"Alexandre Singh by David Levine," *BOMBmagazine.org* (November 12, 2013).

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All images are from *The Humans*, 2013.

In the week before its premiere at BAM, theater director-turned-artist David Levine spoke with artist-turned-theater director Alexandre Singh about recreating classical theater in Singh's play, The Humans, *which will run from November 13 through November 17 as part of Performa 13.*

David Levine Was the genesis of *The Humans* a question of somebody commissioning you to do a play out of the blue, or had you been wanting to do something like this?

Alexandre Singh I've been wanting to do something like this for a long, long time—seven or eight years. I got an email out of the blue from Defne Ayas saying that she had a mysterious new job—the nature of which she wouldn't reveal—and did I have any large projects that I wanted to do. I said "Yes, I've always wanted to do this play," so she invited me to Rotterdam, gave me the space and the time, and most importantly, the incentive and deadline, to actually produce the play.

All of the pieces I've made in the last eight or ten years have been steps in a process of learning how to craft stories in more orthodox genres, with the aim of moving towards theater and film, perhaps something even like opera—but traditional dramatic genres. I'm friends with this amazing novelist, Benjamin Hale, and we share a passion for cinema. He decided he wouldn't go down that avenue because he enjoys the act of crafting the entire world as it were, by himself, and not being compromised by the stress of having to work with a lot of people. I definitely share that feeling when I'm in the middle of a huge production, but I think it's something that suits my megalomaniacal qualities: I like to interfere in everything.

DL What is the allure of conventional narrative for you? That tends to be a real issue in a visual arts context. If something seems too much like a straight fiction, it can be faulted. Were you criticized for being too classical?

AS Recreating classical theater is not easy in any way. I challenge anybody to write an opera from scratch—it's a very difficult thing to do, just as difficult as making an avant-garde piece.

But I really do think that human beings are very narrative creatures and even in mediums that are considered very formal and abstract, those mediums communicate to their audience, not just through the splashes of paint on the canvas, but very much through the narratives of the people that created them. One of the reasons that there's been a long hangover since Romanticism that has bled into Modernism, has been that we've conflated the biographies of the artists with their sacrificial and exultant attempts at reaching the sublime via their abstract works. We've created a narrative out of that. You can't look at a Jackson Pollock without thinking of the method by which it was created and of his biography and the myth and romance around it. I think people who believe or dogmatically think that there is a space for culture that is not narrative are to some extent deluding themselves.

DL I concur. Do you consider *The Humans* a classical or conventional drama?

AS Well, it's conventional. It's not Chekhov, Wilde or Coward, even though they have a small influence on it. It's perhaps closer to Shakespeare or to Greek theater in the sense that it mixes musical elements and choreography into the story—you don't see much dancing in Oscar Wilde, but it's a very traditional three-act story. In fact, in the very beginning of the play there is a group of white foam letters that are placed on the stage which declare Act I, and all three acts acts are punctuated by an induction scene.

The Humans is probably as much influenced by novels as by actual theater. I'm sure it seems quite strange for a visual artist to say this, but I often prefer reading plays to seeing them. Maybe that's the directorial side—to enjoy imagining the staging.

DL Reading plays for me was always even more difficult than seeing them. They just seemed so flat on the page. If I couldn't think them through materially, I didn't enjoy reading them at all. So, how did Charles Ray wind up in this?

AS I wanted to make a story about the Apollonian and Dionysian divide, because I think it's such an interesting topic that you find woven throughout history and on to Nietzsche. I thought there was really that kind of quality in Mozart's *The Magic Flute* and also in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*.

I also wanted to make a work about a creator as some sort of Pygmalion-like character. I thought it would be amusing to do it in the same way that Aristophanes would choose a contemporary character to play a living sculptor. I admire Charles Ray enormously as a sculptor. His interest is in the classical. He's one of the few people who, if you hear him speak, will talk about how a sculpture touches the ground about issues of weight and demarcation of space. He's also someone who is very interested in Greek statuary and often talks about how that's an important part of his work, so it makes sense for this kind of character.

DL So he's the Prospero figure in your play?

AS Exactly.

DL In terms of the plot, I know there are two characters and that they rebel against God.

AS The story begins with Tophole, the apprentice or son of Charles Ray—the very austere, Prospero-like figure—and Pantalingua, the daughter and assistant to the chocolate bunny, who is constantly rubbing sexual energy onto plants and animals, fecundating the world. Now, Pantalingua's mother can't speak because she's so much of an object of nature, so irrational and sensual and effeminate that she speaks through dance and her daughter interprets her. Pantalingua is a very P.G. Woodhouse, Oscar Wilde type character, a very flighty aristocrat, and Tophole is a very nervous, wretched, Woody Allen type character.

Charles Ray sounds like he's been plucked out of Shakespeare—he speaks for the large majority of the play in iambic pentameter. He has been tasked by an unseen creator called Voxday (we never use the word God throughout the entire play) to do various tasks including making human beings. Charles Ray believes that Voxday communicates to him through secret signs: balls of regurgitated hair and scratch marks and strange messages left in the bottom of his coffee cup. The human beings at the beginning of the story are perfect doll automatons that look like Greek statues.

Pantalingua believes that creating an entire universe and then asking the beings created to witness this act of creation is an act of egotism and vanity, so she decides to rebel against Voxday and seeks to frustrate every one of his orders.

Meanwhile, the audience becomes aware that there is a cat walking about on the stage. It seems to be interfering in the story but the cat isn't necessarily very cunning or motivated, it's really just a cat. The audience understands then that what the characters believe to be Voxday is just a cat. So Pantalingua rebels against him, which seems to backfire.

The most important moment is in the middle of Act II, when Pantalingua corrupts the human beings by having Thirty-one—the human being that Tophole made—take a shit on stage. Not an actual shit though, a cloth one. Thirty-one then feels hungry for the first time and all of the human desires for sex, power, knowledge, and so forth, enter into him and he leads the rest of the chorus into the outhouse where they all excrete and come out corrupted. From this moment on, all of the chorus don grotesque caricature masks. As they become more human—more individualistic and rapacious—they become less human theatrically, through these masks. Then hilarity ensues through the rest of the story.

DL You guarantee that?

AS Well, hilarity and some turmoil.

DL And the Tophole-Pantalingua relationship is ... ?

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AS It's a little love story. I don't want to give away the story too much but they become powerful figures in their own mythology.

DL So, you said you've had both violent criticism and some praise?

AS I wasn't expecting people in theater to be so ideological. While I have spent more time in visual art, I don't really consider myself a visual artist or say that I'm of that world. I'm not more interested in art than any other medium. I assumed that people would be open-minded, and because theater is such a craft-based genre it's quite clear if it's really well-acted or really well-written, regardless of whether I care or don't care about the costumes or these things. But, when I was pitching the project to people, they would immediately be very skeptical about whether a visual artist could do theater, and they worried that I wouldn't understand what it means to have a captive audience. I'm not just going to come in with some strong visual ideas and it's going to be five hours long and you'll spend the whole time yawning. I love the craft, and I'm eager to make something that's entertaining and seductive. But they would frown and say, "Oh, we don't like that kind of theater, we were hoping you'd suggest something more experimental," which to me seems rather contradictory.

DL Well, what's interesting about this project institutionally is that, ultimately, visual artists and theater people will wind up sitting in the same room together, watching your piece.

AS If you make a work in any medium that's strong enough, it speaks across mediums and you don't need to categorize the person that's making it. You just say, "Do you like Woody Allen?" Whatever he does it's totally infused with his character and worldview. That's the kind of thing to aim for, for creative people.

DL Do you have different kinds of anxieties then, about approaching an opening in a new medium or do you just feel like it's another exhibition?

AS The play is a labor of love into which I poured an unbelievable amount of energy over the last two years. It's something that's very precious to me and very fragile because it can fail at any moment.

I think that, large projects aside, most works of art are more like sketches or propositions—it's the difference between writing an opera or writing a two minute pop song. So, I'm not as nervous and anxious about the success of individual works of art, because I have different expectations for them.

DL It's true that a work of art can survive as a gesture, pointing toward the conceptual, whereas a play is *the thing itself*. You're kind of stuck with it, but so are your spectators, so there's also this element of the captive and potentially enraged audience.

The thing about sending work off to an art fair is that at a fair, nobody is paying any particular attention and for the most part, they haven't paid good money to imprison themselves in a dark room with no coffee.

AS Yeah, and if they don't like it they just walk away.

DL They're not aimed at your work the same way that they are in a theater.

AS Well, audience members walk out of theaters all the time, especially in London apparently.

DL See, in America they never do. There's another element to this, more a problem of audience or of architecture than a particular kind of stagecraft. One major difference, and I wonder how this is going to fare for you, is that one of the great things about staging at The Globe or pre-Realist staging—i.e. before the invention of "the fourth wall"—is that the performer can actually address an audience directly with the shared conviction that they all occupy the same room. What happens now though is—regardless of Alexandre Singh's beliefs—you still have an audience that believes very strongly in the fourth wall. BAM's theater isn't built like The Globe—we all carry around a fourth wall inside our heads—and you guys are still performing in a more conventional proscenium arrangement. I think the real challenge would be to figure out how to preserve this Greek or Shakespearian idea where you aren't pretend speaking to the audience, but you are actually speaking to the audience, when the audience no longer experiences things that way. Does that make sense?

AS Yes and no. Because I'm drawing on a particular type of theater, certain characters behave in a certain way. For example, the character Charles Ray plays is Shakespearian, but he's also very French-Baroque, in the sense that he is very frontal. He very much addresses the audience directly and uses very stylized gestures. All of the masked characters are working in strict frontality and communicating with the audience in the typical *commedia* fashion. The *commedia* actor is playing like a cartoon, to the camera, as it were. You think about Wile E. Coyote looking into the camera and looking frustrated because he can't catch the Road Runner. And the stage itself is very pictorial, though not a barebones experience like in The Globe.

DL Would you do another play? *The Humans*, as described, seems like a sort of grand or metaphysical statement. What could another play possibly be after this?

AS I have many, many ideas. Every story suggests different approaches in terms of staging. I'd also like to make films, another medium that has its own rules and regulations. I'm more interested in the stories really, than in the forms. The story suggests a form.

DL One more question. Did you do the sets?

AS Yes.

DL This is always an interesting question: did you farm it out to a scene shop, or did you use fabricators? Did you employ a theatrical apparatus or an art apparatus to get it built?

AS Some of the scenography was built by Jessica Tankard, who is a young architect in Rotterdam. After making plans, it's nice to work with someone who can actually build. Working with theatrical fabricators is just like working with art fabricators, there's no real difference. The prop department approach was a lot like art, and I was also essentially the art director—which, I should mention, I would never, ever do again because I think writing and directing and doing the props and the masks is too much.

In the future, I'd really like to work with an art director on the scenography, because if they understand that I am quite a tyrant in what I want then they might be open to that kind of approach. It was an interesting experience to learn what works in terms of the completely different visual qualities of an object that's viewed from 50 centimeters away versus an object that's viewed from 10 or 20 meters away, as well as the level of finish required to make things work in a theatrical space. It's not enormously different from conceiving of an object to be in a performance. I think it's more challenging and more interesting actually, making sets.

DL Why is it more challenging?

AS Because it has to be a more dynamic object and it can't be precious. It has to be adaptable. For example, when I first sketched the mountain, which is the center of the play, it was really just a sculpture. After speaking with the costume designer Holly Waddington, who has done a bit of theater designing, she made it so clear that this was really a crap set. It just took up space and didn't do anything. By speaking to her I found a couple of different ways that characters could sit on the mountain, ways that the mountain could come apart and have a multiplicity of uses.

Something that anybody who works in theater knows—and that I didn't—is that there is a real economy to the stage. It's such a waste of the audience's attention, energy, and effort to bring on a prop or to build an element of scenography if you don't really use it enough. The best plays and best use of an object is to get as much mileage as possible, and to use it in one way then subvert it. The economy of that is very satisfying. It's a bit like poetry: you want to cram in as much information using as few syllables as possible.

DL That's a nice way to put it. Are these sets going to reenter circulation as sculptures?

AS No, my original idea was that it would be nice to exhibit them, but actually having made them, they live on a stage. You wouldn't want to look at them like art objects, they don't work that way. They crumble and fall apart when you look at them up close.