**Salomé’s notorious veil dance on a silver platter**

By Tessa Vannieuwenhuyze

**Interdisciplinary operatic intervention**

Departing from the observation that art forms carry certain connotations within them that have become fixed over time, *oester* drills down into the rich operatic tradition for this performance. A link is forged between the classical structures that opera offers, and the sounds of music artists who are eager to experiment. For some time now, the opera world has been balancing on the thin line between watching from an impregnable ivory tower and making an explicit movement inwards. Parallel to how the classic narrative of Salomé in this staging is not radically thrown overboard, the elements that make opera into what it is, are deployed as a key to continued reflection.

*Dance of the Seven Veils* draws the somewhat awkward connotations of opera as a pastime for the upper classes into a dialogue with artists who are explicitly anchored in the here and now. With their unexpected instrumentation, Colin H. Van Eeckhout (CHVE, Amenra) and Pieter-Jan Van Assche (Innerwoud), along with soprano Astrid Stockman, construct a swirling wall of sound. On this plateau of vocals, hurdy-gurdy and double bass, Salomé’s choreography is served up by dancer German Jauregui. As a male dancer, Jauregui navigates the sensitivities of a female icon that would instinctively never be linked to his morphology. In his search for points of connection, he throws himself into the ecstasy of Salomé through the scenic elements that sculptor Rui Barros creates on stage in his capacity as an artist. Barros externalises a perpetual motion of inside and outside, of external gaze and introspection, in which he himself is also encapsulated.

*Dance of the Seven Veils’* Salomé ensnares and pushes endlessly forward, which translates on stage into a total work of art where artistic affinities transcend the conventions of genre. From their disparate positions as artist and person, the performers colour Salomé in, guided by potential similarities. In the result of precisely that in-depth creative process, the viewer is given the chance to catch a glimpse of an unfathomable figure, whose shadow flanks us every single one of us.

**Between pleasing and pleasure**

The seven veils of this biblical princess’ seductive dance are the departure point in this performance for charting who or what establishes **Salomé**’s (German Jauregui) existence. As a historically constructed concept, she is the epitome of a budding woman carving out her own position. Making her way through expectations and self-realisation, she allows herself to take shape whilst trying to keep herself on track. She is raised by her mother **Herodias** (Astrid Stockman), whose strategic second marriage to her husband’s brother was heavily judged by John the Baptist. As a mother hen, Herodias offers her daughter stability, but she also unconsciously projects her own desires onto a younger and better version of herself.

This deep-rooted, universal desire for parental validation turns even more sour with her stepfather **Herod** (Pieter-Jan Van Assche), whose full-time job consists of wholeheartedly indulging in life’s temptations. One of these is the dance that he forces his daughter to perform, thereby inadvertently dealing the final blow to **John the Baptist** (Colin H. Van Eeckhout), even though behind the scenes he sided with him in awe of the moral compass he advocates. John’s universe is filled to the brim with norms and standards to live by. Even though his perseverance and straightforward beliefs are precisely what Salomé falls for, it is also what he then rejects her for. His refusal to embrace her otherness results in a frustrating unrequited love, which lights the spark for the actions that will deeply engrave Salomé’s figure to this day.

The dusty veils beneath which Salomé is buried, evoke a shadow play of projections equally present in our emotional lives and everyday structures. Humans might be partly the result of the environment they grew up in, but it doesn’t eliminate agency and the possibility of confronting consequences altogether. The immersion in the collective Salomé imagination that *Dance of the Seven Veils* proposes dismantles far more than clichés about femininity. Within her engagement with others, she executes an eternal balancing act between self-development, personal achievement and self-preservation.

Salomé appears to rid herself of limiting traditions and family structures but comes up against the contrariness of transgression. What characterises her is a deeply human doubt that goes hand in hand with a ruthless decisiveness. When we succeed in looking beyond the provocative façade, Salomé’s appearance pits inner stillness against externalised drama. The inevitability of the personal, relative to the other, thereby comes to the surface. Curtailment and confrontation encounter one another in an interplay of both.

*Dance of the Seven Veils* undresses Salomé with a focus on the vulnerability that this act of baring implies. Separated from the labels that have been attached to her, and without the anchor of historically built-up interpretations, Salomé plays the game of concealment and disclosure during this performance. But what do these values and ideals stand out against, if identity is merely a thought construct, a wild realisation every creator can conjure?

**Peeling off layers of projections**

Salomé still roams our collective imagination as a seductive creature. A picture-perfect Biblical princess, but also a cunning woman whose desires disturb the usual course of events. Her dance of the seven veils, which signed John the Baptist’s death warrant, sent generations reeling. Time and time again, the Princess of Judea was fleshed out by predominantly men, allotting her the same fate as many mythical women. Everyone talks about her, but does the archetype of the seductive woman actually (still) speak for itself? The popular figure of Salomé is wrapped in acquired clichés and stereotypes.

Whereas Salomé still makes her appearance in the Gospel according to Mark as the unnamed daughter, she manages to unleash a full-blown cult during the fin-de-siècle period. The fatalism and general malaise innate to her refined figure exert an irresistible appeal for visual artists and writers alike. Not very surprising when you know that a seductive dance and subsequent beheading anchor the core of her existence. This dark and thrilling context that characterises Salomé merged on stage into a feminine ideal which strikingly enough still resonates with many contemporary expectations of ultimate femininity. She is a sensual monster in an oriental setting and embodies poisoned desire and a thirst for the unknown. She is the women everyone lusts after, but no one wants to be. Prompted by her mother and desperate because of John the Baptist’s love rejection, the pristine innocence of the young woman tips over into cunning strategy. What is persistently portrayed, is her decisive role in the tragic downfall of her object of desire. The essence of her existence seems irrevocably welded together with the fatal momentum that leads to John the Baptist’s death.

The play that Oscar Wilde dedicated to her in 1891 only further frayed the ends of her archetype. Wilde depicted her as a femme fatale who explored the boundaries of self-determination. His interpretation of Salomé’s character elevated her to an erotic fantasy that echoes contemporary contradictory expectations surrounding femininity, but also resonates with gender-transcending existential questions. Her story crystalized into a narrative of a primal force, one that leaves a bitter aftertaste by both triumphing over and licking life’s wounds. Wilde’s text laid the foundations for Richard Strauss’ opera that would cause even more commotion in 1905.

**Unwound and swaddled**

Salomé still comfortably wallows in a fog of provocation and shock. Bloody revenge, unbridled desire and complex family dynamics usually frame her alluring dance, both in an art-historical context and in modern re-interpretations. This controversial heritage has become a protective cocoon, a safe space that even the most contemporary adaptations do not move beyond. And why should they? Her heartbreaking, torn existence does not only exist at the expense of, but also by virtue of the historically grown gaze that swaddles her figure. *Dance of the Seven Veils* therefore does not recklessly aim to reveal Salomé’s inner truth but departs from a resignation to her fate for further exploration in the theatrical space. No radically new form will be imposed upon Salomé’s classic narrative in this particular performance. The connotations that make her who she is are being thoroughly explored.

Dance of the Seven Veils primarily unhinges Salomé’s famous veil dance as an ill-fated dance of seduction. As the incarnation of lust, Salomé here dances her dance, subject to inner struggles inherent to every single lived life. With the utmost devotion, she wraps herself in the various layers of meaning concealed within her veils: impeccable persona, mother/daughter, beloved, sinner, believer and primal force. One by one these are stripped down and dissected. In the end, the process does not distil the so-called true essence of Salomé. Crystalized stereotypes are subtly scrutinized within the overall examination of the process of identity formation, which is inevitably multi-layered. Salomé reveals herself as straddling both an embeddedness in and a desire for being liberated from the whirlwind of movements that characterise human life.