



# 2666

## INTERVIEW WITH JULIEN GOSSELIN

**After adapting and directing Michel Houellebecq's *Atomised*, you've said you spent some time looking for another text that would be just as "huge." What made you choose *2666*?**

**Julien Gosselin:** I was looking for a work that would be even richer, whose construction would be all-encompassing. That seemed to imply a big book and a long show, but that wasn't really the criteria I used. In *Atomised*, Houellebecq explores a tremendous number of themes. That's what I like in a novel, and I wanted to find that again. So I had to find a story that would be as interesting in that regard, whose poetry would be as powerful. In fact, regardless of the length or the nature of the text, the one thing I'm always looking for is something that seems impossible to adapt for the stage, or whose complexity is such that it seems, at least for a while, insurmountable. It creates a very powerful feeling of excitement in the actors. As for me, it guarantees a long-term attachment, and an intensity in my desire that wouldn't last if the text were obvious. That's why I sometimes struggle with actual plays; there are very few contemporary plays that have that ambition and scope. I'd wanted to read Roberto Bolaño for a while, and the further I got into *2666*, the more I thought, "Yes, that's it. I love this novel, it's very moving, but it's impossible, how could I possibly turn it into a show?" It's an impulse that's part repulsion, on the side of reason, and part absolute desire, on the side of the senses.

**What particularly struck you while reading *2666*?**

There's something extremely poetic about it. Roberto Bolaño isn't afraid of digressions, not only within the story, but also stylistically, within individual sentences. The novel is haunted by a sense of "a little bit too much." It's something to which I'm very sensitive. The five-part structure is also interesting: in a book as in a show, I like the structure to be obvious. We project onstage the titles of the parts of the novel that are also the parts of the show. The audience is aware of how the show is built right in front of them. What I like about *2666* is also the possibility it gives you to use extremely diverse forms of theatre. Each part belongs to a different genre. I felt we could deal with that in a way that would be extremely pleasurable for us and for the audience. I was struck by the passage from which the title is taken, which is from another Bolaño book, *Amuleto*: "at that time of night, [Avenida Guerrero] is more like a cemetery than an avenue, not a cemetery in 1974 (...) but a cemetery in the year 2666, a forgotten cemetery under the eyelid of a corpse or an unborn child, bathed in the dispassionate fluids of an eye that tried so hard to forget one particular thing that it ended up forgetting everything else." It's mysterious, tragic, and poetic all at once.

**Is your show a sort of ordeal for the audience?**

I'd never considered things that way, but yes, it is. Wouldn't you say that's the goal of every director? I don't think a single one would say they hope that the audience will remain perfectly at rest while watching their show. When you first see a new play by Romeo Castellucci, who I think is the greatest, you don't sit there quietly, thinking, "It's fine, it's going to be alright!" I don't think you can choose to direct major works and turn them into a limp experience. Working on such ambitious novels implies that the audience has to dive into the world that we're creating, even if it means struggling at times. You can't tackle that theme in a cheerful manner, but at the same time I absolutely refuse to be moralistic, to have the actors solemnly declaim the names of the dead while everyone looks on in silence. I'm looking for the purity of that violence, as Bolaño describes it. It has to be an ordeal. I want to force the audience to display a sort of literary patience. There are some very effective moments in the show, but there are also others when we put the audience in a position of waiting, waiting for literature; the position of a reader, which leads to a complete penetration of the artistic work. I'm not talking about whether our adaptation is faithful to the novel. When I find a novel beautiful, I want the audience to find it beautiful, too. So I try to find the place where a transformation can take place – because there needs to be a transformation – so that the audience can feel something similar to what I felt. Furthermore, when I watch a show, I don't like to simply be given a gift I just have to unwrap. I like things to be difficult, I like it when my position's threatened, when there's something I have to endure; not only on an intellectual level, but on a physical one as well. For instance, I'd like to experience at the theatre the same things I do at a concert, this extremely powerful and direct aspect of

what's offered by the artists, and what's asked of the audience to receive it: the vertical position, the volume, the presence of the crowd, the charge and shock of the energy. As a theatregoer, I'm always looking for that power, and I like it when the audience gets to feel it.

### **What's the result of this enduring?**





Working with actors, I've realised that I like to bring together two areas that very rarely touch. The first is intellectual, extremely thin and precise, whose aim is pure poetry. For instance, in this show, there are long monologues that are declaimed without any accompanying noises or music, very simply. I want the audience to experience an intellectual feeling, almost like that of someone reading a book. I want theatre to be at least as interesting as a book. When I'm disappointed by a play, it's often because the show isn't as good as the literary work it's based on; Racine, for instance, is a pleasure to read, but it's often terrible when you actually watch it! The second of those areas is physical and immediate – it generally has to do with music, which is the most powerful art in that regard – that is to say, an emotion that is no longer intellectual but almost animal, purely sensorial. Power and volume let you do that. The aim is not to reach some limit; it only has to do with a desire to move intensely, and to produce a physical reaction, in the body. The addition of those two areas creates in me, both as a theatregoer and a director, an emotion that seems to me to be the most truthful.

### **Beyond the plot of 2666, there seems to be an underlying struggle; what would it be?**

The point of the novel isn't really to know who the murderer is, but to feel the way literature struggles with the violence of the real. I'm not a romantic, but I agree with Bolaño here: if the struggle of literature is a powerful one, it can't overcome the power of the real. I think the violence of the real is much more powerful than the violence of fiction. The only – but great – beauty of literature resides in this struggle. It doesn't matter whether it wins or loses against the real, what matters is the struggle itself. It's a theme that comes back time and again in literature, but Roberto Bolaño takes it further than most. That's why there are so many poets and painters who end up cutting their own hands or hurting themselves in 2666. At some point, the attempt to fight the violence of the world through artistic means creates a work of art, but in the end, fiction can't but lose every single time. That's why the novel can be misleading: if it ends, and the investigation at its heart along with it, it's because the violence of the real is more powerful.

Interview conducted by Marion Canelas

Translated by Gaël Schmidt-Cléach

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