

**NO BEAUTY FOR ME THERE
WHERE HUMAN LIFE IS RARE**

On Jan Lauwers' Theatre Work
with Needcompany

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CARE OF THE SELF, DENIAL OF THE WORLD Isabella's Myth

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The background whiteness of *Isabella's Room* stands in sharp contrast to the 'dark times' that we commonly identify with the 20th century. As Isabella Morandi makes her way across it, from the first World War to the rise of the Vlaams Blok, Flanders' extreme-right party, in the 1990s, from the world covered in blood to the signs of a new impeding abomination, she gathers the world to become stronger, and more beautiful.

Although Jan Lauwers originally conceived the play as a tribute to his father, the play nevertheless deploys its effects on our modes of perception. The immediate, international success that greeted it created a sort of puzzling phenomenon: "why do people cry at the end?" asked the writer-director, without venturing an answer.¹ The components of the play are evidently the key to its impact. The actors' frontal performances, their complex movements and stage presence — intensified by the use of video, by the ethnic objects from the father's collection (an intrusion of the real metamorphosed by the director), by the choreography, and most of all by the constant support that music provides to the whole — all contribute to the show's deep seductive powers. Add to that the powerful performance of Viviane De Muynck, who is working with a chronological, first-person narrative that makes it easy for the audience to anchor the movement of identification. In effect, Jan Lauwers' narrative of the life of a 'strong' woman zeros in on the process of self-affirmation. To bring this out, he seamlessly varies the point of view between the internal and the external; he takes the audience inside Isabella's mind and around her quasi-motionless voyage in space and time. At the end of the play, it is the world and time that have travelled around Isabella, leaving her victorious and singular, an unaltered island, like the lighthouse of her childhood, the room of her adult life, the Africa of her ghosts.

1. Jan Lauwers in an interview with Nancy Delhalle, "Jan Lauwers. L'art, la philosophie et le théâtre", *Alternatives Théâtrales*, nos. 85-86, 2005, p. 42.

The character imagined by Jan Lauwers, passing as she does from a convent to a lighthouse on an island to a room in Paris, is first and foremost a cloistered individual. Isabella is abandoned by her parents and lives the first years of her life in the seclusion of a Carmelite convent; then Anna and Arthur, the keepers of the lighthouse — and her real parents — adopt her. When Anna dies, Arthur gives his daughter the keys to a room and leaves. He abandons social norms for the margins of society, and also of the story, which from that moment on concentrates on Isabella's universe. The room filled with African objects is a materialization of the world as the protagonist sees it. While her story makes us privy to her many lovers and to the events of her life, the room represents her mental space. Jan Lauwers, using these two modes of representation, constructs a sharp image of the relation between self and world whose effects transcend the limits of the fiction.

The room seems to exist in the world as if on a stage: only snippets of the sounds of the wars and conflicts that punctuate the 20th century filter through to this impervious microcosm. The narrator tells us that the First World War visited no suffering on the people of the island. He also says that after the Second World War, Alexander, Isabella's 'second man', returned from Hiroshima mad. All of this passes by Isabella without really touching her. The signs of a real world that insinuate themselves into the fiction are made even more remote by the fact that they are mostly mentioned by the narrator. This mode of exposition, in which the situation is set without the use of dialogue, reinforces the impression that, if there is a world out there, and if there is another story than the one told onstage, both remain distant and isolated. They intrude upon Isabella's universe through very narrow cracks. With the exception of the monologue in which Alexander evokes the moments immediately following the explosion of the atomic bomb, the allusions to a 'real world' present in the text are almost anecdotal. The contextualization functions essentially like a set: it sparks recog-

nition and creates a sense of familiarity for the audience. In contrast to Brecht's alienation effect, which renders the known and familiar universe strange in order to prompt a critical reaction, Jan Lauwers renders the fictional context banal. Brecht wanted to 'de-centre' the point of view by forcing the audience to replace the individual — the character — in a specific society, thus obliging the members of the audience to take account of both character and society simultaneously. Lauwers, conversely, postulates a known and almost inalterable world, thus re-centring our attention on the out-standing individual.

Actually, Isabella is not exactly cloistered, and the closed off space of the room is essentially metaphorical. To the extent that the story told onstage is not subjected to deconstructions, it shows that Isabella's relationship to the world is not purely illusory. There is a stable base underneath the character, which both delimits and situates her: she goes to university, she has a pragmatic attitude to life, she has lovers and even a child. Nevertheless, her relationship to the world is exclusively mediated by her erotic drive on the one hand, and by the African objects in the room on the other.

Isabella likes to make love. She says so outright and she evokes her collection of lovers, the perfect counterpoint to her collection of African objects. Far from making his character a praying mantis, a 'man-eater', Jan Lauwers insists on the respect she has for her lovers. She is an Epicurean in search of the pleasures to be had from loveless sex, and she turns the act of giving in to one's impulses into a veritable philosophy of life.

In this movement, the other, the lover in this case, becomes a sort of prey who nourishes, but does not transform, Isabella. This strengthens the frame of perception activated by the story, in which the 'I' appears as an entity totally irreducible and singular, an *en-soi* that bursts, self-constructed, onto the surface of the world. For Isabella, in fact, the movement towards the others is a strategic movement — made of seduction and promises — that does not interact with the cloistered self, the *homo-clausus* discussed by Norbert Elias.² Isn't it the case that

2. See Norbert Elias, *The Society of Individuals*, ed. Michael Schiróter, trans. Edmund Jephcott, New York, Continuum, 2001.

Isabella, having gone to Africa in search of her young, moribund lover, is happy to let him go home by himself after she has discovered the dark continent?

Scrutinizing the triad, eroticism-power-death, Jan Lauwers says, "the world of art touches on politics, philosophy, morals ... but it is a sort of hysterical black hole anyway",³ thus reducing, draining even, the social relevance of the work of art. Now, every artistic construction mobilizes schemes of perception that convey a particular relation to the world. The work cannot but be selective, it must choose a take, a point of view; and in the work of montage, of arranging the takes, it cannot but articulate a logic. At this level, at least, it must be efficient, irreducible to pure aesthetic pleasure... The author-director's choice to mediate Isabella's relation to the real through sexuality and a collection of African objects is, simultaneously, a way of showing the character's position within a social space. This universe of violent relationships and forces is dominated by brutality (for Anna), the struggle for survival (for Arthur), destruction through war (for Alexander), and hostile alterity (for Franck).

Lauwers' chosen point of view, or take, portrays Isabella as embodying every attribute traditionally associated with the 'strong woman'. This particular way of constructing the character's subjectivity trades on a simple appropriation of male attributes: Jan Lauwers picks and chooses from among the elements that underwrite male domination, investing his character with a logic of conquest and exploits. Isabella goes so far as to pay a black male stripper to spend the night with her, bragging, time and again, about her amorous exploits. These are two features central to the virile honour at the base of the social construction that makes men dominant.⁴ Further, Isabella, inverting the orthodox division of gender roles, never tries to justify her way of life. She does not meet Alexander's reproaches with a theoretical construction, some sort of feminist counterpoint; she goes on the offensive and literally subjugates

him. All the traditional feminine attributes are thus swept aside by their masculine counterparts. Undoubtedly, this betrays a male vision — that of the author-director — of how a woman imagines freedom and emancipation. Be that as it may, the suppression of passions, and even of emotions ("her heart decided to feel no sorrow"), in the character is integral to her constant concern with rejecting the typical traits of the dominated. And while she grants to the African objects a function that frees them from their decorative status (the voodoo fetish that becomes a key-chain), Isabella, through her words, imposes her own vision of herself in an attempt to constitute herself as absolute subject.

The representation of this woman may seem to transgress the orthodox division of gender, but it is not for all that subversive of the order of things. Because he develops his character through this inversion, Lauwers does not take on the gendered division of roles and attributes that is constitutive of the barrier between the dominator and the dominated. Isabella's character, however, exceeds this adjustment to the social norm. The only relation in the text which undergoes an evolution, her relationship to Africa, puts the finishing touches on her out-of-the-ordinary character, though not without appealing to some archaic traits.

In the story, Africa has the status of an inaugural site, as all of Isabella's travels start from the objects collected in the room. They determine her life, and in this sense Africa appears as the matrix but hallucinated site. Hallucinated because channelled by the objects. A continent sacrificed — in the Left's mythic vision — by the ravages of Western capitalist civilization, Africa is generally seen as a primitive universe governed by instinct, the site of a still-intact authenticity, the forgotten source of our Promethean cultures. It is, moreover, the watermark, the touchstone of reality, against which the grand scheme of lies and truths that runs through the text must be measured. As a reference, it is all the more efficient for being far away and

³ as in an interview with Nancy Delhalle, *op.cit.*

⁴ Bourdieu, *Practical Reason: Reason and Preference*, trans. Richard Nice, Stanford (Ca.), Stanford University Press, 2001.

unobtainable. During Isabella's brief lay-over in Africa, she catches a few glimpses of the myth's flipside, in the plastic bags that line the "desiccated shrubs" in place of the flowers she had expected. This brief confrontation hints at the possibility of an experience no longer channelled through objects, symbols, traces. The text lets us see what there might be of 'daring', in terms of a real engagement, but does not linger over it for long. The direct relation to the world is sketched, but stopped. The dissonance occasioned by the real contact with Africa is quickly toned down, and in the end it is the cloistered self, the strong and intrinsically original individual, who triumphs over the world. Isabella is in Africa for less than seven hours, just enough time to get Franck, who eventually dies during the trip, back. In the economy of the narrative, this direct contact with African society — not African artefacts — does not transform the character. Nevertheless, a real transfer has taken place: Isabella has become Africa, that birthplace of fiction and history that gives free rein to its instincts. She no longer has any need for lovers or for the African objects, which she agrees to sell. She has, in sum, become the myth.

Universal Time

The text as a whole, moreover, paints the protagonist as someone who eludes time and space just as she eludes other people. Consequently, the phenomenon of transmission — foundational of the reciprocal interdependence characteristic of the social world — is in the story inevitably ambiguous and problematic. Conceived when Arthur raped the unconscious Anna, abandoned at birth, and eventually adopted by her real/foster parents, Isabella is the product of a lie. Arthur's, whose actions are only revealed after his death, and whose life with Anna is based on this secret. And Anna's, who refuses to let Isabella regard her as her mother. Floating amidst the obscurity of these origins and births there is also another character, the hallucinated 'Desert Prince', who is said to be the child's true father. The influence of the social group, of its role in transmitting knowledge and identities, is here trumped

by the world of dreams. Isabella seems, by and large, the fruit of spontaneous generation. Like the island of her childhood, she is *one* and unchangeable; the surrounding social group does not touch or transform her. As movements towards others, Isabella's seductions and sexuality, are mirror images of Arthur's daily dives into the sea. Every day, Arthur used to dive from the top of the lighthouse, swim a bit, and then return to the top of the lighthouse to write poems. *Isabella's Room* represents onstage individuals who are caught up in their eternal essence, individuals who are completely autonomous from the human network they are part of. Anna and Arthur, so far as we know, have no parents, their ties to the social world do not exceed the bare minimum. Anna gives lessons on the island, but claims "to hate it". Arthur only calls on the locals to invite them to Anna's funeral, and immediately afterwards he walks out on the universe of the false/real family and of the lighthouse to become, literally, a "terrified savage".

As a matter of fact, the universe of others, of the social group, resembles a hostile jungle — isn't Franck fatally wounded by bullets just as he sets foot in Africa? It is a world in which you must struggle to survive, or that you must try to conquer. Here, anyway, and in spite of the isolation the text insists on, Isabella's relationship to the world is similar to that of explorers and colonists. This relationship depends on the exercise of a power — the possession of African objects, seduction — intrinsic to the individual, hence of a power not conferred by the group.

This dissolution of every interaction between society and the subject is precisely what leads to the construction of the myth. An essentially uncommon character, Isabella is prior to society, and exterior to it. She is a powerful 'I' who triumphs over the hostile and menacing world that is constantly on the verge of dissolving the individual, as it dissolved Anna, whose melancholy shows an evident lack of autonomy. A society that takes Arthur from the isolation of the lighthouse to the condition of beggar, as if life were only possible outside of it, on its margins. Isabella, conversely, is depicted as impervious to the social. She

herself is not the only one who brings this up, "I needed nothing and no one"; the other characters comment on it also. When Alexander declares that "her passion for life was of pure beauty", he underscores precisely the image of Isabella as a complete stranger to the constraints that come with being part of a human network. In this dualist perspective, society becomes distant and abstract while the individual bursts onto the foreground.

A Utopia

This substantialist thought articulates a version of the utopia that forgoes the struggle for a great night of justice and equality among people in order to zero in on individual happiness. In this case, the happiness of those five letters, F.E.L.I.X., buried amidst the African objects and associated with the 'Desert Prince'. But, more importantly, from the point of view of the play it is the world 'external' to the subject that represents the anomie. Almost imperceptibly, we deduce from it the exemplary value of the main character.

Isabella's Room is a programmatic text which strives to construct a myth for our times. A number of resistant archaisms survive in it, such as the matric, indeed auto-matric figure — the sole source of the self, and the representation of the individual as a fully autonomous entity, closed in on itself and split off from the social world. For Isabella, in fact, the order of the world appears simple: it is formed, around the subject, as a hostile outside that one would be foolish to try to master or transform. Isabella is not a Promethean figure, she does not build abstract systems; in contrast to the conceptual search for causes, her discourse posits events (war, extreme-right, etc.) as circumstances that one must get past in order to continue participating in the world. This type of thought, far from being hierarchical, is dominated by an instinctual element (see the scene where she deflowers her grandson) and is therefore lacking in objective criteria of judgment. Characteristic of archaic mentality, this amalgamation of the subjective and objective implies a thoroughly concrete relation to beings and things.

But, and here is where the utopian dimension of *Isabella's Room* takes root, this archaic construction of the self requires a will, a design. Isabella, this force outside the norm, this being who remains aloof to the structures that support the modern world, seems effectively to remove herself from the determinisms that inscribe the social on our very bodies.

The play, as we have seen, relies on an organization of the social in which the individual triumphs while society is relegated to the background, to second place. In this hierarchical arrangement, the truth resides in the singular, original being who immediately gains the status of model or example. As Lauwers constructs it, the character of Isabella calls for audience identification. This is far away from the Brechtian perspective, for instance, with its incitement to engage reality so as to transform it. Isabella does not transform the world; she just is, she just lives as harmoniously as possible in the world. A sort of microcosm, she takes but does not let herself be touched — she remains ideally impermeable to what is going on around her. And from this very insularity she draws her strength, while the other characters (Arthur, Anna, Franck, and even Alexander) let themselves at some point or other be traversed by the social reality that, till that moment, had just surrounded them. Eroded, they end up dead.

Isabella, on the other hand, triumphs over the world and remains, from start to finish, this *homo clausus*, this hypertrophied 'I': enormous, quasi *sui generis*, without ancestry. If, in fact, the ambiguity that surrounds Anna's and Arthur's parentage deals a blow to familial determinism, we should not forget that Isabella's daughter is born from the *deal* struck with the black stripper, and her grandson becomes her lover. Isabella was barely a daughter, and she does not see or present herself as a mother, preferring instead to choose the interpersonal tie herself. A colonist-like conqueror who is for all that filled with respect for the objects of her conquests, she is above all fundamentally free, as the story stresses. She confronts Judeo-

Christian thought with her firm conviction that there is no transcendence, with her obstinate refusal to see herself as a victim or feel guilt. Isabella, with her unbridled sexuality, transgresses all the taboos, commands, and codes of our societies. Jan Lauwers supposes that the self is the world, that a collection of 'I's does not amount to a 'we', and thus he takes the desire for an ideal world to the character herself. And it is by means of the process of identification mentioned earlier that the character goes from a 'selfish individualism' to the more moral individualism which guarantees its moral value and which is the source of the play's utopian dimension.

By creating a character who is immune to the ravages of time — the text specifies that Isabella is 69 years old when she falls in love with Frank — Lauwers in effect achieves a reduction of History. The past is portrayed as a source of anguish. Deadly, it is associated to the schemes of illusion and lies. Correlatively, there can be no progress. The play insists that one must push on ahead, but like a small boat floating along without a particular destination, almost fully atavical. On the other side of ruptures and conflicts, the self's only concern in the world is with its own autonomy. The play brackets out historicization, deactivates History, and makes us witness the qualitative leap into the universal. As an auto-matric, non-relative subject, an I-world *en-soi* that is always already reconciled because intact, Isabella is raised to the status of myth.

A being of undetermined origins, born from a story that is now nebulous (that of Anna and Arthur) and now fabulous (that of the 'Desert Prince'), a character who sometimes narrates, and is sometimes narrated onstage, Isabella reaches the audience like a founding narrative. This is not a metaphoric way to explain an origin, but a programmatic way to forward an advent. Outside of time and History, the character assumes the posture of the inaugural moment of the story, the fiction, but without falling into the autotelic fold of the so-called 'post-modern' movement. On the contrary, Isabella is only fulfilled

in the insemination of the real world, the world of our modes of thinking and of our schemes of perception. And if she demands adherence — note the show's great success, and the fact that everything in the production is aimed at securing it — it is because she bears testimony to a real quest, to an exercise on the self capable of harnessing anguish. Her character is more than the mouthpiece for a philosophy of hedonism.

By the end of the story, Isabella has become a myth for our times, and as such she bears the (maternal) role of consoling and reassuring. Because Isabella offers herself as the model of a non-contradictory totality, her strength stemming from the homogeneous plenitude that she proposes as a pure alternative: "I'll live to be a thousand because I have no secrets". To harness her internal world and multiply her experiences, to deactivate time and the weight of the past for the sake of a dilated present, to go forward like a conqueror who does not let herself be held back — these are the notes struck by the utopian song that pulsates from *Isabella's Room*.