

Variations sur la Mort (Variations on Death)

texte Jon Fosse / mise en scène (direction) Claude Régy / for 6 actors

Both Fosse (Norwegian author) and Régy are highly considered in today's Parisian theatre. In some circles they are 'tops'. I went to see this performance mainly for the theme, its link to the Mexico project - but also because of Régy's reputation.

Théâtre de la Colline (National - 700 places.) The scenography: a white rectangle raised into the auditorium (floating over the first 15 rows of the theatre - reducing the theatre capacity by 50%.) Shiny, almost glittering white surface; penumbra selective lighting. Actors arrive on stage through the dark, as if floating in the night. Most lighting was "contrejour" from behind, with a bit of front light, 'perfectly' dosed.

I would call the text pseudo-naive: an extremely low-key domestic text, with some reiterations which lend themselves to soft candour humour (there were ripples of laughter three or four times in the audience.) A central story of a poor young couple: "Enough money to pay the rent?" She is expecting, so he must get a job. They have an older daughter (ambiguously played by a woman looking almost the mother's age) - who seems to have committed suicide (blurring the play's time unity) - and who falls in love with "a friend". The mother realizes the husband has fallen in love with another woman and is leaving... The play then centers on the daughter and the older man. There is also "an older woman" whose role is very effaced - the grandmother expecting visits from the grand daughter. The text verges on but never quite engages symbolic connotations: does the "friend" represent death?

The performance is declared to be about Death, yet deals with Eros - death as divorce and suicide, you could say. Claude Régy's choice (in my view) concentrates on the realm of the dead described as "the kingdom of shadows" or phantoms (the classical descriptions of Hades.) I would put it like this: "the tender mediocre gray despair of a lower-middle class Northern European family confronting divorce-death - which stuns and suffocated them all into evanescence and loss (of substance.) If I could be allowed to say: "death kills them."

The main quotes in the programme are:

"I did not die, and did not remain alive:
judge for yourself, if you have the flower of intelligence,
what became of me, niether dead nor alive."
Dante - Divine Comedy, Hell Ch XXXIV (my translation)

"Thus Fosse invents a virgin universe lifting all borders between death and live. One sees creatures moving about (evolving) whose nature belongs to one and the other, without their state being able to be clearly defined. // It is all the more disturbing - even subversive - because the usual landmarks which help us find our place are carefully erased in what we believe to be time and space." Claude Régy (my translation)

The performance was over two hours long - totally monochord. All the acting slow-motioned - movement and word delivery - as if though 'normal' life had been slowed 40% and muffled 60% (especially emotional and temperamental deliveries: the wife did let fly a couple of times in front of the husband's feeble denials leading finally to his "do you really want to know her name?" - ripples of laughter, obviously.) The whole thing reminded me of a Christian crib (what we call in Spanish: un belén - a Bethlehem! un pesebre... en français: une crèche, avec santons...) A naive (grey candid) allegory. All the acting emphasised candour. It proceeded to a slight apotheosis of the daughter at the end (which was not without reminding me of the famous levitation of the maid in Passolini's Teorema - where, actually, Terence Stamp was a sort of "angel of death" Eros-Thanatos. Passolini did call his film "teorema"...) I will study the French articles on this piece, but I doubt anyone would dare talk of irony - though I hope someone dares go at "postmodern candour"!

My idea of the "Theatre of Death" is in many ways the opposite of Fosse/Régy's - though the parallels with our Mexican project could be striking, especially in terms of what I have called "interiorizing" the baroque theatre of death. The realm of Hades is classically decribed as grey, dull, muffled, dusty: such a rendering, and the latent greed the dead manifest for blood, as described in the Odyssey, has fascinated much of contemporary theatre, especially Tadeus Kantor and Buto, with their grand repetition theatrics à la Tantalus or Sisyphus, as well as the contemporary performers who want to draw blood (especially women performance artists!) For me the "Theatre of Death" is one of lucidity as opposed to numbing, of "nothing left to lose so lets risk and expose what is inside, behind life", of stripping away the candid protections of hope, future, ignorance, transcendence, afterlife, etc... of perverting such candidness, of curdling, yagourhting, cheesing, cibations, etc. And, like Fosse, I turn to one of the territories where these 'mysteries' are the most alive, vivacious, rewarding, lucid, complex, killing - the territories of Eros.

Enrique Pardo - Paris, November 9, 2003. © PANTHEATRE