



ENDLESS ANDROMAQUE

INTERVIEW WITH GWENAËL MORIN

You've worked with young actors before, like the actors of *Ier Acte* here. What is it about it that interests you? How did the audition process go?

Gwenaël Morin: There is right away a relationship of authority when you work with young actors, which has to do with age of course. It gives an inherent legitimacy to the situation and saves time. The affect is also very different. There is a certain distance in our relationship, which feels right. They're also open-minded and very motivated, and they have relatively few wounds, which means few defences, which allows us to very quickly build trust. During the auditions, I let myself be guided by what I feel, I trust the sensations the encounters give rise to, and they're not always positive. Making a choice is complicated, because it's a process of exclusion, when theatre is supposed to be a process of inclusion. I personally met twenty-three actors we'd preselected based on their careers so far and their motivation. I wanted to work with very young actors of different backgrounds and with a certain innocence, to see how their youth would play in relation to the Alexandrines. I wasn't necessarily looking for an *Andromaque* or a *Pyrrhus*. The casting wasn't determined by the roles, because the four actors—me included—each play several characters. We've all learnt the 1648 lines of the text, so that we could exchange roles within a single performance, or from one performance to the next. The roles aren't set, and aren't gendered. We can therefore endlessly experiment with, explore, and question this jewel of the French language...

Your experience with permanent theatre was founded on the idea of continuous transmission. Is there an echo of it in your work with *Ier Acte*?

I've already worked on *Andromaque* in various ways, which explains this title of *Endless Andromaque*. Directing the same play several times is a conscious decision, it's a way for me to put the question of interpretation at the centre of it. The experience of meeting and talking with the actors, the context surrounding the play, my own personal experience, all of that means that something new unfolds every time. It's never the same show. There's a form of obsession or of absolute trust in our capability as actors to reinvent ourselves for a given play, like a *mise en abyme* of the very principle of rehearsing, with each new iteration something new is invented or runs its course and can be replaced by something else. Racine, Shakespeare, Molière... the great classics allow for this endless repetition. I try to pass on my love of theatre to those young actors, what it means to me to perform this art, to share my experience and see where we can go together. I try to show them the trust I have in the principle of insistence and resistance, in our capacity to move forward blindly, with no goal in mind. Performing Racine today because he's an author who's always been performed is also a way to place oneself within a tradition and a system of intergenerational transmission. To perform *Andromaque* again and again means for the artist to have the responsibility of reviving the play. Theatre, which some may see as an end goal, is for me a rallying point, a point of convergence, of encounters. It's a point of self-assertion, of enthusiasm and energy. It is above all a starting point, which serves to sharpen our appetites.

How do you work on those classic texts with young actors?

I think that beginners must be given the best tools. I see Racine as a delicate but very powerful instrument. We know one thing for sure with him: if what we do isn't good, he's not the one to blame. You have to challenge yourself all the time. But at the same time, the text is very clear, it helps us perform, it's a real theatrical tool. To perform Racine with young actors isn't a sign of arrogance, but of humility. What we have to give the audience is greater than us. In Racine's theatre, and in particular in what he has to say about glory, you have the idea that there is a "togetherness" within us, that there's something universal in our most private and secret moments. Racine asks us to look for this thing we share... What I'm interested in is the life we'll lead together on stage, which will call on all our respective experiences.

Racine's plays can seem grandiose and inaccessible. What did you want to reveal, to make clearer and more relevant in *Andromaque*?

He who knows how to speak, how to write, who knows the text, holds all the power. Racine is a tool for emancipation. Directing Racine today is to seize power, to make yours the power of words in its most sublime, difficult, and human aspects. I also pay a lot of attention to punctuation, and here I wanted to break away from automatic reflexes to go back to the roots of our own language, our own breathing, our own interpretation. The goal isn't to direct a ruined *Andromaque*, but to deconstruct it to build a new play. When I'm working on the direction, I like to spend some time working in the style of *telenovelas*. I ask the actors to improvise, to go off-track with the Alexandrines in a way, because Racine can almost feel like a soap opera at times, just like he can veer close to the most grandiose lyricism. I'm not scared of those comparisons, of working with such a dangerous balance, of making the language more accessible to create breaks and bring in external elements to shift our attention. The goal isn't to direct Racine as is, but neither is it to direct a quirky Racine; rather, it is to be able to claim Racine today, without changing what we are. When I direct a play, and particularly a classic play, the object of the experiment isn't the play itself but us. We give ourselves to the play. Racine claims us, it's the play that builds us, and in that sense it is eminently modern. It transforms us, and it's that transformation I then turn into a show, it's this transformation I make people see and hear, and I invite the audience to it so that they can perhaps be transformed in turn.

Your theatre seems to be a "theatre of emptiness," without sets or costumes, which you approach without preconceived notions with each new creation, and which you pare down as much as possible to fill it again with meaning, form, and language...

I'm so fascinated by the relationship that arises with an actor when we start working together on a text that I almost forget to pay attention to peripheral elements. I could say it's this relationship that removes all material elements. Every once in a while, because I need to create meaning or to clarify things, I might need to use a costume, or a piece of set, but it comes much later in the creative process. It's not an aesthetic choice, it comes from my impatience to confront myself to the actors and to realise that there lies the heart of theatre.

Although questions of space and sets come later, they still play an important part in your work. How does your training as an architect inspire you when it comes to scenography?

It's precisely because I worked as an architect that I can trust my relationship to the space completely. Which means I don't need to define it any more than that. A space is the way air moves and light vibrates, and all that can be produced by an actor. What I'm interested in is how to create a mental space based on an actor's body, on his or her ability to speak and move. In *Andromaque*, a lot is at stake in the way characters look at each other, but also in their ability to arouse and excite imagination, to give back to the audience their capability to create images, which therefore don't necessarily need to be materialised. The question of the other's gaze is also at the heart of the concept of diversity and of the questions those young actors are exploring. This gaze the other won't give me... And me refusing to give mine to the other. Exclusion begetting exclusion.

Interview conducted by Malika Baaziz the 13th February 2020 and translated by Gaël Schmidt-Cléach