

*A qui le tour or How to Mourn with Your Body and
Henrietta Lacks – A Theatrical Take on Practical Ethics*

**Performance Review: Agathe Djokan Tamo's Solo, "A qui le tour",
Cameroun, Festival Sens Interdits, Lyon, 2019 ; and "Henrietta Lacks",
Nowy Teatr and Copernicus Science Center, after a text by Anna Smolar,
Marta Malikowska and Maciej Pesta, directed by Adnna Smolar**

Agathe Djokan Tamo's solo, "A qui le tour", was not only an encounter with a different theatrical culture, the one from Cameroun, but also a chance for the *Sens Interdits Festival* audience to rediscover the strength of a bodily performance. Using dance, movement, music and silence, a voice over, and a few other elements, the artist takes us on her journey of mourning and loss. From the street to the theatre hall, we watch unrevalling in front of us the most intimate experiences of the human soul.

Shock, denial, depression, helplessness, anger, peace and rebirth, all these can be read in Agathe Djokan Tamo's expressive performance. By joining together repetitive, powerful movements, she manages to engage the audience in her tragedy, while inviting the spectators to explore theirs. At a first glance, Tamo's dance is, to say the least, odd and uncomfortable. We don't really know what is happening and all these repetitive choreographic fragments seem monotonous and a bit annoying. She's dressed in black, and a black piece of material is covering her entire head and face. What a sinister appearance! All these elements are meant to push us out of our confort zone and into a place of curiosity and openness, while giving us time to process the significance of every step.

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At the end of the show, one of my friends said: "it was excruciating to watch so much stifled pain! It's like she tried to scream throughout the entire performance and never managed to." In my opinion, that's exactly what the artist was aiming to transmit. The force and the tension in her movements, the fact that the music was absent until the stage of rebirth, the use of the street, a familiar conventional space, for the beginning of a deeply personal tragedy, all these elements vexed us and engaged us. And to make everything even more intimate, at the end of the show, right after the performer completed the stage of relief, she walked through the audience, sharing something from a bowl and calling the names of the deceased: she gave us peanuts as a symbol for the ashes. I doubt anyone managed to eat those peanuts!

We cannot end this analysis without answering a burning question: why might one wish to participate in such an uncomfortable theatrical experience? To this question, I found two reasons: 1. It beautifully displays the expressiveness of the human body, while reminding us that movement is our universal mother tongue; and 2. It can function as a therapeutic experience by inviting us to self-reflection and by embodying the abstract flux of emotions most of us experienced at least once in our lives. What's for sure, however, is that "A qui le tour" is not everyone's cup of tea. And it doesn't have to be.

One of the most memorable performances of the Lyonese theater festival Sens Interdits was "Henrietta Lacks", a polish coproduction from Nowy Teatr and Copernicus Science Center, after a text by Anna Smolar, Marta Malikowska and Maciej Pesta, directed by Anna Smolar. The show tackles the topic of medical ethics and discrimination, while telling the story of Henrietta Lacks, a young african-american woman whose cancer tissue has been removed during treatment and used for scientific experiments without her knowledge.

One of the most fascinating elements in Henrietta Lacks is the refreshing contrast between a topic rather hard to swallow and its entertaining, light-hearted on stage representation. While raising the question of whether it's fair to use human tissue for scientific purpose without the owner's approval, the director Anna Smolar makes sure the structure of the performance is built with mathematical precision in a way that keeps the audience alert. Whether we talk about the step dance, the video-projections or having actors play the Cancer or the Cloned Sheep, the performance is full of attractive and justified solutions that make it memorable. Another aspect that contributed to the overall success of the show was the clean, well-polished acting.



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The members of the cast were visibly tuned in with each other and managed to engage the audience with the socio-psychological subtleties of the play. The performance as a whole was a great example of practical ethics, successfully launching pointing out the multiple perspectives of the situation. On the one hand, we have the lack of consent from the patient. In addition to this, the use of that tissue led to scientific and financial achievements that were not even partially enjoyed by Henrietta Lacks. Moreover, her name was completely forgotten. Is it due to the fact that she was a woman of color? On the other hand, we have the perspective of the doctor: firstly, he was the one who performed both the surgery and the medical experiments, hence the results are due to his own intellectual capacity, and secondly, as he states brutally, “if the patient wanted to have rights over the cancer cells, why didn’t she keep it?”.

I believe one of the greatest achievements of the polish performance is the fact that it raises awareness about a controversial issue while creating a context for meaningful conversations between the spectators. Regardless of the different ways people related to theatre throughout history, there is one function of this art that will never fade: its role in the socialization of communities. And Henrietta Lacks undeniably managed to fulfill this request.

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