



LA JEUNE FILLE, LE DIABLE, ET LE MOULIN

INTERVIEW WITH OLIVIER PY

Why did you choose this particular fairy tale? And why recreate today *La Jeune Fille, le Diable et le Moulin* (*The Girl, the Devil and the Mill*) rather than *La Vraie Fiancée* (*The True Fiancée*) or *L'Eau de la vie* (*The Water of Life*)?

Olivier Py: When I wrote this play, the only version I had access to was the translation by Marthe Robert, which includes about thirty fairy tales. Of those, this one seemed violent enough to avoid sentimentality, which is all too often present in theatre aimed at children. Today, twenty-five years later, I believe that, in a very intimate and subconscious way, it was the traumas of my own childhood that made me pick this text in particular. Twenty-five years ago I wasn't actually aware of what's at the heart of the story: the question of the pain of the child, of the abuse children are subjected to, and the metaphor of incest. It's an incredible tale of resilience. And it is primitive in its writing, which is what makes it so strong. The other two plays you mentioned are more Shakespearean: *The Water of Life* is a sort of *King Lear*, and *The True Fiancée* carries on top of that Wagnerian themes.

Do you consider *The Girl, the Devil and the Mill* to be an adaptation or an original work?

It's an original work based on a synopsis by the Brothers Grimm but which uses not a single word from the fairy tale. I think of it as my first play, and it was incidentally the first one to be published. The title I gave it is different from the original title, which is *The Girl Without Hands*. And this is going to be a new creation, the fifth one now. Every time I direct it differently, and the actors are often different.

Fairy tales have their own rules and conventions. How do they mesh with those of theatre?

If you look at the question of the happy ending, you might think it belongs to the conventions of fairy tales, but my plays for adults all have happy endings as well. The direct address to the reader can also be easily transposed to the theatre, with a direct address to the audience, a device I have also used in some of my other plays. In a way, I have chosen to continue telling stories through theatre. The tale by the Brothers Grimm isn't a moral tale, whose goal would be to end with a moral or a lesson, it is a tale of initiation. Its only goal is to build a story, it is pure story.

There are several different versions of the tale, in the successive editions of *Grimms' Fairy Tales*.

One of the Brothers Grimm collected ancient tales that used to be passed on orally and tried to tell them as he'd heard them. The other, with each successive edition, tried to add a moral to them. The first edition of 1812 was criticised for its lack of moral, for not conforming to the perception of the fairy tale that had existed since the 17th century. The work the Brothers Grimm did was that of sociologists, finding those tales before simplifying them stylistically to get to those archetypal forms. They removed as much of their authorial presence as possible to create stories at their most fundamental. No wonder their work has inspired so many different works of art, from my plays to Walt Disney movies. Their fairy tales are one of Europe's greatest toolboxes. What they did by leaving the drawing rooms behind to go talk to the people of the country helped us discover something that is at the origin of Europe. They probably didn't realise it themselves when they first began collecting those stories.

The devil plays a larger part in your play than he does in the tale. So does violence.

The devil is here the embodiment of all that is evil. I wanted him to appear on the stage, to talk with the other characters, to say what he had to say. He is Evil, he tries to make everything around him worse. There's a story because there is evil, and there is evil because there is a story. They are inextricably linked. That makes the tale extremely violent, especially for French children, who are used to the tales of Charles Perrault. German children are taught very early those tales by the Brothers Grimm. Physical violence, the hovering presence of death, terrifying figures of the father... They're very dark. But this despair comes with a great optimism. Within three pages, their stories can go from the bleakest to the brightest.

Music plays a large part in the show.

Music changes each time we create the play anew, too. There's almost like an operatic form in this play. An opera with nothing but a piano and an accordion. Music creates a certain immediacy in the relationship to children. This latest version is simpler, because it has to move from one place to another. It's a similar approach to what I did when I wrote tragedies inspired by the great Greek tragedies that we played in theatres, but also in high schools, in the locales used by companies or associations. I like this form of itinerant theatre, at once powerful and simple.



How did this desire to do theatre for children, for “all audiences,” come about?

I was asked if I wanted to do it. And I didn't agree because I wanted to do theatre for children, but because I wanted people to hear those tales. I stumbled upon them when I was twenty, and I was stunned. When I was a child, we never read those fairy tales. I grew up reading Perrault's fairy tales, which aren't quite as dark or violent.

As a writer, do you work differently when you're writing for children?

There is definitely a demand for perfection in the structure and in the writing itself. Everything has to be perfect because children can't stand imperfection, unlike adults. Everything must make sense. But I don't have the feeling that I write any differently. Of course, I try not to use scholarly words. What matters is concision, because those plays have to be like cuckoo clocks, which is of course what distinguishes them from the sagas and epics I sometimes write. I have to make sure the children hear in fifty minutes what it sometimes takes three hours for the adults to hear. But I demand the same of myself in both cases, especially when it comes to formal richness. Theatre shouldn't be poorer just because it is aimed at children.

By presenting this show at the Festival d'Avignon, within the framework of a programme aimed at a younger audience, what is your goal?

Those shows serve several purposes. First they bring children to the theatre, to see real plays that use everything the medium has to offer. They don't talk down to children, but make them discover the conventions of theatre, its magic. On top of that, children bring their parents with them, parents who wouldn't necessarily come to the theatre if they didn't have to accompany their children. It makes the audience more diverse, socially speaking.

Interview conducted by Jean-François Perrier.

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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.	