



ROYAN

THE FRENCH TEACHER

INTERVIEW WITH FRÉDÉRIC BÉLIER-GARCIA

How did the idea of a collaboration with Marie NDiaye and Nicole Garcia come about?

Frédéric Bélier-Garcia: This project is the result of several different desires. It's my fourth collaboration with Marie NDiaye, whose first play, *Nilda*, I directed in 2002. Nicole Garcia wanted to return to the theatre with a text by a contemporary author. Marie was intrigued by the idea of building a fiction around Nicole. Before she began to write, Marie NDiaye asked us to pick a few words for her: a moment of loneliness, a betrayal, a memory—and that's how she dreamt up *Royan*.

***Royan* is a monologue. How did you approach it?**

Marie NDiaye approached the monologue not as a dramatic convention which allows a character to talk to himself aloud, but as a cohesive narrative form. Hence this stratagem: a woman talks to people she can't see and by whom she doesn't want to be seen, all while standing only a few steps away from them. The text was born of those contradictions, of the constraints imposed by this situation. I'm always awed by the way Marie NDiaye's writing uses an implacable and flamboyant style to examine the extreme confusion of her characters. With this luxuriant style, she plumbs the darkest depths of their conscience. She grasps the most intimate alienations that can lead (us) to death, to madness, but also condemn us to complete normalcy. Our desire to fit in the world, to live, implies an effort, a prodigious work on ourselves, to train ourselves, to polish ourselves (which is reflected in the style itself), to make us respectable, normal, invisible, to obey the call to normalcy.

Royan is this troubling portrait of the feminine, which arises from this mirror effect between the two women, the student and the teacher. Gabrielle's flow of words sounds like madness, but it's a clear-sighted madness which isn't caused by a distortion of reality but by increased clear-headedness, by an excess of conscience, about our own actions and emotions. The very construction of the sentences, in their convolutions, their twists and turns, reflects the contortions of her thoughts in the effort she makes to understand herself. One character speaks, but in several voices. NDiaye interweaves the threads of the character's thoughts to reproduce the thickness and complexity of our own thoughts as we think them. The word becomes an inner theatre.

***Royan* is based on a news story, which connects this central character to a very topical social question—in this case, teenage angst and bullying. How do the text and the show handle this relationship to the real?**

What I find dizzying in this text is that it starts with and talks about a tragedy—the suicide of a student and the responsibility, be it active or passive, of her teacher, out of negligence or of a refusal to help—but then she explores the part of this story that exists in the "infrasound." Marie NDiaye perfectly describes how the human mind oscillates between clarity and obliviousness, and the coalitions of guilty conscience and bad faith, the moments of failure of the conscience, which allow those tragedies to happen.

Each of our fates is a different answer to the question of how to adapt to the world without breaking, dissolving, or disappearing into anonymity. Here the characters (the student and the teacher) are caught between the self-control imperative and nostalgia for moments where they gave in to their "fury." Life is made up of concessions to social normalcy and of moments of rebellion against the world, which Marie NDiaye describes with surgical precision. The fate of the student forces the teacher to confront her memories—Oran, Marseille, then Royan—and she ends up seeing herself in her student and understanding herself through her student's voice. In this subtle game of mirrors, we're always moving from the most personal—suicide and guilt—to the most contemporary social and existential questions and back.

By digging so deep into our conscience, we reach a place where reason and madness coexist, where the real rubs shoulders with the supernatural. The classroom, for instance, appears as a wild place where the teacher feels that the students want to devour her like savage beasts... The petits bourgeois of Royan have too-white teeth, while she describes herself as a doe, alternately worshipped or hunted... The young girl's hair turns into snakes or into a gorgon, and she uses it as a shield so as not to get eaten... The raw present of the news story turns into an ancient fable. Mythological or fantastic beasts (does, deer, wild animals, Medusa...) appear to help us understand the relationships of power that exist within a class or a society. According to the ancient lesson, human relationships are above all about who eats and who gets eaten.

Would you call *Royan* claustrophobic?

The play is set in a wide-open stairwell, but the character is stuck both in space and in her explanations. The whole play is based on one situation: a woman stops on the first steps of the stairs leading up to her apartment, sensing that two people she really does not want to see are waiting for her upstairs. The play then tries to explain this situation, it's very cinematic, like the beginning of a long, continuous shot. Then, strangely, the text becomes absolutely theatrical in the way it allows thought to unfold. All of a sudden, this cinematic image is conquered by theatre and literature. As if we were dealing with the beginning of a film, of a long shot, which then went through a theatrical anamorphosis. Not with a slow-motion sequence or a freeze frame, but through the distortion of the temporality and the presence specific to theatre. Bringing those two things together is what interested us. That's why it quickly seemed to me that my work as director would mostly consist in opening up the text, like an egg whose shell you slowly remove, in both space and time. The idea of performing it at the Festival d'Avignon is one we quickly agreed on, even though the play takes place in a stairwell. But with its white stone walls that reflect the radiance of the southern cities mentioned in the text: Oran Marseille... All the outer spaces described in the work, all the boulevards, even the schoolyard, they're all in here. We came up with a device that has the stairwell hold all the other sets within itself, like one of those imaginary palaces built during the Renaissance to cultivate the art of memory.

Nicole Garcia plays a central part in this project. How would you say this character and this play resemble her?

There are similarities between the work of Marie NDiaye and that of Nicole Garcia (as a filmmaker), even if the media they work in and their writing styles are very different. Secrets are what make people. Their heroes and heroines are sculpted by the strength they have to use to bring their most intimate mystery to the light, or to hide it. Whether in *The Adversary*, *The Favourite Son*, or *From the Land of the Moon* for instance, Nicole Garcia's characters are always built around a secret they want to hide or tell. Marie NDiaye and Nicole Garcia also share the question of the violence we all must use against ourselves to build ourselves, to make ourselves fit for life in society. A way of thinking about the feminine, the power of the feminine. Their obsessions are strangely adjacent. Their characters often begin in a position of fragility, which can stem from a guilty conscience or from their inability to accept their legacy, and eventually manage to reach (sometimes at the cost of madness) power and grace, a path one could call the power of the feminine, which can be that of a woman or a man. Another ancient lesson.

Interview conducted by Marie Lobrichon in January 2020 and translated by Gaël Schmidt-Cléach