



INSTITUTE BENJAMENTA

INTERVIEW WITH BÉRANGÈRE VANTUSSO

=How did you discover this text, and what made you decide to adapt and direct it?

Bérangère Vantusso: Christine Tiana, who manages the company, recommended I read *Institute Benjamenta*, telling me that the story took place in a school for servants. The setting immediately drew my attention because it creates a link between our relationship to puppets and questions about the world at large. In my shows, I like to offer alternative options to the model we've been insidiously bludgeoned with since we were little, to the point that it now seems self-evident. *Institute Benjamenta* offers a sideways look at the values of power that seem innate. Robert Walser, through the voice of his character, Jakob, develops a dialectics that challenges those values: are the strong really strong? Isn't inner strength just as valuable? Sure, it won't feed you, but so what? Just because everything seems to agree on what is being strong or weak doesn't mean you shouldn't challenge that order. Each sequence of the novel includes a sentence by Jakob that shows that he isn't sure, that he doesn't know if he's right to think the way he does... I find this way of asking questions very comforting in itself. I don't trust people who know everything. Moreover, Jakob goes beyond the status of a servant: he enrolls into the institute because he wants to become "a charming, big round zero." Puppets are indeed an ideal figure of this nothing that can become everything; a zero seen as a promise, a virginal zero. In a similar vein, I see the desert through which Jakob and the director wander at the end of the novel as a place of renewal, a place where something is possible, like a blank page rather than a void. Robert Walser wrote this novel at a time where bourgeois society was crumbling. Mr. Benjamenta, who is identified with the institute, is ready for Jakob's arrival. He doesn't fight; he pretends to, puts up a front for a while, but in truth he's just waiting for someone to kick down his institution to try to rebuild something else, something different, elsewhere... to live again.

What did you focus on in your adaptation?

For this show, I wanted, right from the moment I started working on the puppets, to add a touch of fantasy to our universe. Before reading *Jakov von Gunten*, I saw the movie the Brothers Quay made of it, and I had the feeling we could take our hyperrealist characters out of their everyday nature. While working on the adaptation, I chose to restrict the play to one place, removing Jakob's trips into town, focusing on the question of the overthrow of the Institute. What's most important is our connection to Jakob. It's as if we had our fingers in his brain and could at any time feel his thoughts, his consistencies and inconsistencies, his fantasies. Moreover, I kept the doubt he always leaves regarding what he's saying: is he relating something that happened or making things up? A passage in particular influenced my whole adaptation: Jakob describes how his friend Schacht and himself, lying on his bed, tell each other "lots of stories, stories taken from life, that is, lived, but even more invented stories (...). The narrow, dark room starts to widen, unknown streets, rooms, cities, castles, people, and landscapes appear, and all rumble, talk, whisper, cry, etc." This idea that an entire world can arise from nothing, I once again connect it to the figure of the zero, which I see as the figure of the poet, the artist, from whom everything can happen. That passage is the foundation of our show and of our scenography project—a purely mental space, devoid of any realistic sign, which works only with the imagination and has the potential to become anything.

You say that you want actors and puppets to be on an equal footing in this show. Will they all be on the same level?

That's the correct phrase, because it's a permanent question for me and Marguerite Bordat, with whom I create the puppets, and who's also the show's scenographer. I often say I don't do puppet shows. I create shows *in which* there are puppets. Actors are just as important as puppets. The writing revolves around the relationship between them. We imagine scenographies that welcome them all and allow their presence together to unfold. In *Institute Benjamenta*, there are two levels of play, with actors manipulated by other actors, and actors who play among puppets. To give the show a fantasy aspect, we chose to make the puppets slightly smaller than the actors. I wanted the head of the puppet to be just below the head of the puppeteer, so as to be able to write both levels very quickly, almost simultaneously. This allows the audience to apprehend both at the same time, and is part of this desire to blur the lines between them even more than usual. This choice of scale also allows for

extensions, for a hybridisation of the bodies. I don't think a 1:1 ratio can ever work. You're missing the fantasy element. What I like in our conception of the puppets is the way we spend so much time to carefully reach a realistic result, yet clearly challenge that convention. The goal is neither to produce a double or create an illusion, but to make identification harder. You can't just say "the character is the puppet" or "the character is the actor." The character shifts from one zone to the other. There's always doubt. In this show, the feeling of strangeness arises from the height of the characters, from the mass they form all together, from the shape of their faces and of their features. I'd want it to be at once completely believable and completely impossible. That's the paradox that Jakob highlights: we're interested in lived stories, but maybe even more so in stories that are made up. But for us to like them, they have to be made up so well that we can believe they were lived.






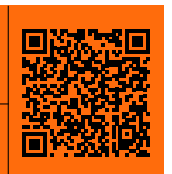
In your show, who's responsible for telling the story?

Our creations have long been influenced by *bunraku*, the Japanese art of puppet theatre. The basic idea is that puppets are manipulated by three actors. The master shows his face and moves the torso and head of the puppet, while the other two wear hoods and move the pelvis and the feet. The voice is dissociated from the body, it comes from a place called the *mawashi*, a small turning stage on which stands the reciter—the *tayu*—who's tasked with telling the whole story, both the narrative parts and the voices of the characters. In *Jakob von Gunten*, Walser operates a shift from narration to action that allows us to use the same technique. The novel takes the form of a diary, that of Jakob, and speech spreads progressively throughout the novel. At first, only Jakob speaks; he's the one who tells the story. At the end of the first third, the other characters begin to find their place and, towards the end, some sequences are nothing but dialogue. There's a shift from a sort of epic theatre to dramatic theatre. It's something I want to keep in our adaptation. There will be an evolution in who among the puppets gets to talk. At first, only one character, Jakob, will speak for everyone, and little by little, the quartet he forms with the director, his wife, and Kraus will increase the number of speaking parts.

You're an admirer of the work of the painter Michaël Borremans. How did he inspire the conception of this show?

I find in his work a projection of what the Institute Benjamenta could be. I like the atmosphere of his paintings, and the characters he creates often look a lot like puppets in their postures and situations. More so than an aesthetics, it's the object of their research that inspires me in painters. Michaël Borremans works on the tension between everyday life and realism on the one hand, and fantastic situations on the other, which I find more interesting than the works themselves, and which is close to what I work on as well. My desire to instil mystery into our show crystallised thanks to Borremans's world and led me to a format of puppets we'd never used before. That choice increases even more the double effect of reality and unreality of our characters. It adds a subtext to the fate of these young people who are deprived of a part of themselves when they arrive at the institute and who are stuck there. The master is free to grant them their freedom or not... With this format of puppets, the circle of what's possible widens, and with it the dream of what we can't see. The hidden part of those beings isn't missing, it's just standing by, latent. It's the most poetic part of them.

Interview conducted by Marion Canelas
Translated by Gaël Schmidt-Cléach

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