

Ode to life

On entering the theatre dressing room, my gaze fell immediately upon her. An actor of great professional and physical stature.

She moved around the cramped room bathed in an aura of strength. The actor had swapped her crinoline for the boots of a musketeer. Looking like a superhero, she seemed ready for any challenge to save the world. That was 25 years ago. Today,

Sylvie Drapeau has chosen to put aside the mantle of the indomitable one, to slow her step and to take refuge in a fortitude that she rediscovered when going through a redemptive illness.

By Nathalie Dumas

Photos: N. Dumas

"We work too much, we think too much!" says Sylvie Drapeau, who now knows the cost of such excess. Exhaustion. Panic attacks. Vulnerability. Time off work. The strong woman who was always ahead of the game was forced to retreat; agree to stop, refuse projects and, for a while, withdraw from the artistic world that she had thrived in since graduating from the National Theatre School. Four long months—an eternity for a stage actor!—strug-

gling to pull herself out of the depths of her malaise, her despair, her fear of sinking even lower. While the ground was shaking under her feet, her sister Suzanne died suddenly from an aggressive illness. A time of mourning. Yet another. Before Suzanne, there had been Roch, her big brother; Gabrielle, her mother; and Richard, the youngest.

Death had struck the family clan early on. The powerful St. Lawrence

River had taken her powerful brother Roch. Sylvie Drapeau was only five years old when she and her sisters watched, helplessly, as her intrepid brother drowned in the forbidden waters. Before that tragedy, her childhood on the Quebec's North Shore had been peaceful, filled with games and carefree distractions. The family's daily life moved between the rhythms of morning and evening prayers. Their home was an abode of peace and hope.



The actor
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And then, tragedy. Nothing would ever be the same again.

“Roch’s drowning was the seminal event,” explains Sylvie Drapeau. “There’s no way of knowing how life would have been had it not happened. Would I have become an actor? Would my mother have died so young? Would Richard have developed schizophrenia? How would our lives have been without that incident? We don’t know.”

Sylvie Drapeau addresses each of these deaths in her tetralogy, published by Leméac between 2015 and 2019. In her body of work, the actor takes a candid look at grief and life, controlling influences and freedom, appearances and truth. She reveals herself with frankness and simplicity. “Illness allows us to take time and to view things like we’ve never done before,” she says reflecting back. The narrator draws in the reader as a witness to her

resilience when confronted with the sudden and harsh losses that have punctuated her journey. "People leave, others come, we simply have to love them while they are here," she writes in her latest work, *La terre*, that came out in the spring, the season of renewal. Above all, the book reveals a Sylvie Drapeau who is luminous, serene and spiritual.

Words of love

"*Le fleuve, Le ciel, L'enfer* and *La terre* actually form one book, four chapters of a single work," she explains. "They were written one after the other over an eight-year period." Eight years. An octave, you might say, as is used to commemorate certain feasts. To remember fondly. To never forget. "I write very slowly, I polish, I look for the perfect sentence, the right word," says the actor-writer, who admits to having written on "stolen time" between professional engagements and her life as a mother. "It's not an elaborate structure, but it speaks from the heart." And Sylvie Drapeau's words are pregnant with love.

Sylvie Drapeau's tetralogy is now available in a box set (in French only).



"There are no scores being settled in these books," she says. "It's only love." "It's a tribute to my family. But I also didn't want to give the impression that everything was *just fine and dandy*. I think it's important to be truthful. Other people, the readers, also have their trials in life; if I try to make it appear that everything in my life is rosy, they won't believe me." Her voice remains soft even when reproaching the artistic world for its excess of pretence. She broadens her criticism to society at large: "In today's world of selfies, smiles, everyone having a better time than everyone else ... having a space for truth is very precious," says the actor.

Devout

In the spirit of candour, the writer reveals in her latest book: "My faith, this friend from my very early years, has never left me!" Sylvie Drapeau speaks of the importance she gives to spirituality, which is "very much alive and constant!" She stresses each word as you would when you know you are giving the correct answer to a question. With composure and confidence. Smiling. And what do her artistic colleagues think of it? They are respectful, but most are reluctant to voice such values. "Strange, isn't it? ..."

The beliefs handed down to her from her childhood are expressed today through a rekindled devotion. "I still pray, every day. It's essential," says



Sylvie Drapeau. "After having put it aside for years, it has come back even stronger! I wouldn't be able to live without prayer. In my family, all of my sisters are believers. I couldn't imagine celebrating Christmas just for the gifts or Easter just for the chocolate."

"I think it's truly unfortunate that religious education is no longer mandatory in school. It's our common reference point, our culture. All authors make reference to it." It's the stage performer who has just spoken. And it's the mother who continues: "Last year, one of my sons said to me: 'Mom, I think I'm an atheist.' Then, one of his teachers sort of opened a small window ... And he said to me: 'Well, perhaps there is something, someone ...' You can imagine how happy I was!" She does not want to impose anything on her two grown boys, who are 19 and 16 years old. She simply wants to pass on to them the "importance of trusting in themselves and relying on their inner intelligence."

Uncovering our humanity

Sylvie Drapeau will be appearing with fellow actors at the Théâtre du Nouveau Monde (TNM) in Montréal beginning November 12 in *Fleuve*, a stage adaptation of her book. “If someone had told me when I was 20 years old that I was going to write that, I wouldn’t have believed them because I was very discreet; and I still am. And yet, it lays bare our family’s story.” A long silence. She reflects and then says: “But is it really just my story? Aren’t we all in the same boat? ... My story, our story, it’s the story of humanity, so it’s probably not so immodest after all.”

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The writer’s craft merges with that of the actor who has offered up to the stage—and to the public!—so many big roles, written by so many famous authors. “People come to the theatre to be challenged in how they see things. The characters offer a vision of humanity that is so powerful it can’t be missed; it’s there in plain view, it’s a revelation,” she explains passionately. “On the stage, we are there to uncover our humanity, to build something, to learn.” To allow others to learn and to learn ourselves.

Of all the lessons learned, which ones have had the deepest impact on Sylvie Drapeau? “To constantly bring

myself back to the present moment. But my goodness, it’s not easy,” she admits. “It takes a long time to learn how to do it!” Her list also includes: “Accept that everything doesn’t have to be perfect” and as she has written: “Cool down the fervour to be always the first to step in.” Perfection and the need to perform, when pushed to the extreme, can turn into formidable foes. “Already at a very young age, I found myself in the role of the brave one to help my mother. Helping, helping, helping ... even excessively to the point of repressing my own needs. And it’s a role that’s difficult to give up. I feel this will be the work of a lifetime,” admits the actor. “It’s not easy!” she says with complete

sincerity, before letting out a sigh and then bursting into laughter.

Continue: a verb that she loves. Continue to smell fragrances, to pick ripe fruit, to delight in the seasons’ offerings. Continue to drive along the river, as long as it is. Continue to take time. Continue to step out onto the stage, to uncover our humanity. Continue to live.

What has she learned from Roch, Gabrielle, Richard, Suzanne? “To love. To love. And they continue to teach me,” says Sylvie Drapeau. ✨

As Brother André had said

In the fourth book of her tetralogy, Sylvie Drapeau opens up about a dark period in her life. Seeking comfort, she made her way to Saint Joseph’s Oratory.

“(…) My very breath and my tears cried out, Dear God, help me! (...) The waves of darkness were so deep, so heavy, I couldn’t see any way out. On a wall in the Basilica, an inscription. Had I dreamt it? Brother André appealed to us to believe in healing, saying that no one left the Oratory unchanged.

(...) I moved forward, slowly. I recalled the words of Brother André as another wave of angst washed over me. (...) I sat down in the chapel, exhausted, pale, almost transparent with vulnerability. As I closed my eyes in the hope of silencing my erratic thoughts, I heard the sobs of a woman sitting just behind me. (...) So I began praying for her. (...) Dear God, help her! (...) After some time, slowly, slowly, her sobs quietened. We remained there like that, in silence, for a very long time. (...) and, as Brother André had foretold, I did not leave the Oratory in the same way I had entered it. The crisis had passed.”

Unofficial translation of excerpts from *La terre*, Sylvie Drapeau, Leméac, 2019, pages 62–64.