

ANTÓNIO E CLEÓPATRA

It is a well-known legend. Plutarch wrote about it in his *Parallel Lives*, Shakespeare turned it into a tragedy, Mankiewicz into a cinematic masterpiece. The year is 41 B.C., a republican general has just been given the eastern half of the Roman world to rule when, anxious to safeguard her people's independence, a young Egyptian queen goes to meet him in a gilded ship, surrounded by a crew disguised as nymphs. Their relationship will last ten years, or perhaps it is still going on... How then can you tell a story whose every detail is already known? "By telling the story:" Tiago Rodrigues's answer isn't ironic posturing, it is at the very root of his theatre. If the Lisbon director refuses to give in to "the monumentality of *Antony and Cleopatra*," it is to allow us to watch his dancer-actors, Vítor Roriz and Sofia Dias, as through their own breathing they approach the tragic knot of this intimate and political relationship. So that we can watch, all together, how it enters our present. To do so, he has composed, on the very bodies of his performers, a vast cosmogonic poem that requires us to dive deep into the eyes of the other, at the risk of losing what makes us an audience: our belief in the illusion of the theatre.

Show premiered on 4 December, 2014 at Centro Cultural de Belém, Lisbon (Portugal).

TIAGO RODRIGUES

Recently appointed artistic director of the Dona Maria II National Theatre in Lisbon, one of the oldest and most prestigious theatre institutions in Portugal, Tiago Rodrigues is an actor, a playwright, a director, and a producer. As an author, he writes screenplays, poetry, songs, and opinion pieces published in the press. He has appeared in the film *Mal Nascida*, directed by João Canijo, and is the creative director of cult television series *Zapping*. He is regularly invited to teach dramaturgy in Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker's classes (P.A.R.T.S.), as well as at the university of Évora. He has appeared in the creations of Belgian collective tg STAN, and founded in 2003 the company Mundo Perfeito with Magda Bizarro. He has been lauded for his original approach to dramaturgy as well as his collaborations with international artists (Tony Chakar and Rabih Mroué, Tim Etchells, or the group Nature Theater of Oklahoma). Tiago Rodrigues has also directed plays written by a new generation of Portuguese writers. His engagement in the artistic life of his country as well as the political and metapoetic vision of his theatre have led him to appear in the most prestigious European theatres.

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Myths are forever being modernised. In his *Parallel Lives*, Plutarch sees the story of the queen of Egypt, heiress of Hellenistic culture, only through the lens of her official relationship with Rome. By opening his tragedy with "Nay, but...", Shakespeare focuses on the political discords that plague his own century. As for Joseph Mankiewicz, he finds in Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton a way to put the passion of Hollywood at the service of this story of epic love. All three are there, implicitly, in Tiago Rodrigues's play. But his third song, which speaks of the failure of the imperialistic diplomacy of the Roman republic, is an original approach: the desire for efficiency of our productivist societies forever reduces the number of spaces where we can take the risk to meet the other.

INTERVIEW WITH TIAGO RODRIGUES

In the very first song, you write: “Antony is at one extremity of the present, on the very border with the future. Cleopatra is at another extremity, on the border with the past.” The word *present* comes up time and again in this dramatic poem, one could even say that it influences the dramatic contract.

Tiago Rodrigues: The word *present* is first and foremost an answer to a practical problem. I wondered where Antony and Cleopatra should be. In the palace, or outside it, like in Greek tragedies? In their bedroom? Out in public, or in their private space? In the end, I decided those were trivial questions, very... theatrical. So I tried to translate them into an idea, into a word that could be a space. And I tried *present*. Concretely, it led me to the space of the theatre. Because in the end, what's a stage? It is the present of the actors during the show, which in turn is the only present the characters know. This word is the ideal place where to set the play! It is the present of the stage, of the story, of the distance between Antony and Cleopatra, between the actors and their characters. It is the space between East and West, between Rome and Alexandria.

***Present* can also be related to the cosmogonic dimension of your scenography.**

When you look at the stage, at this never-ending canvas, this forever-moving mobile, you can see the cosmos, infinity, a relationship between what we are and what is beyond us. The space of the stage isn't meant to help you tell a story, it is meant to be lived in. It doesn't imprison the actors, whose present is like suspended as they play, and it doesn't imprison their characters by creating temporal and spatial breaks.

Is this *present* has any other impact on the play?

Present is also a motivating word. When you enter the present, you become involved. There is a rhythm to it, too: it makes you speak differently, because you're here, in the moment. Thinking of the present as an idea is closely tied to the knowledge of why we are gathered here tonight, together, at the theatre. It helps create a sense of complicity with the audience, a reflection on our co-presence that I'm always looking for in my theatre.

The acting isn't naturalist. It instaures a distance from the character by the actor.

I don't think you can play *Antony and Cleopatra* as larger than life anymore, as something sentimental and monumental. But you can still try to evoke the meaning of that story. What I'm trying to do is to leave illusion and belief behind to try to find the root of the theatre. You have to remember that we cross a sort of natural boundary when we try to convince others we are someone else. From the first to the sixth song, for instance, the actors talk about the characters. The more they talk about them, the closer they get to them. At the end of the sixth song, instead of looking into space and saying “Cleopatra is there,” Vitor looks at Sofia and says “Cleopatra is you.” At this point, the audience starts to see them as Antony and Cleopatra. But it would be “too much” to try to play Antony and Cleopatra today. You have to talk about their story.

The theme of gaze is also fundamental.

The gaze is a political subject. The subject of the gaze of the other. It's a key question for Antony and Cleopatra, who know that they are being watched even in their most intimate moments, that someone, someday, will tell their story. They aren't naïve, they understand that their love is political, that this love is also a matter of politics on which the lives of others depend. This is going to sound a little pompous, but I believe that in love like in politics one has to have the will, humility, and courage to destroy a part of oneself, to leave some ideas and dreams behind so as to have the space, the possibility to see the world through the eyes of the other.

Breaths play an important role in your show: those can be seen as a sensible and intimate encounter between the theatre and dance. It remembers that Sofia Dias et Vítor Roriz are both dancers and choreographers.

If they weren't dancers and choreographers, this text would never have existed. It is through them that I imagined the writing of this play, without them it would be entirely different. Sofia, Vítor and I share the same urgent desire to work with the danger of language and the power of metalanguage.

Tell us more about your writing process with your dancers.

I use the key moments of the story: the present of Antony and Cleopatra, Antony's departure, the time they spend apart, his return, the wars they lose (which I turned into one, using a cinematic process) and the final scenes of tragedy and death (again with a temporal ellipsis). And I added my questions about the theatre, my relationship with politics, to freedom, to the lyrical image, as well as what I imagined of Antony and Cleopatra, what Sofia and Vítor inspired in me. Then we read and studied Shakespeare's tragedy and Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* and I started writing for them. I came in with that first page, that idea of a breath, of a change of state, with this premonition Antony and Cleopatra have of their own deaths, killing hope right from the start so that the tragedy could begin. In all great stories, it isn't the what we're after, but the how. We talked about it and I changed the text based on their remarks, on their reading of it, on the way they played it with their bodies. And once the text was set, we started working on that first scene. Then we moved on to the next, working the same way. I wrote all nine songs one by one, chronologically, trying to create consequences within those scenes with the consequences on my writing of Sofia and Vítor's opinions as readers and creators. It's a little risky because it makes it difficult to come back and change the text, but it has the advantage of being faithful to the way they are going to play it. It gave me the opportunity to write for a show that wasn't theoretical anymore because the work already existed, in a sensible and sensual way. We didn't really write on the stage, the text isn't the result of improvisations, but of a dialogue, because the answers to my questions about that story have always been within Sofia and Vítor, two performers I find fascinating.

Interview conducted by Francis Cossu / Translation Gaél Schmidt-Cléach

AND...

THE WORKSHOPS OF THOUGHT

Site Sainte-Marthe de l'Université, free admittance

- 13 July at 11:00 pm, *Teaching of the University*, with Tiago Rodrigues

Site Louis Pasteur de l'Université, free admittance

- 15 July at 05:30 pm, *Dialogue artists-audience* with Tiago Rodrigues, encounter hosted by the Ceméa

- 18 July at 11:00 am, Télérama dialogue : *Shakespeare, again!*

CINEMATOGRAPHIC TERRITORIES

Une femme sous influence, directed by John Cassavetes

Screening followed by an encounter with Tiago Rodrigues

14 July at 02:00 pm, Utopia-Manutention

FESTIVAL CONTRE COURANT

By Heart by Tiago Rodrigues / 16 July at 10:00 pm, Île de la Barthelasse (exclusive booking CCAS)

TOUR DATES OF *ANTÓNIO E CLEÓPATRA* AFTER THE FESTIVAL D'AVIGNON

- from 22 to 25 March 2016: Humain trop humain, Centre dramatique national, Montpellier (France)

- in April: Hebbel Am Uffer, Berlin (Germany)

- 23 April: Festival Terres de Paroles (France)

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