

Interview with Viviane de Muynck.
The Molly Bloom of Viviane.

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This interview with Viviane de Muynck took place in January 2022 in Santiago de Chile, after a showing of *Molly Bloom*, directed by Jan Lauwers, in the International Theatre Festival STGO. A MIL. The play is based on 'Penelope', the last chapter of *Ulysses* by James Joyce, in which Viviane performs the character of Molly Bloom in an hour and half monologue. After her performance, Viviane arrived to the Catholic University Theatre (Teatro Universidad Católica) for this interview to discuss her work as an adapter and actress. It was a balmy evening in Santiago and the audience was still leaving the theatre when Viviane sat down beside me to start the interview. In what follows, Viviane (V) tells me (M) about her two adaptations of *Molly Bloom* performed more than thirty years apart, her exploration and embodiment of the character Molly Bloom, and the traits that connect her with Molly, such as the humanness that lies behind the original text. The interview was carried out in English and I have translated the transcript to Spanish.

Why did you want to work with the last chapter of the Ulysses?

I have been thinking about it and working on it for nearly thirty years, because at one point I had read Ulysses and was very impressed by the whole work. At the time, I did not fully understand the consequences of the book and certain things were still a bit obscure to me because I read it in English. And I was asked to work in Holland with a very important director, who made the theatre renewal over there. In parallel, I was asked to be part of a reading of The Complete Ulysses in Antwerp (Belgium) and to deal with the last chapter that was Penelope. The idea was that different actors would read parts of different chapters. It was not going to be a reading of the entire text, but it still lasted for eight hours. It was a big body of work. So, I worked on it.

The younger director who I worked with for that reading told me not to try to read it only on the intellectual level of understanding, but to take into account the fact that the text is very melodic. He said, “If you read it aloud, let the vowels and the consonants speak to you in order to be able to achieve a high speed in the reading.” And I made my first adaptation of Molly Bloom, which was reasonably long. But when I got to Antwerp for the reading, there was another very important and politically influential actress who would read it, I just realized it (would be her) when I arrived at five in the morning, after having performed another play in Amsterdam the night before. They told me that the other actress would do the reading. So, we returned to Amsterdam, the technician and me, but the text haunted me the whole time because I found it so interesting. Nonetheless, I did not see the opportunity of doing it until like twenty-two or twenty-three years ago, during my time working with Jan Lauwers. Up in his company, we had been dealing with Joyce’s material, but we were not allowed to use the text because of copyright. So, we did a performance based on a text that Lauwers wrote inspired by this huge world that Joyce develops in his writing and so, we came to talk again about Molly Bloom.



At one point, Lauwers asked to do something with me in Germany on a special occasion. The idea was to put on whatever we could, to do something together there in Berlin. Then I took the adaptation of Molly that I had and showed it to him, and he liked it a lot. But, he also said it is too extensive and you have to concentrate on the thought that is the motor of her story, which means, telling her story. Therefore, I made another version. I made changes to my adaption because he said it would be too difficult to include a lot of the passages dealing with her past, dealing with the English soldiers in Gibraltar, or dealing with the political situation in Ireland, because that would confuse the audience. So, he suggested that I concentrate on Molly's observations about the men in her life, and to capture some moments of her past. We did not, of course, include all the men, but some, yes.

Do you think that there are connections between what Molly Bloom's character talks about and your experience as a woman?

Yes. Well, that is very interesting because, of course, when I finally did it as a rehearsed reading, the text was longer, and I was younger, so it was easier to try to transform myself into Molly, even in a much-reduced form. But when I started working with Lauwers now, he suggested that I don't try to embody the woman, for example, not to try to play young, but to consider it as an older woman talking about her life to the audience. So, this new version is very direct. And what happens is that I do not start as Molly. I start as me. He also wanted to create a sort of a showcase for the kind of actress I am – I have some reputation in the acting world. Then, he wanted to show how I work and gradually, how I turn into Molly. In the beginning, people do not really realize that because it comes and it goes.

So, it's not about trying to impress the audience, but trying to embody the words, so that the words become alive and therefore, how life is brought to the character. Thus, it is not anecdotal, as it used to be in the past, in which



there was a bed on stage, and she was waiting for Leopold in the night. I mean, a girl not being able to sleep. Lauwers has found a very simple and effective way to portray the situation.

There is a big table; there is a chair behind the table and there are two chairs, one on the left and one on the right. Moreover, these chairs represent the men. Therefore, during the performance, when I address the chair, or when I go near to the chair, people end up seeing Bloom and other characters mentioned in the script. And for me, the table is the realm of Gibraltar, the realm of memories. So, I move around the stage a lot to directly address the audience. You could say that it is similar to the way in which a stand-up comedian would talk, and use the audience as a witness to what happens in a woman's life, and how the woman reflects upon the attitudes and the decisions made by the man she knows.

Although, we did not do every character. We have Bloom, of course. We have Boylan, we have Mr. Stanhope, who belong to her past, in a way. Then we go to Mulvey, because Mulvey is very important, as he was the first man who kissed her, so he is, in fact, and then finally, we go through the burial of Paddy Dignam. We go to Stephen Dedalus because he is the representation of a search for an innocence that was lost in the past, and that (chair) is at the front. So Mulvey is somewhere in the memory, somewhere around my head, so to speak. But Stephen Dedalus is right in front, very close to the audience, because it is like she is looking at the future. Do that make sense?

Yes, absolutely.

And that gives me the opportunity to address the whole audience, because with my movement towards the chairs and the small things that I do to portray the situation, for example, making love with Boylan, and then going back to Bloom, I can explore, in a certain sense, that she is caught between two men. But at the same time, she establishes that her love for Bloom is so



enormous. That is the reason why the end of this monologue is so moving, because she reflects upon the fact that Leopold has turned out to be different than she thought he was, because she met him a long time ago. And Gibraltar is still, in essence, present in the performance. It is related to where she comes from, she is part Spanish. I work with the reference that she is the daughter of Lunita Laredo. So, it's more like where she came from, what has nourished her, what has given her this sense. Her outlook on the world comes from a Southern way of living. And it is not the very tight, straightforward and puritanical Irish situation where women are supposed to be very religious.

Therefore, it is a joyful Molly in a way, with a sense of darkness, because she is there alone and she talks and she reflects upon things, but there is always the joy and her aim to figure out how she can make Bloom desire her one more time. So, she is very *drôle* when she talks about the men, and the success of this performance, I think, is because women understand how other women feel; it's not an attack of the male persona, not at all. It just shows how different we are. Because in these times, where there is a certain return to what I call a puritanism in the Arts because of the #MeToo hashtag. I think that it is important to show that a woman is also a sexual animal. Molly Bloom is certainly a sexual animal – yes, sir!

I am wondering about your two adaptations of the text, between the first one thirty years ago and this one. What kind of things did you change for this new version and what kind of things did you maintain?

Well, this new version is more about the observations Molly makes, about her life, her desires and demands in her life, without dwelling on any political situation of her past in Gibraltar, surrounded by the army and the other people she met there. Lauwers also said it could not be too complex for the audience because the original text is already very complex, and it goes very fast. So, it is a stream of consciousness. It is very rapid, very alive, and very jazzy. As it is not an anecdotal scenario, the character always



has the purpose of letting the environment nourish her to come to the next point, but there are no silences in this performance. There are only a couple of silences, maybe at the end, and the end is so moving, because it is her final declaration of love to Bloom. When she talks about nature, when she talks about why she is religious, because she is a Catholic in fact. But she has this almost childish version of God, in which she reflects on the quotes of Virgin Mary. So, it is in the end that it all comes down to her version of a godlike nature.

Thus, my questions regarding this new adaptation were, “Am I saying this correctly?”, and from Molly’s perspective, “Is nature the engine that keeps everything moving?” For me, these questions are very heart warming. Moreover, what inspired me to dwell on this implicit sexuality in the novel is the relationship between Joyce and Nora, because he literally took Nora’s way of talking and being, and turned it into this Molly Bloom, into this amazing figure. If you read their letters to each other. I mean, the letters between Joyce and Nora, they did have a rather wild private life. Yet, Nora wasn’t always recognized for her intelligence. Although, for all those years, Nora was the one that Joyce could work with to create the environment and opportunities he needed to continue with his writing; she would arrange loans, she would do a lot behind the scenes. Yes, and she could look at him in the sense of, “Oh, well, you may be a genius, but in my eyes, you’re just a man.” Something like that.

How did you approach the text adaptation for the stage, in terms of tempo and rhythm? I was thinking about these elements too, because Joyce wrote the original, as you mention, as a stream of consciousness.

The first adaptation I made maybe had more to do with a stage of narration. So, I did not focus so much on what each sentence actually meant. It was an instinctive reaction to what I read, because it was supposed to be a rehearsed reading. For me, it was important that the parts that I took would represent the original material of the novel, so I wanted to create the feeling that it



was the end of Ulysses. So, in a way, in the first adaptation, I dealt more with what events happened before, than with the very personal aspects of Molly's thoughts, and her inner world. It is afterwards with another version that, when I addressed this analysis of what she says, and how she said it. Then, it was of course, not easy to find out who she talks about, because there is no logic between one passage and another. So, that was the hardest work; I mean, to analyze it in such a way that it will make sense to me. I felt very strong about that, because I have spent time thinking about these questions during the years between the first and the last version. I have spent a lot of time trying to understand it.

And the thing is, if you read it intellectually and you try to understand it – the monologue–, it escapes from you, because you are not drawn into the fantasy of it. But it is very important when you start reading it aloud. Then I refer again to the first director, Jan Joris Lamers, who said, “Let the sound embody you.” If you concentrate on that, then soon a pattern will emerge, a pattern of possibilities, and then you have to make a choice. The more the pattern becomes clear, the better you can judge where it is going. So, that takes some time, but it creates the possibility of making Molly very alive because she's not always right. But Leopold is not always right either, because there is this chapter in which he talks about her lovers. And then people say, “Oh, yes, she has twenty-five lovers.” That's what Leopold believes. Moreover, there was this idea that she had to make him jealous. She had to withdraw to a certain extent, so that he would stay interested and in love with her. Maybe it is something of the time because this text is so modern even though it was written a century ago, which is amazing. And it is written with flamboyancy, the whole Ulysses I mean, which is incredible. But Molly has to be made. She is not a philosopher, but she has this instinctive directness between her and her belief and the world and that's what makes it so vulnerable as well. The audience is allowed to answer her questions: “what shall I do?” ... “What did I do?” So, that's what makes Molly's character so rich, I think.



Viviane, I have a question about your process of embodying the character, because from what you explained before, there are some inner stimuli and some outer stimuli to approach Molly, based on your two versions. How did you manage to put those inner and outer stimuli together?

Oh, well, it's how I usually work, because the character is not a mask. That also comes from the teachings of the good directors I work with, like Jan Joris Lamers and Jan Lauwers. It is not a mask. It is not closed. It is an open hand that sometimes comes in front of you. But the actor is always seen as an actor. It is not Brechtian. But there are Brechtian elements in this last performance. I consider myself as a synthesis between Stanislavsky and Brecht. I use both methods, but I am nourished by the words and the interpretation I can give to the words with taking into account that it is me, it is my age, it is my physical appearance, it is my body. And it is my intelligence and humor that I put in the balance in order to become. Finally, at one point, Molly appears, because you don't realize that she is acting. You think this is if you're talking to me and then all of a sudden you realize, no, it's Molly. So, that is the transition, that happens at the beginning, when I say, this is what we're going to do and this is what we have decided to do with the chapter of Ulysses. The transformation starts without the spectator realizing that it already started. Then, the train leaves the station, and then it becomes this stream, this body of life. So, in a way, this is how I always try to work. Sometimes it is necessary for performers to *already* be in the character mode. Nevertheless, I always like to show that there is a person behind it. I am not next to the character, such as having breakfast in a certain place at a certain time. So, I use the elements I have, to make the character larger than just the anecdotal portrayal of a woman in a certain situation, which is how Molly was portrayed before, and which could be beautiful, but that portrayal has no connection to us now. I always think that in my work it is important to show what life means to me, and how I see life at my age, and to portray hope, and this enjoyment, and not to show an older woman as a tragic figure.



Tragic things happen in life. I know, because I've survived some tragic moments, but life is about keeping up the fight and standing up again. Because we all fall at some point in life. We learn to walk, and then, we stand up, and then we run, and then we fall, and then we have to get up again, and these are interesting moments to portray the perfection of it. Because for us, there is no perfection, there is only trying. T.S. Eliot says that in his *Four Quartets* and I find it very important. This has been the engine that drives me, and with which I have worked for about twenty-five years now, and I have had the "Oops, sorry" and, the success moments of embodying a text that I connect with, because life is also what you make of it and the choices you make, how they influence you, and how you wander this road of discoveries. You have to keep discovering things.

This is what gives me the possibility to do more than an actor of my age could do with a traditional play. Because classical drama is male: men do, men thunder, men think, women react. Joyce has seen the strength in women and that is why his text is very special. He also empowers women in this work. That is very special because it passes the mere classical portrayal of what a woman could be or should be. It opens the world. That is what Molly does.

So maybe at one point she really discovers that she loves this man, even from the beginning. She just looks at him asking us, "How can you ever live up to them, the way they think?" Therefore, it is that clarity and that simplicity that every woman understands. And it's always amazing to feel the reactions of the audience because then I can fly. When everybody is silent. It happens sometimes. Then at the end of the performance, the people are crying and laughing at the same time.

And it is different. Because men are not stupid, sometimes when they are young, they're shocked, they're a bit shocked, "Is that how women see us, or is that how we are?", but men who have been around for a while, they know, they know. Just like women know, it is the battle of the sexes, it has



been going on for ages, and it will go on because there is no perfection in how you deal with each other. It is only by trial and giving each other space, and that is even what Molly does, when she says, “Well, if that’s where he wants to go, let him go, let him go.” Then she also says, “I’m to be around the kitchen preparing his breakfast”, which is a thing that women recognize. It is not a philosophical dissertation on love and male and female relations. Instead, it is taken from life and that is why it is so special. That is why the play is also Penelope, in a way. Yes, in a way, not in the classical way, but in the way in which Molly waits for her man and declares her unique love.

Thank you so much for this interview Viviane.

