



"Afrique Asie" – November 2011 Culture

Music Following "Maraina", Jean-Luc Trulès and Emmanuel Genvrin present a tragic opera which recalls the bitter 1955 sugar conflict on Reunion Island, using an accomplished score that blends contemporary and Reunionese compositions. Beautifully provocative.

"Chin", the inconvenient opera

by Corinne Moncel

Emmanuel Genvrin still remembers: "*Monkey music* " That's how certain members of the Reunionese press described *Maraina*, the first contemporary Creole opera that he created with composer Jean-Luc Trulès in 2005. Used to long term struggles within Volland Theater⁽¹⁾, on Reunion Island (French overseas department in the Indian Ocean), the pair paid little attention: disregarding the narrow-minded and - let's not be afraid of the word - the racists who still hold sway on this scrap of French colony, after strong critical acclaim, they 'reoffended' with *Chin*, an opera of musical maturity and exceptional writing. On stage you can see singers of all colors and origins, like the Reunionese people themselves.

Produced on Reunion in 2010, performed at Vitry-sur-Seine (Paris area) last October, now waiting for invitations to China and Algeria to be confirmed, the opera dares to talk about what everyone has preferred to forget on Reunion and mainland France: the bitter 1955 sugar conflict at the Quartier Français factory (called Bel Air in the libretto), during the period of Third World decolonization, and separatist, if not to say Maoist, tendencies on the island. The strikers' mobilization, which affected the whole island, was to be the opportunity for an unnatural alliance between the factory owner and the communist leader, Chin, in order to save the factory which was sought-after by a consortium of competitors from mainland France.

Inspired by Paul Vergès

Chin. Meaning "the Chinese man", nickname given to Paul Vergès, twin brother of Jacques, of mixed French-Vietnamese lineage, and key figure of the local Communist Party, who led the fight at Quartier Français and went into hiding for eight years before becoming a major political figure on the island for decades. It's his story that inspired Genvrin and Trulès' opera, which Paul Vergès attended for the first time last October, and to whom the director paid tribute at the end of the performance. At first the senator⁽²⁾ was rather reluctant about the liberties taken by the librettist to evoke the life of his hero. Thus Genvrin's Chin has an affair with both the boss's daughter - to whom he gave an illegitimate son when they were enlisted in the Resistance - and the young worker spearheading the factory mobilization.

Chin, a historical tragedy, is nevertheless a work of total creativity which takes its roots in History, but also in the mythology of the inhabitants who peopled the island little by little: Europeans, Malagasy, Indians, Africans. Chinese... Both the text and score intertwine references to these cultural contributions that forged the Reunionese melting-pot. In *Chin* - a subtitled opera - both French and Creole are spoken, and the Greek goddess Iphigenia is invoked alongside the Hindu deities Kali or Shiva, and the Malagasy god Zanahary... Symphonic structures can also be heard with a lyricism that is sometimes classical, sometimes contemporary, mixing typical Reunionese sega or maloya, or Chinese or Indian melodic lines. It's precisely this blend that bothers those who only see "*monkey music*" in *Maraina* and *Chin*.

Those who "*practice cultural apartheid want everyone and everything to be pigeonholed*" fumes Emmanuel Genvrin.

In telling the suppressed story of the 1955 sugar conflict, story that he'd already staged in a theatrical trilogy about the workers' strikes on Reunion, Genvrin, with his comrade Trulès, wants to educate. "*Reunion is young and suffers from a lack of memories*, says the playwright. *There's not really a History yet, with its myths to reinforce Reunionese identity. The island is inventing them little by little, and Volland Theater is taking part in its construction.*" At such a point that in 2002 *Lepervenche*, a play inspired by the life of Léon de Lepervanche, a communist aristocrat who led the rail-workers' strike in 1937 and who was at the origin, with Raymond Vergès (Paul and Jacques' father) of the 1946 departmentalization law, took over the spelling of the real Lepervanche: on an official plaque the "a" has been lost in favor of the "e" of the play's character... *Chin* participates in the creation of myths on Reunion. "*We explain a different History, different from what becomes official,*" states Emmanuel Genvrin. It took Jean-Luc Trulès and he three years to write *Chin*, during a ceaseless

creative back-and-forth. First the libretto had to be written; then set to music with piano-singing, which gave rise to two or three drafts; and finally transcribed for the orchestra. The score is enriched with pieces specially written for certain singers. Of course everything was always thought of in terms of the staging. Why choose to write an opera, which takes so long to create, after the theatrical endeavors? "What interested us in this genre was the tool, explains Genvrin. *By combining music and song, we can express an infinite range of possibilities.*" Too many perhaps? The pair had to cut large swathes of the score. "Some pieces were so beautiful, aroused so much elation, that you could have been forgiven for thinking we were writing a hagiography of the Communist Party! But as artists we have to address everyone. We have to be careful not to exert a moral pressure on the audience, therein lies our greatness", insists Genvrin.

A free theater

Opera was also a way of answering back to the various institutions that wanted to "sink" Volland Theater, admits the director. Volland is a free theater that has never subjected itself to academic orders, and who paid it dearly. But it's been worth it. *Chin*, acclaimed by the specialized press, is much more accomplished than *Maraina*, and is apparently even less so than the third opus that the pair have already programmed for the coming years. A fine example of resistance by and for art "With our operas we want to set an example and say to composers in the South: "We can do it!" enthuses Emmanuel Genvrin. *We also want to say to mainland France: "Open up! "*

⁽¹⁾ Dynamic, creative, provocative and anti-academic, Volland Theater, created in 1979 by Emmanuel Genvrin, has transformed the cultural landscape of Reunion but has always been exposed to financial and administrative troubles.

⁽²⁾ At the age of 86, Vergès became a senator for the island on September 25 2011.

** *Chin*, composer and musical director: Jean-Luc Trulès; libretto and director: Emmanuel Genvrin; Chinese, Malagasy, mainland French, Reunionese, and Caribbean singers; Massy opera orchestra (France). Production: Volland Theater, Reunion (France). Libretto and (eventful) story of the theater: <http://www.volland.com>

{PHOTO CAPTION: *The composer Jean-Luc Trulès and the librettist Emmanuel Genvrin (right) situated "Chin" in the middle of the Third World separatist and Marxist period.*}

AN OPERA THAT WANTS TO FIGHT LACK OF MEMORY AND REUNITE ... REUNION AT LAST.