

La Prisonnière des Sargasses



Immersive opera

Opéra in english, after « Wide Sargasso Sea » by Jean Rhys

Mariana Ungureanu

Marie Olivier



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The artistic project

A powerfully inspiring literary work / the libretto :

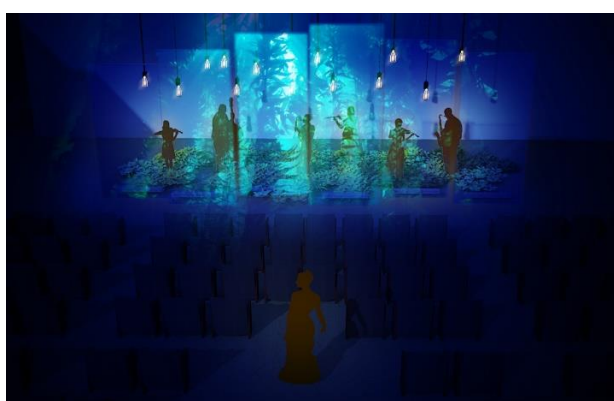
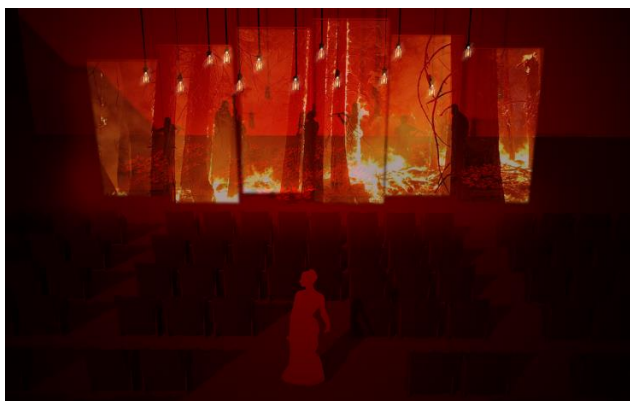
Jean Rhys's novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* examines **the impact of the lived environment on the human psyche**. The heroine will be marked from birth by a clash of cultures (such that, as a béké or white creole, she belongs neither to white nor to black society), by the aftermath of slavery, by the experience of paternalism, and by the gradual loss of her identity, culminating in her final, grotesque gesture, her self-immolation in the fire with which she burns down the place of her imprisonment. From this dense novella, **Marie Olivier** has derived a reflection on **split identity**, and the **instability** which it engenders. While the structure of the libretto follows the chronological sequence of the novel, it nevertheless dwells on those scenes which are seminal to the heroine's madness. The protagonists are represented by four singers, each of whom takes on a pair of linked roles, and by the instrumentalists, who alternate between playing the roles of the crowd and of unspeaking characters. (*see more in the appendice*)

The meeting of two worlds / the music :

In order to give expression to these **questions of identity**, the composer **Mariana Ungureanu** has drawn on two distinct types of music. The **improvisers** are drawn from the musicians of Likembe (who interpret western classical music through the prism of African musical performance traditions), and from classical musicians dedicated to the art of improvisation. In collaboration with them, the composer will seek to create specific acoustic textures, while granting them the freedom to bring a rougher sound. The **classical musicians** are distinguished instrumentalists, devoted to the interpretation of the most complex of contemporary scores, who will play music written by the composer, mingled with the more spontaneous contributions of their colleagues. The vocal music will bring the dual role of each singer to the fore (see annex p. 8, the structure of the work).

An immersive experience / the dramaturgy :

In order to **plunge the audience into the psyche of the heroine**, **Eleonore Lemaire** has conceived a **porous dramatic space**, in which the audience will represent the mind of Bertha. The audience will see from up front (or around them, depending on the space) the performers, with the exception of the singer who plays the role of Bertha (Antoinette). For the most part, she will be embedded within the audience, such that she is both spectator and participant in the opera. As the action unfolds in front of Bertha's eyes, or in her memories of her childhood, it also unfolds in front of or around the audience. When the action includes Bertha, the other performers (both singers and instrumentalists) could either pass through the audience to interact with her, or interact with her as if with a subjective camera (meaning the audience is Bertha). The diffusion of the sound will also show the difference of space. The public will thus come to experience physically the invasion of Bertha's psychic and personal space. Each time Bertha intervenes in the action, the audience will experience a sensation of being **caught between two spaces** which reflects the growing dichotomy of Bertha/Antoinette.



A sensory experience / the scenography :

The visual artist and film-maker **Julio Gadelharente** is working to create a **space shaped by video** which will envelop the performers and reflect the sensory elements of the action. The garden of Coulibri, which haunts Bertha's memories and dreams, will be evoked by an array of artificial plants hanging from the ceiling, with lighting elements tangled up within them. The constituent parts of this "garden" will be painted white or grey, such that their colour and appearance can be completely transformed when they are lit up. The lighting elements (incandescent bulbs), controlled by DMX (Digital Multiplex Signal), will make it possible to create local effects within this structure to bring it to life, like a living organism in its own right. Other elements of the "garden" will be simulated by a series of suspended white panels (sheets of linen hung from wooden or metal frames), onto which the **video** images will be projected. These will combine **footage in real time** of the performers (and especially of Bertha, like mirror reflection, since she is almost always absent from the stage space out front) with film which alternates **natural landscapes** with **purely mental landscapes**, reflecting Bertha's innermost feelings. As these video elements of the piece are still in an early stage of development, the proposed positions of the projection panels and the garden elements are still not fixed. It is possible to envisage the production in a number of different configurations, and we are currently considering the possibilities and constraints presented by various different options.

A corporal density / the staging - choreography :

Johanne Saunier's choreography will include all of the performers, instrumentalists as well as singers, with the aim of **giving physical form to the visual and acoustic environment**, and embodying the **changes** experienced by Bertha (as she bears witness to various situations) and some of the other protagonists. This element of the production is still at an early stage of development, but the idea is **to give physical incarnation to the power relations and states of mind of the characters**, by means of **precise gestures, anchored in the performing space**. Questions of **kinship and opposition** will be at the heart of the choreography. The instrumentalists and the conductor will be treated in the same way as the singers, and even if it proves impracticable for them to memorise their parts, we will seek out ways of incorporating their printed scores into the staging without using music stands or conventional orchestral seating.

Precise shapes/ the costume :

Our partnership with **Sapologie2design** (Kinshasa) allows us to envisage costumes which derive their inspiration more from the world of fashion than from traditional operatic costumes. In Jean Rhys's novel, clothing serves to **denote membership of a social group** (white and black creoles, English colonists), but also to **indicate social hierarchy**. The costumes will thus be a strong indicator of the identity of each performer. *Examples of our partner's work can be seen below.*





The artistic team (in alphabetical order)

Nicholas Chesneau, *conductor and musical director*: following studies at the CNSMD de Paris, Nicholas Chesneau pursues a dual career as vocal coach and opera conductor. He has participated in various productions at the Opera Bastille, Opera de Lille, Opera de Marseille, and at La Monnaie (Belgium), and has assisted at various prestigious festivals such as Aix-en-Provence, Ruhrtriennale (Germany) and Vienna Festwochen (Austria). After a creation in the Cervantino festival (Mexico), he has conducted Britten's *Curlew River* and Offenbach's *Tales of Hoffmann* at Dijon Opera. He has a particular affinity for the works of Leos Janacek, German repertoire, and contemporary music.

Julio Gadelharente, *scenographer and video artist*: from a very early age, Julio Parente has been active in the visual arts, in architecture, in new technologies and in music. As a producer for COMUNA, an interdisciplinary company involved in cultural production and management in the creative economy of Rio de Janeiro, he collaborated with Pedro Varella on the installation COTA 10 (first prize for architecture, Tomie Ohtake Institute, Sao Paulo, 2015). His work has been selected for festivals such as Visualismo, Multiplicidade, Live Cinema and Cinerama in the 2015 and 2016 seasons. He has participated in residencies at the School of Visual Arts (New York, 2013), Red Bull Station (Sao Paulo, 2015) and Hobra (Rio de Janeiro, 2016). Julio Parente has also created interactive video systems for the theatre director Christiane Jatahy.

Serge Kakudji, *artistic codirector and performer*: The Congolese counter-tenor Serge Kakudji first came to public notice in the principal role of Jesus in *Pitié* by Alain Platel (Ballets C de la B), an arrangement of Bach's *St Matthew Passion* by Fabrizio Cassol. This trio of artists were reunited in Serge Kakudji's own creation, *Coup Fatal*, in 2014, which received more than 180 performances on a major tour to venues including the opening of the Avignon Festival at the Court of Honour at the Papal Palace, and the Jean Vilar room at Chaillot. It was awarded best Belgian production of 2015. He has also been seen in The Dialogue series: *Dinozard III* by Faustin Linyekula, *Amor* in *The Coronation of Poppea* by Monteverdi (Madrid and Montpellier), *Tolomeo* in *Giulio Cesare* by Handel (Versailles), and the title role in the same opera with Les Concerts d'Astree at the Opera Garnier, under the direction of Emmanuelle Haim. In 2017, he created the company Likembe, whose purpose is to use artistic and cultural exchange as a means towards dialogue and mutual understanding between countries and peoples.

Eléonore Lemaire, *dramaturge and performer*: Eléonore Lemaire is an eclectic artist who divides her time between appearances at international opera houses and close creative relationships with some of the foremost composers of our time, such as Arnaud Petit, Aurélien Dumont, Francesco Filidei, Jean-Pierre Calvin, Unsub Chin, Pascale Criton and Mariana Ungureanu. With them she has created a number of demanding roles in collaboration with Ensemble Intercontemporain, Asko|Schönberg Ensemble, l'Orchestre Lamoureux and Les Siècles, at venues including the Théâtre de l'Athénée, the Comédie Française, the Teatro Valle, the Piccolo Teatro Strehler, and the Muziektheater, the Concertgebouw and the National Opera of Amsterdam. She recently gave the first performances of *I.D.* by Arnaud Petit at the Grand Théâtre du Nord with Les Siècles, and *Homo Instrumentalis* at Ruhrtriennale 2017, Festival Musicà, Strasbourg, 2018, and Opera Forward Festival DNO. She is working as a creator and a performer for Johanne Saunier's Ballets Confidentiels since 2018.

Valia Ndelela/sapologie2design, costume design: Valia Ndelela is the founder and coordinator of the training institution Sapologie2design (Kinshasa), which brings together over 2,000 fashion students.

Marie Olivier, librettist: senior lecturer in Anglo-American literature at Paris-Est university, Marie Olivier researches the aesthetics of poetry, critical theory, and lyric forms in poetry and opera. Her publications include: *Playing with (??) the poem from the margins: the play of intertexts in "Scattering as Behaviour Toward Risk" by Susan Howe* (Modernities 42 (2017) Pictorial Writing, Musical Writing, On Literature and the Arts (Bordeaux University Press); "The Mosaic Prestige: a reading of "Day Without Night" by Louise Gluck," *French Review of American Studies*, *Imposture (??)*; "The Mutable Poetics of Louise Gluck: A reading of "Summer Garden" by Louise Gluck" (Angles: Unstable states, mutable conditions); "Song in reserve: a reading of two poems by Louise Gluck" (L'Atelier 7:2, 2015)

Johanne Saunier, stage director and choreographer: From 1986 until 1998, Johanne Saunier was a dancer with Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker's company Cie Rosas, with whom she continues to work as an assistant. With Jim Clayburgh she founded JOJI INC which received the Prix Seine Saint-Denis/Bagnolet à Paris in 2000 and tours internationally, notably with the series Erase-E(X), a collaboration with artists including the Wooster Group of New York, Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker, the composer Georges Aperghis, and the video artist Kurt d'Haeseleer. She has been the sole performer in contemporary opera productions by Luc Bondy, Guy Cassiers, Georges Aperghis (an ongoing collaboration since 2002), Jim Clayburgh, François Saran (with Quatuor Diotima), Sybille Wilson and Modern Dance (with Mathurin Bolze). She teaches at PARTS and a number of other European schools. Her company Ballets Confidentiels explores the relation with the public through places unexpected. Since 2012 she has worked as assistant to the director Jean François Sivadier on his operatic productions. She made her own operatic directing debut in March 2018 with *La Légende du Roi Dragon* by Arthur Lavandier, a production at the Opéra de Lille featuring 210 children.

Mariana Ungureanu, composer: born in Moldavia, Mariana Ungureanu holds a diploma from the National University of Music of Bucharest. A composer in many genres, she has worked all across Europe in collaborations with dance companies, orchestras (including ATEM, the Chamber Orchestra of Wallonie, the National Orchestra of Lorraine), musical performances (including productions in Belgium with Frederic Roels and Mauro Paccanella), and film soundtracks. Her work has been performed in various European festivals (Hamburg Klangwerkstage, Bergamo Festival, Atlas Festival, Festival Impuls). Having frequently written for voices, she wrote her first opera, *Dorian Gray: a quest for eternal youth* in 2017, to a commission from the French ministry of culture and MPA St Germain.

Distribution :

Bertha / Antoinette enfant / Annette, soprano : Eléonore Lemaire

Christophine / Daniel Cosway, contreténor : Serge Kakudji

Rochester / Richard Mason, baryton : Jon Stainsby ?

Tia / Amélie, coloratura : Natascha Young ?

Ensemble orchestral :

Accordéon : Elodie Soulard

Alto : Soazic Le Cornec :

Clarinete : Jérôme Schmitt

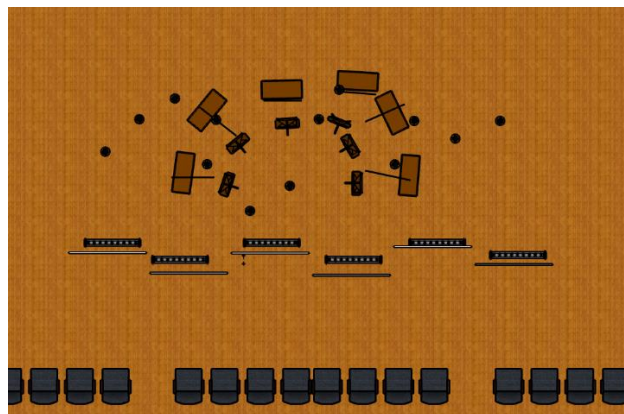
Flûte : Julie Brunet-Jailly

Guitare électrique : Pytshens Kambilo

Percussions : Ameth Sissoko

Violon : Leyli Karrieva

Violoncelle : Alfredo Mol



Technical requirements

Performance space: the performance can be presented in an open space, without frontal orientation (in which case the staging will be arranged in an arc [??] around the audience; or in a forward-oriented space. In either scenario, a playing space will be cleared within the audience seating, according to the possibilities and constraints of the venue.

Scenic elements: at the current stage of development, none of our requirements are fixed, but as things stand we will require the following items:

VIDEO RIDER

3 projectors FullHD 7.000lumens
 1 Macbook Pro
 1 Tripehead2Go Video board
 3 HDMI 25mts cable
 1 Mini Studio Recorder
 1 HD-Sdi long cable
 1 Sdi compatible Camera

SCENOGRAPHY

6 Wooden white pannels 2m x 3myur
 Plastic Plant Arrangement
STAGE LIGHTING
 8 Elipsoidal Spotlight Re_ector
 8 Fresnel Lights w/ Barndoor
 8 LED PARs
 4 Led strips

+ portable LED Music Score lights

PLANT ARRANGEMENT

WHITE PANNELS

PROJECTORS

Pratiquable pour l'espace de Bertha

Duration: 1'45"

Contact :

La compagnie Likembe/Serge Kakudji : adm.likembe@gmail.com

Ballets Confidentiels/ Eléonore Lemaire : +33 6 74 51 68 53



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Appendices:

Structure of the work

The opera comprises two acts, each divided into three scenes

The work is based on the novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys, *prequel* to *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë. Rhys, a British author who was the daughter of a Welsh father and a creole mother, gives voice not only to the mad women of the Victorian novel, imprisoned in a dungeon (no! An attic) at Thornfield Hall, but also to a whole forgotten history.

While Jean Rhys's novel is set in the 19th century in the British Antilles, following the abolition of slavery in 1833, the opera *La prisonniere des Sargasses* aims to be universal and timeless, giving voice to the creole woman who has been deprived of her story and her identity by patriarchal social and narrative structures. *La prisonniere des Sargasses* aims to be a feminist opera which gives voice to those whom history has passed over in silence, using an innovative *mise en scene* which abolishes the divide between the stage and the orchestra pit, integrating the instrumentalists with the singers so as to make this opera a unique experience in which music and plot are interwoven within a sonic and sensual choreography.

The opera has a cyclical structure: the first scene opens in a **Garden of Eden already in a state of decomposition**, and in a temporal zone which could be either the beginning or the end of the day. The atmosphere is apocalyptic. **The music conveys both premonitions of the coming drama and the heavy atmosphere created by the tropical, throbbing odours of flowers and over-ripe fruit.** The piece is structured around a huge conflagration (act 1, scene 2), rendered by video projections on the screen, and culminates in the flame of a match in the attic which triggers the burning of Thornfield Hall (as is depicted in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*).

Plot

The opera *La Prisonniere des Sargasses* follows the journey of the heroine Bertha, whose real name is Antoinette Cosway, daughter of a white creole mother, Annette, and an Englishman, a former slaveowner who, having fathered a number of children out of wedlock, kills himself, ruined by the abolition of slavery. The work presents Antoinette's slow descent into hell, starting with a childhood marked above all by the madness of her mother, and the early loss of her innocence and her childhood. **Bertha** is the name given to the heroine by her husband, Rochester, and is the name by which she is known in Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre*. This assumed name is the marker of the absolute alienation of this creole woman, who has been robbed of her family history and her cultural identity.

The marriage of Antoinette to Rochester (future anti-hero of *Jane Eyre*), arranged by her father-in-law, seems doomed to failure from the start. Overwhelmed with feelings of incomprehension and impotence in these islands which are utterly foreign to him, and where love and death are mingled in a poisonous atmosphere, Rochester will always have a grudge against her: as an impoverished member of the English gentry, he has had no choice but to marry this rich creole heiress. What ensues is a disastrous match of two people whose natures are utterly opposed: for Rochester, Antoinette is a sulphurous creature, a radical Other.

For Antoinette, Rochester is the last in a sequence of patriarchal figures in her life. Just like her mother Annette, Antoinette lives a life dependent on men, starting with her father, and then her father-in-law, who in turn marries her off to Rochester. Antoinette is robbed of any stable notion of identity, and is relegated to the status of an object or puppet in the eyes of others, such as the black domestic servant Christophine - a powerful priestess of black magic who looks after her from her earliest infancy and tries to protect her - and, above all, Rochester, who gradually strips her of her identity, even to the extent of erasing her real name. On a mysterious and rapturous night, he baptises her Bertha. Rochester takes her far away from the Caribbean islands of her birth, to the cold climate of England where madness, imprisonment and death await.

Synopsis

Setting:

JAMAICA, “wild, untouched, above all, untouched, with an alien, disturbing secret loveliness.” It is “a world ripe with the scents of frangipani and orchids, cinnamon, dust and lime trees, and heavy with verdant growth, wild confusion and sinister rotting.”

Time:

Mid-19th century, after the 1833 Emancipation Act in the British West Indies.

List of characters:

Antoinette, as a child, and as a woman	Annette Christophine	Daniel Cosway Tia
Rochester	Richard Mason	Amélie

ACT I

Scene 1

The scene opens on the vision of Annette’s dead horse. Near the family estate, Antoinette, her daughter sings about the Garden of Eden that is Coulibri. She screams as she discovers that the sweet fragrance she was smelling is the dead horse’s smell. She is found wandering there by Christophine, the family’s servant, who advises her not to remain alone and invites Antoinette to go and play with Tia, a little girl the same age as Antoinette. The two girls look at each other as in a mirror. Tia challenges Antoinette to skip pebbles, and takes her money away with her. Antoinette is left on her own, standing in the stream of the water, lamenting the inhumanity of people.

Scene 2

There is a party at Coulibri estate. Annette and Richard Mason are dancing and celebrating their return from their honeymoon in Trinidad. Annette and Mason have an argument over the Jamaicans and about leaving Coulibri. Annette fears for the life of her son, Pierre. Suddenly, a fire starts. The parrot goes up into flames screaming “*Qui est là ?*”

Scene 3

Antoinette wakes up in a convent where she is surrounded with the quiet affection of nuns. She learns a new sort of happiness that is quite peaceful. Mason comes and visit her and tells her that Annette died of grief after the loss of her son Pierre. He announces her that he has come to take her away with him.

ACT II

Scene 1

Antoinette and Rochester are on their honeymoon in Massacre. Rochester writes his father in England. Already things unravel between Antoinette and Rochester. Rochester goes out on a walk and gets lost in the forest. He finds himself in the ruins of Coulibri. When he comes back, a letter is waiting for him. Daniel, old Cosway’s son, is expecting him, and tells him he will disclose secrets about his wife’s family and past. He decides to pay him a visit. Daniel tells Rochester about Annette’s story.

Scene 2

The scene opens up with the cock crowing three times.

Antoinette goes to Christophine’s house to intercede for her through her powers with Rochester so that he falls in love with her. Antoinette ponders over going away: living in England might be the only solution to save her marriage. Antoinette and Rochester reunite in a mystical night. He baptizes her Bertha.

Scene 3

Rochester wakes up without a memory of what happened the night before. He is seduced by Amélie, the child servant. Rochester and Christophine have a confrontation. Rochester writes his father that both he and his wife will return to England.

Epilogue

Antoinette wakes up in a dark room in a cold mansion in England.

Before slipping away from the attentive guard of Grace Pool and before walking out of her room, she catches a box of matches.