



# THE LAND OF NOD

## INTERVIEW WITH FC BERGMAN

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### **How did you come up with the idea for your play, *The Land of Nod*?**

**FC Bergman:** Our productions are conceived for theatres, but very often for other locations as well. When we started working on our new project, we knew immediately that it would be the latter. We wanted to create a show based on the history of a place. Back then, the Antwerp Museum of Fine Arts was about to close for about ten years for a large renovation project. The museum is built around an extremely important room, which is really its heart: the room dedicated to Peter Paul Rubens. Some of the fifteen works on display there are so big that they can't actually be taken out: the doors are too small. In January 2015, we visited the room while work on it was underway: the paintings had been moved to the basement and the room had been destroyed, it was nothing but ruins. It created a very strange feeling. Like most Antwerpians, we have a very intimate relationship with the museum in general, and with the Rubens room in particular. That room is a symbol of permanence, of resistance to time and trials. It was a huge inspiration. We pictured the museum as a human being, with its own life, with times of prosperity, but also having to face aging and death. That space became a wounded, weakened body.

### **Why did you decide to create an exact replica of the room?**

While working on the history of the museum, we found pictures dating back to World War II; a V2 bomb had partly destroyed it, and on a photograph, you can see rain falling in the Rubens room. That picture echoed our vision of the museum as a construction site. At first, we wanted to create and perform our show *in situ*, in the room itself. But after long negotiations, it turned out to be impossible. For reasons of security as much as principle. So we decided to create a copy of the room. That crazy idea, the result of a rejection, turned out to be a stroke of luck, a real opportunity. The copy indeed creates a distance that allows us to think about the original. It also offered technical opportunities that would have been unthinkable inside the museum. We recreated the room like we would a wooden ark whose threshold you only have to cross to enter the museum. It's just like a refuge, a box that surrounds you completely, with dimensions of 12 metres by 12 metres by 24 metres.

### **You talk about an ark; do you mean Noah's Ark?**

Absolutely. We consider that room to be a space of silence where human beings can find comfort and protection from the outside world, where time stops. However, this space of silence is under pressure from the outside world. This space allows us to picture culture as a place of refuge but also as a place under siege, under many types of pressure. This building and the ideas it houses seem able to resist any attack. Yet this refuge isn't real, because the outside world always finds a way to get in. It's not hermetic. Life is constantly reinventing itself, and you can't stay away from the world forever. Even if you want to get away from it, you have to be a part of it. The definition of places of art and culture as sanctuaries, safe from the torments of the world, is but a fiction; a beautiful fiction, and a necessary one, to which we're attached.

### **The title of your show, *The Land of Nod*, also brings religion to mind.**

The Land of Nod is mentioned in the story of Abel and Cain: that's where Cain was abandoned after killing his brother Abel. It's a place that has no purpose. For us, the land of Nod is outside the room of the museum. We're all like Cain, condemned to live in the land of Nod, but we can find a refuge. The land of Nod tries to enter the box, that space of quiet and peace. We can't escape it, maybe because it is actually inside our minds. Religion is always present in our work; we grew up in a Christian culture, it's part of our bodies, of our souls. We're not religious, but religion is everywhere within us, in society, and in the arts. We place the religious outside the walls of our space, but at the same time, there's this huge Christ by Ruben looking down on us, watching with a certain gravity what's happening before of his eyes.

### **You speak of the Rubens room as a refuge. Did the refugee crisis serve inspire you as well?**

Of course, current events are an inspiration, but we never try to make a political statement or lecture. Our show can't but refer to it, and we accept it, but we're always trying to tell universal stories. We consider that the context in which a show is played always gives it a specific meaning, beyond the initial story. We played 300 el x 50 el x 30 el in Athens in 2011; everyone saw it as a metaphor for the Greek crisis. Our goal is to create stories that can be interpreted in different ways, like the open works described by Umberto Eco. We try to tell nuanced stories rather than write treatises about what's going on in the world of politics.

### **Captivating differences of scale are at the heart of your artistic project. What does excessiveness allow you to do?**

It's a formal demand that we think is inseparable from the content. We tell stories using forms, images, and sometimes language. By playing with those differences of scale, we can create significant and memorable images. It's very important in our relationship to the audience. Mark Rothko said he worked on big canvases to allow people to get lost and journey in his works. By immersing the audience within the work rather than placing it in front of them, that's the effect we're looking for. The vastness of the set makes people very vulnerable and humble. The fragility of man, faced with elements that he can't control, is something we're very interested in. Thanks to technical effects and to that spectacular dimension of our shows, we're able to convey the sheer size of the elements and to show the beauty of a man who tries to fight but cannot. By entering the box, the audience become small as well. It's a way to tell the story already.

### **What inspired you for the show's dramaturgy, what materials did you use?**

We start with a thought, then we collect images. In newspapers, in films, everywhere; it's a very open, very intuitive process. Cinema and the visual arts are a bigger source of inspiration than the theatre. We like to mix genres and disciplines. Our shows have something of the installation, with their limited duration. As they enter the room of *The Land of Nod*, the audience can see a plaque that explains it is the Rubens room; the box is a work of art in and of itself. For this show, Jean-Luc Godard was a huge inspiration, particularly that scene in *Band of Outsiders* in which a man starts running through the Louvre, until others start doing the same. That iconic scene celebrates a very open relationship to space. After that, we watched many of Godard's films; it was a revelation. The plot never plays a central part, twists aren't what structures the story. It's the same in our work. We also saw something of our approach in the way the actors play in his movies, with almost no emphasis on psychology.

### **In spite of this reference to Godard, *The Land of Nod* is a show without words. Can you tell us more about the story?**

You have six characters: two museum guards, three visitors, officially inspired by *Band of Outsiders*, and the curator, the main character. He's been tasked with getting the paintings out of the room but cannot get the last one, *Le Coup de Lance*, out. The visitors wander through a room devoid of paintings, the curator cannot do what he's been asked to do, the guards don't guard anything anymore. There's a strong absurd dimension to this series of portraits. What seems at first to be a very concrete place—a room in a museum—slowly turns into a metaphorical space. The story has little use for chronology, there's no unity of time. Everything that happens could happen at different times. We could define our shows as atmospheric works. We offer an experience in which the audience take part, where the point isn't to understand the stakes of a story, but to feel that story with your senses.

Interview conducted by Renan Benyamina

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