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« Realities of illusion »

Review 2

Claude Buchvald, *Valère Novarina en scène*, Presses Universitaires de Vincennes, “Théâtres du monde,” 2014.

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Valère Novarina en scène

Claude Buchvald

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Fortunate is the director who meets their playwright, living creator! Valère Novarina, painter and writer, arranges word architectures, accumulations, songs, slogans and litanies in his workshop. Remaining in paper form for a long time, this theater is a genuine challenge for the stage. Claude Buchvald, professor at Paris 8 University, directed *Vous qui habitez le temps* (1995), *Le Repas* (1996), *L’Opérette imaginaire* (1998), written for her company, *L’Avant-dernier des hommes* (1997). These plays make up the four chapters of her *Valère Novarina en scène* published by the Presses Universitaires de Vincennes in the collection “Théâtres du monde.” The book recounts a path of flesh and blood—a “Blood Fountain” in *L’Opérette imaginaire*. It is the chronicles of incursions and longer journeys in *Novarinia*, with the gestation and germination of plays: rehearsals without obligation of *Vous qui habitez le temps*, devouring table-companionship in *Le Repas*, steep tunes in *L’Opérette imaginaire*, worried solitude in *L’Avant-dernier des hommes*, a near monologue by Claude Merlin, actor—debris-objects bearer. The venues (La Cartoucherie in Vincennes, the Lavoir moderne in Paris, Brest, the Théâtre d’Evreux, a disused cinema in Tartu, Estonia) are changing, the acting team – soul of the plays—is steady with an exceptional musician, Christian Paccoud. There are the stage and costume designers, the light creator, the assistant, the manager and the choir of students from Paris 8 and elsewhere. The landscape widens to Estonia, Brazil—and why not China?—towards “a linguistic clash.” The book is

polyphonic, letting Claude Merlin, codiscoverer, but also the musician, the Estonian translator, talk. How could we join into Novarina's language frenzy, this colourful and vibration babbling? Words diffract, negate and split themselves, rough and cutting, rejecting the psychology behind their sparkle of life and lyricism. In turns bawdy and occult, anarchist and contemplative, centered on the awkward writing process, unstable leakage and projection, refrain and bottomless pit, novarinian creation enlightens bodies with the actor for support: "Eat, swallow, eat, chew, wolf down, chew, masticate, cannibalise! Oh, ow!..."¹ They become puppet. The wood of the marionette collides with live tissues, all openings are opened for manducation. How can one "incarnate" when "it's not character composition" but rather "character decomposition, decomposition of the guy made on the stage"?² How to achieve it from a humanly perspective? The director hollows matter out. She spins a thread if not her canvas, sends beams of light into the maze, taking up the challenge in the shape of denial towards "all those directors who build," or this "director-in-chief" who "wants the actor to scratch like them, to mimic their body."³ Claude Buchvald neither overlooking nor despotic, she keeps a weather eye, ready to adjust, she sparks off rather than commands. From page to stage, time is a gloomy yet fortunate life giver. Step by step, they walk. The director is part of a dialogue with Rabelais, Dante, Claudel, Homer. Teasing, cheeky and improvising, she sees dramaturgy beneath deconstruction: scene exposure, forbidden weddings, twists and turns, catharsis, pastorals, Brechtian moments and even the Spanish *auto sacramental* and its *entremeses*. As Christian Paccoud puts it, to sing "broken plates," one first needs to "make plates"; It is a skill. The director's role is part shadows part patience—a "sentry's post," just as the "maid," ultimate glow on stage. The experience knows its own tempo—matter, lines, perspectives—touches of paint (Kandinsky, Fra Angelico, Giotto, Piero della Francesca, Dubuffet, something rough and smooth), of philosophy (Saint Augustin, Deleuze...), of literature. We encounter Valentin and Brecht (the songs), Kantor, Rimbaud and Madame Guyon, the *Annonciation* interpreted by Daniel Arasse, and personal joys: nursery rhymes ("Deer, deer! Open up for me..."), walks in the forest of Brest. All this mixes up with the great matter of the representation, a collective maieutic. It makes room for coincidences and a dialectic necessity. Novarina is a materialist: "What does this mean? It means that those who dominate, dear Madam, always find an interest in making matter disappear, in suppressing the body always, the support, the spot where it talks"⁴ (speech in the flesh, the "talk").⁵ Directing brings directions (room volume and configuration, the wooden matter)—"secret diagonal," vertical and horizontal. It is a construction in progress rather than a voluntary edification. It is not a cathedral, but a childish tree house which has its beliefs set "in the Jewish feast of Sukkot" which designates our interior space, provisional and full of holes. The architecture is cadenced, precise, thanks to the singing, to

¹ Valère Novarina, "Lettre aux acteurs," *Le Théâtre des paroles*, P.O.L., Paris, 1989, p. 10, text written in 1974.

² Valère Novarina, "Lettre aux acteurs," *Le Théâtre des paroles*, P.O.L., Paris, 1989, p. 10, text written in 1974, p. 24.

³ Valère Novarina, "Lettre aux acteurs," *Le Théâtre des paroles*, P.O.L., Paris, 1989, p. 10, text written in 1974, p. 15-16.

⁴ Valère Novarina, "Lettre aux acteurs," *Le Théâtre des paroles*, P.O.L., Paris, 1989, p. 10, text written in 1974, p. 17.

⁵ Valère Novarina, "Lettre aux acteurs," *Le Théâtre des paroles*, P.O.L., Paris, 1989, p. 10, text written in 1974, p. 23-24.

rehearsals, to the accordion. This matter is searching for light, a “luminous antimatter that has nothing in common with the human.” Novarina admires the noh psychoanalysis, a form of the sacred. Matter calls for transfiguration. In the beginning there is “the word castle,” an “antiquated heraldic.” The verb incarnation has not taken place yet. The road is apophatic. Acting, directing, it is to *undo*, *unplay oneself*. Matter meets the nothing. This scenic practice takes after Lucretius and Democritus for whom the letters of the Greek alphabet, their configuration, are a model to atoms. The letter is upside down, laying on its side, associated. Head down, in every possible directions, but also in pieces, the body, like the language, is breaking up. The material data of the play meets the nothing, space is making room for movement (“logodynamics”) on an inclined plane: a *clinamen* of shock and encounters. The actor parts with his “mechanics.” He loses hope, cannot make it, feels as “killed.” The scene experience is a journey through death, a crossing of “thresholds,” limbos that Claude Régy looks for in other fashions. Deads for life! The directing feels like symbolism: Artaud, Craig, Kantor, Brecht, Meyerhold. In Novarina’s work, it is masks and make-up, lighting and obscurity effects, the street choruses. The barrel organ, dear to Laforgue’s heart, to Italian crepusculars, to Chekhov in mute, becomes a scene accordion here. The funfair, the cabaret, the circus, the clown, are an urban poetry and a call to childhood. The crossing, withdrawal or defeat (all that is mushy is worth more than the triumphant bugle of the military), goes towards the resurrection of the frightened flesh. Matter – Death – Resurrection are the three steps along the way. This testimony, life lesson, marks the solidarity between scenic creation and writing. There are traces of this elegant cabalistic in the plays: the long phylactery of *Vous qui habitez le temps*, the bag full of old objects found in *L’Avant-dernier des hommes*. The transfigured actors—“poverty embodiments”—are like writings under the engraver’s chisel. It was logical for this to be laid on paper, shouted, rejected, recomposed, so as it would be shared, in other ways than in representations. The exploration starts at Paris 8 University with the students who sometimes are at the origin of the plays, or take part in them. The drama workshop, that of the painter, language handler, is the birthplace of teaching. The rehearsal log, drama notes are an alchemic enterprise on bodies that have been made subtle. This is what it partly means to be director and professor at a University. And Claude Buchvald knows everything that happens behind the mirror-scene. She describes her passing on the other side of the fence for *L’Opérette imaginaire* so as to replace an actress on short notice. The “figures gestation,” the swarm of actors, the rustle of gestures through the “germinative value” raise the “swell of words.” The actress’ state is the source of texts direction which key, big or small, she finds, just as Alice: “Having been a comedian for over thirty-five years, it is from this role that I grasp the work: I blend everything, I physically manifest, I think I have the skill to be in several bodies, and thus to grasp the force they exchange, and how the senses intertwine endlessly.” It is Valère Novarina *en scène*, secret and open topography of a crossing.