

SYNOPSIS

"Wormwood Maria" is based around two monologues of confrontation. In a charged Lithuanian landscape, a man remembers his past desires, vagabond journeys and betrayals from the 1930s and 1940s. Nearby, a young girl confronts the statue of the Virgin Mary with dreams, songs and injustices from the past.

DIRECTORS' STATEMENT

Wormwood Maria (Pelyno Marija) is a response to the landscape and history of the small town of Luokė in Lithuania.

Each location filmed is a site of remembrance: the massacres of local Jews in the 1940s, the graves of partisans killed in the 1940s and 1950s and victims of World War II. Also featured is the churchyard of Luokė's *Church of All Saints*, which is one of the oldest Catholic churches in Lithuania, established in 1416. We were equally interested in how this landscape shows itself in the present: everyday village life and the life of plants and animals at the height of summer. The way the horizon divides the landscape and the movement of the sun and moon were as important to us as the human domain.

Two unnamed figures, a man and a young girl each perform monologues which cut across the violent history and sensory richness of the landscape. We worked with three translators to render the writing of Dante Alighieri, Jean Genet and the Yugoslav surrealist Aleksandar Vučo into Lithuanian. These texts together form a texture which moves between our everyday observations, via old local rhymes to Dante's moral questions. Genet's interrogation of bourgeois and christian morality is placed side-by-side with the poetic memoirs of a surrealist during his time in a Nazi concentration camp. In this way, layers of thought, emotion and European history from the last 700 years are brought into coexistence in Lithuanian, in Lithuania.

The two performers bring their lilt, gait and simple gestures to the staging. It was important to record sound at the same time as the images - in this way the performers were able to interact and coexist with the richness of their surroundings. The performers do not attempt to create characters, but recite and follow Bertolt Brecht's advice: "*Instead of wanting to create an impression that he is improvising, the actor should rather show what the truth is: he is quoting.*" Brecht's work on 'estrangement' and his advice for utilising irregular rhythms in the actors' diction were useful to us in inviting a questioning and open response in the audience. Also important were his ideas on epic theatre, one which is not based on plot and linear development, but put more value in telling and a collage approach.

The work of Straub-Huillet, in particular their film *Workers, Peasants* (2000) was relevant in thinking about memory, and the relationship between memory and speech, reading and speaking. We found Frans van de Staak's cinematic approach to staging, reading and performance to be liberating for the performer and the audience. We feel affinity with his film *From the Hard Work of Baruch Spinoza* (1973) which puts the audience on an equal footing with the actors: they are active in the creative process, instead of expecting to be served a polished presentation of a fixed 'truth'.

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