A Longing for Death

A Conversation with Director **Christof Loy** and Stage Designer **Christian Schmidt**

Most audiences are probably not familiar with Vincenzo Bellini's opera "I Capuleti e i Montecchi", though the piece tells a famous story. The Capulets and Montagues are the warring families of Romeo and Juliet. What was it about this opera that interested you?

Christof Loy: First of all, the fact that the opera is so different from Shakespeare's version; the librettist Felice Romani used other sources. I found this strange at first, but it also made me curious. The only similarity to Shakespeare is the basic constellation: two young people who fall in love although their families are enemies. Otherwise, the atmosphere of the opera is completely different; a veil of melancholy lies over the entire piece. This is not the story of a love that slowly blossoms, but of a love that ends—we see the last 24 hours in the lives of Romeo and Juliet. There is very little overt action in the opera, which is dominated by slow tempi and long musical numbers. Everything is stretched out, and the tension is almost unbearable. This is to a large degree due to Juliet herself, who seems paralyzed throughout the entire piece. Everything happens around her and because of her. Romeo wants to liberate her, but for many rea sons she cannot allow herself to be freed.

Christian Schmidt: When I heard the piece for the first time, I could understand why Richard Wagner and Giuseppe Verdi found it very interesting. Bellini had an unbelievably stringent, single-minded perspective on the material, with no compromises to the usual operatic conventions such as dance scenes, market squares, and such. I find it very modern. We experience a stifling close-up of the Capulets' world, since everything takes place inside their house. It is at heart a chamber piece with only five main characters: Juliet; Capellio, her father; Tebaldo, the intended son-in-law; Lorenzo, a doctor; and Romeo, the outsider. I think it is fascinating to look at such a family structure and try to discover why families come into conflict and cause each other so much harm and pain.

Christof Loy: I was particularly interested in Juliet's story. Why does she refuse so vehemently to give in to her love for Romeo and leave her father's world behind? You get a definite feeling that she has a huge fear of intimacy. She first confronts Romeo with terms like "duty" and "family honor", and later she speaks of another love that seems to be more important to her. She feels a stronger sense of duty to this love, and one has to assume that she means love for her father. I was immediately reminded of other constellations of daughters and fathers in pieces I had previously directed. I thought of "Louise" by Gustave Charpentier—where it is very clear that the title figure has a disastrous relationship with her father—or of Daphne in Richard Strauss's opera of the same name, whose deep sexual anxieties and fear of male erotic desire probably come from an early experience of abuse. Juliet's behavior is what we see when victims of abuse attempt to confront their traumas, and also what we call the "Stockholm Syndrome", where the victims feel an obligation to their tormenters and do not want to offend them. They do not want to do anything to risk being unloved.

Given this background, what is the significance of the fact that the role of Romeo is sung by a woman?

Christof Loy: I think it is symptomatic that the character Juliet allows to approach her most closely is not a "virile" man, but a woman's voice in men's clothing. Bellini had complete freedom to choose his subject matter and knew that he could use two extraordinary female singers. But he chose the Romeo and Juliet story, consciously accepting the fact that a woman would play Romeo. Of cour se, it is true that the sounds of the two female voices mix beautifully together, especially in contrast to the male-dominated environment around them. But even when their voices are most closely intertwined, as in their duet in the first act, it is not really a typical love scene between Romeo and Juliet. Their relationship remains problematic.

The world of this opera is dark. From the very beginning, death is always present. We hear of massacres and bloodshed between the warring clans; one of the victims is even Juliet's brother.

Christian Schmidt: It is typical for such conflicts that close family members are targeted in order to inflict the greatest amount of suffering on the other side. In this story, it is Juliet's brother, the family heir, who is murdered. Juliet not only has to suffer because of her pathological relationship to her father; she is also traumatized by the violence around her.

Unlike other versions of the Romeo and Juliet story, in this opera there is no mother, a protective female figure...

Christof Loy: This only increases Juliet's isolation in a male world where aggression is the norm. In Juliet's mind, Romeo is a figure like Wagner's Lohengrin, who will rescue her and take her away.

Romeo is initially quite vital and passionate. How does his character develop?

Christof Loy: For me, Romeo is from the beginning a very conflicted figure. He has grown up learning to deal with violence and aggression, and we should not forget that he, too, is a killer, the murderer of Juliet's brother. He probably truly wishes to end the feud and give love a chance. In the first scene with Juliet, he describes himself as someone who sees only a choice between making a clear new beginning in his life or dying. He has this Tristan-like quality: given the prospect of life going on in such a complicated fashion, death is certainly an alternative—even the more attractive alternative! He carries this self-destructive side within himself from the beginning. Perhaps the happiest music he sings in the entire piece is at the end, when he dies. It is almost as if he had unconsciously sought this solution the entire time. It is interesting that he does not tell Juliet that she should die with him. He actually encourages her to live.

Strangely enough, while Romeo's death is set to music, this is not the case with Juliet. The stage instructions simply say that she should collapse onto his body.

Christof Loy: Apparently Bellini felt it was more important at this moment to compose Romeo's death. It is in fact odd, because throughout the piece it is Juliet who speaks of death and says that she believes she will soon die.

Is the morbid atmosphere of this work reflected in the stage design?

Christian Schmidt: We show the house of Capellio and his family as if it were a flashback. The tragic events have taken place some time ago; we see signs of decay and dilapidation. Or to put it another way, it is as if something is reanimated that took place long ago. Only a few sketched-in objects are still present: pieces of furniture, a few lamps. Many things are faded and rusty. We felt it was important to leave certain aspects unclear.

Inside the house, Juliet moves as if she is a prisoner. Yet at the same time, she is imprisoned within herself. What does this mean for the depiction of the interior spaces?

Christian Schmidt: We show the specific rooms, but they are strangely compressed. Next to a public ballroom and a narrow corridor, we see Juliet's intimate, private sphere with her bedroom and dressing room. These are only a wall away from Capellio's room: the room where power resides, where the men of the world come and go.

Christof Loy: Juliet and Capellio's rooms were important for us in order to demonstrate the conflict in the piece. Just a short distance away from the person who has the most power, and in the truest sense occupies the most space, we see the person who is the greatest victim of this power. The paradox is hearing this terrible story together with such beautiful music. It is as if the beauty of the music also contains an entreaty: the hope that things might, in spite of everything, be different. Nevertheless, it must be said that the characters seem happiest when they sing of their longing for death, since it offers a chance for escape. This is truly one of the most pessimistic pieces I have ever encountered.

The interview was conducted by Kathrin Brunner.
English translation by John Patrick Thomas and W. Richard Rieves