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Revisiting Yeats's *A Full Moon in March*

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Abstract:

A recent re-staging in London of John Harbison's opera based on Yeats's late dance play raises serious questions about a fitting style of staging and performance and an appropriate directorial approach to what is a quite unique and challenging drama.

Keywords: Dada and Symbolism, Dance Drama, Directorial Approaches, Myth and Mythologising, W.B. Yeats

When from 1933 to 1935 Yeats was composing his two late dance plays, *The King of the Great Clock Tower* and *A Full Moon in March*, he was anxious lest on their publication he was accused of imitating or copying Wilde's *Salome*. All three plays involved the central female character dancing with a severed head. In the event he had nothing to worry about: parallels with Wilde were not drawn and no intimations of plagiarism were forthcoming. The most significant parallel was drawn elsewhere: in January 1935, *The Times Literary Supplement* carried a review of Yeats's *Wheels and Butterflies* and *The King of the Great Clock Tower*, which drew an interesting comparison between Yeats's late work and "the Surréalistes", noting especially their similar preoccupation with "the night-side of life" (Buchanan 1935, 37). The critic, however, drew attention to a marked difference between Yeats and his continental contemporaries: "unlike them, Mr. Yeats works with a great intellectual control" (38). A recent staging (April 26 to May 4, 2024) of John Harbison's operatic version of *A Full Moon in March* alongside Bohulslav Martinů's *Les larmes du couteau* (a one-act opera composed when Martinů was resident in Paris and befriended Georges Ribermont-Dessaignes, the dadaist playwright and librettist) made a testing of this comparison possible.

The Martinů is on the surface a wild fantasmagoria in which a young girl pursues marriage to a hanged man in preference to her mother's favoured suitor, Satan. Even when Satan revivifies the corpse, the Hanged Man fails to rise to Eleanora's passion,

provoking her to commit suicide; Satan now revives Eleanora, then impersonates the Hanged Man to the mother's horror before departing, leaving the girl in despair. Her anguished cry, "I am a poor misunderstood woman!" ends the opera. The music throughout is for a fourteen-piece jazz orchestra and is clearly influenced by Kurt Weil and his cabaret-operas. Beneath the dadaist clamour and games with audience-expectations, there is (as Eleanora's final cry makes clear) a fierce satire on the emotional and social pressures confronting women and this creates a kind of thematic logic within the mayhem. It is unashamedly a theatre piece, but not devoid of intellectual intent. Beside the rarified, mythical world of Yeats's *A Full Moon in March*, with its narrative deriving from traditional folk-lore, however, that intellectual intent seems thin and overly cerebral, almost a creative after-thought.

The two operas were staged at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, to mark the graduation of the current group of singers studying under the Jette Parker Artists Programme: the demands, particularly of the Yeats, were challenging and they were only half-met for want, sadly, of greater experience on the part of cast and directors. To the point where the Queen orders the Swineherd's execution, the production of the Harbison/Yeats was suitably compelling and strange (in Yeats's sense of the word as meaning "awesome", "eerie", "otherworldly"); but thereafter it fell to pieces, since the staging began increasingly to lose contact with just that tight "intellectual control" that the critic for the *TLS* admired as the distinguishing quality of Yeats's artistry (Buchanan 1935, 37). Harbison was in part responsible for this, as his imprint on the dialogue/libretto was marked from the first: his version begins by cutting Yeats's opening exchange between the two Attendants. In retrospect one realises how Yeats deploys that seemingly offhand, arbitrary tone at the start ("Sing anything, sing any old thing") (Yeats 1977 [1934], 621) to draw attention by contrast to the meticulously exacting precision that is enforced as the action then develops. The Attendants were presented by Harbison less as observers of the action and commentators on its development, than as the organisers and guides of cast and spectators through an established ritual, designed to achieve a specific outcome. (Is this perhaps why at first in this production the Swineherd was aggressively resistant to the Attendants when they dragged him onto the stage, as if he were already foreseeing and fearing his death as *required*?) These Attendants set the scene, placed the actors within it, then retired to the side of the stage to watch the outcome. Their songs in this context became less troubled quests for meaning, exploring the possible significance of what they were seeing, than satisfied appreciations that matters were proceeding in accordance with their plan. Their costuming, reliance on exaggerated, overly theatrical posing, their knowing looks to the audience and their general air of assurance were at a far remove from Yeats's Attendants: one, an experienced, older woman, full of quiet understanding; the other, a young, uncertain but curious man, growing in awareness. It was less the staging as a total entity that captivated one's engagement than the commitment and power these Attendants (Valentina Puskás and Jonah Halton) brought to their singing. Once Queen and Swineherd (Veena Akana-Makia and Edmund Danon) occupied the stage, however, the performance moved onto a different plane, one more akin to Yeats's conception.

This is the third production to date in England of Harbison's setting of Yeats's play, which he describes on the title page of the score as an "emblematic, ritual opera" (2009), a chamber work, scored for eight players, including a wide range of percussion instruments and a "prepared piano" in the manner of John Cage's dance works, which brings a sharply brittle tone to the keyboard's range. Harbison's style shows a fondness for cross-rhythms and propulsive, onward-thrusting blocks of sound rather than any distinct forms of lyricism. (Audiences were left in no doubt from the start of the performance that the end of this ritual would be violent and fatal.) This style of invention sat in uneasy tension with Yeats's poetic rhythms, the pro-

pulsion at odds with the verbal simplicity but intense allusiveness of Yeats's text, where ritual in the poet's imagining is both otherworldly and disturbingly immediate. The exception to this over-riding quality to Harbison's sound palette were passages where certain instruments were combined together to intimate the special timbre and sonority of the gamelan. These occurred in those moments in the action where the Queen seemingly abandons her distant, aloof formality, her "virgin cruelty", and briefly comes close to recognising the humanity of the Swineherd. (The gamelan is a brilliant choice here, implying through its timbres both "otherness" and a radiant sensuality). If Harbison's overall approach seemed unaffected by the poetic implications of Yeats's play, this criticism was not true of the central, extended interview between the two protagonists, which received by far the most satisfying musical interpretation of Yeats's intricate dramaturgy. This is where Queen and Swineherd steadily reveal tantalising glimpses of their hidden selves: her refusal to harm him "for a reason which I cannot guess" (Yeats 1977 [1934], 624); his unrelenting truth to self, his courage before the threat of execution, and belief in a future mystical union. It is at that precise instant where he envisions a reality within the story he has heard of a Queen who "sank in bridal sleep" (626) while she, momentarily sharing that vision, imagines how "Her body in that sleep conceived a child" (*ibidem*), that they reach towards the possibility of a potential union beyond the merely physical.

It was here that the production seemed to be moving wholly at one with the psychological progression of the characters. In addition to the two sets of curtains that Yeats's stage directions require, the stage floor was painted with two black bands that came from the rear stage corners to meet in the centre downstage, enclosing within its bounds the Queen's world (presented here as a vast bed with suspended hangings, where she first appeared capriciously playing with a fanciful toy creature). Initially the Swineherd roamed freely in the outer space while the Queen stayed reclining in the bed, but as their interaction moved cautiously towards communicating alternate, less combative selves, so both stepped slowly towards that dark dividing line until they hovered dangerously close to each other. This matched her reaching the climactic question: if she were to leave all that her realm contains which defines her status, "What do I gain?" (625) With his curt answer: "A song – the night of love, /An ignorant forest and the dung of swine" (*ibidem*), he finally crossed the boundary between them and with that invasion of her space (he passed her by and revelled in her bed: "She shall bring forth her farrow in the dung") (*ibidem*), the Queen retreated inexorably into her cruel self, insisting he be beheaded instantly. Here stage direction, music and dramaturgy worked perfectly in sympathy and the inexorability of it all proved both compelling and full of sensitivity for Yeats's dramatic methods: the economic but powerfully allusive setting working to illuminate the psychological turmoil and conflict defining the action, all designed to give tentative access to a myth situated within a distinct cultural inheritance.

This was an instance of creative empathy and synthesis; but then things fell apart, as if the director, Harriet Taylor, suddenly lost her creative stamina. There were no masks, presumably because of the needs of the singers, though to judge by photographs both earlier productions of the opera in England used masks as prescribed by Yeats. Instead of the ritualised execution that avoids sensationalising the death where a mask takes the place of the severed head, the Swineherd was strangled by the male Attendant within the royal bedclothes and in full view of the audience. Presumably taking his cue from Yeats's direction that the dance be accompanied by drum-taps getting ever more rapid, Harbison's music grew unrelievedly declamatory and insistent, becoming less the ritual of Yeats's conception than a Seventies- or Eighties-style "rave", an overwhelming, pounding tumult of sound (the opera was completed in 1977). Most surprising of all, there was no dance, even though the directions for the opera actually require such a climax to the action. The Queen became as if drained of animation, her central placing on stage now being

occupied by a female boxer, tying her gloves before aggressively attacking a punch-bag till the stage curtains closed for the final song: "Why must those holy, haughty feet descend…" (629). She was described in the programme as "The Queen (Boxer)". Whatever inspired the image, it was certainly in keeping with Harbison's equally aggressive music. Did the director find the implications of Yeats's ending (the descent into post-orgasmic sleep of a Queen covered in the Swineherd's blood) for all its careful, abstract processes of stylisation overly challenging to her sympathies or mores and in need of feminist reclamation? Perhaps; but why take this form? Was the Boxer to be seen as a symbol of the inner state of the Queen's psyche (warring against the imposed, constricting values of her regal status and her gender)? If this last were the case, was Harriet Taylor aiming to bring the end of Yeats's piece in line with the conclusion of Martinů's opera to achieve a form of unity within the evening's programme overall? The impact in the theatre was simply baffling. This was not the kind of fertile ambiguity Yeats pursues by engaging a spectator's involvement in the drama before steadily carrying it into uncharted, often ominous territory where that spectator must decide the parameters of her or his private response to what is best defined as theatre as poetry, drama as total, all-embracing symbol.

These shortcomings aside, the pairing of the two operas did illuminate a number of Yeats's strengths as a playwright. The contextualising that resulted from placing his dance play alongside a dadaist/surrealist conception by one of his European contemporaries illustrates Yeats's perennial awareness of a larger cultural scene than that obtaining in Ireland but a response that resists imitation or appropriation: Yeats rather sees a potential only to transcend it. *The King of the Great Clock Tower*, for example, the earlier companion piece to *A Full Moon in March* that shares much of its narrative incident, draws not on surrealist roots nor on Wilde's *Salome*, but on the symbolist vision of Maeterlinck's *Pelléas and Mélisande* in terms of structure, situation and relationships; yet Yeats does this only to enter a decidedly different mythological world, less evanescent and psychologically more defined and nuanced. It is a significant distinction between Maeterlinck and Yeats's plays that Mélisande fades at the conclusion of her tragedy into an indeterminate pathos, whereas the Queen in *The Great Clock Tower* comes into a new-found power that attends complete self-possession, as she politically and emotionally dominates both King and Stroller, who have each sought to shape her being.

There is a similar cultural and folkloristic palimpsest beneath *A Full Moon in March*: here the Chinese-derived fable of Turandot. Gozzi had first dramatised this in 1762 in the style of *commedia dell'arte*, influencing a future dramatic version by Schiller (1801), an opera by Busoni (1917, though this had been preceded by the composition of incidental music for a revival of the Gozzi play in 1905) and finally the opera by Puccini that premiered in 1926. All these dramatic or operatic versions have one marked difference from Yeats's play: they all enjoy the expansiveness of a developing narrative allowing for contrasting sub-plots and techniques of verisimilitude, whereas Yeats prefers to refine, paring away such amplifications along with the dramaturgy that realises them in theatrical terms. In doing this, he reaches the core of a myth that he seeks to comprehend. The result is a consciously ambiguous engagement with the myth of the seemingly cold, destructive queen. Where other treatments of the tale of Turandot develop the narrative in terms of her unexpectedly "melting" on finding fulfilment in love, a traditional, masculinist power-fantasy, Yeats investigates the possibility of the Queen achieving consummation beyond her innate destructiveness. By deploying dance as his prime medium of expression, he avoids making a direct statement of his own response to the material; instead he leaves each spectator to make his or her own interpretation and judgement based on a personal interpretation of what he or she watches. It is notable too that instead of accompanying the dance with a musical score (as in the manner of the climactic dance sequence in *The King of the Great*

Clock Tower, for the Abbey premiere of which in 1934 Arthur Duff composed original music) he gives instruction merely for drum-taps of varying speeds. These would give the dancer the necessary rhythm to shape her performance, yet that percussive sound would carry no lyrical or emotional overtones that might evoke a particular expectation or response in a spectator. Yeats prefers to take no control over his audience that would either suggest or, worse, dictate a specific reaction. What is performed is on many levels disturbing, but the organisation of the performance would not appear to give spectators any retreat back into their known comfort zones. The myth compels attention on its own terms. The imposition of the boxing imagery in the recent performance of *A Full Moon in March* inevitably proved reductive by contrast.

Yeats submits completely to the myth and the discipline that ensues results in a focused integrity controlling both the conception of the play and the play's execution. The remarkable consequence is that out of that submission comes release into a new form of drama that owes nothing to conventional tenets of realism. The play has excited a wealth of critical exposition, led by Frank Kermode's *Romantic Image* of 1957, that examines *A Full Moon in March* as an allegory or extended metaphor for the relation of writer to inspiration. The dance play can signify that, but not exclusively so. Always the critic or spectator must submit to the discipline in shaping an interpretation. This has become a special feature in the work of a number of Irish playwrights in following Yeats's example: Beckett's whole canon, for example, shapes such an independent world, exerting a hold over spectators and performers before releasing them into new states of awareness, whatever the particular dramatic medium the plays are designed for; Friel's plays in the manner of *Faith Healer* or *Wonderful Tennessee* likewise; Frank McGuinness's most recent work, since he has explored his creativity in poetry more extensively alongside his theatre writing; and Marina Carr's major output, but particularly *By The Bog of Cats* and *Woman and Scarecrow*. These plays demand courage in the writing and courage in the interpretation. Always the discipline of the over-riding myth must obtain, if the freedom enshrined within it is to be found.

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