



THE DAMNED

INTERVIEW WITH IVO VAN HOVE

This isn't your first time at the Festival d'Avignon, but it's the first time you've ever worked with the Comédie-Française. How did you meet Éric Ruf? How did the idea of a show in Avignon, and then place Colette, come about? Do you have specific expectations when it comes to working with this company?

Ivo Van Hove: I knew Éric Ruf as an actor – I'd seen him in *Phaedra*, directed by Patrice Chéreau, and admired and respected his talent. When he was appointed General Administrator of the Comédie-Française, he wrote me a letter – when I only ever receive emails! – which eventually led to our meeting, first in Amsterdam, then in Paris. I learned he was in talks with Olivier Py to have the Comédie-Française appear at the Festival d'Avignon in 2016. A happy coincidence did the rest; Olivier Py wanted an artist who had never worked in the Cour d'honneur to perform there this year, Éric Ruf invited me to direct a show with the company... This invitation from the Comédie-Française is very important to me, because few foreign directors get the chance to work with this ancient institution, with its mythical aura. When it started to become clear that I would get the opportunity to create a show for the Salle Richelieu and the Cour d'honneur of the Palais des papes, I was even happier. I've been working for years with the same troupe and actors, but I have also always worked in parallel with different groups of actors, be it in Germany, in the United States, or, not so long ago, in France. The key moment in my relationship with the actors, the moment when everything is decided, is that of the rehearsals. That's when we get to truly meet, beyond all speeches, all prior conjectures.

You once said that you can only work on material you are "in love with." Is that why you picked *The Damned*?

In my conversations with Éric Ruf, we quickly started talking about maybe working with something that wouldn't belong purely to the theatre. It just so happens that I have already directed adaptations of *Rocco and his Brothers* and *Ludwig*. To further explore Visconti's themes with *The Damned* is something I had been thinking about for a while. It seems to me that the reasons why one would want to tell this story are even clearer in the current social and political context than they were when the film was made. I see *The Damned* as telling two stories: on the one hand, that of the disintegration of a rich family – a family whose fate is intimately tied to that of the economy of their country, as they rule over an industrial empire – and on the other, a political story, that of the triumph of an ideology, Nazism, whose influence, in spite of the outcome of World War II, has only grown in recent decades, and now threatens many European countries. What we see in *The Damned* is a political alliance between a powerful family and a regime that they actually hate. The idea that financial prosperity and economic wellbeing would be more important than the happiness of mankind, the beauty of relationships between people, is a strange phenomenon that I find particularly interesting to observe and describe.

***The Damned* is first and foremost a film...**

No, it's first and foremost a screenplay. I saw the film as a young man, but I haven't seen it in a while, and I don't want to. I'm not trying to adapt Visconti's film. What I plan to do is to go back to the screenplay and direct it for the theatre. We'll see what we'll do with the changing locations based on the venue. Their diversity and number aren't necessarily a problem. Think about Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, for instance: the action takes place in more than forty different locations, in Rome, in Egypt, in the Orient! It's impossible to show that onstage, and yet... For *The Damned*, things are very similar. It's actually easier, because most of the story takes place in the Essenbeck family mansion. With Jan Versweyveld, we'll try to come up with a theatrical space that will allow us to figure the house at the same time we do other locations. It doesn't have to be realistic. The two venues where the show will be performed, the Cour d'honneur of the Palais des papes and the Salle Richelieu, have very different dimensions; we've decided to play with horizontality, to use something akin to installation art, to create a universe of molten steel, iron, and raw timber. Its role will also be to reveal, in its own way, the dance of death that is at the heart of the story. We should then be able to recreate it on a smaller scale, so in the end, people will get to see the same show in both venues.

In *The Damned*, we follow the psychological evolution of various characters faced with ever more oppressive and dangerous events, influenced by History as well as by their personal lives. Do you find this aspect of the work particularly interesting?

In my work, I always try to bring together an important sense of theatricality with the exploration of complex psychological areas and sophisticated emotions. Of course, a lot of things will depend on what happens with the actors, on the way they'll react to my propositions. What's interesting in *The Damned* is that the behaviours it exposes aren't "raw" but "corrupted." To highlight the violence of those characters, we'll paradoxically use the sensuality of bodies; flesh will be at the forefront. There's a lot about relationships between men and women in this "twilight of the Gods" (*Götterdämmerung*), but none of those – with the exception of that of Herbert Thalmann and his wife, who'll die in Dachau – is authentic – there's always something to cloud, even annihilate, romantic feelings; and sometimes, that relationship is based on deviant impulses – paedophilia, incest. Everyone's always trying to manipulate everyone else. Nothing *real* can happen in such a context.

Is there one character you see as standing out in this screenplay?

At the heart of the story – and at the heart of the show – stands the character of Martin. To me, he's an extremely symbolic character, in that the son of Sophie von Essenbeck is a real chameleon, able to adapt to any situation, even the most stressful and oppressive ones. He's an unambitious nihilist, who thinks only of his own survival. And he ends up all alone. Everyone else is either gone or dead. He is like Musil's "Man without qualities," living in a brutal and cruel era.

If you had to describe *The Damned*, would you say it is a historical nightmare, a social nightmare, an individual nightmare?

I see it as a celebration of Evil. Like a death ritual. Love and art have no meaning in that world. The story of *The Damned* is the negative reflection of everything that is beautiful and good in the world. It's the "other side." In our troubled era, I think it is important to show the audience a world in which they would *really* not want to live. But I am no moralist: I can understand if you think that, in the end, Martin was right, he survived when all the others died. And I know there's always something fascinating about Evil, which is also why works full of violence and cruelty are popular. In *The Damned*, there's a sort of downward spiral: after a while, you can't stop what's coming, things pick up speed and quickly deteriorate. If Evil triumphs so quickly, it's because time is always of the essence. The Essenbecks make a deal with the devil not for ideological reasons, but for financial ones. They don't have a choice. The cruelty and violence that result of it can be fascinating for the audience, but it's better to experience those feelings at the theatre than in the real world.

Interview conducted by Laurent Muhleisen
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JULY 6 TO 24, 2016

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