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Julia Pascal, a committed testimony, a postface to The Holocaust Trilogy

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“We are always open to new plays which explore cultural identity and exile” reads the first sentence on Julia Pascal’s company’s website. Indeed, her commitment for people from different cultures to meeting, working, and living together in mutual respect has always been apparent, whether in her producing foreign playwrights¹, working with Thomas Kampe, son of a Wehrmacht soldier, as “an act of cultural reconciliation”, staging her plays abroad, speaking out in favour of the acknowledgement of the Armenian Genocide, or celebrating Bradford’s cosmopolitanism in her *Guardian* chronicles.

Paradoxically, her activism in building cultural bridges seldom finds positive expression in her plays. While they ultimately all plead in favour of the world living together in peace, they focus on the events that have precluded it, showing very few happy images of intercultural contact, and never placing them at the plays’ thematic or dramatic forefront.

Such scarcity, however, is no reflection on their importance. Every positive instance of intercultural contact, be it ever so slight, comes with a humorous remark, indicative of the existential fulfilment it potentially carries. According to philosopher Henri Bergson, laughter starts where tragedy - that is to say destiny, ineluctability - ends. Laughter fluidifies what was reified, and places the human subject back into the stream of its life, a life which is at once individual, collective, and ever renewed.

Indeed, in Julia Pascal’s plays, some situations open up a positive gap between characters from different backgrounds, one in which a living link can take root, since genuine profound contact comes about in the comparison of experience. The combat comradeship of Tommy and Jules in *Year Zero*, for example, is cemented by their cultural differences, for they are precisely what create the conditions necessary for communication. “JULES: Work? London? You? / TOMMY: My Job? I was a tailor. Shneider. *Tailleur*. / JULES: My tailor is rich.”² When it is love that draws characters together, cultural difference becomes a positive “space between”, which not only en-values lovers’ respective identities, but nurtures their feelings through the free circulation of words. “EILEEN: Look at the moon. And the sound of the waves. You think everyone is dead and we are the only people in the whole world that's alive. / PAUL: You and me. And not a squirrel or a mouse or a giraffe. [...] That's England opposite. / EILEEN: I know, silly. Did your family come this way?”³ At other times, characters come into contact when they need assistance, as in the many cases of translations. Cultural differences then become a fruitful cooperative space, as in *The Yiddish Queen Lear*, where a Yiddish company produces classics “*Hamlet*: translated, and far better!”⁴

Important as it may be, this intercultural ideal is to be seen only as a watermark in the plays, and a very flimsy one indeed, systematically toned down as it is threatened by its transitory or fantastical nature, or even by Evil itself. The Anglo-German couple in *Theresa* is composed of a Nazi soldier and one of the nurses who will betray the heroine; Joan’s “good voices”, stressing the mosaic of European cultures turn, in a flash, into her “evil voices”, those followed by the real Joan of Arc, now symbolising the cornerstone of French xenophobia.⁵ The closeness of antagonistic archetypal figures (Eve, Sarah, Hagar⁶) is a metaphor of the playwright’s wishes, not an image of reality. Ultimately, the shadow of annihilation floats over possible intercultural fulfilment, so lightly

touched upon. Eve, Sarah, Hagar, Joan, all vanish when she who is dreaming them wakes up. Lovers do not age together. Comrades die. Yiddish theatre does too. Fulfilling contact with someone radically different from oneself is always shown as slightly warped, slightly unreal. Indeed, the inaugural experience of coming into touch with the Other, as with a touchstone shaping one's own self-consciousness is always presented as indissociable from rejection, its opposite. In *Far above Rubies*, Abraham meets Sarah and casts Hagar off; in *Theresa* or *The Yiddish Queen Lear*, Mr Askew and Irving turn away from their wives; *The Dybbuk* is the tale of a rejected fiancé, etc. Couples are but an index of human relations at large. In *Far above Rubies*, about the relationship between men and women, the first person Esther, a grown woman, meets in Jerusalem, is an Arab boy who touches her as if she belonged to him. Power, possession - the world is a set of token places where rejection is archaeologically raised to the surface: Domrémy, the ghetto, Maubeuge, Palestine. All immediately present space and time in terms of exclusion, and posit the founding character of rejection. "GOLDMAN: A long time ago in the heart of a land called Europe lived a special group of people. These people were called the people with the yellow patches. / ...MANGOLD: But these people were not allowed to live in the centre of the town. They were forced to live in a walled area called a ghetto."⁷

A vision of the human condition truly emerges through the ambiguous welcome given to Man by its environment or its kin. Julia Pascal seeks confirmation from the great classical texts, which question our relation to existence, such as *The Dybbuk* or *Hamlet*. "To be or not to be, duss is die frage."⁸ Identity is not so much a piece of luggage as an inherited experience, feeling, mark: that of an initial antagonism, of a self-definition imposed by a negating exterior authority, that of self-consciousness acquired through the schizophrenic experience of one's birth in a hostile environment. Women and Jews in particular find themselves prisoners of a definition of themselves imposed upon them by stronger authorities: men and Nazis. "A virtuous woman, her worth is far above rubies"⁹; "Why are we Jews if we don't believe in God? / Because they tell us we are Jews".¹⁰ "To be" is synonymous with "not to be", that is to say, in existential terms: "being" is tantamount to "being betrayed".

And so in Julia Pascal's plays men betray women, ruling over them through a god fabricated to legitimate their infamy; collaborators betray Jews, communists, *résistants*; nations betray their allies, parties betray their followers, creatures like the Golem betray their creators, spouses, armies, friends: everybody betrays everybody. In short, like *Woman in the Moon's* Wernher von Braun, Man has a terrifying ability to betray his own humanity.

The insane synonymy between "to be" and "not to be" is projected over the world which presents itself not primarily as a place where humour can grow, but as the site for a bad joke. Cabaret, puppet show, stand-up comedy, grotesque or monstrous caricature abound, producing a particular effect of "sad comedy" with a dangerous and chilling aftertaste. Many characters encapsulate the dual nature of the world, like *Year Zero's* Marianne de Vichy and Marianne de Paris, or Punch and Judy /Jew-dy.

An absurd joke is one that works on the negation of the rational, moral, collective character of humanity, one which ignores the human and humanising empathy making us recognise ourselves in the other before becoming autonomous. Absurdity is, by definition, in-human. Hardly conceivable, such painful experience of arbitrary rejection literally de-humanises: it contaminates everybody, even its victims. Social, economic, or political relationships are pictured as co-substantially impregnated with this aberration - our world at large, where one lives at the expense of the Other, ends up working at its own expense, like the Arab sausage-vendor at the

National Front meeting in *Saint Joan*. The sociological sphere also bears the marks of nonsense. Women and Jews, whom Julia Pascal sees as its main victims, reproduce male or racist violence perpetrated against them. Identity becomes a narrow cell, ultimately going back to fuelling the self-destructing madness of the world.

What can be done if one cannot no more dissociate oneself from one's cultural identity than take refuge in it? "Where would I go? All the roads are closed to me. There is heaven and earth, there are worlds without end. ... But nowhere, nowhere is there a place for me."¹¹ Julia Pascal found out that during World War II, ghetto prisoners who were aware that they were going to die continued to educate their children, even though they knew they would soon die too. That particular creative vital force, with an essential need to come out stronger than any paradox or contingency, is what gave Pascal the space of existence she was looking for: "a place for her".

For one form of art did come out of sacrifice, rejection, betrayal; the scapegoat art based on the empathy proper to humanity; the prime social, collective, civilising art: theatre.

In the same way as her *Dybbuk*'s characters give a voice to Hanan, who does not have one, when playing Anski's *Dybbuk* before they themselves die and become Pascal's dybbuks, she vows to give a voice to *all* dybbuks in history – not just Jews. Refusing to make distinctions between woes and injustices, refusing to deny to one what is granted to the other, Pascal thus stops the spiral down. Morally unable to leave the shackles of her identity, she chooses to stretch them to allow the world in. She will indeed give a voice to Theresa Steiner, who died in the camps¹²; but she will also give one to Khalil, the Palestinian boy so despoiled by Israel that he blows himself up¹³, one to Khatyoun, Iranian girl betrayed by Khomeini's revolution¹⁴, as well as one to Parisian Malians deported in French charters¹⁵. The moral and sane vital force that reaches beyond the lethal character of an absurd and hardened world springs precisely from the claim to be the vehicle of all silenced voice: from the act of creative witnessing.

There are many spokespeople for dybbuks in Julia Pascal's plays – all positive characters, like the interpreters at the Nuremberg Trials, literally speaking for the dead.¹⁶

Dybbuks are not just zombies. They wander between worlds only until they find the souls they are destined to be united to. The importance of the fusion between dybbuk and spokesperson shows the need to unify what non-sense has blown to smithereens. This call for unity is what resists schizophrenia and challenges the definition of the human condition given above, by opposing a certain conception of human nature: that of being collective, of needing the proximity of one's kin. The reference to Plato's Myth of the Androgynoi runs through all the plays.

It is indeed because Julia Pascal endows theatre with such a power of resistance that historical truth and analytical rigour are so important to her. Her art, speaking for the voiceless, ceaselessly recreating a coherence that does not exist outside the playhouse, thereby giving life its true direction, cannot suffer any imprecision. Therefore, her rigorously documented plays feature real people and historical events, using original material such as songs, poems, sacred texts, political speeches, archive documents, etc. The epic quality of the writing, both in scope as in the many alienation techniques rendering its well-argued discourse readable, proceeds from the same need. Truth must be unquestionably shown.

One understands better now: the scarcity of positive intercultural images in Julia Pascal's plays is not a flat (and contestable) image of reality but the sign of the contradiction between the human condition - perceived

as liable to annihilation under pressure from the world's incoherence - and human nature, seen as profoundly empathising. This contradiction is exposed and denounced in a dramatic form, whose epic and documentary qualities vouch for its moral and humanistic value. Bearing witness through theatre is an act committed to constantly re-establishing the individual at the heart of its own adventure, in its inalienable right to exist.

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Julia Pascal's plays:

The Holocaust Trilogy (Theresa, A Dead Woman on Holiday, The Dybbuk), London: Oberon Plays, first edition, 2000.

The Yiddish Queen Lear and Woman in the Moon, London: Oberon Plays, 2001.

Crossing Jerusalem and Other Plays (The Golem, Year Zero, St Joan), London: Oberon Plays, 2003.

The Shylock Play, London: Oberon Plays 2008.

Unpublished works:

Far Above Rubies, 1983.

London Continental, 2000.

Broken English, 2005.

Tariq and Sarah, 2005.

Website of Julia Pascal's theatre company: <http://www.pascal-theatre.com>

¹ Thomas Brasch, Seamus Finnegan, Karim Alrawi, Yana Stajno, etc.

² *Year Zero*, p.131

³ *London Continental*, pp.4-5

⁴ Preface to *The Yiddish Queen Lear*, p.7

⁵ *Saint Joan*

⁶ *Far above Rubies*

⁷ *The Golem*, p.97

⁸ *The Yiddish Queen Lear*, p.13

⁹ Hagar, quoting the Bible in *Far above Rubies*

¹⁰ *The Dybbuk*, p.113

¹¹ *The Dybbuk*, p.113

¹² *Theresa*

¹³ *Crossing Jerusalem*

¹⁴ *Far above Rubies*

¹⁵ *Saint Joan*

¹⁶ *A Dead Woman on Holiday*