



AESCHYLUS, WAR PLAYS

INTERVIEW WITH OLIVIER PY

What's the story behind this unique project: to put on Aeschylus's plays outside of traditional theatres?

Olivier Py: The idea came to me while working on *The Oresteia* at the Théâtre de l'Odéon, directing it almost as if it were an opera. I decided to direct Aeschylus's other four plays, a project that could only be carried out outside of the usual formats of production. The idea of an itinerant theatre, that wouldn't necessitate much in terms of resources, soon seemed self-evident. It was the urgency I felt at the idea of directing Aeschylus that led to that choice. We played them in many different locations. The success of that adventure was the start of the process we called "the three-kilometre decentralisation." Aeschylus's plays fit this form of theatre particularly well because they are short, essential, and political. The audience knows right away they're in the presence of indispensable and seminal texts, in this particular case the oldest plays in the history of mankind.

You speak of intervention theatre. What are you intervening on?

I think that with Aeschylus, I'm trying to intervene on what founds our democracy. The first of the four plays I directed, *Seven Against Thebes*, is about the relationship between politics and images; it's a theme that may seem anachronistic at first glance. The images it refers to are of course not the ones we see on television, but those that are drawn on shields, which can distort reality. *The Suppliants* is about the foundations of democracy through two questions: the welcome we reserve to strangers, and the rights of women. Two topics that seemed particularly powerful when we played for associations of migrant women, for instance. Our audience couldn't have imagined that their stories had already been told 2,500 years earlier. *The Persians* is about war, about the madness of power, and the question of commemoration: how do we honour those we have lost? As for *Prometheus Bound*, the last play we created, it is all divine, it doesn't feature any mortal character. The bound god embodies the contestation of absolute power, he's the original political prisoner. The play is at once metaphysical and political: Prometheus speaks to Zeus, who is here the figure of absolute power. It's democracy that is at stake, founded as it is on the right to speech, to contestation, as a regime in which one is allowed to say the opposite of what the ruler is saying.

What vision of democracy is Aeschylus giving, five centuries before the common era?

There is in Aeschylus's plays a desire to establish a world democracy, a state of democracy more than a democratic state. Democracy is for him synonymous with peace and balance. The democratic principle can and should be applied in the private sphere: anger cannot be allowed to rule, hubris—this oversized pride—to become the tyrant of this inner people that is a person. Democracy is a very large idea, with a limit that Aeschylus clearly identified: the law cannot answer every single question. Should we welcome strangers? Fortunately, that isn't for the law to decide. That's why the theatre is necessary, as a place of debate, of conscience. The theatre is precisely the place of dialectics. It's a vision that goes against the somewhat simple idea of hypnotic and spectacular catharsis, whose goal would only be to purge the passions. I think there has long been a misunderstanding about the notion of catharsis. I'd say that it describes an effect of distance rather than a forgetting of the self through the watching of a show.

You've brought together all four plays under the title *Aeschylus, War Plays*. How is war described in those plays?

Aeschylus is a highly respectable character, unlike Homer sometimes. He sees war from an angle the Homeric tradition doesn't recognise: for him, war is first and foremost a monstrosity. It is the position of a veteran. When he describes the battle of Salamis, paying special attention to the victims, he's describing a slaughter he took part in, the memory of which may have kept him awake at night. Similarly, when he speaks of the siege of Troy, he talks about the vermin in the clothes of the combatants. This isn't *The Iliad*, or an American movie in which war would have this heroic dimension. He shows that nothing beautiful or just can arise from a slaughter.

What place does Aeschylus occupy in your work and in your life?

I fell in love with Aeschylus in a way I didn't with Euripides or Sophocles. In the end, I've directed three playwrights in my life: Aeschylus, Claudel, and Shakespeare—at least when it comes to the classics. Aeschylus taught me to live, to think, to do theatre; he thinks that the origin of democracy isn't law but a poem. It's something I've read nowhere else. A key question for me is that of the right to speech of the citizen. We find ourselves in a very paradoxical situation today, with every citizen having the right and the power to speak on social networks, while political speech is the exclusive domain of politics and media professionals. I find that very startling. Debate plays a more and more important part, for better and worse, without the people having their say in it. Meanwhile, our political class seems prehistoric. Its members still speak as if social networking didn't exist, as if it weren't possible to launch a revolution in a few clicks. As if the authoritarian power that is television still reigned supreme; I think the situation is well summed up in *Seven Against Tehebes*. In it, Aeschylus describes an attempt to incite the people to a better understanding, a better hermeneutics of violent images.

Aeschylus's vision can seem pessimistic...

There's something I always like to point out—even though it's but a theory: I believe that all of Aeschylus's tragedies have a happy ending. Only seven have survived, and only one, *The Oresteia*, is the end of a cycle. Tragedy must end well. After all the struggles, all that physical and agonistic violence, balance is restored in society, a balance that can be identified as democracy. In most cases, we only have the first few plays of a cycle; the end of *Prometheus Bound* can indeed lead to despondency, but I don't think that's what Aeschylus's work as a whole aims to produce. By directing four plays, I'm hoping to give a larger, more nuanced vision of it. Aeschylus aims to show how the word of the individual can change the entirety of the political organisation of a regime.

How will the itinerant programme and the performances at the Chartreuse of Villeneuve lez Avignon be organised?



We'll play *Prometheus Bound* as an itinerant show. In the Chartreuse, we'll perform all four plays, on the same stage, following that idea of a "poor" theatre. It's an integral part of the project of the Festival d'Avignon to go into the surrounding neighbourhoods and towns. It will be the third show of this three-kilometre decentralisation. I'm lucky enough to have had two excellent predecessors: *Othello*, *Variation for Three Actors*, directed by Nathalie Garraud, and *Ubu*, directed by Olivier Martin-Salvan. The plays of Aeschylus are perfect for this kind of exercise, as we've already seen when we performed them in and around Paris. There is, in his plays, something of the pedagogical, like a civics lesson. But it isn't me, as director, who teaches that lesson, I'm also its recipient.

You often talk about your love for the theatre and its effects. What of it here?

The whole thing is very simple, very pure, put together almost with nothing. We chose the simplest costumes possible, ones that send the fewest signals. There's no light. I like to put on a show, but I think it's healthy to go back to dramatic works that rest entirely on poetry and on actors. Actors play a very large part in this project. If I hadn't met those three actors, if they hadn't carried this project, I wouldn't have been able to put on the entire tetralogy. They're exceptional, born to play tragedy. You have to be born to do it: even if the plays are short, they require the actors to be in paroxysmal states right away, and they don't allow for any psychological letting up. We also came up with a bi-frontal scenography in order to produce a similar effect to what we could not represent, that is, the extreme importance of the chorus in Aeschylus. The audience can therefore watch themselves watching the actors.

Interview conducted by Renan Benyamina

Translated by Gaël Schmidt-Cléach

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