

Alma



BY **FABRICE MURGIA** AND **PEGGY LEE COOPER**
MUSIC **SZYMON BRZOSKA**
SCRIPT **TRICITY VOGUE**

A production of the Théâtre de Namur
Season 2022/23
Opens 16 May 2023 at the Théâtre de Namur



The context of creation

Fabrice Murgia and the cabaret artiste Peggy Lee Cooper have taken the myth of Faust and marinaded it in the universe of reality TV to create a diabolical spectacle that plays with the codes of anglophone musical comedy.

The curtain comes up on the finale of a reality TV show where the candidate Faust, who is just about to lose, calls upon the devil to help her regain her place. The pact she signs will enable a meteoric rise, only the price she has to pay may be a bit too high...

«*Alma*» is not an adaptation of Faust like numerous others. For this original work, the story as told by Goethe represents a source of inspiration acknowledged by the 4 creators, but they depart from it in several respects in order to follow their own paths.

The work is a amalgam of multiple influences, marrying traditions of cabaret glamour and interweaving inspirations from Goethe with the more contemporary. The team brings together creators of multifaceted talent: the libretto is written by the Irish-British composer Tricity Vogue, songwriter and ukulele musician; the music is composed by Szymon Broszka, who is experienced in complex, cinematic, and imaginative sonic accompaniments; mise en scène by Fabrice Murgia playing on the codes of sensational and ratings-driven television; and a sulfurous performance by the audacious and divine Peggy Lee Cooper.

A weaving together of music, cabaret, theatre and audiovisual elements, this piece takes us to the heart of a universe inspired by Faust that remains resolutely contemporary and surprising.

Interview with Fabrice Murgia and Peggy Lee Cooper

« Alma » : the myth of Faust meets self promotion. In the age of shameless hyper narcissism, what is a person willing to sacrifice in order to come out on top?

Why is the story of Faust of interest today? What does his famous deal with the devil mean now ?

Fabrice What we want to explore in 'Alma' is the self as spectacle: how we curate our selves, the self as a brand, living all the time as if we were looking at ourselves in a mirror. Life as a performance piece! But the result of so much self-staging is that one no longer knows whether one is actually living one's life or simply playing the rôle of oneself in the film of one's life.

This way of constructing our public selves does not matter just for celebrities or superficial people looking for the spectacular and the outrageous. It matters to all of us. The world incites us to position ourselves, to have a 'look', to push ourselves to the limit. This puts us under pressure, with one eye always on the gaze of the other and on how we appear to ourselves. This 'ego-trip' society causes suffering. When we look in the mirror, can we still discern a correlation between what we do, what we say, and what we think? At what point do we have to say that we have sold our souls to something or someone? To satisfy what need ? What have we given in exchange for this illusion of eternal youth? It is a parable: the desire for more functions as the dynamo of our fantasies but as soon as we have something, it ceases to be a fantasy and has to be replaced with something else. We always need a fantasy of some sort.

Peggy This constant pressure people feel to conform themselves to the images they find on social media or to what they see celebrities doing is on the increase. In the next ten years, I would say that it will rise by 1000%! Celebrity is a monster that needs constant feeding and keeps asking for more in order to maintain its position and visibility. How far are people prepared to go in order to remain up there? Which pressures are they prepared to put up with? There are already plenty of people waiting in the wings to take their place, each with millions of followers of their own.

Today, for example, there are people with 50 million followers and more, which represents a frightening amount of power. Most of them don't even know what to do with their power. When I was young, international icons – Pavarotti for example – were creative people, artists and makers. Now, by contrast, 'celebrities' create nothing other than themselves.

Fabrice In the myth of Faust, knowledge and power go hand in hand. Faust is a young scholar who knows basically everything. There isn't a book that can teach him anything new. The pact that the devil proposes to Faust takes the form of pleasure and eternal youth. Adapting the myth to our self-centred society re-poses this question: is popular recognition still linked to competence and talent or is it simply a matter of the notoreity one is able to create for oneself, to one's self-curation?

The play will open on the finale of a reality TV show where the contestant Faust (now played by a woman) is about to lose. She calls upon the devil to help her re-take the lead and win the programme.

Fabrice In Act 1 we will witness the negotiation of the deal between Faust and the devil leading up to the signing that will enable Faust's ascent into the world of reality TV. When Act 2 opens, two years have passed and Faust's popularity is unassailable. But she has changed. She now has her own programme and even if she is still being exploited by the system, she is also in a position to exploit others.

Peggy She has realised that there is a price to pay and that the instrument the devil has given her is actually an executioner's axe. Victory has a bitter taste and her career – no matter how great it seems – comes at the cost of her soul. Faust is ready to do anything at all for the best interview, to make the biggest noise, because this is what gets her noticed. This will lead to her downfall: the day she invites the devil onto her programme.

How was this project conceived ?

Peggy By the coming together of several people. Fabrice, the composer Szymon Brzoska, and myself found ourselves wanting to work together with a shared vision of spectacle: halfway between cabaret and musical comedy (in the Anglo-Saxon tradition where these two cultures mix and cross-fertilise one another). The origin of the project is also in a desire to enjoy ourselves because if you want to make a musical comedy or a cabaret you need first this desire to enjoy yourself.

Fabrice For a long time now I have wanted to open the stage to different forms : less rigid, more generous. I wanted to have a taste of what is happening in the Anglo-Saxon world and also of what you will find here in night-time cabaret and clubs. Added to this is the desire to reconnect with the spectacular – which has always attracted me – both from a technical and a musical point of view, and to take it all the way, to really have fun with it.

Peggy Personally, I come from the world of cabaret and I am attracted by the contribution that Fabrice's different way of looking at things can offer, re-framing things and freeing them from their habitual little boxes, and taking them to a different audience.

Fabrice I wanted to have fun, Peggy wanted a frame... so we decided that each of us was taking a step towards the other.

Peggy In a way, we both wanted to try out different elements from each other's worlds.



How will you retell the story of Faust within the world of cabaret and musical comedy ?

Peggy Working with music is working with an extra actor. A horror film without music isn't scary! Intense scenes without music won't make people cry. Music is an invisible actor whose role is to amplify the emotion. It gets used all the time in musical comedy where a good song accelerates the emotions and allows you to go straight to the hearts of the audience members while still moving the story on. The only way to really understand it is by experiencing it. The first musical comedy I ever saw ('Chicago' in 1994 in London) made me cry so much from happiness that I missed two thirds of the performance! What interests me about working in this medium is that you can give your audience a big slap upside the face, and they won't even see it coming.

Fabrice Dialogue and singing will alternate in this production, in the manner of musical comedy which is very different from theatre or opera. Music will be in the driving seat. It will be composed in such a way that it tells the story by addressing the audience directly (as in cabaret or with the breaking of the fourth wall). We will play with the story, collapsing it into a story about two people (there are more characters, but it is first and foremost the story of a negotiation, of a combat, of a deal between two people) and then stretching it out into dimensions beyond where realism can take us: all of a sudden the emotion is too big, and so we sing! Music is a vibration. It goes via your stomach to reach your brain.

Peggy Formerly, opera was the music of the people, whilst symphonies were for the serious-minded. That's why there are so many well-known opera melodies: they were written to be remembered. Musical comedy is a bit like opera that has got mixed up with jazz. It remains a story full of emotions, feelings, told in music that is not trying to be elitist in any way.

Fabrice, the reality TV setting leads to the presence of cameras on stage and this creates a back-and-forth game between real-time and filmed narratives that is a signature of your work. Is this an infinite regression that you want to continue to explore?

Fabrice There is always a different reason for the camera to be on stage. Here it is to mark the transition between public speech and intimate speech, between the moments when one is being watched by others and the moments when one is supposedly alone but the external observer is still there! This paradox means that those places where one can usually 'let oneself go' in solitude end up being the places where one is most exposed. Nothing escapes the ever-present camera. As a public personality, having become famous as a TV presenter Faust is never at peace. Even in her dressing room she is followed by the eye of a camera that is constantly tracking her emotions.

Stars like Avicii or Amy Winehouse, who died aged 27 or 28, bear witness to the enormous pressure that celebrities are under. When you watch documentaries about them you realise that the camera never left them alone for a second. It makes you wonder whether the pressure was coming from what the camera revealed, or from the camera itself.

This raises questions about the fabrication of images...

Peggy Manipulation is one of the big themes of this show. Who manipulates whom in this particular universe? By creating content in bulk, from images filmed in spades, one can tell whatever story one chooses. People's lives become a story woven out of images twisted out of context. You take a picture of a happy family and another of a sad family, and you construct your scenario however you want to.

Fabrice Our objective is to help people feel the falsity of this world, the 'plastic' side and the disposable 'Kleenex culture': Kleenex actors, Kleenex producers, and a Kleenex audience that get picked up and then thrown away again...

Do you already have an idea of the visual form your show will take?

Fabrice The show will be quite mobile so that we can tour it easily, including internationally (there are already English and French language versions). The idea is of something contemporary, light, which uses elements that are already present on site, such as a wall in the distance, a partially illuminated room where we can film the audience... The scenography will play with the juxtaposition of large open spaces and more enclosed spaces such as the dressing room. We would like to create the impression of a studio set mid-filming, through the use of a sparse décor that includes tech equipment and a monumental screen: a sensation of the total image.

Peggy The screen is a magnifying glass and a perfect illustration of the truncated life of images. That which appears on screen and which is supposed to completely absorb our attention is in fact nothing but a cropped version of reality whilst, off-screen, everything else offers itself to our inspection: the backstage and the wings, the devil's manipulations...

Can you say a few words about the creative team you are working with?

Fabrice The core foursome includes, apart from Peggy and me, the composer Syzmon Brzoska and the librettist Tricity Vogue, who knows the world of reality TV from having worked at Endemol (the company that made – among other things – 'Big Brother').

Peggy Tricity has already written one musical comedy and she has several albums of cabaret songs to her name. She is a past-master of the rhythm that musical comedy needs in a song.

Fabrice On stage there will be four performers from the world of cabaret and cross-dressing: Peggy as the devil, Sarah-Louise Young (well known from musical comedy) in the role of Faust, and two other performers. What is really fabulous about such characters as Peggy Lee Cooper is they come with their own style, their own look, their own humour, their own personality – it's a real strength.

Peggy There will also be four musicians on stage, multi-instrumentalists who will give variety and colour in the soundscape.

How will the creative foursome work: each in their own domain, or will you be mixing your talents?

Fabrice Since we come from different disciplines, we complement each other quite well. I will be focussing mostly on the visual side of the narrative, Tricity and Peggy on the writing of script and lyrics, with Szymon of course on the music. All four of us will be working on the scenario.

Peggy As far as the music is concerned, we have a lot in common, as well as styles towards which we want to go, and composers of whom we are all fans: Kurt Weill (composer of the 'Threepenny Opera'); Stephen Sondheim who is – for me – the best composer and the best lyricist in musical comedy; John Kander and Fred Ebb, who composed 'Chicago' and 'Cabaret'. These are our inspirations...

- Interview by Pascale Palmers

Allegory of the times we live in – the Zeitgeist

One of the strengths of the Faust story is that it lends itself to the spirit of the present, illustrating the individual anxieties and ambitions that are characteristic of our age. Holding up a mirror to contemporary society, this creation stages the fragility of the search for success through the light-heartedness and extravagance of cabaret, the power of music, and the sparkle of costumes and decors.

Timeless, these characters keep sending us back to the contradictions and eternal emotions that belong to us as human beings. In the era of social media and the staging of the self, this spectacle offers a totally contemporary take on a secular myth that has become the archetype of human aspirations.

Press quotes

"Captivating music theatre."

- De Standaard

"Szymon Brzoska's live music inspires the piece by giving direction and rhythm, emotion and thought. The soundtrack is like flowing blood; it keeps the piece and its dancers alive to continue their transformations."

- Broadway.com

***"Sarah-Louise Young
has a powerhouse voice
and an effortless way
of drawing all of us in...
captivating, engaging
and glorious"***

Musical Theatre review **.***

CAST
Sarah-Louise Young
Peggy Lee Cooper
Aleksēi Von Wosylius (ongoing)

DIRECTOR
Fabrice Murgia

DRAMATURG /PLAYWRIGHT
Peggy Lee Cooper

COMPOSER
Szymon Brzoska

SCRIPT
Tricity Vogue

VIDEO & SET DESIGNER
Giacinto Caponio

TECHNICAL DIRECTOR & SET
DESIGNER
Marc Defrise

SOUND DESIGNER
Matthew Higuēt

LIGHTING TECHNICIAN
Thomas Debouche

VIDEO TECHNICIANS
Julien Sartillo et
Marc-Alexandre Delacharlerie.

Bio's

Andrea Dainef



Fabrice Murgia (Cie Artara)

Cie Artara was founded in 2005 by Fabrice Murgia, to form an operational unit around his creations. Today, the core business of Cie Artara is to bring together actors, musicians, visual artists and videographers around the shows of Fabrice Murgia. Murgia is working on the development of a personal style in which these different languages confront each other on set. The text is not at the core of the narrative structure. There are a few key principles that are reflected in the creative processes of all performances of Cie Artara, namely: writing while working on scene, reflecting upon important questions in society, looking for a coherent link between the scenic form and the subject, associate narration and reflection and creating a sensorial image and a creative distance.

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Peggy Lee Cooper

Cabaret artist, Mistress of Ceremonies, jazz and blues singer and lyricist,

stand up comedian, actress, producer, director, she does it all. For more than 10 years, her style mixing sensuality and humour have made her a muse. She is often compared to Eartha Kitt, Bette Middler, Marlene Dietrich, Louis Armstrong, Tom Waits...

In recent years, she has been seen at the Théâtre National Wallonie-Bruxelles, with her show «Piano-Bar-Tabac» or at the Festival XS. A la Balsamine alongside Lydia Lunch, at the Théâtre de la Toison d'Or, at the Spa Festival, at the Casino de Bxl. In «Belgium's Got Talent», on Arte and RTBF for «Karbon Kabaret» and for «Tout le Baz'Art», at the Grand Théâtre de Liège, at the Cabaret Mademoiselle, at the Festival La Semo, at Namur en Mai, at the Blue Bird Festival, at the Festival Supermouche, at the Park Poétik, at the Eden of Charleroi, at the Prix Maeterlinck de la Critique, in almost all the small venues and cabarets in Belgium.

In 2018, she released her first album «It ain't over 'till the fat lady sings». In 2020, during the first wave of Covid, she produced 8 variety shows and concerts online. In 2021, she produced the podcast project «Y a pas d'âge pour en parler» (There's no age to talk about it) for the National Theatre, a series of children's stories written and performed by cabaret performers from Brussels cabarets. Also with the National Theatre, she produced the cabaret shows «Peggy Lee Cooper & Friends». In collaboration with KNEPH (Leuven) she created the installation «All dressed up and nowhere to go» at the Kanal Pompidou, as well as a series of summer concerts inspired by the world of circus and freakshow. Together with Greg Houben, she created the show «Récital Idéal» which they performed at the Os à Moelle and as part of the Festival Ouvertures for the National Theatre.



Tricity Vogue

Scriptwriter, lyricist and novelist Tricity Vogue, AKA Heather Tyrrell, currently has three major projects in development, including her collaboration on a new original musical with theatre director Fabrice Murgia, composer Szymon Brzóska, and celebrated drag queen Peggy Lee Cooper. Heather is also co-writing a proposed Netflix project with collaborators including Tony Award-winner Frances Ruffelle and actor Alan Cumming – a trio of single dramas set in a theatre. Her “drag action musical” *Heels of Glory*, co-written with composer Richard Link, was awarded development funding from the Arts Council of England, headlined the Pride in London Festival 2016 at Chelsea Theatre, and is currently receiving interest from UK, US and Canadian producers.

Tricity has written two novels in a murder-mystery series. The first, *The Blue Elephant*, was shortlisted in 2021 for the Grindstone Literary Crucible Award. Her UK TV credits include *My Family*, *Totally Frank*, *Holby City*, *Byker Grove* and *the Teletubbies*. She co-wrote US *South by Southwest Festival's* Best Game Award winner *Smokescreen* for Channel 4 in 2010. Her original series ideas have been optioned by Avalon Entertainment and Channel K in the UK, and she was a finalist in the BBC Two *Timing* competition in 2004. As an international cabaret performer and musician, Tricity Vogue has staged five hit Edinburgh Fringe shows, and played venues including London's Royal Festival Hall, Royal Albert Hall and Wiltons Music Hall with her *All Girl Swing Band*.



Szymon Brzóska

Originally from Poland, Szymon Brzóska graduated from the Music Academy in Poznań, Poland as well as the Royal Flemish Conservatory in Antwerp, Belgium, where he studied under composers such as Mirosław Bukowski and Luc Van Hove.

Szymon Brzóska's work explores synergy between music, movement, and image. The composer's particular interest has led him to participate in many collaborative projects across various art forms.

His musical language can be placed somewhere between contemporary avant-garde and expanded tonality with a touch of minimalism, yet is deeply rooted in the very tradition of the classical music.

Through his music, Szymon creates a world of diverse colours, specific atmospheres, intimate and personal emotions and conditions of the mind.

Next to his autonomous work, Szymon Brzóska has an established career in creating music for dance. He worked with many award-winning choreographers (Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui, David Dawson, Maria Pages, Vladimir Malakhov), acclaimed orchestras (Sächsische Staatskapelle Dresden, Het Balletorkest) and reputable dance companies (Het Nationale Ballet, Semperoper Ballett, Cedar Lake Company, Eastman).

His compositions have been performed many times over in numerous prestigious venues and festivals across the world such as Sadler's Wells Theatre, Sydney Opera House, Lincoln Centre and BAM in New York, Semperoper in Dresden, Esplanade in Singapore as well as at the Festival D'Avignon.

Szymon's autonomous compositions were performed during the music @ Venture Festival in Antwerp, Festival of Polish Piano Music in Słupsk, Biennale Ars Polonia in Opole, Sounds New Contemporary Music Festival in Canterbury, Operadagen in Rotterdam, Tehran International Contemporary Music Festival and En Avant Mars Festival in Gent.



Sarah-Louise Young

Sarah-Louise is an actor, writer, director and acclaimed cabaret performer. She's appeared in the West End with Julie Madly Deeply, La Soirée, Fascinating Aida and Olivier Award winning Showstopper! The Improvised Musical. One half of comedy partnership Roulston & Young, she has performed all over the world including Off Broadway and at the prestigious Adelaide Cabaret Festival. She is currently touring her 2019 Edinburgh smash hit 'An Evening Without Kate Bush' after a sold out Soho Theatre run.



Aleksei Von Wosylius

A classically trained professional dancer, Aleksei has been touring the international burlesque scene and alternative cabarets for about 10 years as a boylesque artist and performer... His characters, inspired by Ballet, Opera, Mythology or fairy tales, will transport you with delicacy and poetry in his elegant universe and in a reverie at the same time sensual and dreamy...

Contacts

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