



MÊME LES CHEVALIERS TOMBENT DANS L'OUBLI

INTERVIEW WITH MATTHIEU ROY

Right after you graduated from the school of the Théâtre National de Strasbourg, you founded a company and chose to focus exclusively on contemporary writing. Why?

Matthieu Roy: I realised that what mattered to me was to give a voice to strong social, and thus political, issues, and that contemporary writers were more in tune with the world in which we live. They are even a little ahead of us, as they sense what is brewing, what is about to happen, and they are able to turn that into drama. I really wanted to be the first to direct texts that had just been written, either because I'd read them or because I could commission writers. That way I could create a direct relationship with authors.

Who are the writers who played a central part in your work?

As I work mostly by intuition, they are often writers I met randomly, each project often leading to the next one. The first one was Elfriede Jelinek, with *Princess Dramas*, which led me to Jean-Luc Lagarce and *Histoire d'amour (Love Story)*, then to Alberto Moravia and *Conjugal Love*. Christophe Pellet saw those plays and we began working together on his first play for all audiences, *Who's Afraid of the Wolf?*

Why choose a play "for all audiences?"

That's a decision we made after a representation of our adaptation of *Conjugal Love* in front of an audience of high schoolers in Saintes. Our anxiety leading up to this experience was unfounded, since it went very well. From there came the idea that teenagers could be interested in our work. We thought it was important that their first encounter with theatre be striking enough that they would want to come back, which meant for us working even harder. Christophe Pellet agreed to embark on this adventure with us.

After that first experience, you decided to create a trilogy aimed at teenagers.

We called it "Face(s) of our Youth". It begins with *Even Knights Get Forgotten*, the play by Gustave Akakpo we'll perform at the Festival d'Avignon, which will be followed by Marius von Mayenburg's *Martyr* at the Théâtre Gérard Philipe in Saint-Denis in November, and Fabrice Melquiot's *Days of Nothing*, in la Chartreuse in 2015 with the ATP (Associations de Théâtre Populaire). All three take place in a school: Gustave Akakpo's is set in a playground, Marius von Mayenburg's in various classrooms and meeting rooms, and Fabrice Melquiot's is about the arrival of a writer at a school. But we decided to perform those plays in theatres rather than in schools because we thought it was important for the students to leave those buildings, so they could return and look at them differently afterward.

You worked in Benin to recreate *Who's Afraid of the Wolf?* with Beninese actors and said, upon coming back to France, that it had changed the way you work. Why?

This experience strongly questioned the way we work. We were used to working in France with state-of-the-art technology, but when we got to Africa, there was no electricity, which meant of course no sound and no light... We had to start from scratch, and the actor on the stage, naked, so to speak, became the heart of the project. Now that I'm back, I don't think I could go back to directing actors the way I used to. Technology should be a tool in the service of the actor whose role it is to create a space with light and sound.

Were you familiar with Gustave Akakpo's writing before the general council of Seine Saint-Denis asked you to work with him?

I'd read some of his texts, but it was the project that interested me first and foremost. I found the idea of a double commission, to a writer and a director, around a common project, to be very exciting. There was some risk involved on both ends, since I didn't know the text before accepting, and Gustave Akakpo had no idea what I would want to do with it. We soon realised we had a lot to share, especially in our respective relationship to other countries. Through my creative experience in Benin, I was able to better understand the work this writer does with language. The way Beninese actors make French theirs is at once obvious and disconcerting. They make it ring, they make us hear its words and its syntax differently. Since the play summons an image of Africa on the stage, we had to find again this particular relationship to the language I'd felt in Benin.

How does Gustave Akakpo summon an image of Africa?

The play revolves around a little white girl who believes she is actually black, that under her white skin is an African skin that suits her better. It raises for us the question of the representation, since this change has to happen on stage.

I didn't want to solve it by resorting to technical effects. Similarly, the girl changes names, calls herself George. It is not a gendered choice, but a reference to a historical character she's read about, and because she has a lot of admiration for a little black boy named Mamadou, with whom she wants to be friends and share a lot of things, like boys do. When she goes back home, she probably goes back to using her actual name... She wants to have extraordinary things to tell her classmates. She thinks her white skin makes her too normal, that she looks like everyone else, like someone who lives quietly in Seine Saint-Denis with her mother. If she were black, things would be different. Which is why George is also the Knight of Saint-George. The Knight was a mulatto slave who lived in the 18th century and who became an aristocrat, a musician, a composer, and a master fencer, and whose life is known, even though it has been somewhat forgotten, or has been mythologised. His story caught Gustave Akakpo's attention because it is that of a mulatto who becomes part of History, of a man who chose for himself a life that wasn't the one meant for him.

But he has been forgotten.

Yes... There's a street that bears his name in Paris. Who knows today what his incredible life really was? The title of the play acknowledges that fact. Younger members of the audience have a different reading of that title because, if at first they expect to see knights in armour, they quickly accept that the heroine's double skin constitutes an armour of sorts. Which isn't wrong. There's a shift I like a lot, from this mythological knight to this little girl living today.

Saint-George is therefore a strong masculine figure. Is there no father figure in the story?

There isn't a single father in any of the three plays of our trilogy. None of the three authors are particularly generous towards adults. The question of the function of the parents, of the responsibilities adults have towards children, is one that I think is very important. That's why I chose to use video to represent the parents, rather than have actors play them on the stage. It creates a void; when the actors take a bow at the end, none of the parents are there.

Have you always used video that way?

With this kind of show, theatre is sometimes lagging behind the audience. Young people nowadays are used to a certain speed and immediacy in everything, and the technical means at our disposal allow us to tell our stories while staying as close to the text as possible. This relationship to time is primordial for those plays for all audiences. Which doesn't mean we only briefly touch on the issues we talk about, and that we don't take the time to breathe, to think about what's going on.

Do you think children's dreams are more provocative than those of their parents?

There's almost a desire to be in complete contradiction with their parents. They are at a point in their lives where everything is possible. Theatre allows us to make children think about the processes that lead to the choices they can make. The show becomes an experience, a trial, and younger members of the audience who go through it might leave the theatre feeling different from how they entered it. I think that today, it is only through individual choices that we can change our societies.

Interview conducted by Renan Benyamina.

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	Pour vous présenter cette édition, plus de 1750 personnes, artistes, techniciens et équipes d'organisation ont uni leurs efforts, leur enthousiasme pendant plusieurs mois. Plus de la moitié relève du régime spécifique d'intermittent du spectacle. Ce carré rouge est le symbole de notre unité.	