

MILLE E UNO, TAUSEND UND EINE, THOUSEND AND ONE

A theatrical play

developed, researched and tested as part of the Erasmus+ Project

LA LANGUE DES OISEAUX



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I SCENE

Two birds meet on the roof of a building in a city in Europe.

ALBATROS Who are you?

BECCOROSSO Me?

ALBATROS Yes, you. Who else? There's only you here.

BECCOROSSO And you.

ALBATROS Me. Oh, well, me, sure.

BECCOROSSO The two of us. You, who are you?

ALBATROS Don't you want to answer?

BECCOROSSO Yes, no problem. I am a bird.

ALBATROS Well, so am I.

BECCOROSSO You, a bird?

ALBATROS Yes.

BECCOROSSO How can you be a bird? You are so different from me.

ALBATROS What am I supposed to be then?

BECCOROSSO I don't know. A whale.

ALBATROS Have you ever seen a whale?

BECCOROSSO No. But I've heard about it.

ALBATROS I have seen them.

BECCOROSSO They are small and swim slowly.

ALBATROS They are very big instead. Whoever told you that they are small is a liar. Besides, do I look small to you?

BECCOROSSO Big is the buffalo, big is the rhinoceros, big is the hippo.

ALBATROS Never seen them. Where do they live?

BECCOROSSO My house.

ALBATROS Where is your house?

BECCOROSSO Above them.

ALBATROS On the trees that give them shade.

BECCOROSSO No, there were no trees down there. Me and my kind eat, sleep and mate on their backs. (*Reflects for a moment*). That is, we ate, we slept and we mated on their backs. Before we got here.

ALBATROS And where are your kindred?

BECCOROSSO I don't know.

ALBATROS What do you mean?

BECCOROSSO I lost them.

ALBATROS That's terrible.

BECCOROSSO Yes.

ALBATROS I too have lost my fellow men. And now you, so different, come and tell me you are a bird.

BECCOROSSO Yes, because that is what I know, even though I no longer live there in the bush, eating ticks and lice on the backs of giraffes. I know, however, that I am a bird.

ALBATROS If one day I should call you, bird, what name should I shout?

BECCOROSSO The surname is Bufaga, but you can call me Beccorosso.

ALBATROS Why did you come here Beccorosso?

BECCOROSSO I didn't want to leave the savannah, but in the last few years the heat was getting hotter and the big animals that were our home began to chase the rains northwards. We also left. But the journey was long and dangerous. Some fell. Others stopped. I made it all the way up here. I hoped to meet one of my kind. And I have met you. (*Pause*). But who are you?

ALBATROS I am the Albatross.

BECCOROSSO Your house is not beautiful: just hot roofs, flies and mosquitoes.

ALBATROS This is not my home. I fly over the oceans and my nest hangs on the rocks. There my mate used to lay her eggs. In turn one would leave to look for food and the other would hatch. But then the little ones started to get sick, because with the fish and molluscs we also ate small plastic crumbs. And they would swell up and die. We flew further and searched better, so that our bellies wouldn't be full of caps and coloured bags. But the last time my flight lasted so long that when I returned the nest was gone. My mate and our chick had flown away, maybe. Perhaps they had died. I was left alone.

BECCOROSSO I used to think that my story was the saddest one in the world. Not anymore.

ALBATROS Courage.

BECCOROSSO Shall we take revenge? Attack the man? Eat his eyes?

ALBATROS We have wings to fly.

BECCOROSSO Then let's run away.

ALBATRO Do you have anywhere to go?

BECCOROSSO I don't.

ALBATRO Neither do I.

II SCENE

Bubo Bubo enter the scene. It drags an unconscious Pelican with him. He deposits him on the ground. He moves away.

PELICAN And what's that over there?

BUBO BUBO That? The harbour. That's where the ships dock.

PELICAN No, there. See that long line, with a red spot at the bottom?

BUBO BUBO There by the church?

PELICAN Church? What do you mean church?

BUBO BUBO It's one of the places where men go to pray. Those that ring with big upturned metal flowers, called bells. Then there are other places, called temples, where the bells are small and sharp: little bells. And others, where there is a voice calling the faithful and which are called mosques.

PELICAN (*interrupting him*) I understand, but I say over there, that big blue street.

BUBO BUBO Blue, red? Explain yourself better.

PELICAN (*agitated*) Down there at the end, that thing lost in the horizon.

BUBO BUBO That?! But that's the sea.

PELICAN The sea? But then where are we? (*Pause*). Who brought me here?

BUBO BUBO Too many questions. The best virtue of the ignorant is to learn to ask questions. But, beware: they must be few and fair. Now: how is it possible to know which questions are right? It is well known that the concept of right and wrong is not the same for everyone. Let us take the example from before. According to some, it is right for female specimens to go and pray.

According to some, however, they must cover their heads. According to others, it is preferable for

the head to be uncovered. For still others, only the males should pray all together. In short, what is right for some is wrong for others.

PELICAN I only asked how I got up here.

BUBO BUBO Do you realise that you are a rather impertinent creature? You always interrupt me.

PELICAN Don't take offence. Your explanations are beautiful and I am happy to learn things about the religion of men. And also of women.

BUBO BUBO Then listen.

PELICAN First, however, answer my question.

BUBO BUBO What's so important, let's hear it.

PELICAN I... (*interrupts himself to look for the right words*)

BUBO BUBO (*interrupting him*) There, you don't even know, what's important. Everyone should know...

PELICAN I want to know how I got up here.

BUBO BUBO But what questions! You are a bird. You are on the roof of a city. Who brought you up here? Your nature I suppose.

PELICAN Are you making fun of me, by any chance?

BUBO BUBO I wouldn't dare.

PELICAN Seems to be.

BUBO BUBO Rude. Ungrateful. I'm trying to educate you and you attack me like this?

PELICAN Why do you force me to say what I don't want to say?

BUBO You're the one forcing me to say what I don't want to say.

PELICAN What do we do now?

BUBO BUBO I don't know. You've created a problem, now solve it.

PELICAN Ah, I've created a problem?

BUBO BUBO Who else?

PELICAN How many of us are up here?

BUBO BUBO Give yourself an answer.

PELICAN Do you see anyone else but the two of us?

BUBO BUBO (*looks around carefully*) There's a fly on the gutter, but it doesn't seem to be a big deal.

PELICAN Then we must settle it between us.

BUBO BUBO I agree.

PELICAN Let's start again?

BUBO BUBO Do you want me to tell you more about the religions of creatures called humans?

PELICAN I want to know how I got here.

BUBO BUBO You are a bird, you must have flown up here with the strength of your wings.

PELICAN You like to humiliate me.

BUBO BUBO Don't start that again.

PELICAN My wings are of no use any more.

BUBO BUBO Are you ill?

PELICAN (*in a provocative tone*) Yes, my illness is called spillage.

BUBO BUBO Are you contagious?

PELICAN No.

BUBO BUBO Is it hereditary?

PELICAN No.

BUBO BUBO Have you been eating too much rubbish?

PELICAN No, no. I got into the oil slick of a big ship carrying oil and all my feathers stuck together. I got blisters on my skin, my eyes, my beak. I couldn't get warm any more. And I thought I was going to die. (*Pause*). Of course a predator would come down from the sky and eat me alive. (*A silence*). There. Now you know. (*Pause*). Maybe I am dead and you are the bird that devoured me. Maybe this is the sky where all the souls of dead birds meet. (*He looks around*). But it is strange that no one is here. Where are all the others?

BUBO BUBO You are right. I am your predator. (*A pause, while Pelican reflects*). I saw you from afar in that dense water. Your head was bent. You were breathing badly. Killing you was easy. So many died in that black pool of sea. Dolphins, turtles and corals. Someone has to survive. I decided to save you.

PELICAN Now how can I repay you?

BUBO BUBO See, you forced me to speak.

PELICAN Like you did.

BUBO BUBO Then now let's forget the whole thing.

PELICAN We can also tell each other who we are. Who are you?

BUBO BUBO I am the bird with the big eyes: the eagle owl. But you can call me Bubo Bubo.

PELICAN My name is Pelican.

BUBO BUBO I know you. Ancient legends tell that in case of need you pelicans would go so far as to open your chest to feed your young with your blood. Your lineage deserves the greatest respect.

PELICAN So is yours, you big-eyed Bubo Bubo.

BUBO BUBO There are not many who think as you do.

PELICAN Who can doubt your nobility of spirit?

BUBO BUBO There are those who describe us as beasts of ill omen.

PELICAN You?

BUBO BUBO Perverse animals in the pay of man.

PELICAN I can't believe it.

BUBO BUBO Machiavellian strategists.

PELICAN I don't know what that means, but it sounds horrible.

BUBO BUBO You know that truth is only an opinion.

PELICAN I know that if a thing has happened it is true, and if it has not happened it is not.

BUBO BUBO At one time, perhaps. And I'm not so sure, if King Solomon had to threaten to cut an infant in two to establish who its real mother was. (*Pelican struggles to follow, but listens attentively*). But today fantasy reigns supreme. The victim passes for a murderer. And the executioner passes himself off as a benefactor. My family and I used to fly quietly in the skies of our country. But in recent months our space has become a battleground. Our routes were invaded by fighters. The bombers left behind high columns of blinding smoke. We tried to push a little further and for a while it worked. Then one night, while flying, we spotted a drone and one of us hit it with his poo. Look, he shouted: I got him! So we all tried. And most of us hit it, you know, we have very sharp eyesight. And everyone shouted: I got him! And: me too! Me too! And the next night we gathered in a flock for another competition. And for several nights we played poop on the drone. We were young and we wanted to have fun.

PELICAN Yes, of course.

BUBO BUBO They accused us of high treason. They shot at us. We were forced to leave. I had never seen the sea until then. (*Wistful*). I had never flown in daylight.

PELICAN If you hadn't shat on that drone, I'd be dead.

BUBO BUBO This is the law of the universe, which rules over space and things.

PELICAN I feel that with you I will learn many things.

BUBO BUBO I hope that with me you will learn to fly again.

PELICAN I will fly over the ocean again. I can still hear its sound in my head.

BUBO BUBO You will hold on in the wind.

PELICAN Like you used to be.

SCENE III

Swallow sings softly, alone. Condor appears, Swallow becomes quiet, hides a little.

CONDOR Awfully quiet here. (*Silence*). Awfully quiet... awfully quiet... awfully quiet! (*Gets louder*)
awfully quiet!!!

SWALLOW Stop shouting!

CONDOR Stop singing!

SWALLOW I'm not singing at all. I'm very quiet. Unlike you.

CONDOR Silence is also a sound.

Silence

SWALLOW That's right.

Silence

CONDOR When it's quiet, the thoughts become loud. I then hear what the others are thinking.

SWALLOW And?

CONDOR So what?

SWALLOW What am I thinking?

CONDOR You're not thinking anything. You're a little stranger like me.

SWALLOW You're huge. I've never seen a bird as big as you. Stranger, impertinent!

CONDOR Yes, I'm a big stranger. - Are you afraid of me? Don't be afraid. I don't like swallows.

SWALLOW Uh-huh.

CONDOR I'm not here by choice, by the way.

SWALLOW I am. I live here. In winter we live in Africa, in summer in Europe. I'm not a stranger at all. I fly here and there, have you ever seen a border in the sky? There you go.

CONDOR Summer? You call this summer? And who's we? All I see is you.

SWALLOW One swallow does not make a summer.

CONDOR How?

SWALLOW It's only spring. I'm early this year. Had a little trouble on the road. I was gonna keep going, but I had to stop.. I've never been here before.

CONDOR I've never been away from home.

SWALLOW Even though you're so tall.

CONDOR You're a bit stupid, aren't you?

SWALLOW Insolent! I'm highly educated. Highly gifted. I speak several languages.

You're lucky I speak yours. You don't speak a single foreign language?

CONDOR No, why? Now, don't be cheeky or I'll eat you.

SWALLOW I thought you didn't like swallows. What's your name, anyway?

CONDOR You can call me Queen of the Skies, I am, how could you miss it, an Andean condor! And if I don't find anything here that I like, then I'll just take a little strange-looking swallow....

SWALLOW You're very racist.

Silence

CONDOR Have you noticed how racist these strange birds are?

SWALLOW Yes, I have. These weird European birds are probably frustrated. Because they always have to hurry to get everywhere on time.

CONDOR Yes, on time, imagine I was one minute late for dinner and already I didn't get anything.

SWALLOW Of course not. One minute past time, there's no food here. And if you want to meet one of those weird birds to chill, you have to keep a diary first to be able to make an appointment.

CONDOR Haha, an appointment!! (*Silence*). This silence is cruel. Look in the window! There are strange birds sitting there eating. Nobody says anything.

SWALLOW Nobody sings. In my swarm, there's always singing. When we go out in the evening, there are so many of us. It's quite noisy, I have a big family.

CONDOR Me too. Why isn't your family here?

Silence. Swallow sings.

KONDOR I'm scared of the weird birds.

SWALLOW Don't be. They're scared of you. Because you're so beautiful. And so tall.

CONDOR No matter where I am, they see I'm different.

SWALLOW Just like me.

CONDOR But you don't look so special.

SWALLOW Impertinent! Everyone wants to look special.

CONDOR No, I mean you're small, lots of birds are small like you. You don't stand out.

SWALLOW You don't know anything about me. They don't accept me.

CONDOR Who?

SWALLOW The weird birds, they don't open their window. They're afraid I'll fly in. Without an appointment.

CONDOR Without papers.

SWALLOW With the whole noisy family. They think if one swallow comes, many will come.

CONDOR They might be glad. With the swallows comes summer.

SWALLOW They're not glad. They're scared.

CONDOR Shall I scare them?

Condor makes himself even bigger, Swallow flies wildly around. They laugh

SWALLOW Shall we tell them that you had to leave your home because otherwise you would extinct?

CONDOR How would you know!? You're pretty cheeky.

SWALLOW Look, there opens the window! Hey, weird bird, yeah, you, *(to the audience)*

CONDOR You, yeah you... Hey and you too...

SWALLOW Do you want to come out? We could fly a round together.

KONDOR Let's fly together!

IV SCENE

Stork moves along the edge of the roof, making a rhythmic noise with its beak. Parrot is sleeping, its head tucked under the coloured wing, then hearing the noise, it suddenly wakes up

PARROT *(anxiously)* Halt!

STORK What is it?

PARROT Stay where you are.

STORK I come in peace.

PARROT No one ever says they're coming to war.

STORK I come in friendship.

PARROT You're not coming anywhere.

STORK But I haven't done anything to you.

PARROT And I won't let you do anything to me. (*Stork taps his beak*). Stop making that noise.

(*Looking around*). Where are they? Where are they hiding?

STURK Who are you talking about?

PARROT I understood, you know, what you said: there's prey, brothers, come.

STORK Can you please calm down?

PARROT So that you and your brothers will take advantage of me?

STORK But have you looked at yourself?

PARROT Yes.

STORK You're tiny.

PARROT I am beautiful.

STORK You can't eat beauty.

PARROT Oh, yes, you can.

STORK And where should my brothers be?

PARROT (*looking around*). Maybe over there. Or there. (*Stork takes a step forward. Parrot is panicking*). Don't come any closer. (*Stork taps his beak*). Stop that noise. If you don't stop calling them, in a moment they will be here, I will see them high in the sky and as soon as my gaze is distracted by their arrival, you will hook me with your devilish beak, they will throw their net over me and my freedom will be over. I will find myself in one of those markets where they skin live frogs, choke chickens and behead fish, alive, of course, but locked up in a cage as wide as my wings, eating and sleeping on my excrement, until a gutless woman buys me to show me off in her living room.

STORK Poor bird, you are sick. You talk about things that are only in your head. And you don't understand our language, which is strange. We are not like humans, divided by languages: we are one big family and we can recognise each other. You are small and colourful, I am big and painted black and white, but we have wings to fly and legs to walk and we know the winds and fly over lands and waters. I beat my beak when I am excited and just the thought of finding you has put me in a state of contentment. But you treat me like an enemy. And now I shut up because it makes me nervous not to be understood.

PARROT What if you are deceiving me?

STORK Can't you tell who is deceiving you from who is speaking truthfully?

PARROT No.

STORK And you think you're free?

PARROT (*unfolding his wings for a moment*) I don't think I'm in a cage.

STORK Come closer then.

PARROT For what purpose?

STORK To enjoy the space around you.

PARROT And end up in your beak? No, ma'am.

STORK Fly away, then, if you are free to do so.

PARROT So that your brothers catch me in the air. No, ma'am, I won't fall for that.

STORK Swoop down on the city: we don't glide through the streets.

PARROT So that your human accomplices would catch me at once. No.

STORK I feel very sorry for you.

PARROT You're wrong. I managed to escape.

STORK But the cage stayed on you.

PARROT (*opens his wings demonstratively*) That's not true: look.

STORK When you have tasted the cage, it is hard to forget.

PARROT But who are you, to say that?

STORK I have been flying for many years over the skies of the world. And I know a thousand and one stories and I remember them all. I know that when your home is no longer safe, it is no longer your home. I have watched men and seen them prisoners in their own territories, threatened by day and anguished at night. I have seen high walls and barbed wire. I heard frightening sirens and saw children cover their faces with gas masks. There in the lands where I migrated from year to year, I saw people become sad, lonely, no longer exchanging tenderness. I saw them stop lighting fires in their homes, and I was forced to leave, so that no more babies would be born, forced to wince every time I beat my beak, thinking it was a machine-gun fire.

PARROT Mine is a little drama. And perhaps I should feel ashamed. But it's my story, and as the song says: my evil hurts me. I am beautiful, my feathers are blue, red, green, yellow. I am strong. And then - (*She interrupts herself*).

STORK Then?

PARROT Then - Do you want to know?

STORK If it's not a secret.

PARROT If it's not a secret.

STORK If it's a secret you can't tell.

PARROT If it's a secret you can't tell.

STORK Otherwise it's no longer a secret.

PARROT Otherwise it's no longer a secret.

STORK It's a joke.

PARROT A joke.

STORK Will you stop repeating what I'm saying?

PARROT Will you stop repeating what I'm saying?

STORK The game is good when it's short.

PARROT That's my secret. I can repeat sounds.

STORK But it's miraculous. (*She looks at him admiringly*). All of them?

PARROT All of them.

STORK (*in his mother tongue*) I have a secret too, I understand all men's languages.

PARROT (*repeats the sound of the sentence perfectly, then*) What did I say?

STORK (*translating*) You said: I too have a secret, I understand all the languages of men.

PARROT All of them?

STORK All of them.

PARROT But it's miraculous. I repeat sounds, but their meaning is empty. How did you learn them? Ah, it's a secret.

STORK My secret.

PARROT We were born under a good star. But then something got interrupted.

STORK That's life.

PARROT When I was young, I believed that beauty would save me from pain: everyone was looking for me, everyone wanted me, but those who love your beauty do not love you. Now I would like to be invisible.

STORK One day we will all be invisible. Now we must live.

PARROT And you call that living?

STORK When at the change of season we cross the high mountain passes and the men unload their Kalashnikovs on us for the pleasure of seeing us fall and they collect our bodies as trophies for their souvenir photos and say: 'That's a beautiful bird', and I look towards the sun and I am still flying, I know that this is still life.

PARROT To overcome fear, do you just spread your wings and look towards the sun?

STORK Follow the spring wind.

PARROT Follow the spring wind. (*Pause*). Yes. Beat it, stork. Beat. (*Parrot imitates Stork's beat, then with a smile in his voice*). Yes. Yes.

II PART

I SCENE

All the birds are attracted by a strange music that invades the space: it is a radio frequency radio frequency, which the wind has carried up to the roof of the building. A powerful male voice recites a poem. The birds listen in amazement.

ACTOR There are many marvelous things,
 Yet none more so than man.
 This power traverses the sea
 When it is grey with wintry wind,
 Passing under the surging swells
 As they nearly engulf him. And of the gods
 The eldest, Gaia immortal, restless Gaia,
 He wears out by turning her soil with plows
 And the stock of horses, moving through and

Back and forth, year after year.
 He leads by taking captive
 The race of thoughtless birds,
 The nations of wild beasts
 And the aquatic life of the deep,
 In twisted nets woven into meshed coils,
 The very skillful human;
 With contrivance he rules over
 The field animals and the beast of the mountains,
 As he restrains the horse by placing a yoke

Around its shaggy neck, and holds back

The untiring bull of the mountains.

PRESENTER We listened to the first stasimo of the chorus of Sophocles' Antigone in Andrea Caimmi's splendid interpretation. Andrea, you chose to read this text. Why this one?

ACTOR A good question. Why, with all the contemporary authors whose merits we cannot but recognise, choose an author from 2500 years ago?

PRESENTER Indeed?

ACTOR Yes.

PRESENTER Now, the words are a bit heavy, the structure - But it does indeed seem like it was written yesterday.

ACTOR It looks like it was written today.

PRESENTER Does that mean that the man hasn't understood anything?

ACTOR It would seem so.

PRESENTER A species doomed to extinction. Maybe in another 2500 years.

ACTOR Or sooner.

PRESENTER Before -

ACTOR Unless another people come to save him.

PRESENTER Let's go back to the imagery of extraterrestrials?

ACTOR Maybe animals would also suffice. Without history. Without memory. Weightless.

PRESENTER Like birds.

ACTOR Like birds, yes.

PRESENTER Again thank you Andrea, who knows, maybe some heavenly creature won't listen to this appeal of ours to save humanity.

ACTOR Let's hope so.

SCENE II

All the birds realise that for 2,500 years man has not reached a state of consciousness that would allow him to live a balanced life on the planet. They decide to call a conference to seek solutions that might enable mankind not to self-destruct. This is followed by a concluding improvisation scene, in which the birds launch their proposals for a better future.