

The Quay Brothers' *Eurydice - She, So Beloved...* is a new work commissioned to mark the 400th anniversary of Monteverdi's *Orfeo* – the first opera ever produced. This tragic narrative tells of Orfeo gaining entry into the Underworld in an effort to bring his wife, Eurydice, back to the land of the living. Using the opera as a reference, the Quays chose to develop their response through the character of Eurydice which led them to Rainer Maria Rilke's poem 'Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes.' Rilke subtly inverts the myth by placing emphasis upon Eurydice's state and suggests that within the Underworld she has become a 'treasure', a 'sweet fruit of darkness', implying she would rather stay with Death than return to life.

The dramatic nature of the myth unfolds in a three-part installation – a film ballet (choreographed by Kim Brandstrup) connects to an optical box via an anamorphic painting. It is appropriate that the Quays combine dance with film, animation and painting to form a coherent whole, for opera itself brings together emotive lyric with voice, music, performance and stage. In addition to this, the visual devices are essential elements of any work produced by the Quays, implying that *She, So Beloved...* functions as both a celebratory commission and an extension of the Brothers' ongoing practice: the optical box is another manifestation of the Bachelor Boxes or the arcane mechanical devices that frequent their films. The anamorphic image continues their preoccupation with such image distorting effects whilst the elegantly choreographed movements of Eurydice (played by dancer Zenaida Yanowsky) correlate to the movements made by so many of the Quays' puppets. These connections open up deeper and more fertile grounds for interpretation, and suggest that the installation can be seen as a further auterist marker within the Quays oeuvre.

Of all the Quays films, *She, So Beloved...* links visually most with *The Street of Crocodiles* (1986) and *Anamorphosis* (1990) whilst, in terms of narrative, it makes strong connections to their second live-action film *The Piano Tuner of Earthquakes* (2005). Within the latter, opera singer Malvina Van Stille seemingly slips into a death-like state during a performance and is taken away to a remote island by the diabolical Doctor Droz. There she remains, existing as a woman of immense beauty waiting to be woken. Droz later hires Filesberto, a piano tuner, to service the seven automata he has placed around his island. As Filesberto repairs these devices he becomes aware of Malvina and resolves to both awaken her from the trance and free her from Droz.

THE FILM BALLET

The protagonists of *...Earthquakes* are reflected in those of Rilke's poem - Orfeo is Filesberto; Eurydice is Malvina whilst Hermes is Droz. Eurydice and Malvina are both women of significant beauty who are inextricably bound to Opera but frozen in death whilst Orfeo and Filesberto can be considered to be interlopers for they are both characters who enter a mysterious and forbidden world in an effort to rescue a loved one. Filesberto is invited into this realm, whereas Orfeo must gain entry himself: having looked into the Underworld through a dirty pane of glass, he kneels at a small but ornate aperture and sings. So tragic is his song that he is granted entry by the Gods.



TO SEE IF ONLY ONCE

EURYDICE - SHE, SO BELOVED...
A NEW INSTALLATION BY THE QUAY
BROTHERS

IN THEIR LATEST WORK, THE
INTERNATIONALLY RENOWNED QUAY
BROTHERS RESPOND TO MONTEVERDI'S
OPERA *ORFEO* TO PRODUCE A DARK AND
POIGNANT INSTALLATION.

Within the Quays' interpretation, the Underworld is, like the derelict *Street of Crocodiles*, an industrial space of sheathed scaffold; its covers loose and rippling in the wind. A dark, turgid river flows beneath while, high above, an animated crane reaches out into the darkness. Orfeo (baritone Simon Keenlyside, who also performs the beautiful and powerful accompanying soundtrack), stands amongst this wreckage and, looking down upon his bride, continues to sing. Eurydice lies all but still, her arm slowly rotating from the shoulder in a movement that recalls the deathly unwinding of the puppets in *The Street of Crocodiles*. It is as if she were a clockwork, the mechanism slowly unwinding, the semblance of life breaking down into this one fractured movement. It is painful to watch for it is in some sense a betrayal – Eurydice may be revived by the emotion of the song but it may be for only the briefest of moments.

Until now the film has been presented in black and white but, upon Eurydice's stirring, the film slips momentarily into muted colour. Life is made suddenly evident by these pale tones and Eurydice's movements become more pronounced.

She moves her head back and forth, gracefully shifting her body until Hermes (Kenneth Thrap), like Doctor Droz, steps out of the darkness and draws her back into her deathly state with a gentle touch of his hands. Undeterred, Orfeo continues his song as he works his way through this Underworld, eventually coming to rest at the side of his wife. There is silence and the couple touch. But this is *Orfeo*. Unable to resist their desires, Eurydice casts one final look upon her husband.

THE OPTICAL BOX

The act of looking through and into is another repeated element within the Brothers' work evident within this installation. Many of their characters – be they puppet or actor – involve themselves in the solitary and secret act of observation. Be it in an attempt to gaze upon the forbidden or merely to witness what lies outside, looking empowers these characters with a new knowledge. Within the installation the viewer becomes complicit with this act, for they are invited to look into the optical box via a series of



peepholes, whereupon they find a version of the filmed Underworld. By looking into this space the viewer becomes character – Orfeo – for they mirror his acts of looking and see only what he has seen.

It is worth noting that the act of looking is compounded in the film's concluding images: when Orfeo finally reaches Eurydice she reaches out and touches his hand. It is a tender moment, silent and still. Eurydice continues to caress him until her hand rests upon his cheek and then she turns, casting her gaze upon him. There is a piercing sound and then only mist - in this Underworld the cost of looking upon the desired is death. This ending makes the implications of Rilke's poem obvious, as well as much echoing the many bleak endings of the Brothers films.

In typical Quay fashion, the film ends with elegant calligraphic credits – words not written or printed but carved and chipped, a font constructed in relation to the narrative itself. The credits momentarily stop and the audience are granted one more image of Eurydice: she lies still, swathed in black velvet. Her mouth briefly opens and we hear her speak with the voice of Death: a single caw of the crow comes from deep within her throat, a sharp crack sounding out in the darkness. It is a voice that confirms her death and one that binds her to this Underworld. An abrupt cut and the credits continue.

Physically the Optical Box, with its coffin-like shape and multiple peepholes, recalls the wooden boxes seen in *The Street of Crocodiles* and *Anamorphosis* as well as the broken automata of ...*Earthquakes*. Within each of these narratives,

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they present a clockwork moment, an instance of a narrative fractured from its surroundings. Movement is active within them, solitary moments and gestures that implicate or betray some sense of story or emotion. Within *She, So Beloved...* the mechanism has long unwound and the moments contained within this funerary are locked in time. As the Quays' themselves state in reference to Rilke's poem ('She had become all root'), within this box Eurydice has 'taken root' in death and we see her likeness and beauty depicted within a static puppet made of gnarled branch and bark. She is simultaneously dead and alive, organic and frozen.

THE ANAMORPHIC IMAGE

Throughout the Quays' work there is always some sense of visual disturbance within the image, either through optic effects such as shallow focal planes or soft focus through to the more extreme disruption through anamorphosis: here the image is distorted through altering the lines of perspective which can only be rectified by viewing the image from a certain angle. Preoccupied with this visual quality, the Quays accepted a commission to make a short animated film, *Anamorphosis*, concerning the historic use of the technique for *The Program for Art on Film*.

Within *She, So Beloved...* the viewer is required to look through one of the smaller peepholes embedded within the optical box in order to correctly perceive the distorted image on the far wall - Orfeo playing his lyre. The painting acts as both a physical and symbolic device which connects the two depictions of the Underworld and reinforces the relationship between Orfeo

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and the viewer – he sang to gain entry into the Underworld whereas the viewer gains their entry through their enquiring gaze.

Throughout their growing body of work the Quays have often adapted existing works (*The Street of Crocodiles* is based upon Bruno Schulz's book of the same name) or taken influence from a diverse range of literary sources and infused it with their own narratives (as with ...*Earthquakes*, whose influences range from Rousset's *Locus Solus* to Casares's *The Invention of Morel*) in order to structure their imagery. Although this interpretation, a response to and adaptation of an opera, continues this trend, the very nature of both the source material and the commission has created something wholly unique within the Quays' oeuvre. It is a work which the viewer may fully interact with, as opposed to merely viewing. For once, and perhaps at last, the audience can physically enter the space which the Quays' imagination occupies. And that, like all their work, is a moment of immense but terrible beauty.

Eurydice - She, So Beloved has been commissioned by Opera North Projects and Capture in association with Leeds Art Gallery and The Culture Company. The installation runs until 20th January at Leeds Art Gallery (www.leeds.gov.uk/artgallery) and then goes on tour. For further information, contact Nicola Stephenson at The Culture Company - nicola@theculturecompany.co.uk or 0113 244 4130.

FURTHER READING

James Rose has written a critical biography of the Quay Brothers for the online journal *Senses of Cinema* which can be accessed at www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/directors/04/quay_brothers.html.

Further essays and interviews with the Quays can also be found on this site: *Through a Glass Darkly* - Interview with the Quay Brothers by André Habib and *Hand of Hysteria: The Bipartite Body of the Brothers Quay* by Amir Mogharabi.

Other internet based texts and interviews include *Shifting Realities: The Brothers Quay* - Between Live Action and Animation by Suzanne Buchan (www.awn.com/mag); and *Brothers Quay: In Absentia* by Roberto Aita (www.horschamp.qc.ca).

Predominately concerned with interpretations of contemporary horror cinema, James Rose has written critical texts for a range of national and international clients. Recent publications assessed *The Company of Wolves* for the March 2007 edition of *The Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies* and *The Descent* for the Autumn 2007 edition of *SplICE*. He is currently completing a book concerning British Horror Cinema for Auteur Publishing due for publication late 2008.

Images by Brian Slater.