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Le Balcon
Bordello, Theater, Opera

Alain Patrick Olivier

By choosing to set Jean Genet's *Le Balcon* to music, Peter Eötvös barely had to alter the original play. Whereas for his previous opera (*Three Sisters*) he set Anton Chekhov's text in a complex perspective, here he has remained faithful to the linear progression of the work, and only condensed the structure, leaving the dialogue unchanged. Libretto writer, Françoise Morvan, has compressed the play, introducing only the slightest stylistic variations possible and remaining faithful to the spirit of the original. In this way, the musician treats *Le Balcon* as if it were already a potential opera libretto.

Firstly, he exploits a spatial dramaturgy which takes account of the play's fundamental conflict – the clash of two opposing worlds: the world the insurgents taking the city; and the world of the bordello, in which the symbols of power take refuge. In the original spoken version, one could already hear in permanence, within the enclosed confines of the bordello, a sonic reality from the upheaval taking place outside, namely the cries and the crackle of gun fire; in short, noise.

The most notable change in the opera adaptation is the addition of another sonic reality within the house: the instrumental world of the professional musicians, who come to play music for the customers. A dialectic establishes itself between two forms of sound and two forms of sociability: the raw musical expression coming from the street, and the cultivated, civilized sound of the musicians, domesticated to point where they have become little more than parlor standard lamps.

The composer also makes use of the strong musical qualities inherent in Genet's language. His poetic prose immediately offers itself as an extremely rich material. But instead of sufficing in itself and making the music all but redundant as in so many classical texts, here the poetry seems to elect songs as its natural medium of expression. Eötvös has therefore chosen to make the text resonate in its intelligibility, so that the meaning may be fully perceived, with the same simplicity as French chanson.

At the same time, elocution attains another dimension. For the director, as for the musician, words which are sung assert themselves with clarity and necessity, taking up the challenge to recite in lyricism and grandeur, something that has always been problematic for the spoken theatre. The extravagant convention which holds what we sing on the stage seems at its most natural here. "The theatre of Genet, as Stanislas Nordey recognized, was not written for actors, but for monsters or innocents." He therefore finds in the singer "that part of innocence and excessiveness that the actor is not always in a position to offer".

Generally speaking, the theatre of Genet is "operatic". And the production of *Le Balcon* particularly exploits the excess and artificiality inherent in opera as an arena of theatricality pushed to its ultimate peak.

For the author, *Le Balcon* is nothing other than “the glorification of the Image and the Reflection”.

In the bordello’s salons, theatrical scenes of extreme extravagance are played out, yet paradoxically these very scenes prove to be more real than any scene depicting the reality outside. The three archetypal Figures, the Bishop, the Judge and the General, take on the tragicomic trappings of opera in the brothel. They can only truly live by reveling in the pleasure of contemplating their extravagant and artificial image, a deceptive image which ultimately becomes the essence of their personalities.

The bordello becomes the hidden theatre of their social characterization, before opening out on to the exterior, when the characters appear on the balcony for the crowd. The Grand Balcony thus becomes the new Royal Palace (no doubt because every Royal Palace is also a place of fantasy and theatre). In the midst of all this suffering, the house of illusion becomes the refuge of all the actors, the place where reality holds, while the revolt, outside, dissolves like a mirage. This place, on the fringes of the norm becomes the refuge for power and its simulacrum. In its cult of excess, and representation, in which abnormality becomes the norm, is the bordello – this “house of illusion” – not already an opera house? The play thus finds its natural extension in the artifice of lyrical performance.