



LE 66 !

INTERVIEW WITH VICTORIA DUHAMEL

Right from the start of your career as a director, you chose to focus on opera. Where does your love from this art form come from?

Victoria Duhamel: I've loved the opera ever since I was a child. When I discovered it, I was immediately transported, it brought me a lot of joy. I think that experience had a lot of influence on my life. It's only later that I was able to understand that I'd been exposed to opera so early for reasons of social determination, while for others, opera remains out of reach. Captured as it is by the upper classes, opera is a source of violence, and to this social violence one must add the violence of the place given to women in it. They're kept at arm's length, celebrated but kept at a distance. Not only when it comes to the characters, but also in terms of all the codes associated with performance, something I realised in part through my experience as a singer. Those realisations came as important shocks to me, and made my love for the opera more ambivalent. But today they're at the heart of my work. When I first encounter a work, I try to take it in as a whole and to tackle its problematic aspects. The word "deconstruction" is very important to me. I think it's essential always to be looking for tangents, which means identifying and questioning the systems and relationships of power we're caught in.

Le 66 ! is one of Offenbach's lesser-known operettas. Why did you choose it?

Offenbach wrote many operettas for a small number of characters. I find this economy of means very stimulating, and *Le 66 !* makes use of all the tricks of the genre. From the point of view of the music, it's incredibly inventive and joyful. But it also has unexpected depth, and goes a little further than the questions this kind of small operetta usually deals with. Here, it all leads to a very powerful moral, "money can't buy happiness," the flip side of which is "one should stay in one's place." It's a very conservative viewpoint! Offenbach's contemporary audiences—most of them from the bourgeoisie—probably thought this a light and happy fable, in part because it comforted them by propping up the established order. I want to explore the distance between the context of creation and the reception of the work today. It also has to do with the style of the operetta, which can seem very foreign to us. It's a challenge, you have to find the right way to go about it.

The idea of playing is at the heart of the narrative. How did you want to approach this dimension?

"To play" can be understood in different ways. Here, we start with the idea of playing a character to then move on to a whole host of games, from noughts and crosses to roulette... The real subject of *Le 66 !* is gambling. The gambler is a very important figure in philosophy and literature. For Walter Benjamin, the gambler is an integral part of the domination of capitalism: he wants to win within a system that values profit and property. Yet the very fact that he gives himself permission to play is a sort of utopian gamble which holds within itself the possibility of resisting this domination. I think it's a very interesting way of thinking, especially applied to *Le 66 !*, and I wanted to include the audience in this reflection by inviting them to put themselves in the gambler's shoes. To that end, I imagined a prologue in which the character of Berthold (the pedlar of the play, who first appears here as an acrobat) tells the audience they're about to see Offenbach's *Le 66 !* and that they will be playing an active role in the proceedings. There are therefore two levels in the show: the time of the tale (the narrative of *Le 66 !* itself) and the time of the present, which we can call the time of the performance. The latter necessarily implies unpredictability, and thus requires the performers to improvise at times (particularly for Berthold, whose role is close to that of a host and who constantly interacts with the audience). The performances might be different from one to the next, which is rare in opera and allows us to deconstruct the rules of the genre a little. But by accepting to take part in the game, do we allow ourselves to take things in hand, or to the contrary do we expose ourselves to more constraints?

This invitation to participation seems to be more and more present in our societies, especially for children and teenagers, through the use of new media...

The entertainment industry nowadays offers us the chance to take part in what it's offering. But to what end? To show us an idealised version of life? To create engagement? To make us dream without leaving our seats? Operetta as a genre is concerned with those same questions, since its goal is precisely to be effective entertainment and to bring happiness. I'm interested in exploring what we imagine we have to do to appeal to others, especially among younger people. More speed, more interactions... with this show, I wanted to create a space where we could ask the question of what society gives us the opportunity to do or not to do. I also decided not to use any digital tool. The concrete means of machinery can also recreate the rhythm, the cumulative effect, and the speed of those new technologies. 18th- and 19th-century theatre created a lot of images, of wonder; it's only the means that have changed.

How did you work on the musical aspect of the show?

Opera has to be approached as a complete form of art, where music and performance go hand in hand. For *Le 66!*, we have a very limited cast: three actor-singers and three musicians, who are all part of the performance. It's real troupe work! The musical ensemble is also unusual, since François Bernard, our arranger, proposed to replace the orchestra by a trio: a piano, a trombone, and a clarinet. There's a brass band aspect to it which reflects Offenbach's project of a show that could easily move from place to place, but also of permanently walking the line between subtle melancholy and slapstick comedy, elegy and mischievousness—something the trombone perfectly embodies. As for the score, it's a reminder of Offenbach's incredible skill as a composer of tunes, with lightness but also a lot of nuance: you have great moments of opera ("le trio de la ruine"), very eloquent solos, etc. He's at once entirely original and working in the style of other composers: for instance, "l'air du tirage" sounds a little like Rossini.

What would you want the children and teenagers who'll come to the show to take away from it?

I'd want to pass on to them the enthusiasm I felt as a child for the opera. And the idea that it's possible to have fun with it, in every sense of the word. To defang it, to make it your own, to criticise it, to play with it. The manifestations of this art form ask questions of us, the works are not linear. That's precisely what I'm interested in: the idea that things aren't set in stone, but always moving. I'm interested in this polysemy, and in all the responses the show is going to elicit.

Interview conducted by Marie Lobrichon in December 2019 and translated by Gaël Schmidt-Cléach