

The Sorcerers – A Play About Interracial Marriage

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Well, thank you for inviting me and offering me this marvelous opportunity to talk about *The Sorcerers*, a play about “unusual forms of racism” I wrote some years ago and has been translated into English and staged last year in New York City³.

What do I mean with “unusual forms of racism”? Well, we are used to some obvious forms of racism. Our collective psyche is full of images where bad persons, be they inhumane Nazis, Ku-Klux Klan slavers, bigoted Afrikaners or just “normal people”, discriminate, reject or abuse other people based on their race or ethnicity. These have existed since time immemorial, but we’d believed them to have been dislodged, at least partly, especially on the legal and political side. I’m referring here to Civil Rights Act (1964) or the end of the apartheid in South Africa – but sadly as we can see in many places - and United States not the least concerning of them -, expressions of racism or xenophobia have the wind in their sails.

Yet, there are other forms of racism. More hidden, more difficult to catch and even understand. Why so? Well, because they involve educated, open-minded people, with apparently strong moral values and who can very sincerely proclaim themselves as anti-racist... and still, even if they will never accept it, they continue to demonstrate racist behavior.

How is it possible? Well that is precisely the question.

About racism

Much has been written about racism. But one curious aspect as René Girard said is that it shows up especially when there something likely to be desired by other “ethnic groups”, be it space, air, pure material stuff or persons. As long as people live in different places without interacting, they don’t need to feel superior to the others since the others, not being present, don’t actually exist. Problems arise when there is a common life at stake and where people from different ethnic or cultural backgrounds are likely to interact, share something, and even mix. And what’s the optimal opportunity for mixing between two ethnically diverse groups if not a marriage?

And that’s exactly what my play is about. Two young persons, Luc, one Caucasian Belgian and Paula, a girl from Nigeria. They both fall in love and will need to face the journey of most (if not all) interracial couples, even if they believe they belong to a new world where values of respect and tolerance prevail.

¹ URL: <https://criticalmixedracestudies.wordpress.com/>

² URL: <http://www.mixedracestudies.org/?tag=critical-mixed-race-studies-conference>

³ URL: www.facebook.com/TheSorcerersBelgianPlay/

My inspiration

My inspiration comes from a Belgian family I had very close ties with. I won't be very detailed since we're not here to study them. But here are some key elements.

Firstly, the action took place in Brussels, Belgium in the nineties (1994-1997). Just as a reminder: Belgium is a small country of 10 million inhabitants but one which has a shameful colonial past, as it exploited and ruled Congo; it has Brussels for capital—containing one million inhabitants which is also the capital of Europe and is one of the most multicultural cities in the world, one third of people living in Brussels being foreigners; French is the most frequently spoken language.

Then, the real family. The real family was a big one at that time. They were all Caucasian as well as Belgians and formed a very close unit. They belonged to a bourgeois intellectual leftwing type milieu, many of them holders of PhDs who were leading an academic life, the type of people who are normally in the forefront of defending human rights and fighting racism and injustice.

What happened? One of their children went to Africa (Mozambique) in his twenties, for two years to work for Doctors without Borders. There he met a local girl, 18 years old, named Paula in the play, and fell in love with her. He brought her home, married her and they had a child. But unexpectedly (because, I repeat, the real family is supposed to be very open-minded), the couple didn't succeed at being accepted by his family or by his friends (generally speaking). So, what happened was a relentless process of rejection involving a battle for custody of the newborn child.

Failed unions can happen of course. But this case was special, because the struggle was unbalanced. The girl was not a "normal Western girl". What I mean here is that she was defenseless. Belgium and Europe as a whole was new to her. She had no roots there and spoke only Portuguese. And she had against her the real family as a whole together with their friends and acquaintances. The situation was therefore very unfair to her, and also dramatic, because it caused her serious health problems which remained mysterious to the doctors – we're talking about symptoms like loss of blood and severe pains –, to the extent that one might believe her life to be at risk.

I won't tell you how the story ended—just that thankfully it did not turn out to be as bad as in the play.

Thus, I knew the persons involved but could not do much to change the situation. But I felt the duty to bear witness to it. And I had also the need to understand what had happened and to shed some light on this peculiar form of racism. I was a doctoral student at that time and already (a young) playwright. So, I went for a play.

The creative process

Now, having said that... the question is "How should I go about it?"

My first idea was to start from reality: Take some domestic scenes I had seen or heard about and to reproduce them in a realistic way, maybe with some extra dramatic tension. The 2 main characters (Luc and Paula) were created for that purpose. But I was not too happy with that: there was no strong story line and something important was missing. Actually, I was not sure myself of how to really catch (and even less reflect) the inner logic of the process. On an intellectual level, I was able to understand: the difficulty of building a

couple, the in-law pressure on their shoulders, the clash of two cultures and the failure for the 2 lovers to overcome the challenge.

But I didn't know how to use it dramatically, nor how to take advantage of existing models. To give you an example, one of the most famous models for failed interracial marriage is of course the Medea myth. Medea, the exotic witch, who helped Jason-the-Greek to catch the Golden Fleece and who was then brought back to Corinth where she married him and gave birth to two children. But some years passed, and Jason, whose first priority was his career as a king, decided to leave her for some kind of a true Greek Princess and ban her from Greece. Then, rightly feeling that she was being unfairly treated, Medea decided that before leaving she would kill not only the new bride but also her two beloved children. And so she did. Based on that myth, famous plays have been written namely by Euripides, Seneca or Corneille. And more recently Pasolini adapted it for the screen with Maria Callas in the lead role. But my problem was to transfer and update Medea's myth with all the seriousness it implies to our present situation, especially knowing that we are in Belgium. You may or may not know, but Belgians are better known for not taking things seriously, having a strong self-mocking sense of humor, and not always able to tell the difference between reality and fiction. It may sound a bit neurotic, but it can be very artistic – think of surrealism.

So, what could I do?

By chance, I had suddenly a flash of intuition when I read a short text by Levi-Strauss, the famous French anthropologist, out of his famous book *Structural Anthropology*

The text basically emphasizes the tremendous power of sorcery. It reads:

"Since the pioneering work of Cannon, we understand more clearly the psycho-physiological mechanisms underlying the instances reported from many parts of the world of death by exorcism and the casting of spells. An individual who is aware that he is the object of sorcery is thoroughly convinced that he is doomed according to the most solemn traditions of his group. His friends and relatives share this certainty. From then on the community withdraws. Standing aloof from the accursed, it treats him not only as though he were already dead, but as though he were a source of danger to the entire group. On every occasion and by every action, the social body suggests death to the unfortunate victim who no longer hopes to escape what he considers to be his ineluctable fate. Shortly thereafter, sacred rites are held to dispatch him to the realm of shadows. First brutally torn from all of his family and social ties and excluded from all functions and activities through which he experienced self-awareness, then banished by the combined effect of intense terror... and, finally, to the group's decisive reversal in proclaiming him — once a living man, with rights and obligations — dead and an object of fear, ritual, and taboo. Physical integrity cannot withstand the dissolution of the social personality."
(Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*)

In other words, what Levi-Strauss says is terrible: through sorcery, a group can physically kill an individual by simply changing their social status.

And I thought of the real Paula, how she had physically suffered from her Belgian experience. The text refers to mechanisms observed in the framework of anthropological research, implying they occur somewhere in Africa or Latin America, aka "far far away from our Western civilization". But then, I asked myself, what if these mechanisms were more universal than I thought and could also be pinpointed in our supposedly more advanced societies? After all, are we not well aware how social, moral or sexual harassment can impact not only the victim's psyche but also his or her body?

On this basis, I had the idea of adapting the mechanism described by Levi Strauss in our modern "civilized" world, thereby implying a role reversal. The Belgians, even if they want to be known for their rationality, moral and political correctness would be able to put a

lethal spell on someone. And for that reason, they will be called “The Sorcerers”. And on the opposite side, the foreign African girl will be their victim, although she would have been expected to be the one attracted by supernatural forces, witchcraft, voodoo and all that stuff.

Of course, this turned my original realistic approach upside down. But it opened space for the unseen world, the unconsciousness, the unknown, and to a certain extent human madness, too. And theatre is well suited for that – recall Shakespeare’s *Midsummer Nights Dream*, *Hamlet’s* ghosts, *Macbeth’s* witches or Peter Weiss’ *Marat-Sade*.

I was very happy: Levi-Strauss’ text had inspired in me a storyline that was original, dramatically interesting and culturally relevant to what I had observed. And beyond that, it opened up a tantalizing possibility for using the Medea narrative that I discarded.

Yes, because as a matter of fact, another idea came to me: To have Luc’s family behaving with Paula as if they were facing Medea, therefore believing that she really was some kind of a witch who could murder her own child and maybe them too. Of course, that was not her initial intention, but the mechanism of enchantment as a whole could impel her to such a project. Why? Because, as you remember, the challenge for the group (or here the sorcerers) is to put pressure on the victim to change his or her relationship to the world, including by having him or her follow dangerous paths and do bad things he or she would have never done “normally”. Why? In order to put the blame on him or her, and therefore justify themselves in condemning him or her.

In other words, I could imagine them turning Paula *de facto* into Medea, with the hidden intention of stopping her at the last moment. Of course, in my mind, they weren’t 100% conscious of the game they’re playing. It’s much more interesting to have them believe they themselves are the victims, because, let’s not forget, Luc’s family pretend to be highly moral and need to feel they always ready to stand up for a good cause. In this matter, we’re not far from the spirit of an Inquisition-like system or a witch hunt, as in Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible*.

Neither black, nor white

Of course, a key figure in the dramatic structure of the play is Luc.

It would have been easy to have portrayed him as a madman, a sadistic pervert. But it would have been untrue. My intention was to unveil the inner logic of a roving mechanism of racism. And for that, I needed him to be sincere in his love for Paula and his dream of building a multicultural family. And as a matter of fact, many scenes of the play show him taking care of Paula (SCENE FIVE, “Flowers” for instance) or playing with her (SCENE EIGHT, “1,2, 3 and 4”).

But he’s put under pressure too. He has to decide whether to fight for his love or on behalf of his family and social interests. And the more the play goes on, the more he’s torn apart, one voice telling him to be faithful to Paula and the other to see her as evil and become a “Sorcerer” himself. You know, a bit like in Ionesco’s famous play, *Rhinoceros*, where everybody becomes a rhino and tries to convince the main character to become one too.

His lines towards Paula, to say the least, aren’t always crystal-clear:

LUC: And if, and if.... And what if... It’s a question, right? What if there were still overtures that could be made? From our side, I mean?

PAULA: What!

LUC: Right, yes, and what if the fault lay with us? Hunh? In us? The entire fault ours alone? On our side it's all violins playing 'If we only had love, we would melt all the guns. Then we'd give the new world...' Now is that what YOU WANT? (HE *imitates the sound of a romantic violin playing.*) Yadadadadah. But for them it's bulubulu. (*Imitating a medicine man doing a ritual.*) Just imagine, and if I take back my question and if they're right, even an itty-bitsy bit right... Let's approach this scientifically. As if our situation was an amoeba or a mysterious chemical solution someone put under the microscope... Let's be self-analytical... If they're wrong, we can be all the more convinced of the injustice of it all, and if they're right, even if it's just by a micro-hair's breadth of one percent, that means we could improve by the micro-hair's breadth necessary! After all, who's perfect? And in either case we win, don't we?

PAULA: I don't understand what you're saying at all. (SCENE TEN, *The Argument*)

But towards the end, Luc will be able to feel he is in a midst of a tragedy (like in *Medea*), although he's more pathetic, having lost part of his mind through the overall process:

How could I love you after such an abominable act
 You are the most despicable of women
 To drown what was in your own belly
 You take him in your arms to give him a bath
 And you lower him into the water until he's immersed in water all the way
 Gently under water
 Not a sound no crying
 In just a few seconds it's all over
 He's so little
 May your belly cause you pain
 Yes suffer and suffer some more
 Oh why didn't you try it on me
 Confess you didn't have the courage
 I'm going to show you what it's like to have courage
 Show you what you deserve
 You wanted to kill yourself with shiny scissors
 Well you see those two blades spotless for now
 You're going to make a place for them
 Yes a little gap between your bones
 Offer the scissor blades a bloody sheath to enter
 In order to make you remember deep down in your very own guts what such an act really means
 Unless you slice yourself even deeper, right down to the bloodiest, blackest part of yourself
 So that you never pull that again or even think of killing striking and don't even think of touching
 petting caressing my son yes my son or even listen to me even trying to be in his presence getting close
 to him to my son only to me no never again I swear you'll never see him again (SCENE FOURTEEN,
The Scissors).

The reception of the play

Now, what about the reception of the play?

To tell you the truth, when it was first staged in Brussels, it was not well received. "How dare you say that? How dare you show us Belgians as being hypocritical and racists?" That was more or less the message.

I felt a bit lost, and much like Hamlet after the performance he had performed before the king and his mother in order to denounce the murder of his father.

By chance, I found an opportunity here in the States.

David Willinger is a stage director and professor at the City College, CUNY. He is also a specialist in Belgian theatre. I contacted him and sent him the play. He liked it and proposed to publish it – together with three other Belgians plays¹. I agreed of course.

A year after, he asked me if he could stage it in New York City². For three weeks. I was very lucky.

Some adjustments were made for the English translation. For example, the customs officer behaved like a typical guy from Brooklyn and not from Brussels. Or puns were of course adapted (like in SCENE SIX, *The Future lion*).

The show was very successful and I was so happy to see that my play spoke to American audiences. I attended most of the performances. I had discussions with spectators. Some of them were very concerned since mixed marriage was a challenge for them in their own personal lives. And they were very touched by the representation I'd made from the overall enchantment process.

I was very happy, because it helped reinforce my convictions on three points. The first one was that the unusual forms of racism I saw in this real family were universal, and not just specific to Belgium. Secondly, it confirmed that these forms of racism could be explained through a mechanism of rejection which has deep anthropological roots. Thirdly, all these performances in NYC helped also to regain faith in theatre as an artform in general, because I think that a piece of art – in my case a stage play – must not necessarily be limited to entertainment. Of course, audiences need to have fun, but I think that a story, a performance, a music piece, may also have the power to make an impact, to change people's minds and therefore the way society works. Of course, only to a certain extent, and with a certain dose of humility, and probably following invisible paths... but nevertheless, one should be conscious of it. And I won't deny it's part of my personal artistic challenge.

What's next?

One last word about the ending of my play (and for the ending of my speech). The ending is a bit sad, and in this regard, not too optimistic. But I definitely think that interracial marriage is possible.

Actually, I'm presently writing a sequel to *The Sorcerers*. It won't have the same characters, but will address the same object: interracial marriage, or more exactly, the result of interracial marriage, in the person of the children.

This new play will be more positive, because I really believe that something good and meaningful can come out of situations that are unusual and often under fire by many and which involve a degree of pain, especially when there is a true search for freedom, love and self-accomplishment.

Thank you.

¹ « The Sorcerers », in *Four Millenium Plays from Belgium*, New York, Martin E. Segal Center Publications, 2015, p. 33-80.

² Theater for the New City, March 3rd- 20th (for more details: www.facebook.com/TheSorcerersBelgianPlay/).