Résumé en français

Une femme se réveille dans le hall d’un grand hôtel délabré qui s’enfonce lentement mais inexorablement dans les sables mouvants de nulle part. Elle ne sait pas trop comment elle en est arrivée là ni comment s’en sortir ; tout ce qu’elle sait, c’est qu’elle doit écrire elle-même sa propre sortie. Ses seuls instruments de navigation sont une machine à écrire et les clients de l’hôtel, une collection d’étranges personnages apparemment peu fiables.

Director’s Notes

Sally Stockwell and I met in 1994 in Wellington, New Zealand. She was studying at the Aetaroa Drama School, probably the most mature and gifted actress that year. She then came to Paris to the 2000 Panthéatre professional workshop. Last summer on a working visit to Malérargues she asked me to direct a play she was writing. We elaborated the ‘deal’ by email. She expressed one clear concern: that I would deconstruct her play beyond story recognition, knowing that I tend to work very close to what is called today non-narrative theatre. Could we reconcile the “popular” expectations of story recognition with the ‘elitist’ ambitions of non-narrative theatre? I liked the challenge and signed the contact.

But then I was quite surprised when I received the play: very interesting playwrighting, but not really what I would call story writing — more of a situationist surrealist montage — and not that far down my street! The author and style that came to mind was Bruno Shultz (Kafka’s nephew of sorts); the intellectual references I associated it with were “The Secret Life of Puppets” by Victoria Nelson, and Adriana Cavararo “Relating Narratives” (both high priorities on Panthéatre’s reading list.) I knew my task would be easier than I first thought — and it was, and pleasurable too! The artistic complicity between author, actors, musician and director immediately took flight, calling in Psyche’s touch. (A big plus : both Sally and Nigel arrived with the material ready: text, musics, costumes, ideas for the setting and, very important, having worked the characters — and engaged the work with utter professionalism.)

Gravity Hotel has some twelve characters, on paper: the central Woman (named Esther towards the end), various cameo ladies, The Girl Down the Well, Trudi, Belle, Lucille; there are references and apparitions by Grace Cash, by Walter, and by three or four male characters. But there are only two actors, one of them The Musician; he becomes a character layer of all the male characters — yes, even the hotel receptionist plays the piano! In a film production you would simply lay the make-up thick and use transformism, or hire extras, like the grandmother — and end up with what I call rational fiction, realistic dreams that everyone can so-called follow. Sorry - I seem to have a tooth (“une dent” as the French say) against cinema at the moment… I get total artistic claustrophobia in those flat-screen dark dream-halls!

But back to narration and to Psyche’s touch. Much as I admire Romeo Castellucci’s work I cannot give up language to the degree he does - Castellucci being the epitome of what is called today non-narrative theatre. So I end up with something like non-narrative narration, or narrative non-narration — impossible labels, obviously. Plus I seem to want to navigate in search of reconciliation zones, dream territories where there can be a full interplay between image and language, emotion and discourse, voice and ideas. On top of all this, Gravity Hotel is quite verbose, at least by my usual standards (twelve pages! I usually work with five or six.)

I hope you see and hear how often Gravity Hotel is “graced” with Psyche’s touch. Here is what I mean: Psyche gives us our models of exchange (we also use words like relationship, affect, consciousness, or even soul…) The current historical term tends to be quite simply: “psychology” — originally, the logos of Psyche: her discourse, her moves, her voice in the broadest poetical sense. Psychology is a term we need to keep “revisioning” not to let it be kidnapped by reductivist schools asking for linear explanations. So, welcome to Gravity Hotel, welcome to the theatre of Psyche!

To be militant : Psyche manifests herself first and foremost in moves and moods — which is where texts and ideas come to life — otherwise we stay in literature. Moves and moods personified are ghosts, desires, fears, imps, angels, spirits: Psyche’s court. The art is in the “figuring out” and in the handling of those creatures, the art is in the quality of tact and tone. Not just presence (the magnificence of being there), not just presence of mind (intelligence and culture) but finally presence of spirits — yes, spiritism, pre and post-contemporary psychology.

The story in such a perspective is made of many stories: clusters, series, odd apparitions, recurring obsessions, collections… in other words, images. “The image is the story” was one of archetypal psychology’s early mottoes.
Every mood and move of Psyche’s yields an image-story, which is often at odds with the spoken text, or with the music. We, as spectators, have to work out the contradictions in choreographic theatre, glory, humour and tragedy all dwell in paradox much like life itself.

My gratitude and congratulations to Sally and Nigel; the four weeks sojourn setting up the spiritist dilapidation of Gravity Hotel was a real pleasure. I hope the hotel keeps sinking into new depths in its journey downunder. Maybe it will come back to haunt us again. Bon voyage. EP

Sally approached me with her idea for Gravity Hotel about three years ago. At that stage it was images and characters rather than a scripted story, but I was struck by the beautiful dream logic of the people she was describing and the depth of the world and its resonances. Also her courage in revealing a piece that was so personal to her but with meaning within it which felt universal. I like universal. I like reaching people with a piece of work.

Sally had three songs which she wanted to include in the piece which we worked out for us to perform these were the earliest ideas for music in the play and established an overall feel for the music.

Before we travelled to France I also spent some time with the script, at home with my piano and a mic composing fragments which felt like they might fit with the world of the play. Mostly first takes I like the roughness and immediacy of those first impulses.

During the rehearsals we listened to these fragments in the Orangerie - our venue which has become itself such an important character in the piece and experimented with matching (or contradicting) scenes with music. Enrique also generously gave me the opportunity to compose as we improvised, and the live music is the current result of that.

It's been a challenge and a privilege to bring Sally's script to the stage in this first incarnation of Gravity Hotel both she and Enrique have been fantastic to work with both as professional provocateurs and also friends to have a laugh with while we've been creating. Its got to be fun.

Arohanui (that means Big Love where we come from) to Enrique, Liza, Linda, Marta, Brenda, and the Lord God Almighty,

Nigel Collins.