

## Willem Bruls

"In the margins of the Opera" - Alla Turca - East meets West - Shéhérazade - Teorema

Orientalism is one of my topics. I've worked on it for a long time now. It's because of the travelling in the region, it's because I wrote a book on orientalism in opera which is actually investigating the representation of the Orient in western operatic and music theatre arts, I've made radio programmes about musical traditions in Syria, and from this I came into several projects where people – directors, choreographers - asked me to come up with a story, with a libretto, with a concept for productions. And I just want to give you some examples of the works I have made over the last years. I want to give you three examples.

I'm still working on a libretto on the Aleppo theme which I actually started on a couple of years ago. I'm doing it with a Flemish composer Wim Hendrix, who is absolutely wonderful, I think and, at least in Belgium, one of the most important composers; but generally someone who is a very good composer and someone who is very much into the Orient, not the Orient as *couleur local* but as very intrinsic inspiration for his music, especially also the further east, Iran and India, which of course is part of this whole conglomerate of "Orient", what we consider Orient in the West.

The first example, is actually a production I made; it's also a perspective of West on East, - because of course I am a westerner and can't help it, so it's only my limited point of view on the orient. It's taken from - and the starting point was - the letters of Lady Wortley Montagu, who was an eighteenth century wife of a diplomat,

a British diplomat, who travelled with him to Constantinople. He was an ambassador for England there, and she was a wonderful observor; she wrote letters of the things she walked into and experienced, and the talks she had with the women in Constantinople in the early eighteenth century. These letters, I quote them, I took parts from these letters, and there was an actress, a wonderful actress in the Netherlands who actually played Lady Wortley Montagu with a costume which is that of an English, British woman wanting to be an oriental, and it was combined with all kinds of "à la turca" music; so music from rather unknown composers, also known, Glück and Haydn, but also Zussmayer, and Kraus who was Swedish, and Hase a German composer. And all these scenes I took are actually dealing with relationships between a man and a woman. And the game I played is that the observations of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu are actually about one main question: Are the misunderstandings between a man and a wife based on a cultural difference, or a racial difference, or whatever difference? Or are they just intrinsic human misunderstandings between any woman and any man, or in any relationship? I'll show you a short part in which Lady Montagu is finishing one of her texts, and then the singer who is at her feet starts singing; and there's a Baroque orchestra on stage which plays the music.

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So this is the Hase part of it, and this is the moment where the woman is actually a *constantza*, someone from the West, and the Pasha is from the East, and it's discussing this misunderstanding.

The second project that came out of this obsession with orientalism is a ballet and the Polish choreographer, Kristoff Pastor, asked me to rethink the Scherehazade. It was the celebration of 100 years of the Ballet Russe, but of course we didn't want to do a historical

Scheherazade from Rimsky-Korsakov and we wanted to do something different. And what we actually did was to choose some other music, - actually very simple to find, it's the Shéhérazade by Maurice Ravel -, so we used his first song of this song cycle which is Asie, in the show; we opened the show with Ravel's song. And secondly we used three parts of the Rimsky Scheherazade. That's actually the musical change we did which is not that big, but the second thing which I really enjoyed working on was re-writing the story of Scheherazade, and I took a beautiful novel by Naguib Mahfouz who is the Goethe of Egypt; he died a couple of years ago. He wrote wonderful novels about Egyptian society, and Arabic society. And he has a wonderful story which is A Thousand and One Nights; well you can't find a bigger cliché than A Thousand and One Nights, but he tells the story very differently. He starts with end, he starts at the moment where Scheherazade actually cures the sultan, the Pasha, Shahryār, from his urge to kill all the women that are unfaithful to him. We all know the story, Scheherazade starts talking, every evening, every evening; a thousand stories about love and he's cured by that. And that's actually where the novel starts, at the moment Shahryār and Scheherazade have to build their new life with this bloody history, so their traumatic history. And it's a wonderful starting point, and we actually made the ballet from this point of view. And my main question in developing the libretto, - which is of course a wordless libretto -, my main question is how can a ruler, like Shahryār be an honest lover and an honest ruler with the past, with the killing, and the blood on his hands. And actually Naguib Mahfouz's answer is he can't; it's impossible, with this history, to renew yourself. And what we do in the ballet is we actually... we show a love which is the love of the sister of Scheherazade, Dinazarde; and the position of Shahryār, the Pasha, is to protect this pure love which is something the society wants to destroy. The fact that society wants to destroy this pure love is because the society

developed in resistance to the cruelty of Shahryār; it is his fault that the society is the way it is and wants to destroy the purity, which he now tries to defend. But he can't, he has no power any more, because of his history, it's a paradox. And that was actually the nucleus of the ballet. And the wonderful thing is that actually, well, when you look at television today and when you follow the news about Egypt and the Revolution... I mean, Naguib Mahfouz was a visionary and he really tells the story here and now of Egypt with this character of Shahryār. And we can have a short moment which is the end of Ravel and the change to Rimsky. We see the singer who is a narrator, but she is also a double of Scheherazade, she's actually a kind of soul, singing the story of Scheherazade. And we have on stage Shahryār, Scheherazade who is in red with black tights, and the sister Dinazarde who is completely in red. The two characters in black are the Djinns, who are the spirits that incite all action.

[Fragment]

So, that's the end of the prologue where you saw Shahryār and all the women he killed lying all around him. So that's the starting point for the new part of his life.

The third production is not an orientalism production. It's an adaptation, a play I wrote. It's based on Teorema, the famous film by Pasolini. And it was actually a mission impossible, because there are only three words spoken in the film, and I had to make a stage text for it; so I had sleepless nights for a long time, until I discovered the novel Pasolini wrote on the same subject which was a great help to me. So I took the novel as a model and not so much the film, which is also safer to make an adaptation of course. So I took the novel and I made a couple of monologues for the characters, - which more or less conform the film -, and it's not music theatre but it's a play with music and for me the music was very important. I worked

together with the composer. The director was Ivo van Hove, but I worked with the composer Eric Sleichim and we came up with a dramaturgy of music in the play. And in the first part the basic idea was a string quartet, because we have these four members of the family who are Paolo the father, Lucia the mother, Odetta the daughter and Pietro the son. And then there is of course this housekeeper, Emilia, but she's a character outside of this family who has a different development in the story. But the four members of the family represent, of course, the four instruments of the string quartet. And in the first part everything is still alright, when the guest arrives everything is alright so we have this classical harmony of the Beethovenian world. Secondly, in the second part, when everyone is leaving and everyone is desperate, this harmonic world falls apart and we have parts of the string quartets of Webern which we use in the stage-set of the play, and then thirdly in the last stage which is a kind of supernatural transfigural scene at the end we have only tones, pure tones, and there is even a disintegration of the string quartet because the four musicians that play the music go to the four corners of the space and play discs, and on these discs are just the pure tones. I can't show you this, but I can show you one part, a part that's very dear to me, because it's the moment where the father falls ill and is actually more or less cured by the guest, but it's false, he doesn't really recover and for this moment we chose to use Beethoven's string quartet Dankgesang eines Genesenen, which is of course a thanksgiving for someone who is a cured, so it is exactly parallel to the theme of the play and the film, but it also refers to the overall theme of Teorema. So I'll show you a fragment. [Fragment]

You can see the father on the left with the guest who is helping him. At the same time it's the part where they read from Tolstoy, The Death of Ivan Ilyich, which is of course a third layer of not being

cured – Ivan Ilyich dies terribly in this novel - and this complex of curation and of illness is actually a beautiful moment in the show and is actually the way the music works together with the text, which creates – something that was mentioned this morning – classical melodrama that actually emerges at that moment.

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These are just three examples of what I called deviant forms, so not opera, not music theatre, but deviant forms of how you could combine, or we did combine music and theatre to create an imaginary space for an enhancement of text and music together; so that's what I wanted to say about these things today. Thank you.