



# HEROES' SQUARE

## INTERVIEW WITH KRYSZTIAN LUPA

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**Ritter, Dene, Voss, Immanuel Kant, Extinction, Heroes'square: where does your interest for Thomas Bernhard come from? What kind of writer would you say he is?**

**Krzysztof Lupa:** It started with *The Lime Works*, which was a literary revelation for me. I didn't expect to go through such a literary experience at the middle point of my life. The emergence of the underground currents of a monologue, to such an unexpected degree, was an entirely new experience. It seemed as if Thomas Bernhard had established new criteria to distinguish between lies and the truth, that he'd unveiled a new inner architecture of the individual, in a very risky and subjective way. Ingeborg Bachman once said that Bernhard didn't represent a new literary style, but a brand new way of thinking. It's precisely that way of thinking that allowed me to redefine my theatre, or rather that drove me to redefine it. Since then, I've been incapable of letting go of Thomas Bernhard. I constantly feel this ever-renewed need to experience his presence in my own transformation, the one that's going on inside me...

**Thomas Bernhard wrote this play in a very specific context, in the middle of the Kurt Waldheim Affair. What is the context of *Heroes'square* today?**

It's the new wave of xenophobia and antisemitism that's going through Europe, this new landscape of hatred for what's different and of fears that is appearing in our societies. Its aspects are slightly different depending on the country. It's hard to understand exactly the reasons for this new form of withdrawal and rejection of humanistic progress. What can create in an individual and a community such a need for hatred, the need to look for and find an object of hatred? When I was working on *Heroes'square*, I saw all of that unfold in Lithuania. At the same time, there was in Poland such an increase in nationalistic and xenophobic aggressions that it became possible to identify fully with the characters of the play.

**There is in Thomas Bernhard's work a question about the nation, about fascism. It's an expression of a larger pursuit of truth. What does this pursuit inspire in you, this never-ending work on history, memory, origins, and legacies?**

It's all closely linked. The positions that lead to fascism result from the rise of hypocrisy; what is expressed is the terror of a made-up and toxic "truth," which celebrates only hatred. Everything that surrounds it, and precisely memory, history, national and spiritual legacies, etc., darkens. The darkening of the path towards truth isn't a phenomenon restricted to a small number of people: this wave can also affect those who try to defend themselves against it... It's the deepest and most mysterious theme of Thomas Bernhard's last play. Its characters carry within them thoughts they are incapable of expressing. A taboo? A paralysis of the intellectual process? Human souls and minds have been poisoned.

**You've said: "It's while directing *Heroes'square* that I felt for the first time this necessity to save characters from the author's claws." Who do you think is Josef Schuster? What does he represent?**

Josef Schuster is like the Sphinx' enigma: by his action, he asked the living and the audience and the readers a question that has no answer but that must be answered at all cost. Josef Schuster, with his enigma, becomes a sort of ghost. A dybbuk! People are always talking about him, and he continues to inhabit the souls of his brother, his daughters, his housekeeper Mrs. Zittel... He survives as a recurring and necessary psychodrama. The original motive seems to be the will: the will of a suicide who aspired to self-destruction. An "extinction," again. To make everything disappear, the work of his life, the funeral ritual, memory: it's impossible. It creates, on the other side, the other face of extinction: an endless existence entirely dedicated to the necessity of answering the Sphinx' enigma, the denial of the darkening of truth engendered by hatred that rules everywhere. That hatred seeps into our souls, we're no longer able to protect ourselves from it. Josef's death initiates in the souls of the living an alchemical work...

**Insults, vociferations: in *Heroes'square*, language is treated in a particularly brutal and direct way. How did you grapple with that language? How did you approach the play with your Lithuanian actors?**

When we manage to get close to our characters, to overcome the borders of the subjective inner monologue, the language of the characters becomes an organic necessity.

**Can you tell us about your scenography, about that box that frames the actors as in a painting, of your treatment of colour? What space did you imagine for *Heroes'square*?**

*Heroes'square*, it's two spaces—the abandoned rooms of an old building (while people are moving out), which opens into the Heroes' Square and the park in front of the Burgtheater—that combine into one archetypal space—the intertwining of a human life and a historic fetish. I tried to recreate all that in Vilnius, which over the course of our research slowly became the place where that intertwining occurs.

**In that play, haunted by death, there doesn't seem to be a future. Is *Heroes'square* a nihilistic play, as some like to say?**

I've never seen Bernhard as a nihilistic writer, even though he is often seen as one. The radicalism of his critique seems to leave no room for anything else. It doesn't matter. On the other end, there's the desperate struggle of the individual. Even the suicide of the protagonist is part of that struggle. The energy of the narrator's protest, the enraged monologue that verges on the absurd, the crash through the wall of the absurd, the levitation in the space of the absurd, where laughter finally comes!... No, no, you can call it anything but nihilistic.

**Often, in Thomas Bernhard's work, love is inseparable from hate. What does this mixture of contradictory feelings inspire you? Is it an engine for the dramaturgy?**

That's how it goes in life, especially when we want to free ourselves from our constant lies. It's in our constant lies that love and hate never touch.

**Is this play a vanity?**



There may be futility in the perspective of a given moment, even in that of an individual life, but there's no futility in the process that leads to truth, which sometimes is bigger than our individual goals and becomes an element of our yearning for happiness. Misfortune, and the anxiety it creates which drives us to search for the truth, is but a constant counterweight to that futility. And in spite of the darkness of this play, you can still find it...

**You've said in a manifesto: "Our souls are no longer useful to anyone... / Because in fact the role and meaning of our conscience and our truths / Are probably disappearing. / Our truths are no longer useful to anyone. / Maybe the role of our creative visions is more and more restricted / Within what the mad carnival of political realities produces." From that point of view, you seem close to Thomas Bernhard, who considers that the mind has been obliterated by provincialism, which deprived culture of any substance. What do you think is the role of an artist in today's society?**

Indeed, in the situation that arose and is currently spreading through Poland, Bernhard's tools for thinking and determination are becoming crucially relevant. The chaos of criteria for the truth and the devaluation of human dialogue in the public space also devalue what used to be the artist's role, that of someone who would trigger intuitions and thoughts. What we have is either the death of the artist or another one of the Sphinx' enigmas, which forces the artist to exist differently. We're at a crossroads...

Interview conducted by Francis Cossu

Translated by Gaël Schmidt-Cléach

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