

*Si la photo est bonne
Qu'on m'amène ce jeune homme
Ce fils de rien, ce tout et pire
Cette crapule au doux sourire ...*

Pardon... ... I didn't see you there. I'm only here for the ceremony then I'll return - to the welcome darkness of my tomb. Where I sing eternally.

So! They are dedicating a path in my name, erecting a sign - in the Square des Batignolles, 17th arrondissement. Look - ...

Allée Barbara, the panel says: *1930-1997 Auteur, compositeur, interprète.* ... Not chanteuse? At the very least I was chanteuse! They dare to claim they know what I was?

How, now I am dead, can I correct their straitening definition, their *diminution* of me? Oh, the frustration! I am screaming through a glass darkly and no one hears!

[Cough-cough] Sorry. ... No wonder I died early. All those years of smoke-filled clubs and cabarets - and pastis and Gauloises, life on the road. And no doubt my addictions contributed: to prescription opioids – and licorice. Licorice. It was so deliciously, reliably - black. A real friend.

But look, should the panel not also say 'sufferer and survivor'? Tally not just my successes, but some of my challenges too? My troubled, nomadic childhood - the endless cycle of flight and hiding, for ever trying to conceal the *juiifs* that we were?

Or all those different houses we briefly inhabited, full of secret rooms and locked doors - making me perfect prey to my *alsacien* father? *Alsacien* in both senses. On our return to Paris after the war, I was sworn to terrified secrecy – yet he eluded discovery by ... leaving us.

And should you not also mention my flight to Belgium as a mere teenager? My attempt to blot out my past and build a whole new identity? 'Monique Serf' was to be no longer – the very name was nauseous to me – but – yes – Barbara! Just Barbara. After my adored Ukrainian grandmother, *Varvara*.

All other previous baggage relinquished, I returned to Paris only when I felt adequately armed - ... - knowing one thing only: I had to, simply had to, sing.

And how did I begin again, against all that backdrop? Not with a *coup de foudre* but the slow drip, the thankless routine of the clubs and cabarets, singing mostly Brassens. Rewards for my pains, though? Jacques Brel found me a spot in a cabaret in Montparnasse - where my audiences were thoughtful students from the Sorbonne and who *listened* - properly. They did not care how I looked: my featureless black dress concealing my *gamine* body, my short-cut hair exposing my Ashkenazy nose. I came to love them because - they let me be: anonymous. Androgenous. Dark.

They inspired new confidence in me, those young men. I wrote dozens of new songs and at such speed that they hurt as they left me: '*Nantes*' about my father, '*Göttingen*' for my German friends - a song that was later billed as 'a massive contribution to post-war German-French reconciliation'. Ha! Yes, put that on your park panel. If there's room.

On I went and upwards I rose! Olympia. Le Chatelet! The *Grand Prix du Disque*. My keynote song '*L'aigle noir*' sold 1 million copies in twelve hours. Only worth mentioning because of the tragic if laughable irony of it: the abused and haunted girl was no longer perceptible - except to herself in the silent, solitary hours of the night. No one knew or cared who she truly was now that she owned the shallow hallmarks of success.

I've heard of people marrying themselves. Heh! I married my piano - *un piano noir*! Oh, the sense of - ... fulfilment at last! I had done marriage to a man, briefly. Just the once, never again. How cruel of me, when I knew all along that I had nothing left to give, that my heart had shut down when I had tried in vain to clamp my legs shut on my father.

The pundits and the public no doubt thought me *guine, lesbienne*, but no: I loved men in shoals - Gerard Depardieu, Michel Barychikoff, hundreds of others - just never took any home to my bed.

And my lovely young men? So many were fading away before my very eyes. Dying - for trying to find solace and security in each other's arms. I was afraid for them. At every performance I sang them my warning song *SID'Amour à mort* - and, at the end, tossed out condoms like flower stems!

As he pinned on my *Légion d'Honneur* for services to AIDS victims, Prime Minister Jospin said I was 'a woman who knew suffering and understood the suffering of others.' He got it. Why can't you? Put that on your little blue and white panel?

And I want it also to say this: The progeny of Barbara? Over 70 extant songs, each one an agonising but joyous birth. My children – born of pain – just minus the violation. They are all grown now, and thriving. But they live with me still – and with everyone, I hope. ... Tell them they can still listen! That I sing on! Chanteuse!

Allée Barbara! Ha-ha. ... Of course! I see it now! A wide path through a park where offspring play! Where offspring play! *Génius. Parfait!* No, there is no need to change anything! *Au revoir.*

Une petite cantate

Du bout des doigts

Obsédante et maladroite

Monte vers toi:

Mais tu es partie, fragile

Vers l'au-delà,

Je te revois souriante

Assise à ce piano-là ...