

## *Shell Shock: Overwhelming Beauty*

BERTA DEL OLIVO

I still have to catch my breath after the overwhelming beauty of *Shell Shock: a great success* for this new world creation commissioned by La Monnaie. The synergy among the music, the lyrics, the choreography, the scenery, the video, the light, the costumes, the dramaturgy, the singers and the dancers results in a piece of overwhelming and devastating beauty. Only beauty and war could be so overwhelming and devastating at the same time.

The synergy of a great team led by Peter de Caluwe, General Director of La Monnaie, who has given the necessary impulse to the idea of commemorating the Great War with a brand new world creation. He has also found and brought together the perfect team to carry this idea out.

This success comes at the same time as the proposal of the Belgian Federal Government to reduce dramatically the subsidies for La Monnaie: around 16% of reduction over the years 2015-2019. As Peter de Caluwe states in his latest press release, with the title *Black-out Culturel Fédéral*, this reduction is 'un vrai massacre'. Then, I wonder whether the initial and final seconds of *Shell Shock*, in a complete black-out, are only the product of the esthetical proposal of the creators.

Not only Belgium but also France, United Kingdom and Germany, among other countries, are immersed in commemorating with different events and proposals the Great War (1914-1918). In our case at hand, *Shell Shock* pays tribute to those soldiers suffering from psychological damage caused by the violence of war, described by Wilfred Owen as: '... men whose minds the Dead have ravished. Therefore still their eyeballs shrink'. The British and Americans used the simplistic term of "shell shock," and the French, commotion and

©

**Bruselas,  
sábado, 25 de  
octubre de 2014.**

La Monnaie. *Shell Shock: A Requiem of War*. Music: Nicholas Lens;



Lyrics: Nick Cave; Commissioned by De Munt | La Monnaie. World creation. Production: De Munt | La Monnaie; Coproduction: Eastman; Conductor: Koen Kessels; Choreography and regie: Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui; Choreography collaborator: Vebjørn Sundby; Set and video design: Eugenio Szwarcer; Costumes: Khanh Le Thanh; Light: Willy Cessa; Dramaturgy: Ruth Little; Choir Director: Martino Faggiani; Soprano: Claron McFadden; Mezzo-soprano: Sara Fulgoni; Contratenor: Gerald Thompson; Tenor: Ed Lyon; Bass: Mark S. Doss; Ragazzo Soprano: Gabriel Crozier, Gabriel Kuti, Theo Lally (Trinity Boys Choir, London); Creation and Dance: Aimilios Arapoglou, Damien Jalet, Kozuki Kazutomi, Jason Kittelberger, Elias Lazaridis, Johnny Lloyd, Guro Nagelhus Schia, Nemo Oeghoede, Shintaro Oue, Ira Mandela Siobhan. Symphonic Orchestra and Choirs of De Munt | La Monnaie. Duration: 90 minutes, approximately. Capacity: 100%

obusite ("shellitis") to name this pathology.



The Great War taken near Ypres (Belgium) in 1917.

The wounded soldier in the lower left of the photo has a dazed, thousand-yard stare - a frequent symptom of "shell-shock".

Many of the soldiers suffering from shell shock were shot at dawn, together with those accused of cowardice and desertion, as their armies thought they were simulating insanity to avoid war.

With *Shell Shock*, the intention of Nicholas Lens and Nick Cave has been to give a voice to those who were never heard; those witnesses who talk on behalf of their friends and relatives, who were the fallen, the disappeared, and the orphans of the Great War. Voices gathered in Twelve Canto or Cantos, each sung by a different character. Sometimes, these characters help each other to get through telling their own stories, describing their mutilated and fragmented identity.

- I. Canto of the Colonial Soldier
- II. Canto of the Soldier
- III. Canto of the Nurse
- IV. Canto of the Deserter
- V. Canto of the Survivor, part 1
- VI. Canto of the Angels of Death
- VII. Canto of the Survivor, part 2
- VIII. Canto of the Fallen
- IX. Canto of the Missing
- X. Canto of the Unknown Soldier
- XI. Canto of the Mother
- XII. Canto of the Orphans

These Canti/Cantos constitute the first libretto written by the Australian actor, singer and writer Nick Cave (1957) and were the starting point and one of the sources of inspiration for the Belgian composer Nicholas Lens (also born in 1957), together with the cemeteries and the 'Last Post ceremony' of his hometown, Ypres, a village where intense and long battles between the Germans and Allied forces took place. So, in the case of the creative process of Shell Shock, it was *prima le parole e poi la musica*.

As Nicholas Lens declares : 'Je peux dire que c'est un privilège de collaborer avec des auteurs qui écrivent comme s'ils avaient trempé leurs doigts dans du sang, d'authentiques écrivains dont les mots et les phrases ont des accents de vérité, parce qu'ils ont derrière eux toute une expérience de vie. Pour un compositeur, c'est donc un privilège, rien que du fait que la musique s'écrit avec plus de fluidité.'

Tout se passe comme si la musique s'écrivait elle-même, comme si elle se dissimulait et s'abritait derrière les lettres et les signes – ainsi qu'il apparaît dans le livret de Shell Shock de Nick Cave. La dramaturgie des mots est tout à fait spécifique et autonome, tout comme celle de la musique. Mais lorsque Shell Shock la musique et les mots se rencontrent au bon moment et au bon endroit, ils se nourrissent mutuellement, et vont même jusqu'à flirter, d'abord avec orgueil et érotisme, avant de se courtiser, de se livrer à l'amour avec passion pour finalement s'accoupler à l'infini.'

These songs written by Nicholas Cave are particularly suggestive, authentic, lyrical and rhythmical, full of accusations and recriminations and without any hint of heroism. Cave's lyrics portray images of war and they intersect with Lens' music on the border of abstraction and symbol. Some excerpts are given below as a way of example:

### **Canto of the Colonial Soldier**

...Some arsehole shouts at me in words  
I do not properly understand  
Because I am a colonial soldier...

### **Canto of the Nurse**

...I want to lick it off and swallow him  
And drink his ears and drink his mouth...

### **Canto of the Deserter**

...My mother's in the laundry  
Crying from the shame  
My father would have preferred I took  
A bullet in the brain...

### **Canto of the Survivor part 1**

...Sometimes I think

my wife wished I'd died  
Sometimes he thinks that I wished he'd died  
Sometimes I think my wife wished I'd died...

## **Canto of the Mother**

...Fuck the flag  
Fuck God  
Give me my son back to me  
Give me my son back  
to me...



## **Shell Shock: A Requiem of War**

The music by Nicholas Lens uses a variety of means to evoke pain, suffering and passion. The use of dissonances (above all the sharp dissonance of the interval of second) creates an atmosphere of fear at the beginning of the opera, setting an extremely bitter and unsettling tone right from the start.

The vocal parts deploy pure and lyrical songs, intertwined with shouting, weeping wailing, and whispering. Shell Shock music showcases a good control of the composition as a whole, its polyphonic complexity, a flexible orchestration and a powerful expression with the

distinctive role of the percussion, both simple and sublime, that gives life and fluidity to the music.

Songs, Cantos, Canti. In the history of literature, I can recall now the work by the American poet Ezra Pound (1885-1972) *The Cantos*, much more complicated than the *Cantos* by Nick Cave. In the history of music, the following works by the Italian composer Luigi Nono (1924-1990): *Canti per 13*, *Il canto sospeso* and *Canti di vita e d'amore: Sul Ponte di Hiroshima*, which share with *Shell Shock* the same overwhelming beauty.

*In Shell Shock: A Requiem of War*, Nicholas Lens and Nick Cave decline using the structure and typical formal model of the Requiem, keeping only the cultural symbol linked to the expression of homage to the dead. Following the expressivity and dramatism of Giuseppe Verdi in his *Requiem*, Nicholas Lens and Nick Cave exploit to the maximum both features using the operatic structure.

As Nicholas Lens states : 'En substance, *Shell Shock* est un opéra en ce qu'il traduit des textes dramatiques, chapeautés par une même thématique, en une langue musicale dont des motifs sont récurrents. C'est pourquoi ce n'est pas simplement un long récit narratif avec un début, un milieu et une fin, mais bien davantage une approche lyrique impliquant divers personnages qui chacun ont leur moment individuel'.



*Shell Shock: A Requiem of War*

The outstanding work of the Belgian-Moroccan choreographer Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui (1976) and his company Eastman follows the spirit of paying homage to the dead: in the image above, the dancers run into the sheets, jumping into death, with the expression of horror marked in their faces. In several scenes, the body of the dancers is the body of the soldiers suffering from shell shock: the dancers moved with the same spasms, shakings and shiverings of the traumatized soldiers, as if they were under mortar fire or shell attack.

Eugenio Szwarcer, in charge of the set and video design, is also to be praised: impressive

use of the light (and shadow) during the 90 minutes of the representation and bold use of the video, even shooting live in one of the scenes! Superb! Thanks to this light, the costumes signed by Khanh Le Thanh took a shine. Soldiers dressed in very elegant colors could be seen together with the new and simpler costumes started to be used during the First World War to avoid being easy targets: Khanh Le Thanh did a previous and excellent work of documentation about the transition in the soldiers' outfit.



### Shell Shock: A Requiem of War

Finally, what a joy for Koen Kessels to conduct voices such as those of Claron McFadden (Soprano), Sara Fulgoni (Mezzo-Soprano), Gerald Thompson (Contratenor), Ed Lyon (Tenor), Mark S. Doss (Bass), all of them specialists in contemporary music, and those of the three ragazzi soprano, from the Trinity Boys Choir in London, Gabriel Crozier, Gabriel Kuti and Theo Lally. Their interpretations, together with that of the orchestra and choirs of La Monnaie, made the music stay with us like the smell of a refined and pleasant scent.

What about the final of the piece? Something such fragile and delicate as the voice of the orphan (image above). A child wearing a keffiyeh, the iconic symbol of Palestinian nationalism, reminds us automatically of the conflict in the Gaza Strip. Ukraine, Syria, and so many other conflicts could have been chosen to carry the same message: never again!

After the song of the child, everybody caught breath. What followed were five minutes of applause and ovations from a very grateful audience: we all deepened in the nooks and crannies of our human consciousness.