



GIRL

INTERVIEW WITH BLANDINE MASSON

Why do you feel such affinity for Edna O'Brien's novel, and why did you want to present it in the Cour d'honneur du Palais des papes?

This reading in the Cour d'honneur is the result of an ongoing discussion over the past few years with the Festival about our shared desire to bring a text to this magical place in the most minimalist way possible. *Girl* is a woman's text about the tragic fates of young Nigerian victims of the terrorist group Boko Haram, and the novel fits within the Festival's desire to take part in the international Generation Equality Forum for equality between women and men. When I read the novel, I was impressed by the commitment of this Irish author to write such a violent story. At almost 88, she went to Nigeria twice to meet those women and tell their stories. Edna O'Brien was able to put herself in the shoes of a 16-year-old girl. This book is about both the power of literature and of human empathy, it's extremely powerful and deserves to be heard in as majestic a place as the Cour d'honneur. A few years ago, I directed a reading of Heiner Muller's *Quartett* with Jeanne Moreau and Sami Frey in the Cour d'honneur, with very simple technical and artistic means, to focus on the venue and on the power of the actors, of their presence and voices. We only made use of an amplification process to create a sense of intimacy with the audience, to make it seem as if the text was being whispered in their ear. I come from radio, so the intimacy of a voice cutting through silence is something I like very much. Two modes of listening become possible with a public reading. There's a collective listening which can, if everything aligns perfectly, border on sublime in this place steeped in history, under an immense sky. Here there's the text, of course, but also the faces of the other spectators, a sea of two thousands bodies listening, which can become a unique moment of communion between an audience, an artist, and a text, in an unvarnished moment of extreme nakedness. And parallel to that collective experience of the spectators, there's the individual experience of the listener, since the reading is being recorded and broadcast live. Radio has the unique characteristic of being able to create this feeling of intimacy simply by carrying the words directly into your ear. Like the book's heroine writing in her diary, it's an act of speaking shared by all, soft and intimate, and not interested in lofty speeches.

Edna O'Brien calls on Antiquity and Greek tragedies when talking about the fate of Maryam, though it takes place in a very real and current context.

For Edna O'Brien, it's first and foremost about telling those tragic stories to question the capacity for empathy of human beings for each other. She seems to be positioning herself as witness of a taboo part of human history, according to which women are always the forgotten victims of war. As for the question of cultural appropriation, when people ask her how she knew how and could, as an Irishwoman, tell the story of a young Nigerian, she says that it's not a question of geography or culture but of humanity. In order to write about acts of violence and events foreign to her, she went back and forth between what she experienced herself and the testimonies of young women she met in Nigeria. Edna O'Brien opens her book with a quote from Euripides's *The Trojan Women*, about the fate that awaits the last survivors of Ilion after the city fell to the Greeks. Women are always the spoils of war and its first victims, tainted and raped, they pay the highest price. By quoting the Greek tragedian, Edna O'Brien reminds us of the universal nature and historical truth of those stories, but also that those women aren't just victims, that they also fight for their survival. In a way, the writer is the old woman, she symbolically becomes a maternal figure telling the story, as her voice and imagination can be felt in the writing. Just like Hecuba, queen and mother, says to the victims in *The Trojan Women*: "*Thy wounds in part will I bind up with bandages.*"

The text will be read by several people; how are you planning on working on the text (who reads what, how the space is used, etc.)?

I worked on breaking down the text with playwright Marion Stoufflet. The book is made up of several chronological episodes, we watch as the protagonist grows older. Through the voice of its main characters, *Girl* tells us about the fates of a multitude of women, so we wanted to use a plurality of voices, like in a Greek chorus, while keeping the linearity of the story. That's why I decided to bring on stage four actresses from different generations, as well as a man—because women aren't the only victims in this story. This isn't about adapting the novel into a play, especially since Edna O'Brien's writing already has a great oral quality, doubtless due to the fact that *Girl* was written as a stream of consciousness, like words spilling forth. The text finds great strength in such a reading, when words can bounce from one person to the next.

Interview conducted by Moïra Dalant