FESTIVAL D'AVIGNON

THE TEMPEST

INTERVIEW WITH ALESSANDRO SERRA

How would you define your theatre?

Alessandro Serra: Two words come to mind: art and popular. I always choose works that speak to us about our present, precisely because they contain the archetypes and structures that have always governed human feelings. That's why William Shakespeare is a writer for whom I have a particular affection. He is the only one who managed, in all his plays, to reach those archetypes and to show on stage all the emotions which govern relationships between human beings. And he does so sublimely, without ever lying; and above all, by using rudimentary techniques—this animal, comic, even sometimes vulgar aspect that Peter Brook called "raw theatre" and which any spectator can understand, without needing to be an intellectual. Yet within a single text, sometimes a single sentence, there can be several levels of understanding, up to the highest level of spirituality, to which he leads the spectator thanks to the trap of dramaturgy. Another aspect of my work, which matters a lot to me, has to do with the spiritual: it is about returning to the roots of our work, to its Dionysian and shamanic aspect. That's what led me to the work of Jerzy Grotowski—a life-changing discovery after which I stopped using words in my creations for a few years. Then the word came back, as if a sort of purification had happened, through a sort of vow of silence. First conceptual, then audible, words eventually reveal their most secret level, which has almost been forgotten, that of the mantra: they then become a magic reality. There's that as well in Shakespeare.

For this project, you adapted and translated *The Tempest* yourself. How did you work on the matter of this text? And what did you discover?

Just like every time I approach a great writer, I first spent months studying the text, translating and rewriting it in Italian, while trying to respect each of its indications, almost obsessively so. In Shakespeare's work, there are very few stage directions, and very little punctuation; everything you need to understand, you have to find in the text. So I dissected it the way one disassembles a clock, so as to know it perfectly and to do away with all the clichés associated with that play. Only then did I start making cuts, but always with the idea that what I was removing would find its way back into the show in a different form. I also looked for what Jean-Claude Carrière and Peter Brook call "radiant words," from which unfolds the deepest meaning of the text. And I realised the most important of all was the word "amazement." It describes a state of shock, apparently cause by Prospero's magic, but which is in reality a sort of ecstasy endemic to the island and which shrouds the characters as soon as they set foot on it. Reaching that state causes one to experience visions. The characters start perceiving reality differently, depending on the condition of their soul: those with a noble soul see beauty—a luxurious island—whereas those with a black soul see ugliness—a barren land. And that's what I'm interested in, not the text itself, but the images behind it. I think this state of ecstasy is exactly what we want to communicate to the audience: for each spectator to see those images through the filter of their soul. Darkness doesn't exist as such, but only through the perception of he who looks at it. That's sort of what William Shakespeare says in *Hamlet*: theatre holds a mirror up to us, in which we can see only what we are and what we know. *The Tempest* is an admirable work in that regard. I hope that, by the end of the show, some of the spectators will have experienced visions.

Magic plays an important part in *The Tempest*; what does it mean to you? And what meaning does it carry?

Magic, in *The Tempest*, is first and foremost that of theatre. It's only by chance that I found myself re-reading it while in lockdown, only to realise that it spoke in the present tense of this supernatural power of the rite of theatre, which we human beings still feel the need to experience. *The Tempest* is an homage to theatre, made with the means of the theatre, and which has never felt stronger as in this historical moment where we ran the risk of losing it forever. Fundamentally, I'm above all interested in the transcendental aspect of art. But I also know that to reach certain levels of communication with the audience, you have to use very artisanal methods. That's what fascinated me in *The Tempest*: Prospero isn't a spiritual being like Ariel, but a very good director who creates magic through the use of technique. There are countless references to the artifacts of theatre, and one could say that everything in this

play is metatheatrical. And yet the mystery deepens and can be glimpsed every once in a while on stage… you have to seduce it, to manipulate it in a way. *The Tempest* is an extraordinary work because it shows how one can reach subtler levels of understanding through the most rudimentary subterfuges: a few costumes and dialogues, a story… even the most vulgar comedy can lead us to the deepest images and the highest secrets.

How do you show on stage the many dimensions of the text?

Back in Shakespeare's time, spectators were much better equipped to decode the words of a text, whereas today's audiences are more used to decrypting images. I therefore tried to create devices that allow the audience to project themselves into what they see. To do that, you have to make them play an active part, to encourage them to use their imagination. The further you go from a realistic depiction, the more it activates in the audience a form of magic participation: the fewer elements are on the stage, the more they become charged with a symbolic dimension which gives the actors the opportunity to activate energies with an empty space… and the more the spectators will immerge themselves in their own imagination. I rely therefore on a rather simple scenography, using the lighting as well as worn objects, often discarded by society—those Tadeusz Kantor called "poor objects," which I love with all my heart. For *The Tempest*, I chose to use a square platform to represent the island and the theatre stage both. It is made of old elm wood, gnarled, moth-bitten, and marked by time, but with a patina, a history it somehow communicates. When an object charged with life is put on stage, it becomes animated by a magic power—almost like a talisman.

What understanding of the world—or, put another way, what form of transcendence—does *The Tempest* invite us to reach?

During rehearsals, I became keenly aware of the political dimension of this play. At its heart is the question of power—the power one wants to conquer, the power that is lost or stolen. It is particularly striking in the relationship between the castaways and Caliban, the island's original inhabitant: one could see here a direct echo of the violence of a hegemonic culture towards an indigenous culture seen as subordinate. Initially described as a "homo spiritualis," close to and respectful of nature, Caliban is reduced to slavery by Prospero. This is further exacerbated by the arrival of the castaways, who make him drink wine until he sinks into a murderous madness—just like Westerners did in the colonies. Shakespeare's genius is to have been able to say so even though he wasn't aware of that reality; and he shows us through the matter of the text itself: while Caliban originally speaks in verse, once drunk, he starts speaking in prose. When violence is unleashed, the beauty of language crumbles away. And yet *The Tempest* ends on a note of forgiveness. Prospero, a harsh, severe man, who has nothing of transcendence about him but has mastered technique and knowledge to dominate the supernatural world, forgives his enemies even though he has the power to destroy them easily. Everything in the play is but theatrical artifice; but it is through this artifice that one can draw the supernatural to oneself. And the effect of this power, on a human being such as Prospero, manifests itself through a most transcendental dynamic: the learning of compassion.

Interview conducted by Marie Lobrichon