



CONDOR

INTERVIEW WITH ANNE THÉRON

The audience of the Festival d'Avignon is very familiar with Frédéric Vossier: he wrote *Ludwig, a King on the Moon*, directed by Madeleine Louarn, and *Housing Estate*, directed by Tommy Milliot. You are now directing *Condor*, the story of one night in the life of two characters against a backdrop of dictatorship and torture. What was your first experience of his writing like? Who are Anna and Paul, the protagonists of this play? What story does your direction of *Condor* tell?

Anne Théron: Frédéric Vossier is in charge of the dramaturgy department of the Théâtre national de Strasbourg (TNS), directed by Stanislas Nordey. Stanislas was first given the text, and he offered it to the associate directors at the TNS, including myself. I read it in one night. I was immediately fascinated by this story which returns to the themes of political and social violence dear to Frédéric Vossier. The title of the play is an explicit reference to Operation Condor, this campaign launched in 1975 by the dictatorships of South America to organise the definitive repression of any and all opposition or left-wing contestation. An operation which made thousands of victims, organised by the intelligence agencies of Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay, and Uruguay, with the support of the CIA and of Henry Kissinger, then the US Secretary of State and recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize... This backdrop allows Frédéric Vossier to talk, in his own words, “*about an old war in the class struggle*” by building “*a traumatic dramaturgy of what the workers’ movement has become: wounded, broken, divided, lost, haunted.*” As for me, I didn’t try to show in my direction the purely historical, political, and social aspects of Operation Condor, which are part of the story of Anna and Paul, but decided to explore Anna’s unconscious and trauma. This approach was possible because Frédéric Vossier’s text works a lot with inferences. It creates tensions and suspense, and gives you a lot of freedom when it comes to the direction. I’ve always worked on intertextuality, always tried to make people hear what is left unsaid, so I saw that as a challenge. *Condor* tells the story of a woman who, one night, calls a man on the phone to meet him. He accepts to pick her up and drive her to his place. We realise they know each other very well, that they haven’t seen each other in forty years, and that this reunion isn’t going to be an easy one. We eventually understand that they’re brother and sister, that they’re from Brazil and that she was an opponent to dictatorship and was tortured while he was on the side of the torturers. They share a memory of the events but have diametrically opposed visions. She’s a survivor. He’s obsessed with order and believes his choice was the right one. Her name is Anna, his is Paul. They’re about to spend the night with each other. A night as terrible as it is strange, during which memories and hallucinations will resurface. Why did she come? Why did he accept to meet her? The whole play revolves around those questions. If we might think that she came to kill him (which she’ll do, in a way), Anna also seems to be there to check that the unthinkable, embodied by her brother, really did happen, that she isn’t crazy, that it’s History that’s crazy... She needs to go through this past again, but finds herself faced with someone who tries several times to reconnect with her, who treats her with tenderness, even though he hasn’t changed at all. Little is said, so everything that is has to be colossal, cruel, sharp. Words can’t convince either of them. In *Condor*, it’s actually the silences that say the most. In the end, all that we know is that Anna will survive this ordeal. Beyond what happened in Brazil, and what is happening there now (it’s terrifying, History repeating itself), my initial intent was to work on questions of memory and resilience: how can we survive? Why is memory so close to fiction? It’s a complex artistic gesture for this play, which I’d call a psychological and political nightmare.

How do you work with the actors? Within what space will you place them, when your directions are, in your own words, objects of research on bodies, video, and sound?

Mireille Herbstmeyer is an actress with an incredible presence. Her partner in the play, Frédéric Leigdens, is another exceptional actor whose fragility I love. For them, I made cuts in this very dense text, in which one might get lost, to build an overall score with my creative team. I asked the actors first and foremost to act in a realistic manner. It's the role of the direction to then create a distance with that performance. I also asked choreographer Thierry Thieû Niang to work with me. I'm trying to find a way for the text to go through the bodies of the actors, to reveal the way they think and are. We had to figure out how to show their history, the memory anchored deep within them. From that point of view, the work we did on voice and sound is key. I often amplify voices, not to change them or play with their volume, but to create sound close-ups which allow me to bring the actor closer to the audience. Music is a rare occurrence in my plays. I use sound as a raw material to then edit and mix together, and I'm always thinking about how to broadcast it so as to sculpt the work of the performers. With Sophie Berger, the show's sound designer, we tried to find an aquatic sound, as if we were underwater, almost suffocating, which would build tension through successive layers leading to a nerve-racking silence. I try to unfold the text, to make it move through the space. Barbara Kraft, the scenographer, immediately had the idea of setting the play in a bunker, which struck me as obviously the right idea. The set is Anna's mental space. The space where she's locked herself up ever since she was arrested and tortured, to the point that she now doubts reality. This reunion with her brother might be but fiction. A sensation the images, created by Mickaël Varaniac-Quard and shown on video surveillance screens, only strengthen.

What place does this play have in your career as both an author and a film and theatre director who attaches great importance to women and their stories?

I've worked on memory for a long time, and the memory of women in particular. What I'm interested in isn't the social or political aspect of the feminine or of feminism, but to explore the female unconscious: "Who speaks when she speaks?" What Anna is going through is very different from what the female characters of *À la Trace* or *La Religieuse* experience. Frédéric Vossier's text brought a different kind of trauma, that of torture. It allowed me to reach a new step in the stories of women I explore on stage, and whose faces I'm always looking for—while knowing full well that there isn't a single face but many, which is what makes it interesting. The paintings of Francis Bacon have played an important part in my life. He paints bodies as if they were but meat. He paints the flesh behind the mask of the face. I want to make people hear what women feel, which to me sounds like a scream. The scream I hear from behind the mask in Bacon's paintings. For all those reasons, *Condor* is a special play. It's short, dense, violent, and it creates beauty out of the unthinkable.

Interview conducted by Francis Cossu the 16th December 2019 and translated by Gaël Schmidt-Cléach