

Tres a l'ecoute

An Interview with Jean Jacques Lemetre

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Translated from the French by Leslie Katz

JB: In your work at the Theatre du Soleil, how does the music support the work of the actor?

JJL: Do you mean in the rehearsals or in the performance?

LK: Whichever you like. Let's begin with the rehearsals.

JJL: Rehearsals are different, because in that context you're always in the process of looking, you don't yet know which actor will play which role.

So how does the music act as a support? It acts as a support because first of all in the course of the rehearsals you determine what the role of the music will be. [In these early stages] the theatre also is looking for its form. Thus, the music is a kind of triangulation between the director, the actor, and the stage. Whoever has an idea to propose proposes it, be it the actor, the director, whoever. Because music is made to explain through images, it's as if the music is the actor's second lung. He seeks to breathe with the music, because what I play is calibrated on the metrics of the French language, on the text. But I never look at the script to see what I will play... Clearly, there are many ways to work. I always work with what is on stage. It doesn't interest me to impose my ideas on a reading. That way of working is too close to cinema, to the music of cinema, and it yields another kind of music that I have no interest in making. Music is situated like the gods, the sky, the stars, internal emotions... always in order to evoke something and never to menace the actor's work. It is always a path which provides a grander, more sonorous, and visual impact to the public, as a means of understanding the characters, what is happening on stage. Finally the music serves as a support in the traditional style of the Eastern theatre; it is always there, which is a curious thing. It allows us to banish words like 'climate,' 'atmosphere,' 'ambiance.' The music is never that. It always occupies the position of a visual image: completely comprehensible, although sometimes in contradiction, but never in conflict. The music is always for the actor, with the actor.

LK: I've read that you always accompany the first rehearsal with a drum. Is that true? And if so why? What does a drum signify for you?

JJL: The heart. The heart, and especially, the speed at which it is possible to do something. For me the drum has no emotional dimension or meaning. It is a thing of extreme simplicity, comparable to the rhythm of the heartbeat, the rhythm of breathing, the rhythm at which the actors invent without psychology. It's the same with children. If you try to make children play at a rhythm that's too slow, it won't work; it's not their natural speed. With adults it's the same. If you go too slowly, everything filters through their head, not their body. The music is there to give the way in, to support the entrance, and afterward, to lend a rapidity, so the actor or actress can improvise in complete freedom, at a speed where she abandons herself completely to the imaginary, the imagination, to the body, its drives, its impulses, &c, and not to thoughts like: "That sentence there, does that mean...?" At the first rehearsal, I don't know what I'll be playing in six or eight months, and I don't pull back to contemplate, "this is a play about..." I don't care, I don't think about anything; and so I arrive fresh, naïve, very open, very ready to listen, and little by little I begin to figure out which instruments I'll play, and after that, I begin to figure out, using these instruments, if the music will be melodic, rhythmic, harmonious.

LK: In another interview, you said the human voice represented a dangerous domain...

JJL: I know too many people who have ruined their voices taking classes from instructors who didn't know what they were doing. Singing is one of the most complex arts, because you can't see the instrument. You have to understand the interior, all its mechanisms, everything that's going on. I'm not enough of an expert...

JB: Why do you never use electronic instruments in your work?

JJL (laugh): For several reasons. For the moment, it's the electronic instruments that seek me out to see what I can give them in the way of sounds. People who do sampling come to me looking for sounds. If one day there are sounds I cannot make, but I know exist in a machine, I'll go find that machine. For now they're not there. I tell myself: I play musical instruments, whereas electronic devices, they're not musical instruments, they're machines.