



FLESH

INTERVIEW WITH SOPHIE LINSMAUX AND AURELIO MERGOLA - STILL LIFE

***Flesh* immerses the audience in four intense life experiences. Would you say that you enjoy exploring the human capacity for resilience when faced with the ferocity of those situations, without delving into the psychology of your characters?**

Sophie Linsmaux and Aurelio Mergola: *Flesh* puts side to side four stories whose scenarios are completely independent from one another; each time, the locations and characters lead us into a different world. The through line can be found in the way they all deal with our relationship to flesh and with interpersonal relationships. The characters are never alone, a situation unfolds suddenly in front of us, we get right into things with the audience. However, there is a powerful feeling of loneliness in the way each character experiences the events and is shaken by his or her emotions. The spectators are witness to intense situations, as in that first story which takes place in a hospital room. Each situation and each set are as realistic as possible, to show a very precise context but also to push realism to its breaking point until it dissolves into a more dreamlike atmosphere. Each story has this moment where it shifts from the hyperrealism of a concrete experience to a poetic or nightmarish vision, presented either as plausible and real or entirely imagined by the characters' subconscious. We begin the show with a dying body, this lump of dying flesh in a hospital bed, flanked by a son and a nurse. To write that story, we met health care professionals who work in palliative care. We wanted to be faithful to reality but also to pay homage to the gestures of their work, which are everyday gestures for them. In *Flesh*, we question the very possibility of embrace, and the array of gestures used to achieve it, between modesty and intimacy, from a comforting embrace to an utterly failed one. The first gesture in this first story we entitled *And Yet* is that of the nurse touching this dying body. On the stage, there are therefore living bodies and inanimate ones. This first scene explores our cultural relationship to death. We question our often blatant inability to accompany the dying in our modern western societies.

Can you tell us more about your writing process for this show in four tableaux?

We wrote this show using constraints from writing exercises over the first lockdown period. After writing down about fifty forms based on images, fictions, and situations which inspired us, we identified leitmotifs. It allowed us to build a narrative made up of four short stories. *Flesh* begins with a death and ends with the arrival of life. We create a cycle. Within that cycle, we came up with a second story, which takes place in the small apartment where Kathy and John live, as they sit on the couch in their living room, about to open their wedding anniversary present: a facelift. But unfortunately, Kathy won't like this change. We dive with them into their obsessions and fears, until the unthinkable happens... We like to question the sensation of demiurgic power men can have over their environment, here on their own bodies, their flesh, and we do so here by exploring the aesthetics and codes of horror movies. With *Flesh*, we leave a story and enter the next one very abruptly. But the shift from one tableau to the next is accompanied by a soundtrack which allows the audience to approach the new narrative and to experience a rising intensity throughout the show. The third scene is called *Love Room*: a place where one can strap on a VR helmet to experience virtual reality on one's own. The flesh of the other is absent, at least physically speaking. But the sensations are concrete and real. The spectators become voyeurs of the experience Dora is going through. We don't know what she sees, but we see the impact of the images and situations on her. She experiences sensations outside of her body, of her flesh. The play ends with *Embrace*: a family reunion in a neighbourhood bar. It's the story of a broken family where no one speaks to anyone else anymore. But they have to come together again for a funeral. Their only means of communication is violence, their heightened physical aggressiveness triggered here by an involuntary gesture by one of the siblings. Which in the end leads to a sort of unwanted contact. Their spontaneous brawl replaces their inability to hug and comfort each other. The stage is built like a box that can quickly open and close to move from one tableau to the next. The sequence of scenes creates a dialogue and the spectators are free to interpret the links between them.

Your theatre is non-verbal, but far from non-vocal or silent...

Indeed. The experiences we show have no need for words and debates, but they of course need breath. Breath is the source of life, of emotion, of communication. The soundscape of *Flesh* plays a large part when it comes to conveying meaning, and in particular during those shifts from hyperrealism to fantasy. It's important in our creative process. We work layer by layer, step by step, starting with silence or rather with the noises created by the bodies of the actors at work and by the objects being manipulated. Beyond the soundtrack which helps create a fantastical atmosphere, all the other noises in the play are diegetic and caused by the actions. To create a scene, we have a method based on physical work which allows us to write down and choreograph series of movements and gestures, and to refine them over time. With our actors, we share a number of tools that let us approach space and time in the same way. Every gesture is meticulously described, from its duration to the direction the body has to face. The intrinsic rhythm of each tableau as well as the rhythm of the play as a whole are primordial questions. We start thinking about this relationship to rhythm as soon as we start writing, even before we can experience it concretely on the stage. It's an indispensable element of our writing process, it's not something that appears after the fact, but it's there from beginning to end. Events, facts, and gestures are concrete, the situations that arise rather extreme. Reading this physical score, the protagonists experience emotions. And we enter into their reactions, into their flesh... That's what we like. From skin to flesh, we're trying to burst the bubble of distance, from the surface to the most intimate.

Interview conducted by Moïra Dalant