

FROM CAVAFY TO LEONARD COHEN AND SHARON. - A POEM'S ODYSSEY

December 19, 2012

There is an exquisite moment during the string of sell out concerts being played by Leonard Cohen this autumn and winter across the United States and Canada. No, it is not the mesmerizing sound of an old master - now 76 - whose songs have been a compendium of love and loss and revolution for millions of people since the 1960s or his wonderful versatile band that makes music from fifty different instruments over a four hour concert.

Certainly Leonard and his voice are unforgettable, but what audiences have taken away from this tour - gathered through comments on blogs, Facebook and concert reviews in local newspapers - is a poem sung solo by Sharon Robinson, Cohen's long time collaborator, joint composer, song writer and back up singer. The song is called 'Alexandra Leaving' and it was an adaptation by an even older poem written by Cohen and Robinson for their joint 2001 album 'Ten New Songs.'

On stage Sharon Robinson's achingly beautiful voice plumbs the depths of despair and loss as a love affair appears to break up. Her dark, rich timbres also sound proud and defiant as she sings of how to accept the loss of a loved one with the necessary dignity.

The original poem from which this is adapted is not merely a love song. It is a poem by perhaps the most important Greek poet of the 20th century Constantine Cavafy (1863-1933) - a poem he wrote in 1911 for his hometown Alexandria. Here is the poem in full.

The God Abandons Anthony.

When suddenly there is heard at midnight

A company passing invisible

With wonderful music, with voices, -

Your fortune giving way now, your works

Which have failed, the plans of a lifetime

All turned illusions, do not mourn uselessly.

As one prepared long since, courageously,

Say farewell to her, to Alexandria who is leaving.

Above all do not be tricked, never say it was

All a dream, and that your hearing was deceived ;

Do not stoop to such vain hopes as these.

As one prepared long since, courageously,

As becomes one worthy as you were of such a city.

Firmly draw near the window,

And listen with emotion, but not
With the complaining and entreaties of cowards,
Listen, your last enjoyment, to the sounds,
The wonderful instruments of the mystic company,
And say farewell, farewell to Alexandria you are loosing.

Constantine P. Cavafy (1911)

Poems by C.P.Cavafy. Tansalated by John Mavrogordato. Chatto and Windus, London 1978.

Cavafy wrote wondrously, erotic love poems, but as one reads through them one suddenly realizes that he was gay and he is discreetly alludes to male rather than female lovers - after all this was 1911 and homosexuality even in the decadence of Alexandria could not be openly displayed.

Cavafy wrote about the Gods and Heros that made up the pantheon of Greece's glory two thousand years ago. He also mourns their passing and the loss of the values, power and love that they bore with them. He writes so evocatively about Greek mythology that the stones and the ancient statues seem to come alive. He also writes about the glory and the decadence of his hometown Alexandria, which was the capital of the Egyptian empire, beloved by Alexander the Great and ever since a heavily Greek populated city. Of course it was also the capital of its most famous Queen Cleopatra and her Roman lovers - first Julius Caesar and then Marc Anthony. Alexandria was to receive even more literary fame a few years after Cavafy died when Laurence Durrell wrote his Alexandria Quartet.

Cavafy's poem describes the last hours of Anthony before he kills himself after being defeated by the new Roman emperor Octavian. The poem appears to suck the hours out of time as we know that soon Cleopatra will also take her life. The Gods have deserted Anthony and so have his men. In his last moments, the poet urges Anthony to hear the music and sounds of the city he has come to love so much, and refrain from making excuses or acting in a cowardly fashion before he dies. It is a poem about defeat and the passing of an empire, a city and a Queen. It is above all a poem about how to face death with dignity and courage so that you remain worthy of your life and what you have created. It is also about losing a lover.

It is this theme of loss that Cohen and Robinson adapt in their hauntingly beautiful rewrite of Cavafy's poem 'Alexandra Leaving'.

Alexandra Leaving.

Suddenly the night has grown colder.
The God of love preparing to depart.
Alexandra hosted on his shoulder,
They slip between the sentries of the heart.

Upheld by the simplicities of pleasure,
They gain the light, they formlessly entwine;
And radiant beyond your wildest measure
They fall among the voices and the wine.

It's not a trick, your senses all deceiving,
A fitful dream, the morning will exhaust -
Say goodbye to Alexandra leaving.
Then say goodbye to Alexandra lost.

(Chorus) Even though she sleeps upon your satin ;
Even though she wakes you with a kiss.
Do not say the moment was imagined;
Do not stoop to strategies like this.

As someone long prepared for this to happen,
Go firmly to the window. Drink it in.
Exquisite music. Alexandra laughing.
Your firm commitments tangible again.

And you who had the honor of her evening,
And by the honor had your own restored -
Say goodbye to Alexandra leaving:
Alexandra leaving with her lord.

Chorus

As someone long prepared for the occasion ;
In full command of every plan you wrecked -
Do not choose a coward's explanation
That hides behind the cause and the effect.

And you who were bewildered by a meaning;
Whose code was broken, crucifix uncrossed -
Say goodbye to Alexandra leaving

Say goodbye to Alexandra lost.

Say goodbye to Alexandra leaving

Then say goodbye to Alexandra lost.

At first glance the city has been turned into a woman. The song is about the end of what seems to be a sophisticated and complicated love affair as the spurned lover is urged to take his loss with courage. It is their last night together and even though the lover "had the honor of her evening" he must say goodbye to Alexandra knowing that he will lose her for ever.

Yet there are enough illusions in the song that also hint at Cavafy's city of Alexandria city and its beauty - the wine, the music, the views from the window - that will soon all be submerged under the terrible loss of Alexandra leaving. Over the years Cohen has built up the ability to conjure up among his listeners tumultuous emotion, love and despair with a single name or the simplest of phrases and this is what he does with the haunting title being repeated.

Robinson sings this song with her own voice providing most of the acoustics, the music, the back up and everything else that may be needed. She is one of those rare and powerful African-American singers like Nina Simone whose voice alone - without accompaniment - is sufficient to carry a song. She has the depth and rich emotion in her voice that can also sound extraordinarily intimate - even when singing in front of thousands of people. Her voice becomes an intimate instrument like a Miles Davis trumpet. Sharon Robinson own recent album 'Everybody Knows' includes songs she wrote with Leonard Cohen and songs she wrote alone but the entire album transports the listener to a new dimension.

Cohen may have reached old age according to some, but he is planning a new life once he reaches 80 when the doctors have told him he can start smoking again ! A man of enormous generosity he has always encouraged the musicians and singers who have backed him to start out in their own careers. His former back up singers including the magnificent Jennifer Warnes have all chalked up individual careers separate from Cohen, if not from his songs.

You can still catch the magnificent non-smoking Leonard Cohen, the trembling voice of Sharon Robinson, a powerful band playing incredible music and the magnificent sadness of this song in New York where Cohen and his band will be performing before Christmas.

The end.

Leonard Cohen plays Boston on 15 and 16 December, New York city on 18 December and Brooklyn on 20 December. His tour continues in Europe after the New Year.