



IN THIS GARDEN WE LOVED

INTERVIEW WITH MARIE VIALLE

Your show, *In this garden we loved*, adapted from a story by Pascal Quignard, is first and foremost a story about love and music...

Marie Vialle: Pascal Quignard drew inspiration from an actual person, Simeon Pease Cheney, an American pastor from the second half of the 19th century, who was also an ornithologist and musician. A century before Olivier Messiaen, he scrupulously wrote down the bird songs he heard in his garden but also “the water dripping from the faucet into a half-full bucket,” or the swirl of clothes hanging from a coat rack caught in a draught. All the noises of the world were music to his ears! He wrote all of that down in a book, *Wood Notes Wild, Notations on Bird Music*. In the novel, the character has lost his young wife, who dies while giving birth to their daughter. Out of love for his late wife, he starts spending all his time in the garden she loved so much. He wants to feel whatever is left of her presence. It's at once a way of mourning and of listening to the world, which reveals itself to him in all its splendour. The pastor drives his daughter Rosemund away because, as she grows up, she starts looking too much like his late wife. But she eventually comes back to help him in his work. They are able to find each other, beyond grief, in their wonder at the song of the world, in what Pascal Quignard calls “a strange marriage between father and daughter.” It's like the fairy tale *Donkeyskin* in reverse. I play Rosemund and I asked Yann Boudaud to play Simeon, because his very concrete style is perfect to make spectators feel the grief of this man who talks to his late wife as much as his cruelty towards his daughter or the depth of his attention to the world.

This is your fifth collaboration with Pascal Quignard. What do you feel when you read his books and when working together again and again?

Discovering his newest book always fills me with joy, and it is that emotion, rather than a precise reflection, which sometimes becomes a desire to adapt it for the stage. It's only afterwards that I realise what the work brought me. The way we work is constantly evolving and goes beyond a strict adaptation. Pascal Quignard is always willing to go back to his writing, to cut or change things based on what's happening on stage, always with a remarkably open mind. Such was the case with our previous show, *The Bank in the Dark*, which we performed at the Festival d'Avignon in 2016, and in which we were both on stage. It's a very simple and rich way to work together, like a sort of pact between us.

How would you describe your adaptation of the book?

Pascal Quignard gave his book its own theatrical form (with tableaux, dialogues, a narrator). Together, we drew up a first version for the stage, simplified and condensed. We notably removed all characters but Simeon and Rosemund. I then had a look at the inspiration for the novel, Simeon Pease Cheney's *Wood Notes Wild*, with its scores, with the idea of performing them during the show. With playwright David Tuaillon, we tried to add Cheney's notes about birds to Pascal Quignard's text. It forced us to reflect about the real-life pastor's approach and, beyond him, about the meaning and value we give to listening to bird songs: what do they really bring us? What thoughts do they awaken in us? What do they tell us about our relationship to nature? To artistic creation? We ended up spending a good deal of time reading about those questions, from the works of musicians like Bernie Krause, Antoine Ouelette, Luc Ferrari or, of course, Olivier Messiaen, to that of bioacoustician Jean-Claude Roché and philosophers Vinciane Despret and Baptiste Morizot, among others—including Pascal Quignard himself, and in particular his work about music. It also allowed us to give Rosemund her own arc, separate from her father's, which is the focus of the novel, by using Gilles Deleuze's concept of “ritornello.” Rosemund ended up taking on the role of narrator. The tension between past and present she embodies gives her a place as important as that of her father and makes possible an address to the audience, like a baton pass through the borders of time. I then asked Éric Didry to work with me on the direction and on the transition from the past of the novel to the present of the show. In the end, the original book became a crucible in which we mixed very diverse sources, including other books and reflections which my original reading progressively called to as I delved deeper into it.

How did you work on the bird songs?

Concretely, what we're doing is playing some of the bird songs collected by Simeon Pease Cheney. We see it as its own scenic material, on the same level as Pascal Quignard's text. I asked musician Dalila Khatir to guide us in our interpretation of the scores. I also invited sound designer Nicolas Barillot to come up with a unique soundscape based on them. What makes bird songs difficult is that we approach them as humans... not as birds. Even Olivier Messiaen, despite his exceptional attention and his will to celebrate their genius, could only perceive them as a human being. There is a great humility in Simeon Pease Cheney's project of trying to understand and reproduce the art of the birds, but he's still a human being speaking for the other, using his own words. How then can we understand the birds as birds would? What can they really tell us about the world through their existence in songs? Why is our human sensitivity touched by their animal sensitivity? It's the kind of question we want to explore in this show, more than that of the replication of their songs. In any case, we're not trying to talk as bird experts, but only to offer a listening experience based on this unique composer's music.

Your directions always tend to minimalism. Why this pared down approach?

It's true that I'm wary of anything that "looks like a décor." I'm trying to avoid as much the image of a pared down black box as that of a beautiful jewel case. But I don't have a particular taste for minimalism as such, it just makes sense for some subjects. What I'm trying to do is to find concrete, essential elements that can produce material on stage and for the actors' performance. I often use simple and real props, and I pay close attention to the floor, to give it a texture. Here, we used copper plates fitted together but which, thanks to Joël Hourbeigt's lighting, remind us of the passage of seasons, the flow of time, but in a sensual register. Our work on the scenography with Yvett Rotscheid consisted in bringing together various elements and needs in a single gesture—just like the gardener bird who builds its nest with its whole body: the nest, the call to the other, the singing, the body are inseparable, everything it does it does with all its life. The challenge was to find a space between abstract contemplation and the existence of a garden described by the text, a place which is not quite in the real world but not quite in the fiction, which belongs to the stage and exists in its own right. A place where images can resonate and which allows the play to have its own suspended time onto which to project its world, much like in a dream.

Pascal Quignard's fictions often explore solitary lives. What is your interpretation of the cruelty those characters can show?

Solitude in his work is mostly the attribute of individuals who exist purely through creation and who have broken away from all social obligations. It's the case with Simeon, who loses himself in this endless task and sets himself apart from human society. Pascal Quignard often tells me that what matters is to give yourself entirely to what you're doing, that it's the only way to create your own gesture. There's no bitterness in that solitude; on the contrary, it's an amazing space open to the world and to the others, and it's first and foremost a way to experience the passage of time differently. I don't think those characters are cruel; rather, they have an honesty I find enchanting. When the pastor drives his daughter away, he does so in half a second. In Pascal Quignard's books, we bump into a reality that appears out of nowhere: death and other upheavals happen suddenly, with no prior warning. They're like surprises. It's a relationship to the living I find incredibly powerful.