

Tree of Codes: cut-outs in time

Tree of Codes is based on Jonathan Safran Foer's book of the same name, a book created by filtering a number of short stories by the Polish writer Bruno Schulz from the collection 'Street of Crocodiles' (1934). Safran Foer commented that the process of working with Schulz' stories was rather like working with the kabbalah – every combination of letters and words gives rise to new meanings, and behind every line sits the larger 'ur-book' of existence. The book 'Tree of Codes' is made up of a patchwork of deleted spaces through which one can see other, hidden stories; it opens up poetic time-space through which subconscious meanings arise. My idea for the opera was also to make a work in which there are holes in the world, perforations in the ordinary through which one might encounter other realities. There is the primordial time of birds with which the work begins, which is not really natural but a manufactured hybrid world of bird-like humans and human-like birds existing in some strange laboratory. There's a nostalgic nod to a burlesque carnival world of masks and floating desires, where identities are tried on, discarded, reclaimed, or repurposed. In a suspended zone, there's the figure of the father who is dead or probably dead, yet he doesn't know it. He tries to create reality, conjuring things out of rubbish. He commands with gestures but he doesn't speak; others speak for him so he's like a puppeteer who is himself like a ventriloquist's puppet.

There are three main singing parts: the Mutant Bird played by the clarinetist of Ensemble Musikfabrik, Carl Rosman – he sings, he warbles like a bird, he triggers sampled sounds, he plays clarinets – his part embodies the transforming in-between spaces of memory, language and being in the work. More than just imitating bird sounds, he also performs some phrases in the whistled language of Kuşküy, a village in the northern part of Turkey on the Black Sea.

Then there is the Son, played by baritone Christian Miedl, and Adela, figure of desire and fascination to both the Son and the Father, played by soprano Emily Hindrichs. Much of the writing for the baritone and soprano is highly lyrical but at times, this lyricism gets turned on its head into something darker. This inversion of the lyrical is found especially in the 3rd Act, 'Ventriloquism' which comprises two big ballads. Adela's ballad begins as a kind of triple-time lullaby accompanied by the plucked sounds of the kalimba (thumb piano). She sings 'Let me tell you a story' which is simultaneously innocent and full of dark undercurrents. In the retelling of a fairy-tale, the story becomes stranger and stranger as it unfolds in a nocturnal landscape of mutated 2-headed birds made of rubbish against which a crowd turns ugly, flinging stones into the sky to bring the birds down. This takes place against a backdrop of the sounds of frogs and insects – in a sense, languages of the animal kingdom, that eventually rasp out Goethe's horrifying lines from *Der Erlkönig*, about the Son who cannot be kept safe by the Father. The second ballad is a sea shanty for the Son accompanied by a solo bassoon - a rocking boat-song about madness, about death as a masked animal, about the soul without a compass in an abandoned craft, lost and at the mercy of the sea.

As well as the main singing roles, there is the central figure of the Father (Yael Rion), who, as I said, doesn't speak or sing. There are also doubles of the Son and Adela played by theatre performers, Stéphane Vecchione and Anne Delahaye. Another

actor, Diane Decker, plays Touya who, in Bruno Schultz' story, is a figure of fecund decay personifying a landscape of overripe sensuality.

The instrumentation of the opera was determined very much by the musicians of Musikfabrik – the brass players (Marco Blaauw, Christine Chapman, Bruce Collings, Melvyn Poore) were keen to involve the double-bell instruments of trumpet, horn, trombone, and euphonium that they have developed and the opera exploits the double-voiced capacity of these instruments. There is a strohviol played by Axel Porath, visually connected to the brass with its amplifying horns, and this was chosen to evoke a nostalgic lost world. There are various pairs of instruments at different sizes – a beat-up and out-of-tune upright piano and a little toy piano; piccolo flutes and then the really huge subcontrabass flute played by Liz Hirst. With the musicians on stage, one becomes aware of their hybrid nature in which the instruments are like prosthetics to their bodies and overall there's a strong thematic thread around ventriloquism and double identities found at both sonic and visual levels. The musicians on stage are not only playing, but also vocalizing and singing as a choir and they form part of the crowd of characters that inhabit the laboratory, the city, the stage. By the end, everyone is singing and there is an elemental nakedness in these voices in which all props fall away, as a musical culmination of the way boundaries dissolve in the opera.

The multiple stories in the opera are, for me, about opening up emotional or psychic spaces. For the audience, I hope that people will see different things and plug into different aspects of the stories depending on their frame of mind at the time. If there is a 'story', it is about the basic ephemerality that attends our lives and our deaths, and a longing for intensity, iridescence, for epiphany.

The last lines in the libretto are:

'Why did you not tell me?
the last secret of the tree of codes:
Nothing reaches a definite conclusion
Reality is only as thin as paper
Behind the screen,
sawdust in an empty theatre.
There we feel possibilities
shaken by the nearness of realization.
I wanted a night that would not end'.

These words remind me of Prospero's speech in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* where all is but an 'insubstantial pageant'...our dreamlike life dissolves, yet still we reach out to try and touch some moment of splendor. At the moment of death, everything is in flux and somehow full of potential and infinite yearning. Bruno Schulz says: 'What is a Spring dusk? A multitude of unfinished stories. Here are the great breeding grounds of history. The tree roots want to speak...memories awake...'

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