

“We always blame the mother. That is a trace of patriarchy”

She is the author, director and one of the performers. He is the sound designer, composer and her long-time collaborator. Lua and Pablo Casella, sister and brother, talk extensively about the brand new NTGent performance *Elektra Unbound*.

Let's start with the very beginning: NTGent invited you to stage a Greek tragedy because that is what the 23-24 season is all about in the Belgian city theatre. Why did you choose to base this play on the character Elektra?

Lua: “It was never in my mind to make a tragedy. I even panicked a bit when the invitation came. I knew people would expect me to make a feminist version and I didn't feel the need to live up to this expectation. Instead, I quickly decided to go for comedy, also because I created a very dystopian piece before this one, *Ferox Tempus – Terror at its best*.”

“I quickly realised Elektra had a lot of potential for humor. As a character, but also because of the plot of the Oresteia. The one kills the other, who kills another, and then another... It's all very violent and extreme.”

Pablo: “The plots of Greek tragedies are really basic. You can easily manipulate them to tell anything you want. *Elektra Unbound* is a perfect example of that.”

So you didn't make a feminist play... or did you?

Lua: “I am no longer a feminist... *(laughs)* That being said, there are some feminist elements to our adaptation. For starters, the fact that we do talk about Elektra is a feminist choice already. As the plot of *The Oresteia* (the full trilogy about Elektra and her dysfunctional family, *ed.*) develops, Elektra is completely forgotten. She's merely a girl on a threshold, crying, talking, screaming... Her suffering never ends but doesn't get a lot of attention.”

“Elektra doesn't have a lot of action in the Oresteia: she does this one thing, lamenting. But because she screams, she is also subversive. She is taking space and has a voice. She is willful. Throughout history, when a girl was willful, she was ill-behaved. While a willful boy was ambitious. Elektra is ambitious as well.”

And how do we see Elektra in 'Elektra Unbound'?

Lua: “She is a bit in all of the characters. Elektra is mainly an intensity for me. That is why all of the characters in our play are an exaggeration of one specific trait. You have Bavo who is in a drive of creating scandals online on a drug vibe. Abigail is obsessed with beauty. Emma is a very rich girl living in a literary world. You never know if she's being herself or quoting from fiction. Lucius is a disciplined ballet-boy who is putting the piece together and takes care of everyone. And my character is a director who is obsessed with making the piece. She struggles with real life so she surrenders completely to her aesthetic drive. She wants to make this piece no matter what.”

“We are not casting the best Elektra, we are casting the most tragic person”

‘Elektra Unbound’ uses the format of an audition. Three young actors hunt for the role of Elektra. But in doing so, they very explicitly reveal their own disastrous lives. What is the meaning behind this?

Lua: “The ambition was to make a pastiche, which is a format within comedy that honors the original and mocks it at the same time. Within this mocking comes a form of social criticism. We are not casting the best Elektra, we are casting the most tragic person.”

“Nowadays, all of us portray ourselves as a product or a project, especially online. Within this, there is an exploitation of personal suffering, a fetishising of mental illness for likes. When you get to stand out from the mass on TikTok or Instagram, it’s because you are considered ‘authentic’. This so-called authenticity is strongly linked with standing outside of the norm in terms of neurodiversity, gender, or race. Through your struggle you become more authentic and profit from that. That’s very tragic.”

Pablo: “This exploitation is also visible in arts. Artists nowadays attract attention by showing how ‘unique’ they are as a person, even before they publish or release their work. It is fascinating yet very tragic, as Lua said. We show everything we are online, all our failures and tragedies, but merely one day after a new viral story comes and shades our suffering. There is no actual healing. This is happening to so many young people right now.”

Lua, you play the role of a director who wants to extract all these personal tragedies from the actors auditioning, because you know it sells. How close is your character to the Lua sitting in front of us?

Lua: “It is exactly like me. I am impressed people still want to work with me... *(laughs)* No, seriously, I try to be very friendly with my actors and my team. But every time I create a character for myself, I aim to say goodbye to a bad aspect of my personality. In this case, I wanted to deal with my anger. Not an abusive anger, but an intrinsic, natural anger I have towards forms of structural violence I experience because I am a woman, a person of color, a mother...”

“Whatever the anger stems from, inspired by the character of Elektra I asked myself: what if I can be this one thing for the whole hour and a half of the play? How can I turn this anger into an aesthetic experience and perhaps heal myself a bit at the same time? Comedy is always an exaggeration of conflict.”

‘The Oresteia’ is also about matricide; Elektra and her brother kill their mother. Is that why all of the auditioners in ‘Elektra Unbound’ have a problematic relationship with their own mother?

Pablo: “Elektra adores her father Agamemnon and hates her mother Klytaimnestra for killing him. But Klytaimnestra did not just kill her husband for no reason, she killed him because he killed their daughter Ifigeneia, the sister of Elektra. So who’s the real feminist in this tragedy then? Is it Elektra or is it Klytaimnestra?

“Elektra is so focused on her mother issues that it takes over everything. The characters in *Elektra Unbound* are equally obsessed with their mother and how she did them wrong. They need to heal from that by revenge.”

Lua: “We always blame the mother. That’s a trace of patriarchy. I was a lot on TikTok during the creation process of *Elektra Unbound* and I noticed that the mother is a character there. There are

mothers making video's about how difficult it is to be a mother. There are people making video's for their mother stating: 'You always did so much for me and I never thanked you enough'. There are teenagers saying: 'You know when your mother is making you crazy...' It's very easy to make comedy about this. Well, comedy is never easy but it was a nice starting point."

"By exploiting your personal struggles, you become more 'authentic' and gain likes on social media. Until someone else shares a more painful story"

One of the important elements of Greek tragedies that you retained in 'Elektra Unbound', is the chorus. What role does it play?

Pablo: "To start with, it fulfils the two classical functions of telling - or singing - the story and commenting on it. In our piece, the chorus mainly comments on the characters, in a very judgmental way. We gave the chorus the role of a judgmental public eye, which refers to the comment sections on social media, or the critics that review artistic projects."

Lua: "It was very established back in the day that the chorus was a political voice. It had to constitute the idea of democracy. In our performance, the chorus is representing the idea of freedom and impact we think we have with our online voice. We are all allowed to say almost anything we want online when we want to. But just like Elektra, who screams and screams and yet is so easily forgotten, we as citizens in democracy have no real impact on society or policies with our online voice. Even worse, we are constantly engaging in a very manipulating system that leads us to read only certain things, forms groups of like-minded people and increases polarisation. That's what the chorus does in our show: highlight the deceiving workings of the algorithm."

The chorus in 'Elektra Unbound' is a text projection, not an actor or a choir. Lua, you wrote the text for the chorus, which Pablo put to music. Was it the main element of your collaboration for this play?

Pablo: "Yes, you could say so. We have been working together for years, but for the first time I composed music for every single syllable that Lua wrote. I got closer than ever to the way she writes. It changed the way I had to compose completely. The text was not written to be sang, you can easily publish it. So the challenge was: how do I make these sentences sing?"

Lua: "One of the first texts we read about what to do with the chorus, talked about the efforts of other makers to bring twelve people on stage to sing and dance, and how impossible that is. With the text projection, we found a very nice way to overcome a voice-over. A way to trust the audience to read and have the singing in their heads."

The music plays an important role in 'Elektra Unbound'. Apart from the chorus, what other music is there in the play?

Pablo: "Every character has a theme that introduces her, him or them, and returns later in the show. Sometimes the themes intertwine when the characters are on stage together. In the composition, it was important for me to make these themes represent the feelings and development of the characters. Since it's a tragedy, it's all going downhill from a certain point."

The cast of 'Elektra Unbound' consist, among others, of three actors who are or were theatre students when the rehearsals started. How is it to work with them?

Lua: "I don't consider them students, they are trained actors and fabulous to work with. The creation of *Elektra Unbound* has been an amazing process. Together with the cast, Pablo and our dramaturg Joline Vermeulen, we got in touch with Greek tragedies, read many versions of the play, did extensive research... Then we built scenes together: iconic scenes from *The Oresteia* but also interviews, a format I wanted to work with for a long time. We sharpened jokes together, and deepened the characters. It was quite a technical process but so much fun."

Was this a process similar to the way you created your previous performances? Or was it really different because 'Elektra Unbound' isn't a monologue like 'Ferox Tempus' or 'Short of Lying'?

Lua: "There's a big part of my methodology that always comes back: the focus on the way language is almost always deceptive and the mechanisms behind this. This time I asked myself: how can all of the characters on stage be unreliable and have instability in their speeches and dialogues?"

"Writing dialogues for the first time was a challenge but I loved it. It gave me the opportunity to create so many nice interactions between people... The biggest struggle turned out to be cutting parts of what I wrote (*laughs*)."

--- interview by Jonas Mayeur and Joline Vermeulen