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PROUST EMBODIED

DANS LA TÊTE DE PROUST (*Inside Proust's Head*), Sylvie Moreau's 2017 creation for the Montreal physical theatre company Omnibus, was all about heads. It was named after the head of the great novelist, which housed the brain within which most of its action took place. Proust himself, played by Pascal Contamine, spent almost all of the play's ninety minutes lying in his sleigh bed, his moribund body often immobile while his head turned this way and that to catch every nuance of his own dreams and reminiscences. The two mobile walls of the show's set, which stood in for the walls of the bedroom in which Proust spent much of his last decade on earth and which had a tendency to fly apart as if to open that bedroom to the infinite, featured a sequence of small windows from which the heads of his characters peered out. At intervals throughout the production Moreau's actors took up their positions behind these windows to engage in a lively *bal des têtes*, chins swiveling and torsos swaying as they traded Proustian *bon mots* about love, fashion, memory, and loss. At other moments they emerged fully embodied upon the stage and went head to head with one another. In one memorable scene the pretentious Mme. Verdurin (Nathalie Claude) traded aphorisms with the acid-tongued Duchesse de Guermantes (Isabelle Brouillette) in a battle of rival *salonnières* that closed in outright fisticuffs. Here, as so often in the show, the words bequeathed to us by Proust's imagination interacted with the vivacious physicality of Omnibus' actors to entertaining and—indeed—heady effect.

Performing Proust is a risky proposition. In his review of a 2014 staged reading of Harold Pinter's *Proust Screenplay* at the 92nd Street Y in New York City, Christopher Richards describes how "at intermission a woman sitting beside me leapt up and declared, 'Horrible,' huffing out of the theater." For Richards, such disgusted reactions are more or less inevitable when it comes to stage and screen adaptations of Proust's masterpiece *À la recherche du temps perdu* (*In Search of Lost Time*, 1913-1927). After all, he

writes,

> The uncanny way Proust mirrors thought gives us a feeling of ownership of the work that we rarely experience with other books. We all have our own way of imagining the three steeples, little Marcel's boyhood crushes, Swann's walk, and, of course, just what that madeleine tastes like. [...] Seeing [the actor playing] Marcel enter the stage gave me that startling sick feeling—like reaching for your mother as a four-year-old only for her to turn around and to have some other woman's face attached to her head.

Though Richards' figure for cognitive dissonance is a little over-Oedipal (the notoriously mother-loving Proust would probably have loved it), he raises questions worth considering. Even lovers of stage and screen adaptations of novels—among whom I count myself—tend to find enacted Prousts a little problematic. Why?

To be fair, Proust's work has inspired many brilliant moments of performance. Though their efforts to cram all seven volumes of *À la recherche du temps perdu* into the three hours' traffic of screen and stage often leave them a little breathless, Pinter's *Proust Screenplay* (written for director Joseph Losey in the 1970s but never filmed) and the stage version of it he created for the Royal National Theatre in 2000 are effective, wedding the playwright's savage irony and pregnant silences to exquisite moments of wry tenderness. Raoul Ruiz's film of the final volume, *Le temps retrouvé* (*Time Regained*, 1999), is more focused and features sequences of astonishing lyricism, such as those of Marcel (Marcello Mazzarella) levitating in his chair through a screening of war footage as his mind floats off in recollection and Robert de Saint Loup (Pascal Greggory) spurring his horse along the beach at Balbec while his own funeral cortège passes in the other direction. My own favourite among recent Proust adaptations is Michael Butt's 6-part dramatization of *À la recherche du temps perdu* for BBC Radio 4 (2005). I once embarrassed myself by bursting into tears on a Halifax sidewalk while listening to the final minutes of this version, in which James Wilby movingly conveys the narrator's sadness and delight as he recognizes time itself embodied in the form of young Mademoiselle de Saint-Loup. Even so, all of these adaptations struggle to reproduce the languorous twists and turns of memory that shape Proust's *roman-fleuve*. Whether managed by lighting

cues, smash cuts, or sonic bridges, their sudden movements across time and space often seem arch, forced, or disjointed. Is it really our personal images of Proust's characters that we miss in these performed versions of his novel, as Richards suggests, or is it the sound of Proust's own narrative voice guiding us with wry, melancholy, and often catty assurance from one corridor of his mind palace to the next?

Sylvie Moreau clearly had these questions in mind when she created *Dans la tête de Proust*. As the show's press release declares, her idea was "not to adapt the *œuvre-fleuve*, but to bear witness to a Marcel Proust in the process of dreaming it, of writing it." Unlike Pinter, Ruiz, and Butt, Moreau made no attempt to reproduce in dramatic form the complex chains of mental association by which Proust's narrator regains the lost time(s) of his past. Instead, she gave us fifteen tableaux, each introduced by the genial museum guide Jeanne (Brouillette): a sequence of glimpses into Proust's life, imagination, and creative process. We learned about his ill-health, his reclusion, and his dependence on a lethal cocktail of drugs and on his housekeeper Céleste Albaret, played by Claude with an irresistible mixture of warmth and exasperation. We heard him offer, from his bed, his insouciant responses to his famous questionnaire. We also heard his asthmatic wheezing for breath and saw him writhe and thrash about that same bed in the throes of physical and mental agony. Above all, we saw him mix memory and imagination to create some of the most beloved characters in modern literature.

When it came to selecting those characters, Moreau and her colleagues at Omnibus were clearly more interested in Proust's comic side than his elegiac one. Where Ruiz's gorgeously cinematic *Le temps retrouvé* circles endlessly around the elegant silhouettes of those quintessential objects of desire, Odette de Crécy (Catherine Deneuve) and her daughter Gilberte (Emmanuelle Béart), Moreau's theatrical fantasia sidelined the former and ignored the latter. Instead, it lavished attention on more grotesque figures, such as Mme. Verdurin and the Duchesse de Guermantes locked in their battle of (dubious) wits, the tailor Jupien (Réal Bossé) assiduously running his specialty brothel for gentlemen who fancy rough trade, and above all Jupien's star client the Baron de Charlus. As the aristocratic Charlus—arrogant, contemptuous, and cruel, but riddled with insecurities and painfully vulnerable—Jean Asselin gave a performance that richly justified his status as one of Quebec's most revered physical theatre performers. He strutted the stage, his massive chest billowing in disdain for the hoi polloi; yet his shoul-

ders, his fingertips, his darting eyes, and even the curled tips of his moustache seemed to quiver with an uncontrollable anxiety. Mixing elements from mime, modern dance, and the *bouffon* clown tradition, Asselin's performance invited laughter and empathy in equal measure. When Contamine complemented his movements by reciting Proust's own witty descriptions of the Baron, Asselin's hyper-eloquent body put even the master's rhetoric to shame.

At such moments *Dans la tête de Proust* gave the lie to Richards' diagnosis of the ills of Proustian stage productions. Here, the highly specific, individual, and riskily extreme performance of the actor illuminated—rather than fell short of—the specificity, individuality, and risky extremity of Proust's characters. By underlining this point, Moreau's work clarified for me some of the greatest successes of the other adaptations I have mentioned. In Butt's radio version, for example, Corin Redgrave as Charlus makes audacious use of his flexible voice, purring, sneering, giggling, and whimpering his way into the audience's half-repulsed affections just as Asselin did with his peerlessly flexible body. Similarly, in what I find the most moving scene in Ruiz's film, Pascal Greggory as the tormented aristocrat Robert de Saint Loup sits in a Parisian restaurant, violently hacking into his meat and shoving it into his mouth as he expatiates on the manliness of working-class soldiers. Contrasting sharply with his patrician elegance of mien, the mechanical voracity of Saint Loup's eating expresses both the power of his desire for other men and the excoriating self-disgust with which he reacts to it. Like Asselin's, Greggory's physicality speaks what words cannot; in its fearless grotesquerie, it achieves a touching and disturbing embodiment of the struggles between desire and repression, longing and fear, self-protection and self-contempt, which govern so much of Proust's narrative.

Ruiz's *Le temps retrouvé* ends with the image of the adult Marcel wandering across the beach at Balbec, where he spent the summers of his youth, while his own childish self frolics at the edge of the waves. In voice-over we hear the Proustian narrator (played by the great actor-director Patrice Chéreau) describing the last moments of the sculptor Salvini. When Salvini complained to the Angel of Death that he had not had enough time to contemplate his final masterpiece, the Angel replied, "In this work is all of your life and the life of all men. To review it would take an eternity." In *Dans la tête de Proust* Moreau and her Omnibus colleagues made no claims to encapsulate the full scope and breadth of *À la recherche du temps perdu* and

its kaleidoscopic effort to express "the life of all men." Instead, they offered their spectators a few small windows on a few of the products of the author's troubled, fertile brain. But such glimpses as they provided went straight to the spectators' hearts as well as their heads. Far from falling short of pre-established mental images of Proust's characters, the actors' unique instruments enriched and challenged our comprehension. And this, surely, is why spectators continue to desire and watch such adaptations, incomplete though they may be. In them, the performer's body, like Proust's prose, can fleetingly capture our own passage through time.