

A BOOK REVIEW

OF

Sorj Chalandon. *Le Quatrième mur*. Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 2014.

By Elio Panese



Book cover: Sorj Chalandon. *Le Quatrième mur*. Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 2014.

Le Quatrième mur is a book published in 2013 by French journalist, writer and former war reporter Sorj Chalandon. It depicts the story of Georges, the young French homodiegetic narrator of the story, long-term student at La Sorbonne, whose life – shared between far-left political activism, his unexpected family life with his wife Aurore and his daughter Louise, and a passion for theatre and some amateur stage direction – will be completely shaken up by the sickness of his best friend, a theater play and the Lebanese Civil War.

In the first part of the book, we follow Georges' life in France, the violence of political activism in the 1970's Paris between far-right and far-left groups, but also his relationship with his dear and admired friend Samuel Akounakis – Sam – a Greek political activist and stage director who fled the dictatorship of the

Greek Colonels. Whereas Georges progressively settles down, choosing with Aurore to leave aside political activism to focus on their family life, Sam tries to fulfill his long-term dream to put on Jean Anouilh's play *Antigone* in a war zone.

As an original peacebuilding initiative, he wants to “offer a role to each belligerent. To make peace entre cour et jardin [i.e., on a theatre stage]”¹ just “two hours of an autumn evening. With the combatant's rifle-grips up in the air for the time of an act [la crosse en l'air le temps d'un act].”² Distraught by the violence of the first phase of the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1982)³, Sam decides to realize this project in the war-torn Lebanon and spend two years to form a particularly interesting casting:

“Antigone was Palestinian and Sunnite. Hémon, her fiancé, a Druze from Chouf. Creon, King of Thebes and Hémon's father [was] a Maronite from Gemmayzé. Three Shias had first refused to play the 'Guards', characters that they found insignificant. To equalize, one of them became Creon's page, the other accepted to be 'The Messenger'. [...] An old Shia woman was chosen to play the Queen Eurydice,

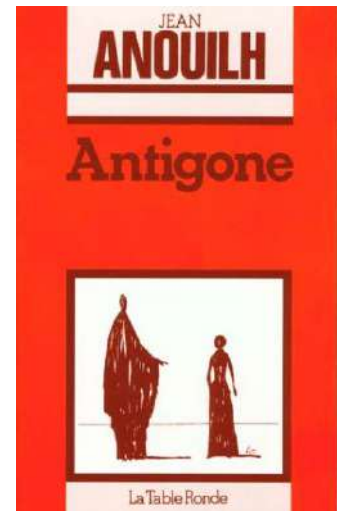
¹ Sorj Chalandon, *Le Quatrième mur* (Paris : Le Livre de Poche, 2014), 87-88.

² Chalandon, *Le Quatrième mur*, 96.

³ Chalandon, *Le Quatrième mur*, 88-89.

*Creon's wife. 'La Nourrice' was a Chaldéenne and Ismène, Antigone's sister, [was an] Armenian Catholic. [...] [And Sam, himself Jewish], would be 'Le Choeur'.*⁴

Embracing what John Paul Lederach called “the great challenge of peacebuilding: how to build creative responses to patterns of self-perpetuating violence in a complex system made up of multiple actors, with activities that are happening at the same time”⁵, Chalandon depicts the objective of this creative peacebuilding initiative as offering an instant of peace through art and an occasion to know the other in order to construct a source of peace. Also, through this description of the casting, the reader can grasp the eminent complexity of the conflict and the heterogeneity of the belligerents during the Lebanese Civil War, emphasizing the importance of religion and culture that constituted one of the main grounds for the war.



Jean Anouilh. *Antigone*. Paris : La Table Ronde, (1944) 2008.

Furthermore, this use of a theatre play as a peacebuilding initiative is part of one of the central themes of the book, namely the counter-intuitive encounter between the chaotic and destructive brutality of a civil war and the poetic and creative fragility of a theater play. Whereas the Lebanese conflict reached a point where atrocities perpetrated made a dialogue between belligerents appearing impossible, theatre – seen as the utmost dialogic art – seems indeed to have the performative power to act as a mean to (re)-build relationships, or at least a dialogue between the different camps, broken by ethnic, political and religious tensions.⁶ This encounter



Representation of Jean Anouilh's play "Antigone" in 1944. [Collection Roger-Viollet - AFP]

and its related paradoxes are beautifully described in Chalandon's book while keeping a deeply realistic tone and avoiding to put forward a bold and *candide* view that a single play can bring peace to a civil war. He rather faithfully presents the fact that “[d]ialogue that happens across different cultures, languages and classes is always hard”⁷ and acknowledges the tragique aspect of the war, in the theatral sense of the word, as well as its

⁴ Chalandon, *Le Quatrième mur*, 95.

⁵ John Paul Lederach, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 33.

⁶ Anna Żurawska, « L'art – moyen de communication en temps de guerre ? Sorj Chalandon, *Le Quatrième Mur*, » *Synergies Pologne* 12 (2015): 161-171.

⁷ Hugo Slim, *Humanitarian Ethics: A Guide to the Morality of Aid in War and Disaster* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2015), 148.

dramatic consequences. Sorj Chalandon’s choice of Anouilh’s adaptation of *Antigone* in the context of the Lebanese Civil War is also not fortuitous. This modernized version of Sophocles’ tragedy was indeed created in the 1940’s occupied France by Jean Anouilh, who described his process as a re-writing of Sophocle’s *Antigone* “in my own way, with the resonance of the tragedy we were living.”⁸ *Antigone* was indeed presented as an “incarnation of the refusal”⁹ and as a glorified figure of self-sacrifice for the good cause.

Hence, similar to Anouilh, Chalandon makes the play resonate with the tragedy of yet another war and even use it as a broader allegory of all conflicts. In theater, a tragedy is indeed a genre that depicts human suffering and that usually ends with the death of one or all the protagonists – a description that may as well be used to

depict violent conflicts in general. In that sense, Chalandon’s book can be defined as a sort of multilayered tragedy in itself. Whereas it addresses the themes of human suffering, whether it is the suffering of the Lebanese population or the suffering of the French protagonists, the book also has a tragic and morbid end that is announced at the beginning in the tragic context of war, quite in a similar manner as Anouilh’s famous play opening announcing *Antigone*’s death:



Eric Corbeyran, *Horne*, « *Le Quatrième Mur* » 2016
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*“Antigone is the little one sitting over there, saying nothing, staring intently at nothing. She’s thinking. She’s thinking that she is about to become Antigone, that [...] she’s going to die, that she’s young, and that she too would’ve wanted very much to live.”*¹⁰

Then, in the second part of the book, Sam is stroked by cancer, and is not able to continue his life-long project and asks Georges to pursue this peacebuilding dream. From there, the author articulates the difficulties that are encountered throughout the process of creating this play in a war-torn country. How difficult it is to deconstruct the prejudices that one has over the other, both seeing each other as an enemy, and how hard it is to reconstruct the “agreements [that were] torn apart by the refusal to acknowledge some part of the

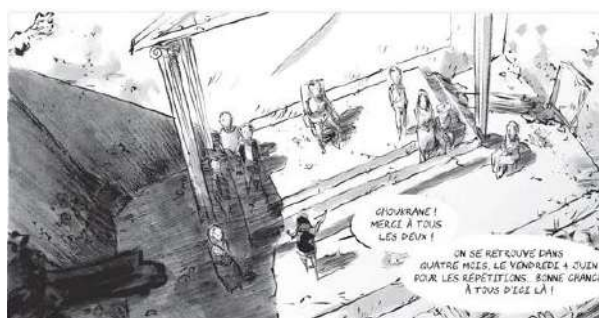
⁸ Jean Anouilh, *Antigone* (Paris : La Table Ronde, 2008), Back cover.

⁹ Chalandon, *Le Quatrième mur*, 199.

¹⁰ Jean Anouilh, *Antigone*, trans. Zander Teller (Rehearsal Script – September 21, 2006), 1.

community [...] as an integral part of it.”¹¹ But more importantly, the author brilliantly depicts the sort of totalizing effect living in a conflict zone has on Georges. We witness the distortion he endures between the rapid and violent life he has in Beirut and his quiet and loving life in Paris near Aurore and Louise. As it is common for combatants or humanitarian workers, engaging in the context of a conflict deeply changes Georges. His life in France appears as a far away and pointless memory. “I didn’t understand anymore why I was coming back home.”¹² After his forced return to France for security reasons, Georges is even unable to disconnect from the reality of the war in Lebanon. He is not interested in anything else than the situation there and starts to violently resent the peaceful situation in France. “The miseries of peace disgusted me. [...] [In Lebanon] children had been chopped up, skinned, dismembered, crushed with stones. And my daughter was crying for a fucking (*sic*) ice cream?”¹³ Chalandon’s depiction of Georges’ behavior appear highly realistic, and one could think that the author’s career as a war reporter may have a significant influence on the precise representation of what seems to be somehow related to a form of cognitive dissonance. Georges indeed believes he has to act in favor of peace in Lebanon, to engage in a world that needs him, but he was forced to come back to his former life in France and is not able to accept it. He experiences an inadequation between his beliefs, the will to keep engaging in Lebanon and his situation in France where he has to endorse the role of a husband, a father, a French young person. Such struggle will of course lead to a tragic ending that resonates once again with the play’s end: “And so, here we are. [...] now, it’s over. [...]. Everyone who had to die is dead.”¹⁴

The elements presented here only constitute a slight part of Sorj Chalandon’s book which brilliantly address the issue of war, violence, peacebuilding, but also family, friendship and the impact violence and conflicts have on people on the field, whether it is the people living in the conflict zones or the Western person navigating these zones to do good. This story really constitutes a relevant example of how literature can make us think about contemporary issues with a realism that may even lead to a sort of confusion between reality and fiction.



Eric Corbeyran, Horne, « Le Quatrième Mur » 2016 ©Marabout 2016

¹¹ Venna Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent Into the Ordinary* (Berkeley, University of California Press: 2007), 9.

¹² Chalandon, *Le Quatrième mur*, 203.

¹³ Chalandon, *Le Quatrième mur*, 297.

¹⁴ Anouilh, *Antigone*, trans. Zander Teller, 59.

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