

Cassandre 79

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L'art principe actif

Allier le pessimisme de l'intelligence à l'optimisme de la volonté

An example to follow closely, the adventures of the Vollard Theatre Company

Led by Emmanuel Genvrin, for 30 years the Vollard theatre company has worked to allow a heterogeneous population understand its origins and build a collective identity. It is rare, even more so in the current context of the Reunion Island, with questions and issues regarding the relation with mainland France being raised. About to create a new kind of opera for the Indian Ocean, we asked Emmanuel Genvrin to tell us about the adventure.

Back then we weren't politicised. The youth here just wanted to do things, had so much energy and desire. And in the case of formations like ours or two music groups, we are still here 30 years on! Our work mirrors the shanty towns of Saint-Denis and their aesthetics: popular, rusting, a mumble jumble. Our name comes from Ambroise Vollard, creole companion of Alfred Jarry, arts dealer who made Picasso and Cézanne. He held a literary salon, wrote several *Ubu*. We knew this and took his name, for we felt a kinship. Out of this came two plays: *Creole Ubu* and *Colonial Ubu*.

The first few years were tough, an itch for the authorities. They couldn't censor us, but caused us all sorts of problems. With Mitterand's presidency came a shift and Vollard took flight, writing its own texts! We decided to be the voice of our generation by creating what we put on stage. Our first was *Marie Dessemble*, a phenomenal success and a play about 1848, the abolition of slavery. It was not complacent, neither of contradictions, nor of the blind eyes turned by the regular inhabitant of Reunion Island to the system. Our society is one of convulsions, each inhabitant is a civil war to himself, as Vergès rightly said. It is a country of immigration, mixtures. The contact with the outside generates artistic forms. But as the population becomes older, it dies out, and those who defend creole culture often aren't from here.

This cultural exception France calls for, it does not bestow to those of La Reunion. The denunciation of abuses on the part of a globalised US culture hides those against the cultures France considers as inferior. There are false forms of respect and mixture. Promoting communitarian politics does not encourage the melting pot, it promotes co-existence: 'I respect you so I will let you develop your own culture, so long as it does not come in contact with mine.'

Throughout our history, made of many a tough times, the cultural communities supported us. They compromised with the authorities to gain some things, but still wanted their bones picked with them. And we do this, we articulate a political message. This is why we often had a lot of difficulties. At times we were caught between the local Right, very colonialist, and an opportunistic Left.

I've always loved history, so we told the history of this place and its people. No one else could have done this. Historical plays were always our greatest successes, for the population here has been betrayed by both sides so often. We helped give identitarian bearings, yet allowing freedom to all. The actor has a social function, a teaching role. Reunion island is a place awash with spirituality, shamanism. It has a deep concern for death. A lot of it is cheap, but there are also strong religious institutions. It's a paradox, a syncretism. The irrational is ever present, and theatre can play a great role in giving it structure.

Why the opera? Because we needed to start afresh. And theatre is becoming increasingly cerebral, whilst opera talks to the core, to the spine. It goes back to the origins of theatre, to strong emotions. And it is a way to reinvent what we do. We have kept the codes of the opera, but introduced music from the Indian Ocean, jazz. The opera is at the height of modernity when theatre is passing tough times. But the opera needs new works of art, we shall do our part, and hopefully future generations will invent their own forms.