

FORGETTING THE UNFORGETTABLE

Interview with director Luk Perceval about *Infinite Now*

Infinite Now is no classical opera. There is no action in the classical sense, dramatically or musically. There are no characters in the classical sense. There is no text or music in the classical sense. For people who have no prior knowledge, can you tell them what type of work it is exactly? How would you describe it?

Luk Perceval: I would call it a kind of pandemonium of sounds, voices, fragments of silence. I can only say what it means to me. It is a kind of representation of how the psyche works, namely in an associative, reminiscent manner, falling back on many layers; in the sense that it contains, among other things, elements of the First World War – in short: trauma. But also sounds or fragments associated with nature. It is also a story about longing for death, fear. According to the current state of neuroscience, our mind is wired primarily for detecting danger or what is dictated by fear. Yet at the same time it is about feeling attracted to the unknown. Those elements are integrated into *Infinite Now*. To me, these are all elements which, if one was to examine the operation of the mind or the psyche, emerge and disappear again. What happens from the moment you try to concentrate, or try to perceive what silence is? That is what I mean by pandemonium of silence. Silence in itself does not exist. It is always the sum total of real sounds, on the one hand, and associations with those sounds, on the other hand, as well as of memories evoking sounds and emotions.

What you can expect musically is hard for me to describe in concrete terms. I would say it is an associative space, not exactly an epic story or a melody, but that, for me personally, is music. Because it is meditation in which the music confronts us with the music of life. It is not just about the music which can be perceived, but also about the music you associate with it.

What is it like working with an all-new composition – work that did not yet exist and that you could not use in advance? What effect did this have on direction?

Perceval: The fact that it is created in this way is also something I wanted. One thing you always have to deal with as an artist is that the audience is usually served with what it knows, with the canon of the repertory company or the repertory of literature or the opera, as is the case here. As a result, people go to the theatre with certain expectations. I want to break away from that in an extreme manner. I wanted to confront the audience with something completely new, with truly new music. What is it like to work with that? It is very challenging. I would not say it is fundamentally different because, after all, I always work like that. I try to discover what happens during the rehearsals and what impulses are headed my way. I try to give that back and see how that develops. It is thus no form of direction one can prepare for – but actually that is something I stopped doing a long time ago. What is different of course is that, as a theatre maker starting from a text – and I have brought many novel adaptations to the theatre in recent years – you can keep deleting and adapting during the rehearsal process; whereas in the case of *Infinite Now*, you enter a virtually mathematically pre-given design: There is the score, the music as a fixed given. And that is different, of course, because you have to look at the dynamic of that music and what the music brings about.

What is the relation between the two text sources, between *FRONT* and *Homecoming*? How do those two works relate to each other?

Perceval: For me, both form one story here. I know this is different in the creative process of Chaya [editor's note: In the composition, the stories of *FRONT* and *Homecoming* are initially placed one behind the other, only to gradually converge and engage one another]. But as a spectator, you will always try to understand things the moment you observe them. That is inevitable. The moment words are uttered, you start looking for some kind of logic and you ask yourself the question you are asking now. What is the connection between these two? From the beginning of the rehearsal, I have been searching and I still discover every day how it is one story; because it is an expression of the search for the connection between things in the mind – it is about someone who discovers. And in that discovery certain echoes from the past, echoes of the war play a role too. These are echoes which all unite us in Europe – the trauma of war which still reverberates several generations later. That is one aspect, the *FRONT* aspect in this narrative. On the other hand, it is a very intense search that all human beings are engaged in: How do I free myself from that, how do I cleanse myself from such a past? What is development at all? Does that mean to forget, to hold back, to experience things? I think you cannot forget things. In that regard, the story of *Infinite Now* comes down to one thing: For me, it is essentially about searching, letting go of your fear and your past.

What role does music play in this discovery and cleansing process? What significance should be given to this work?

Perceval: The music, the composition by itself, is fairly complex. In working with this composition, day after day, I keep discovering new aspects, new dimensions. I find it fascinating to be confronted with something I don't really know what I am getting myself into. I am discovering more and more that what Chaya created is something extremely introspective and, therefore, very complex at the same time. To me, it is still an adventure, a voyage of discovery of sorts. I am beginning to get an idea of where we could be headed, but every day I discover more and more layers she probably experienced, because, obviously, you can never tell for sure. It is precisely that which I find fascinating. But it is also extremely intense because you have to be incredibly attentive and careful when rehearsing. However, I am delighted that we have a mix of singers and actors who, as I begin to notice more and more each day, have a positive influence on one another. In fact, they come from totally different worlds and have a totally different logic in their presence on stage. What Chaya pretends, requires an incredible amount of concentration, not only from me, but from everybody. And, keeping this in mind, I don't think this will become a classical or entertaining kind of opera performance. In fact, it is something for which you should cast aside all possible expectations and on which you should or should not rely. At the beginning, I called this meditation, but of course meditation is something different for everyone. And what I have been very grateful for and have found very inspiring so far is that what she developed requires such great concentration. That is something I often miss in theatre. Not just in theatre, but in the times we live in. Actually, we are people who live from one second to the next and we immediately forget what happened to us in the previous second. This work forces us to stop and think and to consciously experience with all of our senses – we have to employ all our senses. In this regard, I am very curious how the audience will respond. But I also know that when a few hundred people sit together, a different body forms, and other laws apply. This work is something that can be a tremendous provocation, of course. For example, there are very few people who can still sit still, let alone that in this day and age there is something called trained attention. We are continually distracted. And here, we ask for a totally different attitude, one that I am convinced is necessary in the culture and the times we live in – an attitude which is no longer cultivated and, therefore, goes against the zeitgeist. But I believe that is also why we create art: To go against the zeitgeist. As they say in Germany: To not give sugar to the monkey and to deny him his sugar. To say: Look what happens if you remove all distractions and need to focus on a new experience. What I find

fascinating about it is that there are layers of perception we all have inside us but which may all have been forgotten; that there are things that resonate inside of us, that are present inside us. I don't know if this has any appeal to the average spectator. I don't know; I hope it does.

(Luc Joosten and Marjolein Craens)