

# THE THEATRE OF PICASSO

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In 1967, at the Festival of Free Expression in Saint-Tropez, there was a monumental scandal. The city's mayor banned the production of Pablo Picasso's *Desire Caught by the Tail* (*Le Désir attrapé par la queue*). The reason he gave for this decision was that the play was "pornographic" and he had no intention of fighting an "Hernani-style battle over theatre". Of course, the play was nonetheless staged, because people in the neighbouring town of Gassin were more accepting of Picasso's first play. They also hoped that the huge crowd coming to Saint-Tropez would now visit Gassin and it would become, even if just for a night, an arena for the stars.

It should be noted that the play had been written back in 1941. What is interesting is that it was first staged (that is, read out) by such literati as Albert Camus (director), Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Raymond Queneau. The event took place in the flat of The Museum of Mankind's (*Musée de l'Homme*) director's, Michel Leiris – a friend of Picasso's – who suggested a "closed" get-together.

It is only natural that a work by Picasso, and a play at that, would attract great interest. What is more important, however, is that after it was finished and the above-mentioned reading took place, he did not agree to have it staged because of André



Photographer: Brassai

The participants in Picasso's *Desire Caught by the Tail*, 1944. *Knelt down*: Sartre, Camus, Michel Leiris, Jean Aubier. *Upright*: Jacques Lacan, Cécile Éluard, Pierre Reverdy, Louise "Zette" Leiris, Picasso, Zanie Campan, Valentine Hugo, Simone de Beauvoir, Brassai.

Malreaux's requirement that The Tart be dressed. Picasso insisted that he had imagined her that way and that he the only thing he could permit was black stockings. Indeed, this is a condition set in the text of the play, and in any case, it should come as no surprise that a painter might insist on a nude. As we know, this trend reached theatre much later, while in painting and sculpture the nude as a genre has existed as long as they have.

The director of the famed production in Gassin, Jean-Jacques Lebel, explained in the programme that Picasso's play was a "brilliant sketch for a total theatre".<sup>1</sup> And

<sup>1</sup> L'Avant-Scène, 1972, P., X 500, p. 7.

he added that the great Picasso was swimming in Surrealist waters.

It is true that at the turn of the century, and in particular during the 1920s, Picasso was very taken by Surrealism. He and Braque even came up with the system of collages as art, and André Breton wrote in his *Manifesto: The pieces of paper that Picasso and Braque insert into their work have the same value as the introduction of a platitude into a literary analysis of the most rigorous sort. It is even permissible to entitle POEM what we get from the most random assemblage possible [...] of headlines and scraps of headlines cut out of the newspapers.*<sup>2</sup>

What should be kept in mind above all here is not so much the school or the movement the play belongs to, but that it is written by an artist who, in the most general terms, applies to the stage his views as a painter. This is reflected both in the plot and in the logic of the action.

Only a few years separate Picasso's play from the famous beginnings of the Theatre of the Absurd. Moreover, a freer form of a theatrical show had already been in circulation, which would later – in the 60s – be given the name 'happening'.

It is obvious that Picasso had tried to write a play so he could satisfy himself that "a painting can be written in words and feelings can be painted in a poem."<sup>3</sup>

There is one major character in the play – Big Foot, who is a writer and when the play opens, we find him at the 380,000<sup>th</sup> page of his novel. The only real or, more precisely, realistic circumstance is that the characters (all subjected to Big Foot) have moved into a hotel to find some peace and

quiet. From here on, it would be pointless to look for motivation for their actions, logic in their conduct or a semblance of dramatic action. Any attempts to define the genre would fail, though it tends towards the farcical, and absurdist at that. Still, if we were forced to say something about it, it would be the unusual mix of words relating to the everyday interactions and needs in people's lives, and the explosions of comparisons and concepts having a lyrical quality of sorts. The most realistic person in the play is the Cousin, who is incapable of imagination and keeps telling a story about a gentleman who invited her to "converse", and when he taught her "the right way to cut turbot", left forever.

In a way, it could be said there are events, too – for example, the lottery where everyone taking down the numbers turns out to be a winner. Also, at one point the action moves to Big Foot's studio, to Fat Anxiety and Thin Anxiety's villa where the characters emerge from the sewers and throw a party, talking about the soup which "will whisper a thousand stories secretly in your ear, if you want to gather a bunch of violets from the skeleton"<sup>4</sup>.

Critics had great fun with the scenic design envisioned by Picasso. He insisted that an enormous bathtub full of water and foam be brought onto the stage, and all character emerge from it one by one. A gigantic bed was another set piece. We need only say that it was supposed to accommodate ten couples. And maybe the most provisional of all scenes is the one where only the characters' feet are seen, freezing in front of various hotel rooms.

While it was mentioned that the play had no conclusion, this is true mostly in the traditional meaning of the word. There

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<sup>2</sup> Breton, André. *Manifestoes of Surrealism*. University of Michigan Press, 1969, p. 41.

<sup>3</sup> L'Avant Scène, 1972, P., X 500, p. 7.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibidem, p. 10.

is a conclusion: "All characters remain immobile on one side of the stage and on the other. A man-sized golden ball enters from the window at the back of the room and illuminates the whole stage, blinding the characters, who take out handkerchiefs from their pockets and blindfold themselves. All point their fingers, chanting "you, you, you." Meanwhile, letters spelling the word NOBODY appear on the great golden ball.<sup>5</sup> This conclusion is immediately reminiscent of Surrealists' favourite slogan, "Nothing, nothing, nothing," or "Let's be chaotic." However, critics believe that the play should be considered in the context of the period it was written in: in 1941, France was occupied by Germany and people felt and suffered under the authority of "a great Power." As Jean Lebel writes (in 1967), "It is true that nowadays things are different, but the sense of a great power has only increased. This is the issue of man placed in the industrial civilization's culture." He believed that *Big Foot* was a symbol and embodiment of power, and this was also evident in Picasso's work from that time, namely *Woman on the Beach*, which he believed influenced the character of *The Tart*, and especially *Minotaur*, which revealed "the spasms of love and hate, and is a brilliant visual art sublimation of the dramatic depths of desire. The play also raises the issue of transgression, also typical of Georges Bataille's thematic ground."<sup>6</sup>

It seems like these parallels, seemingly straightforward, complicate the subject matter of the play which, as was mentioned above, has more to do with creating a series of paintings using words, in which a number of Picasso's works can be placed,

<sup>5</sup> Ibidem, p. 12.

<sup>6</sup> Ibidem, p. 11.

bound by his extraordinary imagination. The refusal to give these pictures order or sequence can only be explained by his overarching purpose – to give scope to imagination and convince us how much more original and extravagant the processes in our lives are and how silly and unnecessary it is to seek meaning in them.

And so, with *Desire Caught by the Tail* Picasso surprised everyone, and only because years had passed since his enthusiasm for Cubism and Surrealism – everyone saw the use of 'automatic writing' in the play, or as André Breton says, "a dictation of thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason." However, those were the 1920s, and the 1940s in France looked to new horizons; besides, one only need leaf through a Picasso album to know this is not a leap between styles or about any attempts, but more precisely, it is about a person who accumulates, changes, combines, goes back, continues, in order to present us with something – and this is an adjective we always use with Picasso – unique. True, he does not remain bound to one school or movement, but at a certain point, particularly in his theatre designs, the memory shines through, and the gay collages for the 1920 *Pulcinella* stage sets are associated with the curtain and stage sets of the 1962 *Icarus* (ballet by Serge Lifar). Generally, for Picasso theatre was linked with commedia dell'arte, with the celebrated Harlequin, to whom he devoted an entire series, and the stage was the scene of all kinds of whimsical, wondrous and fantastical things with their own mysterious laws dominated by play.

Indeed the play. Plainly, he did not write for theatre to show his prowess as a playwright, too, and that he would triumph on the French stage. His confidence was much



bigger than that. Theatre challenged and fascinated him irresistibly with the power of words. Words – yelled, screamed whispered, organised in sentences, directed at someone who has to be convinced to do something or must fight for something. But what would happen if they were to be put together in as random and chaotic a manner as the free play of imagination demanded, when one utters anything that comes to mind and feels no need for dialogue, least of all one with exchange of opinions or arguments.

This line of reflection gradually brings us closer to Picasso's second play, *Four Little Girls* (1948), but it is by no means characterised merely by what we call 'a flow of words.' It lacks even the barely-there plot, farcical frivolity and the boulevard influence that can be found in *Desire Caught by the Tail*. In it we can intensely feel Picasso the painter who with a quartet of four little girls (close to teenagerhood) shows us not just how "a picture can be painted with words," but much more than that, and unknown before: how to extract colours out of words. Those are Picasso's favourite col-

ours: blue in all its shades, pink going on burgundy and purple; in fact, he likes those unattainable shades of the same colour that his brush makes immediately visible to us. In the play, he is forced to be specific and while he aims at this kind of effect, he is pressed to find all nuances of green that he sees in bitter orange trees, in peanuts; the shade is different in almond and in lemon trees, in grass, not to mention green apples, and the dream of all painters – Veronese green, etc. It is no coincidence that the four girls, during the lovely days of the summer holidays, play in the vegetable garden, where nature has made gifts of colours exciting with their freshness. This is still not the point though; the point is that Picasso has managed to achieve an emotional and psychological effect, a lyrical atmosphere, to draw delight from the impossible and surprising shading, because here colour is the main character. And, naturally, because Picasso knows that arriving at a specific shade is akin to the complex and long path the author of a psychological monologue makes to the bottom of a soul so they can give expression to its mood. This play of Picasso's tells us that any human being can express themselves with colour. Meaning that it has been evidenced and demonstrated.

Here we come to the matter of synthesis which, having been a subject of brilliant theoretical studies (referring to the synthesis of art forms, not the internal synthesis of the art means), was pronounced absolutely necessary. However, one of the art forms always emerges as dominant, takes central stage – and that is the art form the author of the work belongs to. Of course, this is not surprising. It is only natural that Wagner would start from music, and

Picasso – from painting, so this issue finds its perfect solution in *Four Little Girls* as he does not even tap into the traditional tools of theatre, because he is not looking for a foothold in a plot, conflict or anything else. Yes, he uses the methods of Surrealism, but there is a very important point here.

This is one of the rare cases where Surrealism is organic, meaning that the choice of little girls as characters immediately allows and suggests that they can chatter on without understanding everything, that they would combine unjoinable words and phrases, and that, like they do in the play, would talk over each other, telling stories and scenes from various fragments. Yes, talk is the right word, because they are not interested in dialogue which can also be part of playing, nor do they even pretend to listen to each other. They still do not differentiate between hands outstretched for prayer and hands outstretched to punish. Or as Charles Marowitz, who staged the play in London in 1971, says: "Once you are on the stage, you will forget the concepts of sense and purpose and you will not ask me what the author meant to convey."

So he came up with Alice's entrance – Alice is thrown into another world; the house, the garden is constructed as if for playing with dolls and the actresses enter

from a small door on the stage full of re-  
prised pink trees, and by entering another  
world, they accept its rules. Picasso, how-  
ever, knew how to establish those rules. In  
his first play, characters talk confusing and  
silly banalities, while here, they talk as  
though they are getting insights: full of  
childish naivete and exuberance, but with  
a deep, shattering poeticism and genius  
of the painter who "colours" the stars, the  
dawn on marble, the illuminated fields;  
and who upholsters the sky in apple green,  
bridges in mercury grey sigh for their cav-  
alcades, and all of this is surrounded by  
turnips, cabbages, peas, accounts, corre-  
spondence, and memories of the chrono-  
logical drone of the classroom. And so  
many winged creatures! Fantasies, phan-  
tasms, signs – even the children talk about  
them. I could not imagine that a modern  
play that has done away with everything  
remotely resembling a classic, could be so  
baroque, changing picture after picture,  
colour after colour, and that mood could  
have so many shades. But then, this is the  
theatre of Picasso.

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