

**Staging *Frankenstein*:  
Jean-François Peyret's 2018 Adaptation**

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**'Eureka!': Beyond Measure and 'Out of Chaos'**

French contemporary playwright Jean-François Peyret's *Frankenstein* project and modern stage adaptation premiered in Switzerland at the Théâtre Vidy-Lausanne in January 2018. Interesting choice of date... why now? Was the decision to release his play in 2018 a conscious choice? I asked Peyret that question when he came to Grenoble to promote his play in February. No, no, he said to me repeatedly. The 200-year anniversary is a pure coincidence and we must take his word for it. The source of inspiration, however, is not a random choice. On reading the Author's famous 1831 Introduction, Peyret stumbled across that quote which began to haunt him somewhat obsessively: "Invention, it must be humbly admitted, does not consist in creating out of void, but out of chaos" (Shelley 8). And indeed one of the most electrifying moments in the play is when the actress and only woman on stage who embodies both Marys, Wollstonecraft and Shelley, mother and daughter, but also a feminized version of the monster, declares that everything she writes is born "out of chaos". Organized chaos. Peyret's discovery of the 1831 text, the way it has influenced his work as a playwright, his desire to experiment around that concept (*le chaos*, in French) by allowing his actors to read Mary Shelley on their own and improvise or to play different parts as if they were interchangeable, not unlike Danny Boyle's 2011 National Theatre Live version, is everything but a humble endeavour. He himself not so "humbly admits," to echo Mary Shelley's words, that "the structure of the play (*my play*) is very similar to Frankenstein's Creature in the way it is built"; which would mean, if we interpret this

statement literally, that Peyret's monster-play is a gigantic and hideous creation, unfinished and nameless.

If we carefully dissect the fabric of the play, this provocative argument almost begins to make sense when Peyret, for example, transforms Victor into a Narcissistic comedian prone to fits of verbal performance – or meta-performance, in this case – who, in the end, is able to fill the stage, as well as the space that separates us from the stage, with not just one monster but many monsters (plural) that seem to grow out of thin air like multicellular organisms. Peyret's biological madness lies in the fact that he operates with certainty. Not arrogance, certainty. The certainty that we all have dead bodies living inside us: old spectres, unborn fetuses, resurrected authors. His spectre is Mary Shelley's. If Shakespeare was said to have written the role of the Ghost in *Hamlet* for himself, Peyret is probably hidden somewhere in Jeanne Balibar's body and belly. The actress and intellectual Muse (she speaks fluent English and German in the play), Balibar, who plays Mary Shelley, is a former student of the *École Normale Supérieure* in Paris and a member of the *Comédie-Française*, and has worked with Peyret in the past in some of his other productions. If Peyret shares a certain affinity with the character of Mary Shelley as he does with Balibar, here depicted at the early stages of pregnancy, it is because he sees her as an alter ego, a stage director herself, and possibly a reassuring voice to experiment freely on the monstrous and the chaotic by breaking every sort of boundaries, whether they be linguistic, sexual or scientific boundaries.

If Peyret admits to something repulsive in his play, messy at times, self-destructive even, his creation however, itself a living Creature, can be interpreted as a success. What then is Peyret's excuse or explanation when his spectators take offense and choose to leave before the end of the play, making enough noise as they leave the theatre to signify to others that their frustrated outburst is perfectly justified? Granted, the play is more than 2 hours long, not unlike Frankenstein's monster, which is more than 2 meters tall. The whole experience requires indeed courage and perseverance to understand the different ramifications, the hypertext, the shibboleths, and the many, many scholarly references, some more cryptic than others. From Brecht to Beckett, the spectator might feel somewhat alienated or rather comfortably wrapped up in a large bubble of esotericism. Peyret's reply would probably be that his dramatization of failure is successfully explored from every angle and from every human perspective even if it fails to convince the most reluctant spectator. In the same way as Captain

Walton is depicted as a failed writer, simultaneously quoting and misquoting Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* in the play, Mary Shelley is recurrently portrayed as a mother who fails to keep her children alive, tortured by the prospect of another miscarriage. In that context, Peyret comes out as a bold playwright who is not afraid to fail. And yet, he does, in a way. Not because he chose to produce a difficult play, but because he chose to leave his audience behind, deserted and alone, the victim of the playwright's ambition or poor sense of measure and empathy. Some would say, with a strong sense of irony, that the smoke on stage is too thick and clouds our judgement. But really, if you are not a Mary Shelley fan or a Romanticist, you can just leave the playhouse with a headache, feeling either very stupid or quite irritated. You can also decide, in the words of Thomas Carlyle, "to die of exhaustion rather than boredom" in your chair. This is a human error that Frankenstein would have easily committed or a Promethean perversion, *hybris*, he would have indulged in but not Mary Shelley, never guilty, despite her young age, of alienating her readership, convinced that invention and modesty are not mutually exclusive. "Eureka (j'ai trouvé)!" Jeanne Balibar cries out at the beginning play, as if the performative force of scientific genius had suddenly become contagious. Peyret's Mary Shelley definitely found something he is still looking for as a playwright. The quality of the character of fiction you choose to stage, quote or imitate will not make you a better author.

#### **Four Characters in Search of an Author?: Peyret and Pirandello**

There is definitely something Pirandello-esque in Peyret's interpretation of *Frankenstein*. Not six but four characters, played by Jeanne Balibar, Jacques Bonnafé, Victor Lenoble and Joël Maillard, in search of an author, with possible echoes to its Italian model of meta-theatricality which in 1921 had also its crowd of opponents. When the stage becomes a place of experimentation, authors meet and discuss the lives of their unfinished characters or monsters. Peyret also seems to live in this madhouse where striking up a conversation with Mary Shelley through four different characters and attempting to stage both her biography and her fictional anxieties does not seem completely absurd. Peyret's argument, like Pirandello's, consists in showing his audience that to perform a story is as complicated as to think of one. We are reminded, throughout the play, that Peyret was inspired by the Romantic circles of the time, Shelley's exile in foreign territory and that famous competition between authors in the Villa Diodati in 1816 ("We will each write a ghost story, said Lord Byron; and his

proposition was acceded to.” (Shelley 7)), which prompted Mary Shelley to come up with the story of Frankenstein. Once again, the 1831 text spoke volumes about the value of “*think[ing] of a story*,” a vital step in creating something dramatic, something so alive that the stage could even pretend to embody a beating heart. We are reminded of the gigantic womb at the beginning of the National Live Theatre production. Peyret also chooses to explicitly mimic the way Mary Shelley reflects on the genesis of a new form of art, a story about to unfold, a monster’s head crowning about to be pushed out of the female writer-character’s vagina (in Peyret’s play, Balibar simulates the act of giving birth on stage); in other words, “a story to rival those which had excited us to this task”:

One which would speak to the mysterious fears of our nature and awaken thrilling horror – one to make the reader dread to look around, to curdle the blood, and quicken the beatings of the heart. If I did not accomplish these things, my ghost story would not be unworthy of its name. I thought and pondered – vainly. I felt that blank incapability of invention which is the greatest misery of authorship, when dull Nothing replies to our anxious invocations. ‘Have you thought of a story?’ I was asked each morning, and each morning I was forced to reply with a mortifying negative. (Shelley 8)

For Peyret, a student of Pirandello, a playwright navigating like the Romantics between France, Italy and Switzerland, a “dull Nothing” is still something. If not a step forward, it is, at the very least, a step in the right direction. Peyret’s play, mind you, is not a written play, even though the storyline has been previously laid out as part of a larger frame: the decor by American award-winning stage designer, Nicky Rieti, on the one hand, the video installations and cutting edge soundtrack created by young Italian composer Daniele Ghisi, on the other. But the whole setting allows for a series of improvisation exercises where the pieces of dialogue can slightly change from one representation to the next and the deeply felt performance of each actor fluctuates according to his or her subjective readings of Shelley’s text and story. As such, it is a tour-de-force in terms of creativity where drama is a powerful metaphor and a tool to reinvent the contours of fiction.

In Peyret’s world, the notion of genre also seems to occupy centre stage, namely by taking full advantage of the epistolary form and the theatrical quality of the genre. Every letter, sometimes materialized on stage by a blank sheet of paper, corresponds to a different style of performance, which naturally raises questions of authorship. The shifting points of view soon degenerate into identity crises and several acts of schizophrenia when actors feel their stage partner is playing their characters better

than themselves. Once again, we are reminded of another controversial playwright who found his inspiration in eighteenth-century letter-writing, German poet and director of the Berliner Ensemble, Heiner Müller, author of another hypertextual feat, *Quartett* (1980). This adaptation of Laclos's *Liaisons dangereuses* is also a foursome created in a context of chaos, in a salon and a bunker, before the French revolution and after World War III, according to the stage directions. Four characters embodied by two – in Peyret, it is the other way around – Merteuil and Valmont trapped together in a situation of conflict, playing games and changing personalities: one man, three women, in Müller; in Peyret, one woman, three men; in both plays, a variety of masks, mirrors and gender roles. Although the whole effect is one of discord, seething impulses and sexual energies, the whole structure is as rigorous as a musical score, a jazz quartet, sometimes even a military march. Balibar's ghost, at the beginning of Peyret's play, walks back and forth in the background counting her steps. She reappears at the end, like clockwork, walking the same steps, the rhythm of which reproduces the anatomy of a play that is as surgical as it is diabolically scientific.

### **Conversations with Science: From Galvanism to Neurobiology**

In this *Frankenstein* adaptation, science as a creative mechanism is everywhere, from the many instruments and contraptions, the cabinet of curiosities displayed on stage to the explicit references to Luigi Galvani and the somewhat awkward manner with which Peyret and his characters play with electricity. Peyret's love affair with contemporary science goes back to the 1990's when he put together his first adaptation of *Faustus. A Natural History*, in 1998, in which he develops his passion for biology as a perfect segue into the world of self-introspection – an exploration of the living, which, coupled with philosophy and the metaphysics of drama, is a way to fill, according to Peyret, the void we have been left with by our modern societies. His experiments also include a second Faustian meditation in 2000 around the character of Alan Turing (1912-1954) and his relationships to machines. The English mathematician is seen as a pretext for Peyret to invent a new mode of conversation between playwrights and scientists and reflect on the impact computer science has had on stage performance and the theatre world, in general. Peyret has also worked on the influential figures of Darwin (*Les Variations Darwin*, 2004) and Galileo (*Tournant autour de Galilée*, 2008). But his most interesting collaboration is with the neurobiologist Alain Prochiantz, with whom he has worked twice in an attempt to bring

together physically a man of science and a man of the stage who, of course, are still alive and breathing, unlike Darwin, Turing or Galileo. One of the products of this investigation is a parallel drawn between Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and technological advancement in the field of genetic mutations (*La Génisse et le pythagoricien*, d'après *Les Métamorphoses* d'Ovide, 2002). Because the stage becomes a scientific machine, most of these transformations occur before our very eyes – visions of flesh, body and material substance – as Peyret gives Ovid's myths and characters a chance to resurrect and live out their fantasies. Is it a literary or a scientific crime, Peyret wonders? Probably both. If not criminal, there is clearly something blasphemous in exposing these transmogrified works publicly and thus playing with the sanctity of a canonical existence. The reflection takes on a new dimension in Peyret's more recent play, *Ex vivo/In vitro* (2011) where theatrical symbols echo techniques of reproduction and affiliation to stage a debate on medically assisted procreation, on nature's defects and, on an even more metaphorical scale, on infertility as a pathology. This vision of the stage as an experimental laboratory unveiling both the vibrant prospects of science but also its major threats could therefore be seen as Peyret's mission and quest for originality in modern day drama. If the atmosphere of the plays themselves is often either electric or alchemical, they also depict a world that is or feels altogether destructive from the very beginning; the beginning of the plays, of course, but also the beginning of each of the characters' lives. In the *Frankenstein* adaptation, we witness from the start the playwright's compassion for Victor's childhood, his personal experience and his greater understanding of the world through chemistry. To say that Peyret identifies with that aspect of Victor is not another critic's attempt at stretching the truth. On the contrary, Peyret's affinity for Victor, the Creator, is tangible, not just because he is played by one of the younger actors in the play, but because of the Nietzschean force he holds inside him and his potential for questioning values or reinventing human tragedy. Quotes from *The Gay Science* seem to confirm that inclination and the promise a young Victor (or a younger Peyret?) holds for the next generation of charismatic actors who are mad enough to live solely on their improvisation skills and thirst for invention. Needless to say that there is clearly no money to be made and no quick road to fame in the world of independent theatre! This also points to the didacticism of these types of performances, which rely mainly on the attractive nature of the game, the dangers of which are proportionate to its educational virtues. In the end, it seems that Peyret's interpretation of the Modern Prometheus is

one who acts out his fantasy and wins or loses on a dare. His aim is to take unnecessary risks in the name of science, *ennui* or distraction; in other words, what Kierkegaard would theorize as an aesthetic response to boredom. The question seems to resonate throughout the play. What comes out of bored actors or writers? Peyret follows Kierkegaard's path, thinking there might be a lesson to be learned in the way drama teaches us something beautifully unsound and terrifying at the same time about the necessity to aestheticize this impending urge to transgress thus presented as the only alternative. In his *Frankenstein*, Peyret likes to pause on these liminal spaces where it is unclear whether the actors are openly celebrating the joys of acting or are tricking the audience into thinking that they might not be fully conscious of the levels of playfulness involved in a serious and evil play. In any case, it is clear, from all that he has staged, that Peyret likes to play with fire. Mary Shelley and Peyret Unbound. Whether we like the statement or not, the quality of Peyret's craftsmanship relies on a subtle mix of theatrics and poietics around the notion of imminence. Peyret enjoys science and drama in the making, a careful orchestration and yet built on the sense that the whole project is about to go terribly wrong. It leaves the spectators overburdened with layers of insignificance and an almost unbearable nervousness of being, which they cannot fully grasp, let alone understand.

### **Hell, Volcanoes and Pornography**

Another obvious reference in the play is Sartre's *Huis Clos* and his dramaturgy of confinement. No exit, hell on earth. Characters struggle with themselves as much as they are confronted with the reality of others, fatally trapped in their own consciousness. *This is the way the world ends...* Peyret articulates such circumstances around three modes of tension, sexual, eschatological and environmental. From the 1831 Preface, Peyret remembers the "ungenial summer" and the "incessant rain" (Shelley 6). He said himself in our February 2018 interview, that the context in which *Frankenstein* was created also teaches us something about the consequences of climate change. Peyret also remembers that, when Mount Tambora in the Sunda volcanic arc of Indonesia erupted in 1815, it was the most destructive eruption in history, an ominous sign as the European skies grew darker in 1816. Peyret saw it as the perfect opportunity to reframe Mary Shelley's work, by changing focal points and zooming in on Victor's distress through a windowpane, as he faces the endless reproduction of an apocalypse but viewed from different angles, like a John

Martin painting. This allows Peyret to redefine the play's landscape and overall scenery around what Annie Le Brun calls in her short 2011 essay on catastrophe, the "vital tension" of a "depraved perspective" (Le Brun 25). Heir to the Marquis de Sade and his fascination for volcanoes, Peyret, throughout the play, does not shy away from the shame that comes with admitting to a certain taste for natural disasters; in his case, volcanic fury and the way it glorifies the energy of performance, how the actor erupts on stage or attempts to control his flow of words. "Catastrophe" is also the word Percy Shelley uses in his article "On *Frankenstein*," published in the *Athenaeum* on 10 November 1832:

We debate with ourselves in wonder, as we read it, what could have been the series of thoughts – what could have been the peculiar experiences that awakened them – which conduced, in the author's mind, to the astonishing combinations of motives and incidents, and the startling catastrophe which compose this tale (Hindle 18-19)'.

The context of a catastrophe is also the perfect excuse to free one's characters from their inhibitions. Peyret knows it all too well, when he chooses to undress or overdress, depending on the weather, the ageing bodies of his experienced and shall we say mature actors (Jacques Bonnaffé just turned 60) to portray the better part of Romantic youth (Balibar, 50 years old, plays a 20 year old) and some of their most outrageous pornographic instincts. It seems unlikely and, as far as I am concerned, a questionable choice. And yet, when Peyret over-sexualizes Mary Shelley, her nakedness, her transparent white dress and bright red short skirt, her corset and garter, it does not seem all that shocking. The message is one of female emancipation, whatever the state or stage that defines the character. The maturity of one's sex and intellect is therefore depicted as essentially ageless. The message is more or less the same, but from a male on male perspective, when Peyret tests the levels of homoeroticism between Victor, Walton and the Creature as they explore different sexual positions, halfway through the play. Again, the whole experience is quite liberating and frees the characters from any form of frustration or worse, "homosexual panic," to use Eve Sedgwick's now famous expression. If Peyret's characters are simultaneously hot or cold, sweaty or frozen, it is not because they are scared of their sexual shadows, they live in a world without secrets, but because the climate is unruly and that reality in itself should be the source of greater concern. However, fear is consistently productive. That is Peyret's signature. Peyret might be infuriating and lacking in benevolence at times, but he is no fool. His hybrid play is a testament to what the monstrous forms of



Romanticism can do for contemporary drama, in other words, provide it with a platform of experimentation without ever shocking its subjects unless, of course, they have never read the Romantics, in which case they might just as well leave the playhouse and go home since they are a lost cause anyway.

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