



NEL TEMPO DEGLI DEI - IL CALZOLAIO DI ULISSE
In the Age of Gods – Odysseus'shoemaker

by
Marco Paolini and Francesco Niccolini
with

Marco Paolini

and with

Saba Anglana, Elisabetta Bosio, Vittorio Cerroni, Lorenzo Monguzzi, Elia Tapognani
sets, luminism and style Roberto Tarasco
directed by Gabriele Vacis

a

Jolefilm

Piccolo Teatro di Milano - Teatro d'Europa production

We will find the locations for the pilgrimage of Ulysses the day we find the shoemaker who sewed the hides that held the winds from Aeolus.

When the gods play, they play rough. If they make a mistake, they have the time they need to put things right. For the gods, time is not an issue. They don't grow old, they don't wither. They always have time to do things over and over. Perhaps this is why they are unable to understand that what happens to us humans changes things, sometimes for ever. The gods can do nothing to give us back the ten years spent in the lands of Troy, far from home, and - for some - the ruin caused by those ten years remains.

Odysseus'shoemaker

It was created as a kind of pocket-sized Odyssey which grew over time, through sound and space. It became Olympic and almost Alpine. The more you get to know Ulysses, the further he takes you, and distance (both celestial and marine) is the key to understanding and singing of him. Because, essentially, this is a song. One could say, *the* song. Three thousand years old, passed on by word of mouth and from soul to soul, soul music par excellence. This is the story of the Western world, and it contains everything. From the first moment, when nothing existed, and one day began to exist, starting with those mysterious, ambiguous and very capricious entities which guided this story, the gods.

An ex-warrior and hero, ex-bard, Ulysses is reduced to a travelling shoemaker, wandering who knows where for ten years with an oar on his shoulder, in line with the prophecy that the ghost of Tiresias, the blind prophet, had made during his journey through the beyond and told in the tenth song of the *Odyssey*.

This Ulysses, an elderly pilgrim, prefers not to reveal his identity and spins words which resemble the truth. He hides, lies, tells stories that he not only ends up believing, but which become reality and even legend.

He left at dawn on the day after the archery contest and the massacre of the suitors. He had just enough time for a long cathartic cry with his son Telemachus and a night making love with Penelope before immediately departing once more. Because a destiny that was already written together with the will of the gods had forced him to massacre the 108 young Achaean Princes who had invaded his home, seducing his wife and the 12 handmaidens who had yielded to the invaders. He could claim his innocence, because this is what the gods had said, considering that bloodshed to be a sacrificial rite, but Ulysses does not agree. Unable to avoid that destiny of death and violence, and after having been stained with that blood, here is the twist in the tale. Instead of enjoying the victory with the diving protection that came with it (Athena and Zeus were at his side to give their blessing both before and after the massacre), he condemns himself to the hardest of punishments and denounces as a crime that which the gods consider as a *carnage*, the greatest sacrifice that a human can offer them.

Thus, after twenty years of absence and misfortune, Ulysses forces himself into a new exile. He renounces the government and abandons his family and kingdom, but above all he abandons the gods who want him triumphant and immortal. He rebels against their caprices, their ambiguous will, and is not afraid to pay the price for his decision.

All of this, and much more, in the guise of a shoemaker - to be precise, the *shoemaker of Ulysses*, a stranger in tattered sandals, hardened by the years, by age, by the voyages and shipwrecks - as he explains to a very young goat-headed who he has, apparently, met by chance.

They talk as they climb a steep path, where an infinite stream of ant-men laboriously toil, carrying all kinds of delights, because this is the path which leads to Olympus, the divine home where the preparations are under way for a grand and mysterious feast. But the shoemaker, with his oar on his shoulder, has yet to discover all of this.

“How many and, above all, which gods does one have to deal with nowadays? I am obviously not referring to the unshakable convictions of a believer, but to the reasonable doubts of those who, considering the times in which they live, think with amazement and disillusion of the accelerations proposed to the human race. The possibility for long life, for mental and physical enhancement, the possibility to resist illness, etc... Staying human seems to be an excessively simple and reductive slogan, too nostalgic and reassuring when becoming a semi-god seems possible, at least for the most fortunate inhabitants of this world. For me, Ulysses is someone who knows a lot about the gods, and when faced by the sirens of immortality, he knows how to find the will to resist.”

Marco Paolini

“For years, he was, for me, the man who kept his head down and found the right words. The man of the Trojan horse and the archery contest, that of the Sirens, Polyphemus, Scylla, the Charybdis. Then, suddenly, he became a sad man weeping on the shores of the most isolated of paradises, where enamoured women had promised him immortality and much more, just to keep him there, but his desire for his home, his wife and his son were stronger than any possible temptation. This is strange behaviour for a man which legend has painted as the symbol of those who want to fearlessly go beyond all boundaries.

Then, one day, he changed again. It happened when Marco, Silvi Busato and I read the massacre of the suitors and the whorish handmaidens out loud. That was when everything changed, and we had to start all over again. We came up against a huge problem. How can one accept the point of view of a murderer of such proportion? We were suddenly faced with a war survivor who lost control and caused a massacre, much worse than the worst psychopathic marine returned from Vietnam, Afghanistan or Iraq. This is, in effect, what he is, a survivor who, in times of peace, applies the most ferocious rules of the battlefield. His vendetta is out of all proportion. There is no doubt that the Achaean Princes had been brazen and arrogant, parasites who had assaulted Penelope,

threatened Telemachus and devoured the riches of the palace, but were these crimes justification enough to slaughter one hundred and twenty young men and women?

The day that we asked ourselves this question and began to seek the answer was the day that the play began to take shape. However, our Ulysses stopped resembling an ancient and celebrated hero. Filthy with blood and gore, muddied, reeking, aged, wrinkled and tattered, exiled for another ten years with only the company of an old and useless oarsman, we found not the ex-warrior, the ex-hero, but most certainly a survivor from the battlefield, and above all a man who - yet again alone and fighting gods who are hostile and capricious even when they seem to be on your side - is trying to calm old demons which have accompanied him throughout thirty years of war, shipwrecks and unexpected encounters. There is only one possible explanation for all of this, which is provided by the character who I love more than any other in the entire poem (and who has only apparently been excluded from our poem), Alcinous, the magician king, who explains all of this suffering and pain with the most simple and beautiful of words: "so that the ages can have their song".

Francesco Niccolini

"Le nozze di Cadmo e Armonia, the book by Roberto Calasso, carries a quote by Salustio in the inscription: these stories will never happen, but are always present. This beautiful book by Calasso speaks of the relationship between the gods and the mortals. In Classic Greece, the gods were every-day characters. They had all the qualities and defects of humans. It is not easy for our contemporary minds to understand this daily rapport with divinity. When I work with Marco Paolini, we often fall back on the help of one of the greatest Italian writers of the twentieth century, Luigi Meneghello. And he always helps us. In Libera nos a Malo he wrote: Here in town when I was a young child, there was a god who lived in the church... As well as "living" in the church, Meneghello's God caused storms and was also one of the inhabitants of the town. This is probably how the Greeks of two or three thousand years ago thought. The same stories that never happened but which form part of the memories of our parents and grandparents.

And us? Now? Where are the gods now? Where is God? The exact answer that should come from catechism is not a contradiction of the one that I want to give you. Where is God? In Heaven, on Earth and everywhere. When Paolini began to tell me about this play, he asked me to read Homo deus by Yuval Noah Harari. Here we have an answer which does not contradict catechism: Now the Gods are us. It is us, the rich Westerners, who cause storms and live in precious churches. New York and Paris, as well as Dubai or Seoul... according to our own discretion, without any need for rational reasons, decide where humans should live, and how. Calasso's book is important because it speaks of the last time in which humans and gods sat together at the same table. Then the walls began to go up. On the one side the gods, on the other, the humans. In the middle stood Ulysses, a man who had a privileged relationship with the gods thanks to his intelligence and perspicacity. The Ulysses we want to present is the one who lived all of his vicissitudes, he is a modern old man, still very sharp, aware but free of useless illusions. He is a confused and disoriented wise man who needs to keep understanding, against all odds. He is an Ulysses who finally tries to listen to his wife and his son, who even tries to understand the capricious gods who have played with his destiny. This is why Marco will not be alone on stage. Sartre said that hell is other people. This old Ulysses needs to understand that hell which is other people."

Gabriele Vacis

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with Marco Paolini
and with Saba Anglana, Elisabetta Bosio, Vittorio Cerroni, Lorenzo Monguzzi, Elia Tapognani
sets, luminism and style Roberto Tarasco
director's assistant: Silvia Busato
audio-visual and lighting: Michele Mescalchin
sound: Tiziano Vecchiato
technical director: Marco Busetto
producer: Michela Signori
production: Piccolo Teatro di Milano - Teatro d'Europa and Jolefilm
with the collaboration of Estate Teatrale Veronese and Teatro Stabile Bolzano

“A performance with the capacity to escape from the standard categories, a text that offers intimate and entertaining moments, able to raise emotions. Everything supported by a solid artistic direction.”

“Marco Paolini shares the stage with a group of talented performers, such as Saba Anglana: a Somali actress, writer and singer with an enveloping voice.”

Il Fatto Quotidiano

“The need to sing the exploits of a more mature and tired Ulysses is urgent. The character tells his adventure to a young god / shepherd, a boy of today: impatient, curious, who wants to share on the social networks the most "pulp" aspects of the Homeric adventure. A difficult undertaking, but it works”

“The voice of Saba Anglana is extraordinary”

Avvenire

“Paolini offers us his story-telling mode, full of meanings and senses. His voice becomes like a popular song, an uninterrupted melody that on stage acquires visible and concrete forms.”

Hystrio

“The play develops a reflection on humanity and destiny, on the meaning of being human torn between the sense of limitations and one's autosuggested divinity, themes and questions that offer keys to the contemporarity.”

“A sophisticated performance, rough, vaguely stylish, choral: a barbarous song that involves musicians and actors.”

La Repubblica

“In the end it’s Ulysses’ very human weariness that triumphs, his disenchantment, his extreme melancholy”

“Paolini wants to tell us about a confused and disoriented wise man, who needs to continue on his way of knowledge and understanding, a man who will never succeed in appeasing his old and new demons.”

Corriera della Sera – Milano