



2014 COMME POSSIBLE

INTERVIEW WITH DIDIER RUIZ

2014 as possibilities follows 2013 as possibilities. What was the starting point of this project?

Didier Ruiz: *2013 as possibilities* was a commission by Olivier Py and Paul Rondin, then directors of the Odéon-Théâtre de l'Europe, for their project "Adolescence et Territoire(s)" ("Adolescence and Territory(-ies)") with the Ateliers Berthier. We worked with teenagers from the 17th arrondissement of Paris, from Saint-Ouen, and from Clichy-la-Garenne to create a show about their relationship to the world, to the city, and to life in general.

The 2014 edition is aimed at the youth of Avignon. Will the question of the territory be the same as it was in Paris, about the division between the city itself and its periphery?

The question will most likely be similar. Avignon is a divided city: the battlements and the train tracks isolate the downtown area from the rest of the city, but I like to talk about it differently. People whose job it is—architects, urban planners—look at maps, see what keeps people apart, and try to think of ways to bury train tracks or to build bridges. That's not what I do. I talk about other forms of division and enclosure, which are very diverse, and which are rarely where we would expect them to be. When we created *2013 as possibilities*, we quickly realised that the territory we were talking about was intimate rather than geographic.

Who makes up the group working on the show? How does that work actually take place?

We work with a group of fifteen teenagers. Choreographer Tomeo Vergès works with us. The teenagers are free to move however they want but, just like their discourse, their gestures are slowly changed by the successive exercises we do. And in this work on the body, there's also a tiny part that's written: Tomeo teaches them a given movement phrase, like a musical scale, which is also a way of tying them together. It's like a thread. The aim, over the course of the next few months, is to manage to create a cohesive group, which means listening to everyone, and making them listen to one another. When they talk, one by one they have to sit on the same chair. The rule is always the same. Their speech must be directed at someone, come from a clear place, be open to others. At first their words are hesitant, and behind them there remain a lot of things unsaid. That's why everybody has to go through it again next time, to try to reproduce what was said.

Although nothing is fixed and put down on paper, the aim of those "rehearsals" is still to find the same discourse every time?

The idea isn't to use the exact same words, but to retrace one's emotional path, going through the same nuances and colours. I would call what we do working by waves rather than rehearsing. I like the idea of being at once 100% natural and 100% artificial. I think it makes sense: 100% natural because what is said belongs to the person who says it and isn't written down, and 100% artificial because this expression is in response to a request, the decision to speak isn't spontaneous. It's like a free request. My assistant and I write down what they say, they don't have to do it. What is it that the police say again? "Everything you say can and will be used against you?" Well, we tell them, "Everything you say can and will be used *for* you."

Do you work on specific themes during those sessions?

Yes. First I asked them to define adolescence. Then we talked about love, of course. How do we deal with this mysterious thing? Why do I love someone who is obnoxious, or uninteresting? Why does someone else love me? Questions that touch everyone, that come back time and again during adolescence, but that we never actually hear. You'll never hear a high school teacher say, "Alright, open your books. Today we'll be talking about who loves whom, and why." Yet we think about it all the time. I asked them about death, too, because we think about that all the time as well. The studies about suicide rates among teenagers are horrifying. But it's not by not talking about it that we'll prevent it. And it's not because a teenager is talking about death today that he's going to kill himself tomorrow. Talking about death allows us to talk about life, to try to understand it. We talk about the body, this absent body that most people just carry around like something they picked up. All those topics tell us that we are entities, that we cannot separate all those questions that make us who we are.

You've described yourself as a director of the "fake," of fiction, with the Compagnie des Hommes. What does that make you when you work with the "real," then?

I'm a director. It's the same thing. I'm strictly a *metteur en scène*. In the sense that I accompany these young people on the stage and leave them there, step away from it slowly. The end goal is for me to stand in the darkness and for them to be alone on the stage. But they won't be alone, since they'll be *with* others, full with the support of those that

surround them, and therefore able to face the people sitting in front of them. And I'm a director since I ask them not to do certain things. I create a frame. I like the image of the glove: when you're on stage, whether you are an actor or not, you must wear what you say like one wears a glove. The frame must fit the people in it, like a second skin. If the glove is too big, it moves, it wavers. When it is tailor-made, you feel at once straight and free in it, you can stand tall. There's no limpness, no wavering inside you. Actors are forgers, and the teenagers of *2014 as possibilities* are makers. Rehearsing makes things more true, allows you to really be in the moment of speech. It's as valid for the teenager who says something real as it is for the actor who carries a text that is "fake." What really matters is this search for the present of speech. It is only possible because there's a frame: because someone turns off the lights, turns them on in a specific place, and asks people to look at what is happening there. Last week, I went to the Petit Palais museum in Avignon. It has the largest collection of early Renaissance paintings from Italy, many of which depict the Virgin Mary, often standing or sitting in front of a window, through which you can see a city. It's kind of the same thing. The painter leads us into this tiny space to highlight the existence of this other huge and fascinating space, which sucks us in. As soon as you accept the existence of a frame—which acceptance is of course a *sine qua non*—it becomes a door. Here you have steppes, there you have oceans, it never ends. This is a journey, a true journey.

What relationship do those teenagers have with this discovery?

They come in believing that everything is closed to them. "I'm not interesting anyway because I suck, because I wear braces, because I have pimples... Nobody loves me, nobody understands me." They internalise those judgments as certain and insurmountable. My work with them is also that of a guide. I tell them: "You think that there's a wall behind you, but there isn't. You've got a lot of room left. And it's true inside your head as well." I show them mental spaces. And since teenagers are extremely sensitive to this discovery of true freedom, they show us those worlds. A girl from the group once said, "It's crazy, but I now realise that no one ever listens to me." That's what's at stake. Give her a frame, and she becomes a Madonna in one of those paintings of the Petit Palais. Hundreds of people walk by and watch her, fascinated. The models those painters used weren't special. The painter's talent, of course, plays a part, but what matters is their humanity, how they let it be put into shapes and colours. And five centuries later, that humanity moves us, and we weep in front of those paintings.

What does what they have to say reveal about the rest of the population, of the city, of the world?

Those teenagers tell us about ourselves. How far have we come since we were their age? We identify with the one sitting next to us, we realise we're the same, even though we'd never looked at him or her before. Yet he or she shares our fears, our questions. Society drives us away from one another. The feeling of belonging to the same world is key in order to live, within ourselves and with others. Words give the world a third dimension. It's entirely possible to live in a flat world, but if you live in three dimensions, you can live with others who also live in three dimensions. It's very hard to love. It's very hard to think that one day we'll die. We have to try to illuminate those who dare ask the question. And they'll be able to illuminate others in turn. People tend to think that the mission of theatre is maybe to teach us about authors we didn't know, or to entertain us... but no. The mission of theatre is to illuminate this life.

To what impossibility would you oppose *2014 as possibilities*?

To the disappearance from which we may suffer without even realising it, starting from age fifteen or so. We disappear at school, we disappear at home, we disappear on the street. And we keep living that way, *disappeared*. Like those photographs you see on the walls of police stations. We *are* disappeared, missing. Some people live their lives invisible. They die: nobody had even realised they were alive. It doesn't mean we need to do extraordinary things to exist. But we need to be *full*. Full of this thing that is us, awake, upright. To be there. The world doesn't need us. At some point, you have to say: "Actually, it does. I exist in this world, too. And I want you to hear it, to take my presence into account. Not in an aggressive way, as if I were trying to take someone else's place, but just because I am here. So you can't pretend I'm not. And my presence necessarily adds colour to the rest of the world."

Interview conducted by Marion Canelas.