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Vevey's Fête des Vignerons

Unique: a festival of superlatives

With 4600 actors, dancers, singers, and other performers with more than 500,000 spectators, the 1999 Fête des Vignerons will be unique in the world. But what makes the Vevey celebration really unique is the keenness of the people to take charge of what has become the most grandiose of our national shows.

The last big popular festival of the second millennium, the Fête des Vignerons, will welcome 16,000 spectators to each of the 12 performances which will take place from July 26th to August 15th 1999 before the

*Raymond Gremaud**

stands of the Place du Marché. And no less than 4 processions will wind their way through the streets of Vevey. Celebrating "the eternal power of the forces of nature and the human activities which are linked to them", the Fête des Vignerons has grown splendidly, with 4 editions per century. Originally a farmers' festival, it is today the festival of a whole modern people, for whom tradition is not merely a custom to conform with, but a live force.

Show in five parts

"The Fête des Vignerons is the festival of festivals", writes the editorialist of the work dedicated to the 1977 version. And it brings together everything which one can celebrate: the work and the days, the sufferings and the joys, the hopes and the fears, and the destiny of mankind. A ceremony and at the same time a show, the festival borrows its subjects and its rites from symbols and myths whose origin is lost in the night of time. And each festival leaves

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a solid imprint in the Swiss cultural landscape.

Conceived by producer François Rochaix, the 1999 festival will be no exception to the rule. It will celebrate real work and the work of today. It will place the vineyard worker at the centre of the festival, but it will also bring back to life the fabulous story of the Fête des Vignerons from the earliest days to the beginning of the third millennium.

François Rochaix divides the show into five parts. The first is opened by the fair of Saint Martin, which marks the beginning of the vineyard year. The Red Choir made-up of 60 actors and singers, comments on what is happening. Arlevin, the king of the festival, enters the fair, but his crown goes to his head. He sows chaos and, drunk, finally falls asleep.

The second part shows the dream of Arlevin. Orpheus appears to him. The Hundred Swiss try in vain to wake him, but he has a nightmare: giant experts din into him the ten commandments of the wine grower. He also has a sweet dream to the rhythm of the Lauterbach: he marries the Goddess of Spring, Pales. This is the new version of the marriage. The third part introduces the Time of Memory. The last festival of the millennium contains in it those which have gone before. Thus Arlevin orders a festival à la carte: Cérès the Goddess of Summer appears, the festivals of mid-summer of Taveyenne, Monferrine, the Ranz des Vaches and the Messager Boiteux, the limping messenger.

The fourth part is intended to be a return to the elemental, to the myths, but hallows the spirit of openness to the world. The harvesters, the fishermen, and their scary prize: Mænads, Silenus and the god Bacchus in person all breathe life into it. After a devastating Bacchanale, King Arlevin welcomes the wine growers of the world. And the show ends with a huge Song of Hope, which makes up the fifth part and the announcement of the festival of the next millennium.

François Rochaix is not alone. The organisers, the Confrérie des



The Fete des Vignerons of 1977. (Photo: zvg)

Vignerons, decided to entrust the libretto to writer François Deblüe of Lutry, the scenery to Jean-Claude Maret of Geneva, the costumes to the designer Catherine Zuber, who has English origins, while the music will be shared between Jean-François Bovard of Lausanne, Michel Hostettler of Vevey, and the Soleure composer Jost Meier. The music will be performed by a huge Ensemble made up of the Orchestre de la Suisse Romande (OSR) and the Lausanne Chamber Orchestra (OCL), conducted by Fabio Luisi, born in Genoa in 1959.

A town celebrates

Memories of the 1977 festival are those of a town in a state of grace. Intoxicated by the designs of Jean Monod and Charles Apotheloz, the music of Jean Balissat and the poetry of Henri Deblüe, the crowds celebrated wildly. The warm festival suns lit up everything they passed. The 1999 edition promises the same exhilaration. François Rochaix has even thought of making the whole of Vevey into a town where spectators and actors lose themselves, mixing, eating, dancing and drinking in one and the same festival. ■

The Congress of the Swiss Abroad and the Fête des Vignerons.

Next year's Congress of the Swiss Abroad will take place in Lausanne on August 6th to 8th. Those taking part may attend the performance of the Fête des Vignerons on August 7th. Seats are already reserved.

Those who wish to attend another performance should contact directly: Fête des Vignerons, Grande Place 99, CH-1800 Vevey, Tel. +41 21 925 09 99.