

An Ordinary Man

An interview with **Nicholas Lens** by Dorota Semenowicz

Who proposed working together on an opera, you or Coetzee?

Me. I wrote to him ten years ago, probably in 2002. I admired his output. I talked about it a lot with my friends. Many of them found it overintellectualized, too heavy. But I considered him an important writer with works to become classics.

How did you know that Coetzee would like to write an opera?

I read it between the lines in *Disgrace*. Scenes in the book where Lurie takes care of old dogs, takes their dead bodies to a crematorium, were full of unbelievable sorrow – I felt that Coetzee loves opera and music. I do not know in which sentence I felt it but I did.

In *Disgrace*, Lurie also writes an opera about Byron. I did not expect that Coetzee himself would write a libretto though.

I took the risk of writing for the first time to someone I did not know but whom I admired. I sent it to his editor in London and I added “if you ever work on an opera, I would like to work with you.”

And what was the result?

A lot of time went by, but no answer came. What I did not know is that John changed publishers in that period. So my letter got to him practically one year later. Then he wrote that if my offer still stood, he wanted to talk about it. That must have been in 2003.

But Coetzee only wrote *Slow Man* in 2005!

We did not rush into writing the opera. We communicated for a long time. In 2005 I showed him a film I made: *Love is the Only Master I Will Serve*. He watched it and wrote that he was busy writing a book and one of the scenes could be our starting point. He was thinking about *Slow Man* and the meeting of Paul Rayment and Marijana arranged by Elizabeth Costello. It is the most theatrical scene in the whole book.