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## ***A Love Supreme on the Paris Stage***

Congolese writer Emmanuel Dongala's novella "A love supreme" (1982) is the most moving and apposite tribute to the achievement of John Coltrane, in any medium, that I know. The account of a pair of encounters between a young African expatriate in New York and John Coltrane, motivated by the death of the latter in July 1967, exhibits an earnest sincerity toward the era so touching that it might almost be mistaken for parody by readers more accustomed to a jaded view of the 1960s. The details of the text's *mise en scène* — Ornette Coleman or Imamu Baraka on the telephone; a girlfriend's birth-control pills on the dresser; the narrator face down on the steaming pavement, frozen with fear during the Newark riots; a perhaps unconscious allusion to the first line of Allen Ginsberg's "Howl" ("*j'ai vu les meilleurs camarades de ma génération aller au sacrifice...*") — evoke the individual exhilaration and the social exasperation of the era with grace and economy. And Trane's music, Trane's mission, is woven into the fabric of every paragraph.

Now Dongala's text has been adapted for the stage by director Luc Clémentin. The [mission](#) of the [Tarmac de la Villette](#) theatre in Paris is to present French-language works by authors outside of France; the organizers of the nearby [Jazz à la Villette](#) festival (August 30 to September 10) asked the Tarmac to stage this jazz-themed piece, in tandem with the festival's programming.

"A Love Supreme" is not an obvious choice for such a transformation. Clémentin chooses not to depict all the things that happen in the text — riots, night-club concerts, a funeral, police violence, and mostly after-hours conversations — but instead to remain faithful to the character of the novella. For Dongala's text is really just someone telling us what he remembers about John Coltrane, and how he felt about his

death. Accordingly, the Tarmac theatre is transformed into an intimate jazz club; the unnamed narrator — the bartender? the proprietor? — recounts to us, and to the band, the story of his relationship with “J.C.” French-Ivorian actor Adama Adepoju plays the narrator; Adepoju is known as a storyteller as well as an actor, skills well-suited to Clémentin’s presentation of the material.

Adepoju’s is the only speaking role, but he shares the stage with a jazz trio: three-fifths, in fact, of the [Olivier Robin/Sébastien Jarrousse Quintet](#). The performance kicks off with a driving reading of “Countdown”, from *Giant Steps* (Atlantic, 1959), sounding less like Trane’s Atlantic sidemen and more like the members of the classic quartet (namely, bassist Jimmy Garrison and drummer Elvin Jones). Jarrousse, on tenor and soprano sax, merits special commendation for not withering under the daunting task of standing in for Coltrane. (Not so fortunate was trumpeter Jonah Jones during a recording of “I Can’t Give You Anything But Love” with Billie Holiday and Teddy Wilson in 1936. Jones was normally a fine player, but on this track he clearly could not escape the specter of Louis Armstrong’s typically definitive solo on an earlier recording of the same song.)

The trio, at intervals, performs a number of signature Coltrane songs (“In A Sentimental Mood”, “I Want To Talk About You”, “Lonnie’s Lament”), in between, underneath, and on top of Adepoju’s soliloquies. Their sprightly “Royal Garden Blues” (with Jarrousse on soprano) accompanies the particularly lovely passage in which the narrator talks about his earliest introduction to jazz. The presence of the trio in the piece introduces an element of randomness into the play: because of the role of improvisation, no two nights’ performances will be the same.

Fittingly, the musicians play “Acknowledgement”, from the album *A Love Supreme* (Impulse!, 1964) during the most thrilling episode, an evocation of Coltrane’s triumphant

performance (“a star that bursts into a thousand small fires, a thousand small suns”). Ashley Kahn’s book *A Love Supreme: The Story of John Coltrane’s Signature Album* (Viking, 2002) assures us that while Coltrane only performed the entire *Love Supreme* suite once, in Antibes in 1965 after the record’s release, the band had indeed played parts of it at club dates prior to recording the album; this historical verification is all I need to believe that Dongala might have witnessed the scene that inspired such luminous prose, passionately declaimed by Adepoju at the Tarmac.

In a final sequence, after J.C.’s death, the narrator muses on the relationship between the militant politics of the time and Coltrane’s musical objectives. If he cannot reconcile the two intellectually, he does so poetically, evoking what the militants drew from Trane: solace and illumination.

Dongala, who is a professor of chemistry at Simon’s Rock College in New York, is an increasingly well-known writer in the US and his more recent work has been translated into English. No translation of his collection of shorter pieces *Jazz et vin de palme* is available, however. Such a translation would be of special interest to English-speaking jazz fans, as the book includes “A Love Supreme”, but also the piece that gives the compilation its title. (“Jazz and Palm Wine” asks two questions. The first may have occurred to science-fiction fans: what if the hostile aliens had landed in Brazzaville rather than Washington, D.C. or London? The second has probably never occurred to anyone: what if those same hostile aliens could be vaporized by the music of Sun Ra?)

An English-language adaptation of Clémentin’s staging of “A Love Supreme”, with the ever-changing contribution made by a succession of different musicians, would undoubtedly be well-received in the US and elsewhere. In the meantime, we can be grateful to the Tarmac team for their moving tribute and to Dongala for his irreducible faith in an emblematic artist’s quest.

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