

# IMPROBISSIMA FEMMA

A gender opera by Fabienne Audéoud (and collaborators)



Read My Lips, performance, Petit Palais, Paris 2007

Improbissima Femma is an opera, which three acts will take place at various time and in different spaces.

The music is composed by Fabienne Audéoud and structures the piece's **dramaturgy** in term of space and of the performers' actions.

The narratives are centred around the notion of **gender** taken as a hierarchical relation rather than an imposed or claimed identity.

They have their specific performative mode. The first act is 'The Knitwear Boutique': an installation, exhibition and **shop** (see page 3). The second and third act are in progress.

The title of the opera is a reference to story Jordan Kisner relates in his article [Can a Woman's Voice Ever Be Right?](#)

« In ancient Rome, women were forbidden from speaking in the forum, but during the civil wars and political tumult of the late republic, the rules about public oration loosened a bit, which is why we know of Caia Afrania, a Roman from the first-century BC who insisted on speaking for herself when she came before the court. She evidently enjoyed pleading cases, so much so that she acted as a lawyer for others, which was common among men but unheard of for women. The hostility she suffered for this perceived impudence was tremendous. They turned her into a noun: An "Afrania" became slang for an unpleasant woman. Rome passed a law — in which she was referred to as *improbissima fema*, the infamous woman — forbidding women to plead cases other than their own. The rancor was directed not just at the fact of her speech but at the sound of her voice. The first-century writer Valerius Maximus called it an "unnatural yapping," a "bark," a "constant harassment of the magistrate." Detractors pronounced her shameless for exposing her voice before so many. We know only her death date (48 AD) because, as Maximus wrote, "with unnatural freaks like this it's more important to record when they died than when they were born." »

Questions relating to the role of audiences, musicians, performers and costumes, of what defines a stage<sup>1</sup>, a drama as well as temporality have recently been reframed and re-contextualized in both operatic and gallery formats by a number of visual artists including Anne Himof, Ed Atkins and Ragnar Kjartansson (see page 4).

This project follows in this 'trend' and several aspects of my own **practice**: The practice I have developed for the last twenty-five years focuses on relational and power issues, in particular within language. When the cultural role of women is not the theme directly referred to, feminist, gender and care studies remain a base for my work and research as well as a tool to think about representation politics. It has evolved from music performances and composition into a substantial body of interdisciplinary work, including

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1 (same word in French for stage and scene)

writing, painting, and video.

I am interested in what a piece is “doing”, what is being “performed”, what is being “acted out”, in terms of its formal specificities as well as its cultural, sociological and political impact, rather than in the illustration of critical positions and/or comments. The notion of the “performative” (rather than performance) on which my practice is based is a practical and theoretical way to find and/or create a space for intervention(s), to perform an action, to embody a gesture. Like a musician with a score, I interpret images, speech-acts, situations, sounds, music and intensities, as a responsibility I take as an artist, in front of “my” audience. They are not moral postures or positions, but the enactments of “possibilities of living together”. If some pieces are dramatic, most of them play around with what Robert Garnett describes as “the logic of the joke, a disruptive affect rather than an ironic commentary.”“

I have recently and very lately been diagnosed in the autism spectrum and a lot of my work can now be interpreted through the prism of a very specific relationship to language, in term of its structure, what it puts into play

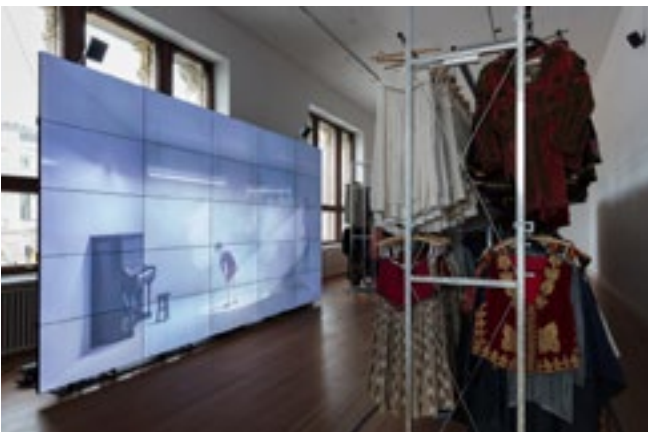


King Comm, music and libretto by Fabienne Audéoud, Baylis Programme, English National Opera, the Royal College of Music, London 1993

between people and how it is physically ‘pronounced’

The notion of disability is not central here (as gender is), but it is inherent to the project as it questions ideas of norms and biases. I am also mentioning it so that it does not remain (or become) ‘something to hide’.

This project has received funding from **CNAP, Mécènes du Sud** (for the 1<sup>st</sup> act in Montpellier) and a recording grant by **Confort Moderne**.



- Ragnar Kjartansson 'Take Me Here by the Dishwas - her: Memorial for a Marriage. New York et i8 gallery Reykjavik et ci-dessus, An die Musik at London Contemporary Music Festival  
- Anne Imhof Faust, pavillion allemand Biennale de Venise 2017  
- Ed Atkins, Olde Food, Cabinet, Londres, (archives of the Deutsche Oper Berlin)