



The Saint-Eustache Mystery

« Riding the Stag »*

Saint-Eustache fête ses



Les 2,3,4 février 2024

Friday, 2nd February : 6 and 8.30 pm

Theatre in movement, staged in 12 stations
(duration : approx. 1h30)

Concept and direction: Laurent Charpentier

Stage design and setting: Johnny Lebigot

Musical improvisation: Naïssam Jalal (flute and voice), Thomas Ospital (organ)

Texts spoken by : Clément Barbertéguy, Antonia Berger, Luc Cerutti, Nicolas Chailley, Laurent Charpentier, Marie-Armelle Deguy, Lucie Gaillard, Philibert Louis, Raphaël Mannier, Jeremy Matias da Silva, Samy Ménétré, Antoine Pelé, Yann Pichot, Mirabelle Rousseau, Louise Savatier, Lucie Weller, Matthieu Welterlin, with the participation of Jonas Pätzold

Sound engineers: Madame Miniature

Assistant director: Antoine Pelé

One day, while he was engaged in hunting, he came across a herd of stags, and in their midst he noticed one bigger and more beautiful than the rest, which left the herd to enter a more extensive forest. (...) He followed it with determination but the stag scrambled up to the summit of a rocky outcrop. Placidus approached, considering how he could contrive not to let it escape. But while he was attentively examining his prey he suddenly saw between the massive antlers the shape of the Holy Cross, more splendid than ever, and the image of Jesus Christ, who spoke to him, saying: "Placidus, why are you persecuting me?" Hearing the voice Placidus was seized with amazement and fell from his horse. Coming to himself an hour or so later he rose to his feet and said, "Help me to understand what you were saying and I will believe in you."

Jacques de Voragine, The Golden Legend

“Follow that Stag!”

Introduction by Laurent Charpentier

The Golden Legend, by Jacques de Voragine (1230-1298) tells the story of the conversion of Placidus, a Roman general under the Emperor Trajan. Baptised Eustatius he was later martyred under Hadrian. His conversion was a consequence of the famous apparition in a forest located by the Jesuit Athanasius Kircher on Mount Vulturello near Tivoli: the apparition of a resplendent light and a crucifix between the antlers of a great stag. As is well known the stag became the attribute of the saint and the emblem of his church. His story inspired many painters and engravers, and amongst them perhaps the greatest of all, Albrecht Dürer. The stag motif is apparent to the attentive eye in many places in the church. On the exterior, at the summit of both transept gables, north and south, the front legs are thrust forward, below a head with branched horns, topped by the Cross. As for the interior, the stag is sculpted on the bases of the lamps, and now appears finely engraved on every one of the new church benches.

However this cross-bearing stag crops up in many cultures and religions. Moreover, according to the anthropologist Nicole Thierry, he is an archetype of the phenomenon of shared legends that belong simultaneously to different peoples and religions, as was once the case concerning the tombs of Islamic and Christian saints of Anatolia and the Balkans. Some historians go so far as to suggest a Buddhist origin to our stag's uplifting legend, developed at an opportune moment in the Middle Ages, doubtless in a period in the 8th century when the art of the icon was losing ground in Christian culture. So when Jean Damascene (676-749) made a clear distinction between the unmediated adoration of God and the veneration appropriate to a religious icon, the image of the stag bearing the crucified Christ was given legitimacy. So much so that 800 years ago, in 1224, they built a new church in place of the little Saint-Agnes chapel in the district of Les Champeaux in Paris, and called it Saint-Eustache in honour of the martyr's relics, transferred from the basilica of St Denis.

In the end the Pope Jean XXIII removed the saint from the calendar, and the Church came to identify Eustace with Hubert, another hunter become the hunted, or persecutor the persecuted, like Saul before them. And these days it's on the feast day of St Hubert, the 3rd of November, that hunting horns sound an echo of the forest origins of Saint-Eustache. For people in the Middle Ages the forest is full of meaning. Penetrating into the forest means advancing towards your destiny, passing through a door leading to another world populated by legends and dreams. It means pursuing a truth far beyond the everyday truth of men and women.

For Dante's "Selva selvaggia", a lofty cathedral of trees, is at the same time a window onto the spiritual and the sacred. To lose one's way there is to better find oneself. So – follow the Stag!

On seeing the vision of Christ between the great stag's antlers the future St. Eustache falls from his horse and remains unconscious for a whole hour. It is this hour of time that we act out on stage this evening. A wisp of a dream ("*un songe épars*") as Mallarmé says, in the midst of the church with its mingled dreams and metamorphoses, relics and spells, like the branching and interlaced boughs of trees. In the Middle Ages it was common to put on plays called 'Mysteries', acting out the lives of the saints or the Passion. For the 800 years of the parish of Saint-Eustache we have dreamed a contemporary mystery around St. Eustache and his stag. Our wish is for the church itself to play the principal role, and we propose a journey to rediscover Saint-Eustache reinvented by the chimerical art of Johnny Lebigot, inhabited by the actresses and actors who give life to the story, to the poems, to our theatrical performance. In short, we take you on a guided visit of the church's spaces in a series of 12 stations.



Saint-Eustache by Dürer

- 1- **The Stag of Light**, based on the legend of Placidus (St Eustache) and other legends
- 2- **The Forest of Danger**, based on the lays of Marie de France and Shakespeare's Merry Wives of Windsor
- 3- **The Sacred Hunt**, based on the epic of Biynöger the Hunter
- 4- **The Legend of Saint Julien**, by Gustave Flaubert
- 5- **The Centaur**, based on The Bath of Diana, by Pierre Klossowski
- 6- **The Bath of Diana**, based on Ovid's Metamorphoses, Book 3 (translation Marie Cosnay)
- 7- **The Recipes of King Modus**, based on the Book of Hunting, by Gaston Phoebus, and King Modus' Hunting Book, by Henri de Ferrières
- 8- **The St. Barthelemy Massacre**, based on the novel Charly 9, by Jean Teulé
- 9- **The Vigil of Saint Agnes**
- 10- **Arborescence**, based on numerous writers on Gothic architecture
- 11- **Illuminations**, inspired by Keith Haring, Allen Ginsberg, Patti Smith and Arthur Rimbaud
- 12- **St. Eustache the Martyr**, extract from the play by Balthazar Baro (1637)

According to the Arthurian legend, Merlin takes on the appearance of a great white stag, symbol of wisdom, or is shown riding the stag. Arthur himself is disguised as Cernunnos, the antlered Gaulish deity.

"Whether he embodies good or (occasionally) evil, the king of our forests is certainly mystical, haunting the realms of legend and poetry in equal measure. Indomitable, the stag lures us into a dream within a dream."

Jean-Paul Grossin