



NYU Paris's Experimental

Musical and Bilingual Theater Piece Lands in New York!

In honor of the performance of *L'Oeil qui voit* at New York University's Kimmel Center, the French director, Cécile Cotté, and composer, Stéphane Scott, reveal their creative process.

I : Interviewer

C : Cécile Cotté, playwright and director

Educated at the Ecole Internationale Jacques Lecoq in Paris, Cotté was also a pupil of Daniel Mesguich (director of the Conservatoire National d'Art Dramatique). As an actress she has performed classical and contemporary texts for the theater, appeared on television and in cinema as well as radio. In terms of writing she has adapted several works for the theater (Simone de Beauvoir, Samuel Beckett, Jean Genet, Eugène Ionesco, Honoré de Balzac). A director as well, she has staged theater pieces all over the world: France, the United States (New York), and Africa. She regularly runs workshops in Paris, Singapore, Butare (Rwanda), Vienna (Austria) and Malta. A professor at New York University in France since 2002, she has created plays which have been performed in Paris (Cité Universitaire, United States Embassy, Théâtre Adyar) and in New York (Maison Française, Wasserman Center, Kimmel Center). She has also been a professor at the École supérieure des sciences économiques et commerciales (ESSEC) since 2009, giving a course in English called "Behaving in Public. A Training."

S : Stéphane Scott, composer

Trained as a pianist, Scott composes music for both cinema and television. He also creates soundtracks and performs music for the theater and dance performances. Among other works, he created "haiku," a CD composed of 65 musical fragments. In September 2009, he wrote music for the "Song of Songs," a multimedia performance presented at PS1-MoMA in New York, and in 2011, for Jean Genet's "The Maids," performed at the Théâtre de l'Atelier in Paris.

I: You have created many shows together; can you talk about your creative process?

C: The creative process happens in several stages. What characterizes our process is undoubtedly the fact that at the beginning the texts we use are not necessarily theatrical texts. We have created performances based on Japanese haikus, literary texts by Balzac, Simone de Beauvoir's memoirs as well as her correspondences, excerpts from novels, short stories, poems and other texts by great authors like Genet and Beckett. In Europe we created a performance about Rwanda using African actors based on texts from ten different authors. There was a lot of music and choreography.

S: We create an experimental work which causes a convergence of different types of art forms... we do not just work with actors.

C: We have worked with mimes, dancers, filmmakers and multimedia artists. Music is always present.

S: It can be recorded or performed on stage.

"I usually choose texts which seek out performance, music, and create images. It is a dramaturgical choice but one that experiments and then finds its definitive form on the stage."

I: What type of music?

S: I was trained as a classical pianist but I play many instruments. My compositions are influenced by jazz, contemporary music and world music. I also have a collection of instruments from all over the world that I use in my own way.

I: In other words?

S: For example, the valiha is an instrument from Madagascar whose strings are usually pinched, but I play them with a bow. I am on the lookout for new sounds. I have also written several works for prepared piano.

C: Stéphane also invents instruments.

S: They are really objects that create sounds. I like to reshape the function of an object and explore new sonorous materials.

C: Let's say that there are always codes... We can reshape these codes, but we need to be able to invent others and know how to use them. I create theater pieces a little like one might create haute cuisine... Look, innovate, let myself be taken over by inspiration... but in the end whether it be a culinary or theatrical work, we inhale the creation of a new harmony.

S: You're using a musical term...

C: It's the famous intersection between the arts...

I: You were talking about a process in several stages...

C: Yes, I always start by reading. I read a lot and do quite a bit of research on the project. And afterwards, I write. It is essentially a work of adaptation, a montage of texts. I usually choose texts which seek out performance, music, and create images. It is a dramaturgical choice but one



that experiments and then finds its definitive form on the stage.

I: How do the actors learn the text?

C: The same text can be interpreted in a thousand different ways. The actor's intention, their personality, voice, physique are the first things to take into consideration. I always start with the actor. The text must excite their imagination, sensibility, influence their body and create movement in space. It is this meeting between the actor and the text which inspires the staging.

I: Do you already have ideas about the staging when you write the play?

C: Yes and no. Encountering the actors is essential. Ideas come to me when I see the actors evolve on the stage as well as when I hear the music. I realize that in my staging work there exists both a mastering and a letting go. I have a precise project in mind but before everything else I must be in tune with the actors and be able to abandon certain ideas in order to take advantage of what is happening in the moment. I must let myself be surprised.

I: Is this how you define experimental theater?

C: Without a doubt. In the sense that the research never stops. I insist greatly on this point with actors. I solicit their imagination and show them that I also believe that an actor is also a creator, a little like a painter who draws lines in space. They must decide what traits they want to give to their character (thin, thick, fat), the colors that they want to use. And also the manner in which they frame the character. There is a difference between an actor who performs in the theater and one who performs in cinema. In the theater, the actor is also their own camera. It is in performing that they decide the compositions. This is where the extreme precision of the gesture originates. Everything is very physical. An actor must also be in tune with the different interior rhythms that can trigger the state of a character. We do not have the same body if we are nervous, relaxed, proud or jealous...

S: Your training has influenced you greatly.

C: Yes, I had the chance to go to study at the Ecole Internationale Jacques Lecoq in Paris. Jacques Lecoq was my teacher and I owe him so much. He offered a pedagogy which was based on all the different styles of the theater. The school proposed a trajectory that encompassed mime, pantomime, masks and farce, the Commedia dell'arte, melodrama, tragedy and even the clown... There is always a corporeal engagement. Young actors, who often separate the mental from the physical, must understand this.

I: And musical work?

S: There are the same demands. Singing is impossible without corporeal engagement. In order to be fair, it is not enough to just respect the melody and the rhythm, it is also necessary to be in a state of performance, to have an intention. It is the character who sings.

I: Can you talk about L'oeil qui voit? L'oeil qui voit is a theater piece which is inspired by the avant-gardes,

right?

C: L'œil qui voit draws from the great literary avant-garde movements at the beginning of the 20th century, notably Cubism between 1910 and 1920 as well as Dadaism and Surrealism which inherited greatly from this movement and succeeded it in the current of World War I up until the 1930s.

S: It's a sort of cabaret. A "cubisto-dada" cabaret. The actors are a kind of lecturer and create the spectacle like Hugo Ball and other Dadaists did in their famous Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich in 1916.

C: The texts chosen in L'œil qui voit create the performance before everything else. Not only the sense, but the images, sounds and rhythms as well. Picasso wrote that "it is necessary to reveal the paintings which exist underneath the paintings."

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I: Is it a collage of texts?

S: Yes, but a literary, pictorial and musical collage. The avant-garde artists created many collages; they fragmented reality.

C: In L'œil qui voit, Tristan Tzara, Blaise Cendrars, Louis Aragon, Pablo Picasso, Gertrude Stein and even Erik Satie, each in their own way, warn against all the different kinds of stereotypes, provoke... They teach us how to see differently.

S: Moreover, in this era people questioned the particular role of the artist. Erik Satie wrote "My Name is Erik Satie like Everyone Else," and we learned from him, how to listen differently. He also said that he was born very young into a very old world.

C: Stéphane did a lot of research on Satie.

S: Yes, I like Satie a lot. I researched his scores, read his texts... The titles of his works are quite humorous and ("Morceaux en forme de poire," "Préludes flasques pour un chien," "Air à faire fuir"...) show a rupture with classicism. John Cage, a great admirer of Satie, performed "Vexations" years later in New York. This work has 840 reprises. The concert lasted 18 hours and 40 minutes!!!

C: Stéphane showed me a text by Erik Satie called "Ce que je suis" ["What I am"].

S: Satie was a great provocateur; he wrote that he was not a musician but a "phonometrographist." Thereafter, Man Ray wrote "What I am" – with the help of Erik Satie, which we integrated into the performance. Man Ray reuses the same phrases that he uses in painting. Like Satie, he is not just defined as a painter but a "photometrographist."

C: Humor was a great determining factor in the choice of texts for the L'œil qui voit! The texts by Man Ray and Satie were among the first selected. We could play with the bilingualism. All the performances that we create with NYU Paris actors are bilingual. But our works do not just arbitrarily go from French to English. It is necessary

to find coherence. Thus the writings of Gertrude Stein became an obvious choice. She was American, a friend of Picasso, living in Paris and at the heart of the avant-garde movement! Stéphane suggested performing Avant-dernières pensées by Erik Satie over Stein's texts and this worked very well. The repetitive side of Stein's syntax was highlighted by the music. It became very sensorial and almost hypnotic...

S: The Stein-Satie combination evoked a cubist painting for me... we looked at one object from different angles, and we projected it in a veritable kaleidoscope.

C: Yes. There are no longer characters but forms. This is what gave me the idea to have the actors wear masks.

I: There is a great amount of creative liberty in everything that you do...

C: Yes, but in a creative process, there are always constraints and those also can be enriching. For us at NYU Paris one of these constraints is bilingualism. The age of the actors is another. The student actors with whom we work are twenty years old.

I: Stéphane, for L'œil qui voit did you compose the music according to the actors?

S: The young American students with which we worked have been greatly influenced by musical comedy. The song thus becomes the principle vehicle of musical expression. L'œil qui voit ends on a song for three rhythmically different voices that I composed based on a phonic poem by Hugo Ball. For some, it was really difficult, but Cécile and I thought it "set the bar even higher" for our work.

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I: Are the student actors at NYU Paris ever musicians?

S: Yes, that happens sometimes. For each performance in Paris, we had a trumpeter and a saxophonist, respectively. They both played the melodic part of the First Gymnopédie by Satie. I accompanied them on piano.

C: There was also an actor who played the "fan"...

S: Yes, I had this idea, of an upside-down guitar on a stand whose strings would be vibrated by a pocket fan... It's rather cubisto-dada as an idea, don't you think?

C: Stéphane also created a soundtrack which was never descriptive. It played with. It was an additional element of performance for the actors.

S: Like all the videos in the performance and the portraits of the Critiques described by Satie.

C: Yes indeed. We also worked with three art history professors at NYU Paris who are also artists: Nicolas Baudouin, Marie Le Petit and Isabelle de Maison Rouge as well as with a young director, Alexandre Donot. Alexandre directed an animated film based on Blaise Cendrars' surrealist menus.

I: And next you are going to perform the theater piece in New York on October 9th at the Kimmel Center for one night only, correct?

C: Yes, for several years now, Caroline Montel, director of

New York University in France and Raïssa Lahcine, director of cultural affairs, have organized performances in New York of the theater pieces that we created in Paris. We have performed at the Maison Française, the Wasserman Center and presently at the magnificent Kimmel Center with a view over Manhattan. We love the idea that we get to share texts like Cendrars' marvelous poem Tours based on Delaunay's paintings of the Eiffel Tower in the middle of Manhattan... Could there be a more beautiful set than Manhattan to evoke the Cubist revolution?

New York University Paris
presents

L'œil qui voit

on October 9th at 7 pm.

Kimmel Center, New York University
Rosenthal Pavilion, 10th Floor
60 Washington Square South
New York, NY 10012

Free Entry

