

MANUEL D'EXIL

30.09. - 10.10.2021

Théâtre St-Gervais Genève

creation

Text by Velibor Colic

Played by Jean-Quentin Châtelain

Directed by Maya Bösch



SUMMARY

CAST _ 3

INTRODUCTION _ 5

ČOLIĆ AND CHÂTELAIN : VERSUS ČOLIĆ _ 7

YOU ARE WELCOME _ 8-9

A STRUGGLING BODY _ 10

TO THE BEAT OF MY STEPS _ 10

A SPIRALIC FORM _ 11

AN INTERVIEW WITH MAYA BÖSCH AND SANDRINE KUSTER _ 12-13

PRODUCTION CALENDAR _ 14

BIOGRAPHIES _ 15

CONTACT _ 16

CAST

WRITER, VELIBOR ČOLIĆ

ACTOR, JEAN-QUENTIN CHÂTELAIN

CONCEPT, DRAMATURGY, DIRECTION, MAYA BÖSCH

PHOTOGRAPHY, VIDEO, LAURA SPOZIO

SET-DESIGN, SYLVIE KLEIBER

COSTUMES, GWENDOLINE BOUGET

SOUND & LIGHT DESIGN, TBC

ADMINISTRATION, ESTELLE ZWEIFEL

PRODUCTION, COMPAGNIE STURMFREI

CO-PRODUCTION, THÉÂTRE ST-GERVAIS GENÈVE

CO-PRODUCTION AND FUNDING PARTNERS TBC



INTRODUCTION

Summer 1992. Velibor Čolić goes to Rennes. He is twenty-eight years old and can pronounce only three words in French : Jean, Paul and Sartre. His only possessions are contained in a shabby sports bag ; a pen, a manuscript, a few deutsche marks, some clothes and a toothbrush. A deserter of the Bosnian army, he is a soldier who has seen death but never inflicted it, preferring to shoot at thin air rather than at his enemies. In Rennes he is put in a shelter for asylum seekers. A precarious life ensues, combining boredom, promiscuity, excessive alcohol consumption and French lessons. Rennes would be followed by Paris, and then Strasbourg. With his papers finally in order, he “benefits” from the interest generated by the Balkan crisis to publish his first text *Les Bosniaques* (The Bosnians), a series of reports on the horrors of the war’s ethnic cleansing that tore former Yugoslavia apart. The chaotic beginnings of a career as a writer, which would do nothing to change his conditions as a refugee in the end.

Velibor Čolić writes in French without going through his mother tongue. *Manuel d’Exil* (A Manual on Exile), published in 2016, is his tenth novel, his thirteenth book in total, published by Gallimard. With poetic language, full of fantasy, with ferocious irony and relentless self-deprecation, Velibor Čolić tackles an extremely relevant topic and describes refugee conditions without pity :

“I am at once anti-war and anti-peace, humanist and nihilist, surrealist and conformist, the Balkan Hemingway and probably THE greatest lyrical poet of Yugoslavia in our times. I just have one detail to resolve : my texts are much worse than me.”

In absence of the 35 lessons the book promises in its subtitle, ten memories are recounted in chronological order. The tone changes. Comedy makes way for poetic prose and sorrow.

Manuel d’Exil is an autobiographical text in the first person, over 200 pages. The character of Velibor bumps up against the system, clashes with laws and constraints, unchains himself like Artaud’s Momo, to finally make use of his battle and his survival while summoning the absurdity, paradox and madness haunting contemporary Europe, creating new ghosts.



ČOLIĆ AND CHÂTELAIN : CHÂTELAIN VERSUS ČOLIĆ

Two men, Châtelain and Čolić, on the edge of everything, waiting for everything, in search of everything. Two men of impressive but different builds. Warriors of words and poetry, enfants terribles, trouble-makers, work partners and friends too. But what unites them in particular is their relationship with the French language, a language they each craft in their way. To think the French language in order to become it. To be and become language, word, punctuation, resonance, writing and sound. First, Velibor, who adopted the French language in order to find a new home and country, then Jean-Quentin who disappears into the flesh of the language in order to build a new presence, a new way of listening. And the two continue forward, phantom-like.

In this project, the meeting of these two giants allows us to pass from one battlefield to another : from the war of literature, and from writing to stage.

YOU ARE WELCOME

Title inspired by the action of Dan Acher, founder and artistic director of Happy City Lab

« I traverse the scandalous silence

Without passing moral judgment, the show will question our notion of welcoming,
and our relationships with each other.

Manuel d'Exil tells the intimate story of a man forced to start over with nothing.

He is obliged to constantly redefine his identity :

**« Avant la guerre, j'étais un homme
et maintenant je suis devenu une insulte. »**

« I am a little scar on the face of the world. »

YOU ARE WELCOME

cf <https://happycitylab.com/fr/project/youarewelcomein/>

and the world's indifference. »

**« I am an embarrassing dirty stain, a slap
on the face of humanity. »**

« I am a migrant. »

« I am a refugee. »

« I am maladjusted. »

« I am an elephant. »

And the question of uncertain futures : :

**« And we, the refugees, do we not have the
right to dream? »**

A STRUGGLING BODY

To follow Velibor is to follow a body that moves in the world. A rider, as heavy as he is light, at times frozen with metaphysical cold. Wishing to resist emotions, one senses a perpetual tension in this 'on the road' writing that suffers from solitude and fatigue. Yet it is this suffering body that reminds us that we are alive.

This body would like to be another. This being would like to live another life, or perhaps regain its former life. One never imagines becoming a migrant. And especially not with such a radical change in standard of living. This fall in society is the struggling body.

This project conjures a veritable journey in the meanders of exile — an extraordinary and romantic adventure similar to that of Don Quixote in which desire confronts destiny, humour encounters despair.

TO THE BEAT OF MY STEPS

The text recalls jazz, blues and underground rhythms. It also brings to mind a heart beating through its pain, sometimes bleeding and at other times ecstatic, footsteps on cobblestones and falling bodies: noises of the mind, head hitting the pavement, war striking from a distance, the desire to vomit, the urgent need to disappear and multiple suicide attempts.

Jean-Quentin Châtelain was awe-struck by the language and its musicality. Perhaps because of the dreamlike wanderings, carefully described but with a sense of humour, and because of its melancholy marked by a search for a lost time. Maybe the silent struggle of Jean-Quentin resonates in the same zones of perturbation as Velibor's: in the obscurity of voice, under the palate, somewhere, near ; a cry for freedom.

Velibor's holy grail is to achieve French literature's musicality. Upon arriving in France, he strived to unlock the language, to access its music. In a society we are defined by our function, and as a writer, one is defined by the music of one's language. In conquering the language he would be able to find a dignified place in society, like the one he once had in his country.

“I must learn French as quickly as possible.
So my pain will remain forever in my mother tongue.”

To contrast the language's musicality, the spectator will be surrounded by landscape sounds composed by a sound designer. Constructing atmospheres with real world sounds rather than written music will envelope the audience and create a space in which the actor can evolve.

A SPIRALIC FORM

Manuel d'Exil is a text that can be “theatre”. The director approached the writer with a proposition for a performance going towards a more radical form and a shorter, more condensed duration, in order to configure, in March 2018, an as yet unseen version for the stage, marked by different breaks and speeds, jumps and startling waves.

Giving another form to these tatters of life, to this fragmented manual is a daring transformation. Maya Bösch offers a spiral that leans towards an ultimate desire to save the author from the streets: “I am a writer”, he always says. It's his postulate, his slogan, his poetic arm, necessary for his combat as a French writer.

This work offers as many different (character) perspectives as possible to create surprise, movement, hybrid forms, as well as reflecting on situations that are as burlesque as they are tragic.

AN INTERVIEW WITH MAYA BÖSCH (MB) AND SANDRINE KUSTER (SK)

SK: Do you plan on making cuts, creating a montage? Is Velibor part of this process?

MB: I don't do anything without Velibor! That's exactly what we did for two weeks in March 2019, during which all three of us worked together, one year before the creation. It was an opportunity to test our collaboration but also our differences and our rhythms! And to see how I can hold my ground with them, be who I am, create a demanding and stimulating working device for all of us. That was the starting point. Then we had to see if Velibor approved of the adaptation that I had done. I presented it to him yesterday and he saw a whole new silhouette. Even if he knows that a novel is not the same thing as a script for the theatre and that there would undoubtedly be a transformation / destruction / surprise, I know that each change can potentially provoke worry in the author... But with Velibor everything always stayed simple, concrete and clear, and that's how we moved forward together. My work is in the composition of rhythm, the musical work. I don't cut the things that I don't like, I cut long passages you can't breathe in, or make changes to bring about more complex imagery, to densify, intensify, layer, I craft, take angles, I create breaks and new links, also in relation to Jean-Quentin. His body slices the writing and he gives his own rhythm. It's a type of work that develops in layers over many months.

SK: We attended the first reading by Jean-Quentin, what came out of that first time we heard him pronounce Velibor's words?

What emerged from that first reading?

MB: Seeing that Jean-Quentin can engage, carry, push, hoist this text. He can cross the writing with his own anger and brutality and he can inject his own desire. What I saw is that the material is solid: the bodies, the writing, the acting, the collaboration between us. We are ready, we can get started, remake, twist, experiment. In any case there will be an effect of collision, friction, force, a political shock. Velibor has produced the content, and with Jean-Quentin I will find the form. What came out of this first reading presented at the Red Cross Museum is that it's interesting to use multiple perspectives in the actor's performance because it stimulates movement and creates contrast and surprise. The same goes for the raw physical reaction to the language and the audience — the body in a state of shock, or facing imminent danger of death — is an insightful dimension to explore.

SK: A few clues on the staging? What will happen onstage?

MB: Obscure ambiences, emptiness, vastness and solitude... powerful, blinding and surprising shocks. A sort of tunnel; underground; a sinkhole. Pathways that mount and descend and situations of waiting like in the metro. Sometimes there will be flickering lights, but they'll never really go out.

A massive physical presence will occupy this "no man's land". A revenant, a witness, a pathfinder who comes to remember, who comes to tell his story and to interrogate us, and to warn us. A veritable journey marked by unforgiving bodily effort, physical and psychological perseverance, immense hope to get out and become a new person; Velibor Čolić, French author, Bosnian refugee in France. Through multiple scenes that act as isolated tableaux, the character contends with systems, landscapes, street-corners, women, as well as falls, bad moves, fears and hallucinatory visions, until he finds hope, the typewriter and the night.

Many sound spaces will animate this journey that leads the character through different places without the ability to change his destiny as a refugee, poor and homeless.

SK: Will it remain a solo?

MB: In principal, yes, he must cope alone in this labyrinth of words, grime, memories and "bad trips", and search for human error within this loneliness of time and space... the evil and violence of our species as well as our condition of life. Although... another presence could suddenly emerge, at a precise moment, and make our heads turn.

Interviewed on February 27 2019 at the Théâtre St Gervais Genève

PRODUCTION CALENDAR

2018

November 14

Reading by Jean-Quentin Châtelain

Encounter with the audience and Velibor Čolić

At the Red Cross Museum and Croissant Rouge Genève

[cf https://www.redcrossmuseum.ch/activite/festival-ecrire-contre/](https://www.redcrossmuseum.ch/activite/festival-ecrire-contre/)

2019

February 18 to March 1

rehearsals and dramaturgy

2020

April 27 to June 1

Rehearsals

June 2

World Premiere

Grande Salle, Théâtre St-Gervais Genève

June 3 - 10

Ongoing Shows

2020-2021

Touring (TBC)

BIOGRAPHIES

MAYA BÖSCH

Maya Bösch was born in Zurich Switzerland in 1973. Artist and director of the company sturmfrei, she studied theatre at Bryn Mawr College in Philadelphia (United States) where she specialised in political theatre. Her artistic research allows her to anticipate new theatrical and artistic forms. In 2000 she founded the troupe sturmfrei in Geneva, with which she has created multiple theatre pieces, installations, expositions and interdisciplinary performances. She has an experimental approach to her work, integrating principals of architecture, dance and contemporary music. From 2006 to 2012 she was co-director of GRÜ/Transthéâtre in Geneva alongside Michèle Pralong; in 2011 and 2014 she curated the Bern's performance festival "bone 17". Maya Bösch gives workshops (MA & VA) in performing arts schools, including La Manufacture Lausanne, ENSATT, Théâtre National de Bretagne Rennes, ART2 Mons in Belgium, as well as the universities of Nantes and Bern. The complete series of four publications "ON SPACE, BODY, SOUND & TIME" (2014 — 2020) will be finalised in 2020.

In 2015 Maya received the Swiss Award for Théâtre.

<http://www.ciesturmfrei.ch>

<http://www.theaterpreise.ch/en/archives/winners-2015/maya-boesch/>

VELIBOR ČOLIĆ

Velibor Čolić was born in 1964 in Bosnia. A young radio commentator and writer, he found himself enrolled in the Bosnian army during the worst part of the war, a witness to the abominations committed in the trenches and "ethnically purified" villages. He deserted the Croatian-Bosnian army in 1992, was imprisoned briefly but managed to escape, fleeing to France where he lived as a political refugee in Strasbourg, working at a library and the local newspaper.

He wrote five works in his mother tongue before switching to French, the language of his exile, with Archanges (an a capella novel). Since then he has been published consistently by Gallimard. Manuel d'Exil, which has been translated into five languages since its release, is a manifesto of crazy ambition and an unwavering faith in literature.

JEAN-QUENTIN CHÂTELAIN

Born in Geneva in 1959, Jean-Quentin Châtelain attended the Ecole Supérieure d'Art Dramatique de Genève (ESAD), and continued his studies in Strasbourg. Since the beginning of his career in 1981 he has performed in Belgium, France and Switzerland in over fifty theatrical works. In 1992 Châtelain received the Syndicat de la Critique's prize for Best Actor in France, a distinction that was renewed in 2001, 2010 and 2014. In 2015 he portrayed the main character in the film Riss/Fêlure/Crepa, directed by Maya Bösch in Gibelina, Sicily. In addition to his work in theatre, which has brought him to perform on all the most important stages of the french-speaking world, he can be seen in over twenty fictive films. His voice and his ability to enter a state close to trance has attracted and fascinated audiences worldwide.



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