparency, like a Rorschach test with its colourful shapes constantly changing and shifting and evolving lightly. The testimonies explore the question of female desire. The light serves as a companion to those more or less intimate stories. The show talks a lot about how a person can fall under someone else's influence, and about the desire which drives us to act against ourselves, about the fantasies our societies impose upon us. The images and set are shaped by the power of the testimonies.

Interview conducted by Moïra Dalant the 22<sup>nd</sup> January 2020 and translated by Gaël Schmidt-Cléach