

An Invitation to Dance – Chloé Déchery's *A Duet Without You*

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“We not only believe what we see,” wrote the renowned neuro-psychologist RL Gregory, “to some extent we also see what we believe.” Our perception of the world is not simply a matter of physical presence, but also an intricate interplay of senses, memories, stories and imaginings that slip and step through space and time. This is the unpredictable dance of past and present, fiction and reality, that can turn a piece of curled card (for example) into a wave, that can turn a potato into a padlock, that can turn a pair of abandoned shoes into two islands on the River Seine that float very close, but which do not touch.

“They are very close, but they do not touch one another,” says Chloé Déchery, performing alone in *A Duet Without You*, about the shoes-becoming-islands, about two cafés on the boulevard Saint-Germain, about two tables for two lovers, two moments from meeting. The repetition of this casual phrase tugs at the edges of an imagined world. It draws together the lovers’ locks that weigh down the Pont des Arts with a chance encounter from a hundred years ago, and it folds them into a never-ending story of human souls looking for their mates. If memory and imagination have the power to transform, then language is the music that brings their movements to life.

Indeed, when language flows over Chloé’s body – this petite woman, simply dressed, her hair tugged back in a loose pony tail – it has a real effect. Here she stands, ringed in light, listening, along with the audience, to the sounds of her absent collaborators – Pedro [Ines], Deborah [Pearson] and Simone [Kenyan], as their recorded voices play overhead. “Relax your face,” says Pedro, his deep timbre as lazy and languorous as a hot summer’s day spent resting on a café terrace in the heart of Paris, and Chloé’s face ripples with the attempt. “I’m thinking of how you have this ... almost scruffy elegance about you,” says Deborah, and Chloé’s simple clothes begin to look like the costume of a French movie star.

This is the nature of transformation in *A Duet without You* – both intricate and light, its skillfulness spun into the progress of time, like a ballroom duet or a piece of classical music. *Entrée. Variation. Adagio.* Perhaps this is why the words for these ‘movements’ appear within the set, unveiled as part of the natural progress of the senses, stories and steps onstage. They string the show together, tying its elements into a single, perfectly fitting skin, at the same time as they conjure the memory of an orchestra to join in.

But language has its limits.

“This is a quartet pretending to be a duet,” says Chloé, at the end of a list of phrases describing what she’s doing.

With each new phrase, the description slips further out of reach.

“I had to send them away,” she says earlier, about her three, invisible collaborators, present only in fragments of pre-recorded, pre-edited speech.

“It was cheaper this way ...It was about work/ life balance ...We were having issues with visas ...”

She runs through a list of reasons – this storyteller, this excuse-finder, this untrustworthy source - that describe the others' absence as a choice, a necessity or a pragmatic decision. The further she goes, the more the words seem to float, untethered, like a line of lost musical notes rising high in the air, searching for a context. It's not a sound that makes a song, but a musical flurry that decides whether you hear an overture or a lament. It is not the invisible performers that appear in this room, but the stories Chloé tells about why they are not here.

Earlier, when she is dancing – this French movie star, this wedding guest, this lover with her soulmate – she is led by an invisible partner. She laughs at an unspoken joke. She traces her steps over and over the stage, marking it with the choreography of absence, until her body is taken over by the momentum of memory. Chloé does not lead the movement but follows it. She responds to a weightless arm, an unseen touch. And, watching from the darkness of my seat, I see what she believes.

When an unnamed voice recounts a story above our heads, first in French and then in English, I can only hear the occasional word. It floats towards me, as if I have forgotten how to hear.

“... I love you ...”, says the recorded voice, “... thirty thousand years ago ...”

Occasionally she falls out of the dance – this anonymous performer, this Frenchwoman, Chloé Déchery, who is spoken about but never spoken for – as if she has forgotten something. Her body falls into the echo of a movement like a faltering recollection, or a memory struggling to be told.

So gentle is the duet between the real and the imagined, the spoken and the evoked, that it exists only as long as everyone is taking part. The audience must will ourselves into the café terraces with Chloé, into the rehearsal studios, onto the dance floor and over the Pont des Arts. We must sip hot, frothy coffee and fill our glasses with champagne. We must follow Chloé's instructions, read her words, wince when we see her plunge her feet into a bucket of ice. After all, if we don't conjure this fiction together then what is left? Just the chalky outline of a window, with nothing to see.

“Will you please tell them,” says the recorded Simone, later, her voice full with a smile, “that it was me who said that you should start in the dark?” The absent performers know we are here. Their past is our present, and they shape it, lightly, bluntly, as if they are dipping their fingers into a cup of hot, milky foam. But their words are thick with lies. They contradict each other. Make things up. Edit the ends of each other's sentences. They joke and play, as if this was a laughing matter –this fragile reality, this conjuring of company, this question of love.

I love you, I love you, I love you.

Most of the locks on the Pont des Arts, Chloé tells us, are engraved with the same phrase. We all have the same things to say, with the same words, and a unique meaning. This repetition marks the absolute distance between you and me: we are very close, but we do not touch one another.

After all, imagination has its limits.

Only Chloé knows how it feels to promenade through café terraces with the confidence of a native Parisienne – this French woman, this performer, this storyteller, this expert.

So fragile is this thing we call the real, this dance of the soul, this summoning of the past, that it requires an author, an agent, a self. It requires someone who knows where to place her feet, how to edit harmonies, how to hide words within the set, and how to unveil them later. For all her desire to submit to the past, Chloé is the agent of a careful present, too. When she draws chalk across the wall (for example) she not only imagines a window, but also raises an echo of marks that are thirty-thousand years old.

And here she stands – this individual, this performer, this product of other people’s voices. She smiles amidst the words of her absent collaborators and, later, she gets the audience to speak in voices, too. We are ventriloquized as members of the Parisian avant-garde during that familiar time, deep in cultural memory, when Paris was the European capital of art and ideas.

Here we stand, in the European capital of art and ideas, next to Picasso in his studio, considering his lover from afar, cherishing her absence, so that we can work on the memory. If imagination dances to a symphony of words, then longing is the dancefloor, the candlelight, the scruffy elegance of the ballroom.

There will come a time when this is a memory, too – this room, this taste of champagne, this imaginary view from this fragile window, this movement between past and present, reality and fiction, possession and desire.

There will come a time when the stage will lie empty and there will be nothing to see but a line of chalk. A mark made any time in the last thirty-thousand years. The same mark, made in the same way, with a unique meaning. An invitation to dance.