



Abramović

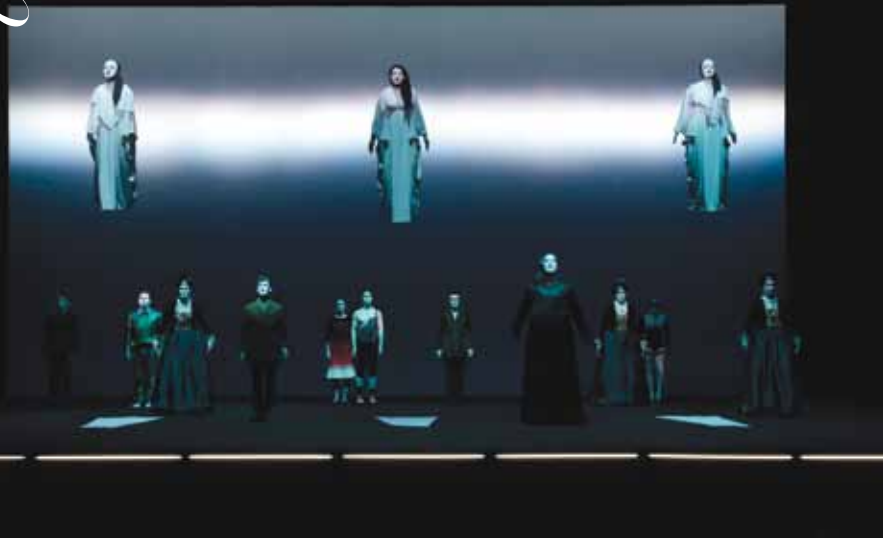
EDITOR:
ELIO IANNACCI

THE AGE OF ABRAMOVIĆ

The high priestess of performance art talks about opera's much-needed facelift and her own fashionable epiphanies. By ELIO IANNACCI

FEW CAN CLAIM TO EMBODY THE term “masterclass” the way Marina Abramović can. The Serbian-born, New York-based performance artist has consistently risked her physical and mental health in order to examine the concept of human limitation. In 1974, for a piece called *Rhythm 5*, Abramović set fire to a large petroleum-soaked pentacle and lay expressionless in the centre of the star as the flames went up (she fainted from a lack of oxygen). Other extreme works—some of which are covered in 2012’s acclaimed documentary on her life, *Marina Abramović: The Artist Is Present*—had Abramović dripping candle wax on her bare skin, masturbating in public, cleaning human skulls and offering her naked body to strangers, who were encouraged to dress and undress her. One of her most time-consuming pieces—a 1988 performance titled *The Lovers*—had Abramović walk the east side of the Great Wall of China alone. The trip, which measured more than 2,000 kilometres, was planned alongside a parallel expedition taken by her lover and partner, Ulay, who trekked up the wall’s west side so the two could meet in the middle. When the pair reunited—three months after their respective journeys began—Abramović chose the moment to tell him she was putting an end to their professional and personal relationship. »

THE LIFE AND DEATH OF
MARINA ABRAMOVIĆ



"I WAS FED UP WITH THE IDEA THAT ART HAD TO BE BEAUTIFUL AND THAT PAINTINGS HAD TO MATCH THE CARPETS OF LIVING ROOMS"

A few critics read the act as a mere gimmick, a grandiose gesture that would hook the media into creating some of the biggest boyfriend-dumping buzz in art history. Others applauded her emotional marathon and saw its place in Abramović's powerful body of work. As part of the Luminato arts festival in Toronto, Abramović will be re-experiencing her epic walk on the Great Wall, along with a number of equally dramatic parts of her life, in a biographical opera directed by Robert Wilson called *The Life and Death of Marina Abramović*. Most people would be reluctant to revisit painful memories, but the 66-year-old artist says the opera does a good job of re-evaluating her past.

"The entire approach to my relationship with Ulay in *Life and Death* is comical," she says via phone from her office in New York. "There is a very serious scene in the opera where I say, 'Now we walked enough kilometres just to say goodbye,' and [the actor who plays Ulay] looks at me and says, 'This is insane! Why didn't you just make a phone call?' It's really funny how the drama was turned into this funny slapstick thing. At the same time, it becomes more tragic."

Abramović's initial heartbreak with Ulay caused a fashion epiphany. "I was totally desperate when I came to the end of my relationship with him," she confesses. "I felt like I was at the end of everything. By chance, I had to work in Paris and dropped into Yohji Yamamoto and bought a suit that changed my relationship to fashion completely. I came out of the shop feeling restored. I realized the right clothes can change your mood. They can give you something that's a forbidden pleasure. This new interest ended up giving me emotions I didn't know I could have."

The experience led her to a long-lasting friendship with Givenchy creative director Riccardo Tisci, with whom she now shares a New York townhouse. They famously posed in a portrait together in which Abramović breastfeeds Tisci in mock "Madonna and child" poses. Tisci also cast his "soul mate" in Givenchy's spring campaign alongside

models Kate Moss and Mariacarla Boscono. "Some designers are artists in their own right, and he is one of them," Abramović says of Tisci. "I love that he would think of me. Fashion campaigns are what you are supposed to do when you are 18," she says with a laugh. "I'm never doing things when I'm supposed to."

Abramović's co-operation with the house is something that she would never have considered in the '70s, when she started to make video works such as *Art Must Be Beautiful*, *Artist Must Be Beautiful*. Filmed like a Vidal Sassoon ad from the disco era, the work attacks mainstream associations pertaining to beauty, decor and fashion. "Back then, I was fed up with the idea that art had to be beautiful and that paintings had to match the carpets of living rooms," she says. "So I took a metal brush and literally tried to destroy my face and my hair, just to create an opposite image: that art not only has to not be beautiful—it has to be disturbing."

Her newfound fascination with musical theatre is not without its complexities either. Claiming that opera "in general" is "a dinosaur: it's very old and needs a progressive facelift," Abramović says her Luminato production—which features Oscar-nominated actor Willem Dafoe and singer Antony Hegarty—took some time to get to. "I couldn't have done this 20 years ago. As you get older, you understand risk more and you understand danger more. With age your mind becomes so much more trained, so you actually push much harder when it comes to work."

The Life and Death of Marina Abramović's libretto also recreates various incidents from her thorny upbringing in the former Yugoslavia, supervised by two national war heroes—her father, a former commander, and her mother, a former major. "Supervised" is the perfect word to use. I had a really difficult relationship with my mother," she says, noting that she will be playing herself and her mother in the Toronto production. "The last thing I would think of is seeing her [on stage with me], but her presence in this work ended up being a self-portrait."

As for opera's legendary damned ladies—the prima donna singers who have fronted the genre for years—Abramović says she has nothing in common with them. "I never feel like I'm forever failing...or broken, like Maria Callas or any of the grand divas," she says. "My spirit is very much like a strong steed. Opera does not close any doors in my life—it just opens more." □

PHOTOGRAPHY BY LUCIE JANSCH/LUMINATO

WINONA FOREVER

The iconic actress talks about her full-circle ride into fame in her 40s.
By ALEXANDRA BREEN



WHEN WINONA RYDER SPEAKS, THERE IS DEFIANCE IN her voice that sounds earned. “I don’t want to do the crazy thing and try to hold onto my youth,” she says while promoting her latest film, *The Iceman*, at the Toronto International Film Festival. “And I don’t want to work just to work, either. At this point in my life, I just want to be a good person. I’m 40, and I’m psyched, because with age comes experience. I’ve paid some dues and had some ups and downs.”

Ryder’s story started with a childhood spent on a commune with hippie parents and quickly led to her discovery by director Tim Burton, who cast her in the film *Beetlejuice*. Stellar reviews and a relationship with heartthrob Johnny Depp followed—Who could forget his “Winona Forever”-turned-“Wino Forever” tattoo?—as well as Oscar nods for *Little Women* and *The Age of Innocence* and a genre-defining role in *Reality Bites*. Blockbuster flops were the precursors to Ryder’s now-infamous shoplifting scandal, and she signed on to do a few indie flicks before officially resurfacing in the Oscar-winning *Black Swan*.

“In the ‘90s, I experienced *a lot* of success, and to be honest I wasn’t expecting it to last. You’re told that you get a couple of years if you’re lucky. It was great, but it came with a lot of pressure,” Ryder reflects. “I wasn’t like, ‘Boo hoo, poor me,’ but I realized that I want a home and I want to spend time with my family and friends. It takes something very special for me to want to leave that now.”

One such project is the chilling gangster thriller *The Iceman* with Michael Shannon. In the film, based on a true story, Ryder plays the blissfully naive wife of Richard Kuklinski, one of the mob world’s most notorious killers. Ryder points out that she’s repelled by violence and typically avoids films that glorify it (a fact that she says stems from personally witnessing the loss of a life in her 20s). However, she found this character’s refusal to acknowledge her hubby’s »

violent lifestyle fascinating. “I have friends who find out that their husbands are drug addicts or are going to prostitutes and there are those politicians who are [caught having sex] in bathroom stalls at airports and they still go on. It’s that denial that globally, politically and just humanly I was drawn to.” So, we have to ask: Placed in a similar situation, would she consider sticking by her man? She answers with a resounding “Fuck, no.”

Ryder may have been at odds with her character’s morals, but her ladylike wardrobe, heavy on vintage Valentino, was an easy sell. She credits the costume department with helping her get into character. “A woman who wears heels carries herself very differently from a woman who wears sandals. Clothes define how you play a part. If you’re wearing a corset, you’re repressed, and then you get all this attention for your performance but it’s really just because you can’t breathe,” she says with a laugh.

When it comes to her own day-to-day life, Ryder, a Marc Jacobs devotee (and muse), says she’s not nearly as put together as her character. After all, she still chooses to spend much of her time out of the limelight at her home in San Francisco, working for various charities and special interest projects including the Leonard Peltier Defense Committee and the Litquake literary festival. But all those devoted fans cheering for the return of their favourite ’90s screen queen will be pleased to know that she has starred in another thriller—*The Letter*, with James Franco.

Although she firmly believes in keeping the past at bay, Ryder still cherishes the relics of her successes, including memorabilia such as the infamous suicide letters from *Heathers*. But when it comes to her fondest and earliest cinematic memory, it’s an event involving her family and not some Hollywood heavy hitter that comes to mind. Her voice lights up as she recalls going to see *Fantasia* as child with her family. “We were removed from the theatre because I ran up to the screen and threw myself against it because I wanted to get inside of it.” In the end, she succeeded. □

CLASSICAL HEROINE

Canadian literary legend Anne Carson opens up to LYNN CROSBIE about her life on and off the page.



SHE IS BRILLIANT, MYSTERIOUS AND MADLY LOVED. She writes on her sofa and drinks tea from a cup with a big rubber wing for a handle, a gift from one of her many admirers. Her favourite movie is Ermanno Olmi’s *I Fidanzati*, and she likes both Homer and Len Deighton (“Who could not?” she asks about the latter). If she could meet anyone, she says she would meet her “Dad. Again.” Her audience, like her work, is all over the place: she is a cult figure among readers and august critics. »



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INTERVIEW

And the Toronto-born-and-educated 62-year-old Anne Carson has just pulled off the literary event of the year by producing a sequel to her novel-in-verse *Autobiography of Red*, published in 1999.

Autobiography ended with its red-winged protagonist, Geryon, looking at a photograph of his lover and thinking: "It is the face/of an old man. It is a photograph of the future."

The future is now. The sequel, *Red Doc*, has been released to such buzz that one wonders why there are no TEAM G and TEAM S T-shirts (referencing the book's central figures/lovers) available for fans. It's a sequel that features the adult Geryon, or "G," and a modified cast of characters, including his mother and Io, a mythical white bull.

the hat was a gift from her partner, Robert Currie, who bought it in Berlin.)

If fans are treating the new book as if it were an event comparable to *Another Shade of Grey*, they are right to do so: the multi-genre book (what poet bpNichol called "borderblur"), which uses classical strophes, playlets and prose, is utterly compelling in its melancholy (G's companion Sad is, like the novel, "Sad But Great"), its pain and its joy. Yet there are laugh-out-loud-funny bits throughout. I ask Carson if commentators tend to overlook her sense of humour, and she says, "Yes!"

While *Autobiography* was haunted by Gertrude Stein, *Red Doc* is possessed by Marcel Proust. Like its predecessor, it fuses classicism and modernity, but it is primarily concerned with loss and recu-

"EACH WORK IS A MORE OR LESS FAILED EXPERIMENT, ANOTHER ROCK IN THE STREAM."

If you have not yet been seduced by Carson's writing, you are in a minority: her reputation grows each year, as do stacks of awards and prizes and awed, high praise from the highest of the holies.

Born in 1950, Carson had published poetry and translations before *Autobiography*, but her fame did not really gel until it started to be passed around and revered by more and more fans. It was the book that established her as Canada's most inventive, erudite and inspired poet.

Known to be a very private person—when I ask her to describe a day in her life, she politely demurs—she does make striking public appearances, and, of course, lectures frequently. Her lecture style, she informs me drily, is "style-less." Her most recent lecture concerned "untranslatability."

The term describes the artist very well: her beauty, her genius, her mystery are hard to render. I suggest watching her University of Toronto convocation address (2012) on YouTube. Her charisma and palpable desire to flee are wonderfully signalled by the fetching dark brown cloche-style aviator cap she wears with the traditional red robe. (Carson is a lover of vintage clothing and

peration through language and memory.

What better topic to explore for Carson, a professor of classics and an eminent translator and writer whose last two books (*Nox* and *Antigonick*) have been similarly yet differently preoccupied?

I ask her about her work with loss, and she tells me that she feels that "poetry has a special function to continue the dead into memory."

At this point in her life, Carson has achieved not so much stature—which tends to ossify its subjects—as an electrical sense of the infinitely possible in her work and reputation.

Her imagination is like a hot, pulsing meteor that has happily crashed through our atmosphere—something from the "very" (her word) alive past that finds its meaning in the present and winged future.

Admirers take note: she says another sequel is more than possible. And when she's asked about publishing the momentous sequel to *Autobiography*, she replies, gracefully: "It's hard to perceive oneself as momentous. To me, each work is a more or less failed experiment, another rock in the stream. I am looking around for the next place to step." □