



## BED AND PUPPET

JONATHAN GILMORE ON WILLIAM KENTRIDGE'S *RITORNO D'ULISSE*

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William Kentridge, *Il Ritorno d'Ulisse*, 1998. Performance view, John Jay College Theater, New York, 2004. Fourie Nyamade (puppeteer) and Furio Zanasi (vocalist). Photo: Johan Jacobs-LaMonnaie.

**ALTHOUGH IT STANDS** as a paradigm of a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, opera has largely relegated the visual arts to only a subsidiary role: as costume, scene, and setting, both literal and figurative background to the expressive voice. In William Kentridge's multimedia production of Monteverdi's 1640 masterwork *Il Ritorno d'Ulisse* (which premiered in New York in March), this hierarchy is undone. For here, as in several other theater productions he has directed (*Ubu and the Truth Commission*, 1997; *Woyzeck on the Highveld*, 1992; *Faustus in Africa!*, 1995; *Zeno at 4 a.m.*, 2001), Kentridge does not so much clothe the opera in a particular visual style as draw out and transfigure its genre-specific resources—the cleaving of the empirical body from the dramatic voice, the tension between the aria that explores a single theme and the recitative that pushes the narrative along—into vehicles for the themes his other media, namely, film and drawing, have explored. In so doing, he remakes a form known for its strained artificiality and theatrical bombast into an affecting meditation on creation and annihilation, the body and interiority, reflection and forgetting.

Performed before and below a video projection that includes Kentridge's charcoal drawings and stock footage, *Ulisse* features seven singers, seven musicians from Belgium's Ricercar Consort (seated in a semicircle onstage, as if in an anatomy theater), and thirteen wooden puppets designed by Kentridge and operated by his longtime collaborators, the Cape Town-based Handspring Puppet Company. Collapsing time and space, the drama revolves around an old, frail puppet Ulysses, lying on a metal gurney in a mid-twentieth-century Johannesburg hospital. More vulnerable than heroic, and racked by feverish dreams of his return to Ithaca after the Trojan War, he reflects on the story that is performed around him and its equivocal aftermath.

Kentridge has described drawing as a metaphor for the indeterminacy and provisional nature of how we construct meaning or order in our lives, and the imagery on the backdrop screen exhibits this searching, unanchored quality, offering a deflected interpretation of the action onstage. A serpentine line, like injected dye flowing through arteries, continually punctures the drawings on-screen, wrapping itself around and through objects like a thread, loose then taut, as if stitching disparate parts into a coherent whole—a visual correlative to Ulysses's reimagining of his past as a coherent narrative. And Penelope's ruse to keep the suitors at bay, her refusing to remarry until she finishes sewing a burial shroud for Ulysses's father, finds its counterpart in Kentridge's drawing and erasing, as each day's progress is unraveled at night. When the foppish suitors try to attach the end of a bowstring onto Ulysses's weapon, which bends only under his strength, the video shows a sinuous line with a looped end, an analogue to both the bowstring and Penelope's needle (the threading of which suggests sexual penetration). Interspersed with this animation are Kentridge's charcoal drawings of Vesalian anatomies, Piranesian ruins, and hospital corridors. As in his other films, these drawings are photographed, revised, and photographed again, with continual erasures and additions leaving palimpsest-like residues, ghostly traces symbolizing memory but also conveying tentativeness about what reality, personal or political, lies outside of retrospection's grasp.

And while Ulysses with labored breath rests supine on the gurney, drawings of x-rays, angiograms, and arthroscopic videos take form (some from *The History of the Main Complaint*, Kentridge's 1996 video of the comatose Soho Eckstein). Kentridge adapts such medical imaging less to reveal hidden quarters of the body than for the distinctive mode of representation that it, along with the spectacle of the anatomy lesson, exemplifies (a sonogram parallels the fan shape of the proscenium stage). Here, contemporary medicine and the surgeon's anatomy theater function, as does traditional dramatic theater, as arenas in which the

vicissitudes and control of human fate are disclosed.

Monteverdi's opera is typically staged as triumphal and redeeming, and Kentridge heeds this tradition: Indeed, as Minerva sings of her anger, we see animated drawings of Troy burning and of mid-century apartments and factories dissolving into dust, and then, as Penelope and Ulysses join in a duet of reconciliation, the destroyed buildings resurrect, trees grow, and flowers bloom. But as if to cast doubt on the certainties so often proclaimed following such momentous events (one thinks of those emerging from the Truth and Reconciliation hearings in postapartheid South Africa), Kentridge's production unsettles this happy ending, setting the ailing, prone figure of Ulysses in his twilight state against the optimistic external narrative, thus injecting into the story a deep and persistent theme of fatalism and flawed or uncertain retrospection.

In Homer's epic, Odysseus is reunited with Penelope only to tell her that he must set out again. The opera prologue's allegorical figures sing of man's subjection to the fate they impose, a manipulation for which the use of puppets (to which the opera singers address themselves, muselike, giving the forms life) serves as a standing metaphor. Like the indecisive Zeno in Italo Svevo's modernist novel that Kentridge adapted for *Zeno at 4 a.m.*, who only endures his life rather than actively lives it, this Ulysses may be driven as much by the will of others as by his own self-understanding. The production opens with the sheet pulled back to reveal him—as an ultrasound of a fetal heart appears on-screen—and closes with the sheet folded over his face, as if to say that one's life, constructed only to fall apart, is merely the story writ small of an epic hero returning to where he began, in terms both geographic and metaphysical.

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