



LES PAUVRES GENS

INTERVIEW WITH DENIS GUÉNOUN

You were invited to direct the graduation show of the Institut Supérieur des Techniques du Spectacle (ISTS), programmed at the Festival d'Avignon. How did that collaboration come about?

Denis Guénoun: Not long after the creation of the ISTS in 1986, was born the powerfully original idea of turning the final exercise before graduation into a full-fledged show that would be entirely in the hands of the graduating stage managers and chief engineers. That project hit the ground running since one of the first directors to work on it was Tadeusz Kantor, which led to a breathtakingly powerful show—which isn't surprising coming from Kantor, but is worth mentioned in this context—1990's *Ô douce nuit (Oh Sweet Night)*. This year, the arrival of a new director at the ISTS, David Bourbonnaud, and of Olivier Py as director of the Festival d'Avignon, led to two successive decisions: the first one was to ask an artist linked to the Festival's programme to direct that show. They were nice enough to call on me, as the writer of *Mai, Juin, Juillet (May, June, July)*, a play directed by Christian Schiaretti for the Festival. The second of those decisions was to programme the show within the Festival itself.

How many people are working on the show? How will you work?

They're all stage managers and chief engineers come to the ISTS to follow a training course lasting a year for the former, and five months for the latter. The stage managers are ten in number; most of them specialise in lighting, the rest in sound. There are also seven chief engineers. We'll need to find a way to divide the different roles. Because of course the central question is, what's a show with nothing but a running crew, or to say it more clearly, what's a show without actors? It's a huge enigma. Will we just highlight, in the middle of all those technical practices, a sort of void, as if to say "here's what's missing, the actors we could have had but don't have?" That was my first idea. The show could have been a preparation that would have ended just as the (imaginary) actors were about to come on stage. But it seemed a little artificial. Anyway, the goal is indeed to show the theatricality of those technical practices. Anyone who has ever been to a rehearsal knows that those moments of installation can lead to incredible moments of theatre. It's important not to lose sight of the dramatisation of the technical act when we enter the realm of fiction. I'm thinking for instance of Federico Fellini's *E la nave va*, or of Luca Ronconi's video based on *Orlando Furioso*, or of Philippe Parreno's on Marilyn Monroe: all those works have in common that at the most intense moment of creation of the image, you can see the machinery behind it. It's very Brechtian.

This creation gives those engineers roles that are usually not theirs. What stakes does this unique aspect add to the project?

This idea actually corresponds to the specific character of the ISTS: the training people get there isn't strictly technical. The aim is not only to teach people skills in one given field like light or sound design. The aim is to integrate this training, very deliberately and strongly, to a holistic approach of the reality of theatre. This work is part of that plan as well. As for the question of performance and of the role those professionals of the theatre who aren't actors can play, there are two hypotheses. The first one is that there might be some in that group whom we could legitimately ask to take the place of the actors. For instance, there are among them some who studied, before coming to the ISTS, in drama schools such as the ERAC (École Régionale d'Acteurs de Cannes) or the school of the Comédie de Saint-Étienne (both of which have also been invited to the Festival). The second one is that there can be great theatre without actors. That doesn't mean without anyone on the stage, or without a relationship to the text, but it means that there's a place for those actors who aren't actors, or for those actors who aren't there. Working with those constraints seemed a little frightening at first. It requires a lot of restraint and humility. That's why I chose such a substantial text.

How did you come to choose this text, Victor Hugo's *How Good Are The Poor*? Did you receive pointers from the ISTS as to a specific theme, or to the form the show should take?

No, I was free to choose whatever I wanted. It didn't even have to be a text; I could have picked an outline, a scenario, an idea. I thought about all these options. I read a lot of literature, mostly contemporary, not necessarily to choose a text but to find an embryo, a trigger. And it was to my own surprise that I settled on a poem, and a poem by Hugo, and this poem in particular. To my own surprise, except that there was one thing I knew from the start, which is connected to the circumstances of this creation but also to the way I am and to what I love about theatre: I wanted something that would come from the outside. When I inquired about the previous sessions, I learned they had often produced montages based on sequences created with the students themselves, often from memories they'd put on paper during writing sessions. I didn't want to use the same methods. Furthermore, I wanted something that would pull us all upwards, something that would be very demanding—as it turns out, both from a poetic and an ethical point of view. I wanted to force us to work on something that seemed at first to be beyond us, with which we wouldn't be

familiar. Finally, in a vaguer way, I felt that, since the people taking part in this project weren't actors and since I had no intention to ask them to become actors, I wanted a text, and a formalised text at that, so that they would have to enter a dialogue with an extremely powerful and constraining form—in this particular case, the alexandrine—which would allow us to see how non-actors grapple with this genre.

What are the “ethical demands” the choice of this poem introduce?

This poem is an epic of generosity and kindness. It's an ode to adoption. People who have absolutely every material and moral reason to refuse to adopt children do it anyway, because they *have* to, from a purely ethical point of view. It also just so happens that it was one of the poems seen as vectors of the values of the Republic at school in France until the 1960s, both in mainland France and in the colonies—for instance in Algeria, where I grew up. It was difficult for children, because they had to learn two things at once. They had to learn an idea of the Republic as universal. The Republic isn't something you own, it's about a capacity to reach out to the other. Those characters are the first anonymous heroes, their heroic act is part of everyday life. They are like examples of the concrete application of this idea of universalism. The second thing children had to learn with this poem, of course, was the French language, that of Victor Hugo's alexandrine, at once emphatic and simple. This poem is in and of itself like a master class about the language of France as a Republic, if by France we think of something that would be completely open. That's the ethical and political idea behind my choice. But even when talking about that, we talk about the poetry of it. The main tool of Republican unification was the relationship to language, and in particular to the language of poetry. This creates a distance but at the same time tells us that we have to go *towards* something. Not towards a unifying model in the sense of reductive assimilation; towards an opening up. It obviously has something to do with the idea of having non-actors say this text. After all, it was said for over a century by people who weren't programmed to say poetry, let alone alexandrines.



Beyond its form, this text contains many very powerful images. What kind of scenic and technical challenges do these images introduce?

Every single step is complicated, because the poem is about storms, wrecked cabins, races on the heath... Those aren't small images. We also have to do something with the two cabins: one is a place of life, the other a place of death. My dramatic intuition tells me that they should be one and the same. In both of them, there's a woman. In both of them, the man is absent. In both of them, there is a crib. In both of them, there are young children. The idea would be to treat it in such a way that, when the heroine leaves her home to see what is going on at her neighbour's, it is as though it were her own life she saw crumble under her eyes. In terms of scenography, it has to be the same house; real and full of life, but also fantastical and nightmarish.

Beyond those challenges, what in this poem made you want to adapt it for the stage, even though it wasn't meant for it?

There's something in this poem that I love, and which is perfectly suited to what I'm trying to do. It's full of extremely visual descriptions that surround a very small number of actions. It's a story that slowly makes its way up towards a tiny dialogue, very short, which occupies the tenth and last section of the poem. Two characters talk, trade lines. It's like the genesis of the theatrical act. We start with the story, which isn't theatrical at all—on which I intend to work in what you could call a choral way—and slowly start to appear a situation, then an action, and finally what could be a tiny dramatic scene, at the apex of the story. This is exactly what we're setting out to create. The way I see it, the students, as a chorus, tell the story. It's not a fictitious chorus, either. “Poetry” doesn't mean ethereal, lost in the clouds. I've always felt that poetry was a trigger for the theatrical act, at the same time as theatre was an operator and a researcher for the poetic core. As for politics and ethics, it is at least as true, in the sense that poetry is the ability to see, in all that belongs to the sensible world, the potential for transport, for a shift, for excess. To see what is beyond the literal, to see the power of metaphorisation that exists in any act of language, and therefore in any human act. This is what we can dream of showing here: the technical act as a process of transfiguration through operations that aren't magic, but indeed very concrete.

Interview conducted by Marion Canelas.

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