

Ritual Expressionism: Fulya Peker in conversation with David Kilpatrick



To say that Fulya Peker is an active theatrical artist is a gross understatement, made abundantly clear as one tries to track her down as she shifts from theater to theater, working on Richard Foreman's *Wake Up Mr. Sleepy! Your Unconscious Mind is Dead!*, the Wooster Group's *Hamlet*, and her own New York directorial debut, *Requiem Aeternam Deo*, a meditation on Friedrich Nietzsche's seminal modernist text, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (using the new Graham Parkes translation as source material). Since completing an MA at Brooklyn College last year (with a thesis on catharsis), the Turkish-born writer, actor and director is busy learning from the experimental scene's leading figures while sharing and refining her own unique theatrical vision. *The Rail* caught up with Ms. Peker at the end of the first week of *Requiem's* run at the Kraine in the East Village.

David Kilpatrick (Rail): *Would you call Requiem Aeternam Deo an adaptation of Thus Spoke Zarathustra? You take at least two key passages from elsewhere in Nietzsche's writings and don't follow any sense of sequence from the text. Are you concerned in any way with being "faithful to Nietzsche" or do you feel this play stands on its own?*

Fulya Peker (Peker): I always emphasized the idea of "a play based on *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*." In the very beginning I struggled with the loyalty issue. I think everybody should go through such a struggle if the inspiration comes not from raw material but an already shaped source. I reached a level of understanding through my readings and involvement with the original text, then it was time to explore my own creativity. I tried not to "fly into flying"; in other words, I tried to walk with the original work, then dance

with it, and then I let some restrictions fade away for the sake of my own need to express my reflections about ideas that already exist. What I really want to express through the original work, to the people that live in my time, in my space, became more dominant for me. It was a stubborn but also joyful conversation with Nietzsche. In the end, we reached an agreement.

Rail: *You subtitle Requiem "a play for everyone and nobody." Do you find the audience problematic? How different is this for an Off-Off Broadway audience as opposed to a broader sense of cultures? Given the preconceptions so many have about Nietzsche's ideas, are you concerned that this work is somehow subject to unfair prejudice or are you in some way trying to clear up misconceptions?*

Peker: I wish I could reach even broader audiences, because I try in the play to direct my questions to not only the Christian god, but to all monotheistic gods, which is why the play starts with a blend of different religious prayers. One of my desires was to reach a deeper sense of Nietzsche's ideas about belief and experience such a journey into the unknown. This desire flourished because of my concerns about the unfair titles that are stuck under Nietzsche's name. It is a wild experiment though to confront with both nobody and everyone, that these two words can sometimes mean the same thing; audience is problematic, because man wants to be neither everyone nor nobody.

Rail: *Are Foreman or Le Compte influences on your directorial style? Other than your recorded voice, there isn't any overt use of technology. Is this in some way tied to what Zarathustra says about being "faithful to the Earth"?*

Peker: I've gained understanding about how technology can be used, how multimedia can infuse theater. To observe the works of Le Compte and Foreman helped me recognize how one can go through such difficulties for years and still continue reflecting one's own vision. This gave me strength. The day comes when people start to hear your screams. In terms of directorial styles, I could not become a friend of technology in theater. I use voice tapes and I give great importance to lights, but multimedia is not very close to where I stand in theater. For now, other than my plans about creating a movement and body based documentary theater piece in the future, where I can deal with the dance of images and body, I do not intend to use technology. If I use technology, it will be from a more critical perspective.

I feel myself much closer to poor, ritualistic, earthly theater. I am running after the body, the veins and the blood because it is affecting me more. When I hear the breath of an actor on stage I feel excited, when I see a body that dances with the air, I tremble. This I cannot feel in technologic theater. And yes, I think I want to stay true to the earth, not because I do not like technology, but because I like rawness more.

Rail: *A friend I went with described Requiem as a "Nietzschean Mass." Is it safe to say you're after some kind of sacred experience? Is this ritual more for the actors or the audience?*

Peker: Sacred-ness is a very crucial word for me. When I was dealing with "catharsis as transformation" this code echoed in my mind again and again. The universal, the earthly, the sublime, the ecstatic, the creative, the awakening. And I searched for a word that would let me get deeper involved with such concepts—that word was "sacred." This is a critical word that is overused in theater though. I am trying to explore how sacred-ness acts upon cathartic experiences, how confrontation, recognition and transformation function in theater. It is very important to share an experience with the performers, but to be able to carry it to an audience also. I would ask, *Who is the performer and who is the audience?* I am trying to play with this question. If there was a Nietzschean Mass, the audience also attended that mass, and the actors were a part of it, too. There should be a shared experience and the deeper the actors engage in the journey the more the audience will share it.

Rail: *The attention to language, the heightened sense of speech, makes the play feel in some way Shakespearean, bringing out the poetry in Nietzsche, but the staging itself was a hypnotic blend of middle-Eastern q'walli singing, Buddhist chants, butoh movement and other hints of global performance traditions. I found myself wrestling with ideas only to be swept away at key moments by the spectacle. Is the spirit or thought somehow Western but the body or sensation Eastern—or are you trying to overcome such a binary?*

Peker: My background in theater is based on a more Western Classical theater and literary tradition. But my intentions in theater, the images that burst out of my eyes are always facing the East. It can be related with the location of the land I come from, with standing between East and West and struggling to hold on to both, which provokes a social conflict. I tried to convert that conflict into artistic playfulness. I prefer not defining the borders too sharply. For me, to get a deeper sense of the other and the self and of how they blend one should not rely on a compass. I like the feeling of conscious disorientation.

Rail: *This struck me as a very Persian Zarathustra. Or wasn't that intended?*

Peker: I ran through a long casting journey. The intensity of expressions in eyes and voice and body were my requirements for all characters. I was looking for a Zarathustra that would resemble the land he takes his name from. So it was conscious.

Rail: *Is this ritual expressionism something you discovered as the best way to engage with Nietzsche's Zarathustra or does he provide you with an ideal figure to suit your theatrical aims?*

Peker: I read him and tried to understand him both intellectually and emotionally. Then I let my vision find itself. It was painful, because to be able to create, one should be able to shatter again and again. I learnt a lot from Nietzsche. His discoveries inspired my discoveries. This play signals my distinct approach, surely. "Transformation in ritual expressionism of the sacred." Sounds dangerous.

Rail: *So you aim for a dangerous theatre?*

Peker: The phrase sounds dangerous. Dangerous theater? I do not want to attack the audience, but I would like to inspire them, as long as they let me do so. If we resist transformation, inspiration can be recognized as a danger.

Requiem Aeternam Deo: A Play for Everyone and Nobody, written and directed by Fulya Peker and produced by Nietzsche Circle, is at The Kraine Theater, 85 East 4th St (between 2nd and 3rd Ave.), 1st floor (no wheelchair access) until April 15; Thursdays, Fridays, Saturdays at 7:30pm, Sundays at 3:00pm; Tix \$15 or \$10 for students and special events \$22.50 (Fool's Day and Easter), www.smarttix.com or 212-868-4444. For more info: <http://nietzschecircle.com>