

PERFORMANCE BY JOAN JONAS
Produced by the Stedelijk Museum and the Toneelgroep
Amsterdam.

"Revolted by thoughts of known places..."
a proposal...

Synopsis

"...an old man in a lion skin led a group of followers whose ears were attached to his tongue by thin gold and amber chains..."

Lucianus 2nd-century B.C.

"Sweeney Astray", in a version by Seamus Heaney, is a story about an Irish king (Suibhne) - a pagan ruler - who clashes with the cleric, St. Ronan who is attempting to occupy Sweeney's territory. Ronan curses Sweeney who is driven mad during a battle, to be transformed into a creature (still a man), doomed to live like a bird. He wanders around Ireland living on watercress and spring water while various attempts are made to capture him. This expulsion from society enables or forces Sweeney to speak - turning his alienation into poetry. He laments his losses, sings praises of nature, complains of hardships, and so on... Eventually he returns to the fold only to die from a spear blow from a jealous husband who suspected him of adultery. The curse was fulfilled.

I see this as a music/theater performance taking place in an electronic setting transporting the theme of the guilty, displaced artist (person) into a disintegrating post-modern world. The tradition in which the individual, stressed beyond endurance by war, retreats into the wild, can be related to what might occur in the particular chaos of the present.

On another level the piece describes shamanistic flight as Sweeney sings praises of trees, animals, birds and other ecstatic experiences. These rather mystical expressions in forms of early Irish nature poetry are musical and potentially magical in possibilities of visual and aural representation.

The paper thin distance between order and brutality, however, as contradiction, gives the poem its movement. The dichotomies between nature and culture, for instance, the lists of what Sweeney misses or doesn't as opposed to what he prefers, give the poem a shape and a rhythm. In his flight, his wanderings, Sweeney mostly runs into other solitary figures, and so except for the first and the last parts when he is 'home', all the dialogue is in the form of a solo or a duet. These pairs, opposites, comparisons, give one the opportunity to experiment with ideas of sound/music/image/noise/movement etc. within this particular structure.

Finally, one of the most important aspects of the poem is the time in which it takes place; the crack between the old and the new when the new dominate christianity collided with the

older celtic temprement in Ireland. On one level this became a struggle between the male (new) and the female (earlier). I am not interested in exploring the 'new' - in this case only the earlier time when women had a particular voice and presence. This is the subtext of the piece. Not to interfere with the basically very moving story of Sweeney's plight, but to question his mysogeny and to give the women substance - mostly visually but also at times verbally.

For this purpose I plan to insert three texts as plays inside the play by and/or about women from the time of the poem - for instance the love poem 'I often go to the flagstone where he once stood...'. Also the two women and the one other man when they are not actually speaking will be involved in actions that have to do with visual structures.

Also, the view point of Eorann will be represented as a counter balance to Sweeney's bird's eye view. To show the bird's view, to contrast it with another is an interesting problem that brings other things like trees and magnifying glass to mind. Simplicity in this case is desirable.

Joan Jonas
Amsterdam, August 1992

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Cast

The characters in the poem "Sweeney Astray" will be played by members of the Toneelgroep Amsterdam.

Pierre Bokma	Sweeney
Gerardjan Rijnders	male characters (Ronan, Moling, Lynchseachan, narrator)
Sigrid Koetse	female characters (....., narrator)
.....	wife of Sweeney
Karin Post	dancer
Harry de Wit	composer/live musician
soprano	Irish singer

Music

Harry de Wit, will compose the music, working with an Irish singer, instruments and sounds that directly relate to ideas in the text and particular sounds suggested by an Irish context.

Harry de Wit will also perform live together with a singer. Prerecorded music will also be used.

Speakers: at least four to be placed, distributing the sound in the space.

D.A.T. en C.D., amplifier, mixer, three or four radio mikes depending on number of actors, two mikes with stands.

Dance

I will work in collaboration with Karin Post in the development of a choreography or dance that she will perform, representing in movement and visual elements certain aspects of the text and subtext. The actors will also take part in some of the movement sequences.

Video

One video projector, one video camera, one small monitor for video system, one video recorder, one mixer to switch from recorder to camera during performance.

Two dia projectors.

Projection screen for video: to be an integral part of set and not a separate entity, i.e. painted wall, cloth, paper etc., for entire rehearsal and performing period.

Stage set

One sheet of plate glass thick enough to stand on resting on a metal frame; glass about 4 x 5 feet, height of metal frame about six feet.

The other parts of the set would consist of simple architectural fragments made of wood and paper on wheels to be easily moved during the performance - perhaps two walls and one tower like structure with ladder: plans to be drawn.

One white scrim installed so that it could be raised and lowered or used and not used during performance.

Painted backdrops on canvas to be made by Jonas and attached to simple poles to hang from ceiling all of above able to be

rearranged in order to change scenes easily.
Various smaller props made from wood, metal and paper to be
designed before march 1994.

Costumes

In collaboration with Toneelgroep Amsterdam, fairly simple
designs based on Irish medieval manuscript drawings (The Book
of Kells).

Lighting

To be developed in collaboration with Toneelgroep Amsterdam.

Seating

See plan Westergasfabriek:
stage and one tribune for ca. 200 people

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