

To Abort, Vomit, or Faint
(*Avorter, vomir, ou s'évanouir*)¹

Agnès Pierron

Translated from the French by Charlie Ellbé

Three verbs² in which the feminine “v” takes its form, a “v” bound not only to gender but also to victory. They express the very special effects of the Grand-Guignol in its best moments.

One of José de Bérlys³ neighbours, was fond of noting: “Every time I am pregnant, I go to the Grand-Guignol.” This cryptic remark left her audience perplexed. Unconsciously, this extreme spectator was joining her sisters of the Antiquity, who spontaneously aborted⁴ at the at the *Eumenides* of Aeschylus (460 years before our era).

To abort out of terror or to vomit out of disgust. Denise Dax⁵, the last victim of what was known as the *Theatre de l'impasse Chaptal*,⁶ and one of Eddie Ghilain's⁷ most privileged performers (along with Germaine Duclos) testifies: “Women in the audience would throw up when the tips of my breasts were cut off.” When I was at the Conservatoire de Nancy in the mid-'70s, I did not suspect that my drama teacher, Suzanne Fleurant—and here I take the opportunity to evoke the memory of this lovely woman, who only knew how to give instructions by smiling—also had had the tips of her breasts cut off. It

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is coincidentally through a picture reprinted in a program found in a flea market that I found out. She who would only refer to the Odéon Theatre and to the sweet Bussang Theatre, sitting in the middle of silver firs in a quiet area, had had her breasts cut off on the Pigalle stage, as if she was a new Agatha of Sicily.⁸

The sight of dripping blood turns the stomachs of the audience, makes their eyes roll back in their heads, and faint. But do they faint because the sight is unbearable or because their pleasure is too great? Do they faint because they cannot continue to watch or because the pleasure of watching would be too great? In any case, director Max Maurey—owner of the space from 1899 to 1914—rubs his hands backstage: two, five, seven, nine ... fifteen folding seats slam shut: It's a success. It brings delight to everyone at the bar: a fainting corresponds to several glasses of port wine—not some Ricqlès⁹ like that served on Air France! Generally speaking, it is the women who faint. Men, on their end, shout: “Enough!”, “I cannot watch this anymore!” In the best circumstances, women swoon in the arms of their future partners. Flirting Grand-Guignol style: an effective and time-saving method.

Echoing the three “v”s, are the three “s”s: sweat, blood [*sang*], sperm. “S”: an erect serpentine shape. The Grand-Guignol is a theatre of spirits and liqueurs. The “s” has the arrogance of being at the beginning of these words. Cold sweat of the frightened spectator; sweat of the actor energetically performing. New blood leaking from the wounds or coagulated blood from old wounds—the composition is not the same. If the colours change¹⁰, the audience members consequently topple over The products used to make blood – of course, it is not fresh blood, which would cause problems with preservation and odour – are more or less well supported by delicate skin. These mixtures of Vaseline and liquid carmine¹¹ risk causing allergies. I imagine Maxa¹², known as “the most assassinated woman in the world,” putting on powders, creams, and ointments to get rid of the itches, burns, and redness. Using redcurrant jelly or rosehip purée leads to other issues: The actors use it as a spread on bread ... Eating bloody bread ... Only at the Grand-Guignol can one engage in such debauchery! Redcurrants and rosehips, forerunners of ketchup!

These are only backstage games. In the auditorium, thanks to the box seats, some of the audience members can move on to a more serious game ... surrendering to the extreme pleasures that were permitted in other rooms of Pigalle, which our puritan epoch has rushed to demolish. I dare say that the Grand-Guignol proposes a secular echo of the Carmel fence¹³. I allow myself to consider it as the conspiratorial other side of the covenants' sacredness with

its tied-up actresses. For that matter, was the Grand-Guignol not a chapel where the fervent patriot Father Didon used to preach? Up until the late 1960s, the Grand-Guignol kept traces of its primitive function, which imparted it with all of its appeal and originality: stalls, neo-gothic woodwork, two gigantic angels, a rostrum accessible through a secret staircase, and, most importantly, the famous box seats, all of which alluded to confessionals.

Nothing is better than a shower to get rid of the traces of sweat, blood, and sperm. As Denise Dax quipped: “I was dead, all I had left to do is to go wash myself!” In a splendid text (see Robert Laffont, p.1381–1395),¹⁴ Maxa insists on the laundry room aspect of the Grand-Guignol backstage. Actors had only to stop thinking of washing themselves and let their costumes dry. While touring actors obsess over laundry baskets, Grand-Guignol actors obsess over clotheslines. But some stains persist; a deep wash cannot overcome them. Thus, the actors find themselves in the street with bloody stains in the folds of their skin. Which can have a bad effect. But the Grand-Guignol was not created to have a good effect; rather, to have *an* effect. The funny part is, in order to wash themselves, the actors only had the parsimonious flow of the quasi-stagnate water of a sink installed on the floor. Since the Grand-Guignol space was not conceived to be a theatre, it did not have dressing rooms.

The blood flowing on stage corresponds to the tight and dry throats of the audience members. Through a very distinctive system of free-flowing sensation, the saliva is pulled out of the audience’s mouths while blood flows on the stage. Grand-Guignol is physiology. In order to rehydrate themselves, the audience rushes to the bar. They put themselves back together with port wine while the actors perk themselves up with quinquina.¹⁵ Performing the Grand-Guignol repertoire leaves one bloodless. One must bring the fire back to one’s cheeks by ingesting Mariani wine,¹⁶ for example. André de Lorde, in-house playwright, the “Prince of terror[,]” goes so far as to praise its merits in the press: “Mariani wine has magic virtues, which made it famous around the world. It is—without a doubt—both the most enjoyable and the most powerful of restorative tonics...” Actor René Chimier, the “king of fear” who died in May of 1997, would speak of himself as a privileged consumer: “There are consequences to performing the roles of madmen, lunatics or sadists. Exhausted, I got to the point where I no longer had control over my own nerves. I feared I would become neurasthenic.” The positive effects of Mariani tonic wine, made from Peruvian coca extract – the ancestor of Coca-Cola – were praised by the end of the nineteenth century. Only one single

performance by a mime of *The Flower of Coca*, by Paul Arène and Gustave Goetchy, took place on June 29, 1892, at the Mariani Theatre with Miss Dowe in the role of Colombine and Séverin in the role of Pierrot:

*And yet coca is living gold, fluid gold
Which turns into a thoroughbred the exhausted stallion;
The mistress holds out the cup for the lover to drink.
Ecce Pierrot redivivus! Pierrot drank.*

[Original French:

*Or, la coca, c'est l'or vivan, c'est l'or fluide
Qui refait un pur-sang de l'étalon fourbu ;
L'amante tend la coupe et l'amoureux la vide.
Ecce Pierrot redivivus ! Pierrot a bu]*

Strange that Séverin, the mime, was among the first artists to perform at the Grand-Guignol Theatre back in 1896 when it was called Théâtre Salon.

In fact, during an evening at the Grand-Guignol, the sensorial safety valve would alternate between comedic and dramatic plays to avoid that a too great tension would leave the spectator shaken and without support. This explains why an evening would be composed of four to six plays. For example, here is how an evening of October 1921—while the genre was at its peak—was composed: an opening (*Un troisième acte (A Third Act)* by Serge Veber), a comedy (*Mado* by Marice Level), a drama (*L'Homme de la nuit (The Man of the Night)* by André de Lorde), another drama (*Le Rapide n° 13 (Rapid N° 13)* by Jean Sartène), a comedy (*La Dame de bronze et le Monsieur de cristal (The Bronze Lady and the Crystal Man)* by Henri Duvernois). I would say that Grand-Guignol is terror shaped like a gloved hand.¹⁷ Laughter is visceral in the same way that terror is. Faces can become congested or contorted as much from laughter as they can from terror. Don't we laugh until we cry and can't we laugh ourselves to death?

Let's not forget that the two registers—comedic and dramatic—are divided. No laughter in dramas or else they could fall flat. As for comedies, they are functional and can only find reason for their existence as alternatives to dramas. With them, the spectator can relax only to get more tense, as in hot and cold showers, which itself offers a dramatic turn of events.

In order to get to such immediate and violent effects as abort, vomit, faint, or to become congested, repulsed, contorted, the Grand-Guignol—a

simple, elementary theatre—uses certain tricks of direct dramaturgy. The lines are ordered like manuscript paper. Contrary to a false preconceived idea, the Grand-Guignol is neither a *théâtre de canvas*¹⁸ nor of improvisation. The plays are not presented like scenarios on which it is impossible to embroider. They appear as true pieces of clockmaking. Didn't a neighbour of the Théâtre de l'impasse Chaptal say that it was possible to set one's watch to the sound of the gunshot that closed each play? The surprise endings were nearly timed like a pre-recorded tape. When I was a kid, we would go to bed at the moment of death of Stanislas¹⁹, which was mentioned in a sound and light show. I can still hear the melodramatic voice coming from the Lunéville castle, announcing “the death that consumes and kills.” The Grand-Guignolesque death of a king: his dressing gown, bordered by the flames from the fireplace where he fell asleep, pulled him into the blaze and into a “horrible,” “dreadful,” “atrocious” death—to borrow the descriptive words of predilection of the genre.²⁰ And the Grand-Guignol is all the more frightening as its action takes place in confined spaces: a lighthouse, an operation room, an asylum, a ship's hold, an opium den.

The positioning of all of the dramatic elements at the Grand-Guignol theatre is close to surgical precision. It is no coincidence that André de Lorde requested that it be a genre within a genre: a “medical theatre” and that he wrote a play so violent towards surgeons (*The Butchers (Les Charcuteurs)*)—which was published but not performed—at least not during his lifetime.

Anguish must be put in place before the terror can emerge. In addition, the preparation can be a bit slow—especially in order to satisfy the spectators of today. Some plays make use of affectations in the style of vaudeville—among the best (*Le Laboratoire des hallucinations (The Laboratory of Hallucinations)*, *L'Horrible Expérience (The Horrible Experience)* by André de Lorde)—before getting into the thick of it. The critics of the time called it “atmospheric drama.” A theatre director must mislead the audience—bring the attention to stage left, while the danger will come from stage right, and arrange the lights to emphasize where nothing will take place, while the danger will occur where no one expects it. The Grand-Guignol is a theatre of sudden appearance and of prestidigitation. It functions with the dramatic turn of events, minus the *deus ex machina*: no happy endings—it can only end badly.

How could a theatre with such precarious balance manage to gain such success? Because it belongs to the “specialty theatre” that was eliminated by “public service theatre.” The “specialty theatre” is to be connected to the brothel, where girls have their specialty. We discussed confined atmospheres: let's also mention the brothel. Let's not forget that we are in the Pigalle

district, where the connection between art and the brothel is obvious. One is the sublimation of the other. Think of Beaubourg, constructed in the district of St-Denis Street, considered the hottest street in Paris. It is the same people who went to see the whores²¹ and who today contemplate paintings and often visit art galleries. One must not obsess over the posterity of the Grand-Guignol via gore cinema: it is much more on the side of creative arts, performances or environments. It is also found in hard rock. Think of performances by Marilyn Manson, which were made in the tradition of Alice Cooper at the Bataclan.

Audiences of the Grand-Guignol know the detours and secret passages to access their pleasure. The junkies—those who take in the performance as a form of addiction—know where to sit in an auditorium. Aroused by a compulsion for repetition, they position themselves in the same place so they can get a look from below. Denise Dax retells how a member of the audience would always sit in the same seat in order to see the woman tied up to the torture pole. If the Grand-Guignol has a connection to art galleries today, it is by the intermediary of bondage: think of the works of Grégoire Desprele in a gallery of the Villette neighbourhood; “his” women with garrotted breasts, a lump in their throat, and tied hands.

For about 20 years, Maxa is an outpost of Grand-Guignol martyrology. She abandons the vibrations of her own voice; she seduces herself when she delivers the screams that made her famous. It is at this moment that she enters the trance of a stage performance resembling that of the shaman more than that of the stage performer. She behaves like a great priestess of horror—a vaticinating priestess.²²

And the audience, forgetting itself like she forgets herself, asks only to follow her, without reservations or reluctance.²³

Notes

¹ Originally published in *Revue Europe Littéraire Mensuelle* 836 (1998), pp. 101-107. *Monstrum* thanks the editors of *Revue Europe* for permission to publish this first English translation of Pierron’s essay.

² Referring, of course, to the titular *avorter, vomir, ou s’évanouir*.

³ Pseudonym of Josep Bloch (1883-1957), French writer who worked for the Grand-Guignol theatre.

⁴ Pierron's term "avorter" means literally "to abort"; here the sense is "to miscarry" or "to have a miscarriage." The literal translation was retained to keep intact the visceral sense of the word "abort" in English.

⁵ French actress who performed at the Grand Guignol Theatre in its last years of existence

⁶ That is, *Le Théâtre du Grand-Guignol*, or the Grand-Guignol Theatre, 1897-1962.

⁷ French Playwright (1902-1974) who wrote several plays that were performed at the Grand-Guignol theatre.

⁸ A Christian saint, martyred circa 251.

⁹ A French brand of mint-flavoured beverage.

¹⁰ Here, Pierron uses the expression "les couleurs virent," which is comparable to the idea of milk turning sour. The poetry of the original sentence, going from "virer" (turn) to "chavirer" (topple), has no equivalence in English.

¹¹ A red dye used in food colouring.

¹² Paula Maxa (Marie-Thérèse Beau) (1892 – 1970), French Actress who performed regularly at the Grand-Guignol between 1917 and 1933.

¹³ Reference to the Carmelites, a Roman Catholic religious order

¹⁴ *Le Grand Guignol: Le Théâtre des peurs de la Belle Époque*, edited and published by Robert Laffont (1995)

¹⁵ An aperitif, or aromatised wine, that contains quinine.

¹⁶ Another aperitif wine, this one containing coca.

¹⁷ Pierron here uses the expression "en doigts de gants," which can also translate as "thermowell," or a tapered pressure-regulating barrier around a temperature-measuring instrument. That is, another barrier that, like a safety valve, manages degrees of pressure, like the alternating mixture of comical and dramatic Grand-Guignol plays.

¹⁸ The canvas is used in theatre to provide a synopsis of the story without getting into details about actors' blocking and dialogue. Pierron uses the term "théâtre de canvas" to refer to a type of semi-improvised theatre.

¹⁹ Stanisław I Leszczyński (1677 – 1766), King of Poland and Grand Duke of Lithuania.

²⁰ [Pierron's note: It is worth mentioning that Stanislas did not die instantly but after many months of suffering.]

²¹ This is a direct translation of the French term, *putes*.

²² That is, a soothsayer or prophetess.

²³ With thanks to Mario DeGiglio-Bellemare for valuable editorial suggestions in this translation.

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