

The quiet magnificence of mask theatre

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“André & Dorine”, a play without words, has been performed in more than 30 countries

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“You’re 82 years old. You’ve shrunk six centimetres, you only weigh 45 kilos, yet you’re still beautiful, graceful and desirable. We’ve lived together now for 58 years and I love you more than ever. I once more feel a gnawing emptiness in the hollow of my chest that is only filled when your body is pressed next to mine.”

So begins a 75-page letter from André Gorz, an Austrian-born French philosopher, to his wife, Dorine Keir. Determined to be together until the very end, they injected themselves with a lethal substance in September 2007 and died in each other’s arms at their home in Vosnon, France. They had often said that, if by some miracle, they were to have a second life, they’d like to spend it together. In “André & Dorine”, a play partly inspired by their love story, they do.

The play is an almost silent, masked performance. It was developed by the Kulunka Theatre Company of Gipuzkoa, in Spain’s Basque Country. The audience first meets André and Dorine when, after decades of cohabitation, they have begun to treat each other with indifference. Instead of words, the characters communicate through gestures and the use of objects and sounds. An off-note played by Dorine on her beloved cello

evinces her discontent, while André's irritated fingers clacking on his old typewriter express his. The combination of the sounds, the interaction with props and the impeccable comedic timing of the actors effaces the need for dialogue.

"André & Dorine" tells a universal story about love and old age. Dorine becomes confused and, after she is diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, the protagonists are forced to remember who they once were. Her illness is the catalyst that brings them back together. The play's cast of three interpret a host of different characters between them, which include younger versions of André and Dorine, but also their son, a disgruntled postman, a doctor and a home nurse. Their masks—colourful, oversized and lifelike, despite their exaggerated features—allow them to switch between characters with ease.

The play draws on a long tradition. From magic and hunting rituals to religious ceremonies, masks have fulfilled an important role across cultures and traditions. Ancient Egyptians used them when reimagining the death and resurrection of Osiris, the god of fertility and the afterlife. The ancient Greeks wore expressive masks on stage: as with the Kulunka troupe, it allowed actors to play multiple roles and for far-off spectators to see the faces more clearly. Japan's *kabuki* theatre and Italy's *commedia dell'arte* use stylised masks. Bertolt Brecht, Jerzy Grotowski and Jacques Lecoq wrote works with masks in the 20th century.

Inspired by these writers and by her work with Familie Flöz, a theatre troupe based in Germany, Garbiñe Insausti, one of the show's three main actors, began experimenting with such disguises. The masks allowed the actors to explore themes such as ageing, illness, mortality, and the loss of love more candidly. The play's creators felt it gave the cast freedom to interpret those difficult subjects with tenderness and humour. "That's the poetry of masks," Ms Insausti says.

"André & Dorine" has been performed around 600 times in more than 30 countries since 2010. It will resonate with anyone who has cared for a loved one that has suffered from dementia or a similar illness, or who has experienced how the flame of a relationship slowly fades over time. Travelling the world with 15 large polyurethane resin masks of human faces has prompted many awkward conversations at airports with customs officials, say the cast members, but the message they transmit in their play resonates across borders. ■

"André & Dorine" will be performed between June 9th and 19th at the Los Angeles Theatre Centre