



THE TRILOGY OF IMMORAL TALES (FOR EUROPE)

INTERVIEW WITH PHIA MÉNARD

Your trilogy seems to find its source somewhere between Ancient Greece and postwar Germany. Can you tell us a little about its origins?

Phia Ménard: It all started with an unexpected commission from documenta 14, the contemporary art exhibit that takes place every five years in Kassel, Germany. The artistic directors, Adam Szymczyk and Paul B. Preciado, invited me to create something around two themes: “Learning from Athens” and “For a Parliament of bodies”. I therefore went several times to Athens, and then to Kassel. The political context of Greece in 2016 was that of the radical left Syriza government having had to agree to the terms dictated by Brussels. In Athens, I was first struck by the terrible economic situation caused by the crisis, then by Greeks who, in spite of their poverty, were helping the newly-arrived migrants. Near the Acropolis, tourists, protected by the police, could see nothing of what was happening. As for Kassel, where the Brothers Grimm grew up, its only interest was that it was one of the first cities to have a Nazi mayor in 1933. The documenta, created twenty-two years later over the roots of evil, was built on the beautiful idea of helping a people stand back up by recovering their humanity through art. And in those two cities, I saw artistic propositions which influenced my work: Joseph Beuys’s ecological sculpture *7000 Oaks*, which has stood in Kassel since 1982, and the 100% Belgian programme of the Athens & Epidaurus Festival, unveiled by Jan Fabre in front of the Acropolis, and which made me say that if I had been a Greek artist, I would have blown up the Parthenon. There was, on the one hand, the economic *doxa* of Europe to which the Greeks were subjected, and on the other, the disdain for local artists. But what did that Europe mean? That’s how *Maison Mère* (*Mother House*) was born, in the form of a fairy tale. Then I imagined a *Temple Père* (*Father Temple*), a reminder of our patriarchal society. The matrix, then the father, and I wanted to end with a projection, this *Rencontre Interdite* (*Forbidden Encounter*), which asks the question of the limit.

Between the exploding Parthenon and your punk anti-heroine, your performance is full of violence and spleen.

I’ve always had a great political awareness, because I come from a background of militant workers who’ve never stopped thinking about the usefulness of their struggle. This feeling of spleen comes from that questioning, and is an intrinsic part of my identity. My generation still had the choice to change the world, but decided not to fight for it. The big difference is that youths today don’t have that choice, they have to fight if they want to keep living. That’s where my anger comes from. *Maison Mère*, written in 2017, is the result of what I’ve seen over my twenty-five years of work throughout the world, so many people of good will who let themselves be absorbed by neoliberalism or by what Achille Mbembe calls “necropolitics”. I was there when Reagan and Thatcher came to power, championing ultraliberalism with their “There is no alternative”. But it’s the “No Future” slogan of the punk movement that really stuck with me. They were visionaries, they’d seen that society was headed straight for the wall. Behind the idea of creating this character of a warrior Athena, I wanted to suggest that, had she existed today, she would probably have been a punk. The central idea of *Maison Mère* is that the ultraliberal elite have decided that Greece, with its sunny weather, is the perfect place to build cheap cardboard houses. The building of this Parthenon, or “Carthenon” as I call it, by this punk Athena, is a symbolic house, a mother’s womb protecting us. This cardboard house which is doomed to be destroyed by water is for me a metaphor of consumer society, a way of saying that humanity, which took so long to build itself, is now reaching the point of failure, that is, climate change.

The second part, *Temple Père*, born of the ruins of *Maison Mère*, echoes your charge against the patriarchy in *Dry Season*.

It's a different aspect of it, since here I once again assume the position of man I know from my past experience. It's the aspect of the father who has other people build the symbol of his power, a tower built like a house of cards, with the Tower of Babel as reference. The erection of the tower—a most phallic symbol—done by slaves, is too big to fit within the theatre. I'm trying to show how the patriarchy and ultraliberalism are connected, and how man profits from the human. I wanted to talk about slavery from the point of view of history, but the pandemic forced me to turn it into something more current. Onstage, five slaves, all symbolic figures, embody those people sent to the front during lockdown, like garbage collectors, grocery store clerks, doctors and nurses, and then the others, us, who aren't "essential": a child, a pregnant woman—symbol of the exploitation of the female body—a fifty-something whose body was ruined by work, a marginalised "anti-social" who can't clearly be identified as man or woman, and the last one, handicapped and blind. I also imagined the building by the slaves of the temple to the glory of the patriarch as a sadomasochistic session, with this idea of voluntary servitude. Why do we turn ourselves into slaves, and why do we accept this situation? I worked on the concept of contract as studied by Gilles Deleuze in his analysis of the work of Leopold Sacher-Masoch as well as the writings of Jeanne de Berg about sadomasochism. It works the same way in an ultraliberal system, contracts set the rules. Today's gig contract, that of the Uber delivery guy, that's sadomasochism.

How does the theme "For a Parliament of bodies" fit in your trilogy?

The question of the body is the foundation of my work. Here, it finds meaning in my relationship with "the worker," who like my father worked his whole life in horrifying conditions and who nevertheless finds pride in what he did. Whatever the pain, we forget it because, in spite of everything, we're taking part in something incredible. A Parliament is supposed to be a place where discussion is meant to build things, so it should help us escape this situation together. But it doesn't, it's always the same story of fascination and astonishment, it remains today a parliament of suffering and servitude, a parliament of patriarchal bodies. Back in *Dry Season*, I was already wondering why we don't revolt. That's the topic of the last part of the trilogy, *La Rencontre Interdite*: how revolution scares us, because revolting is accepting that we might die. We want to change the world but without sacrificing ourselves. The two inescapable questions for me are death and revolution, closely connected in my writing and coming together within the question of belief. As an atheist, I've struggled with a lack of spirituality I've had to compensate. But religious or not, we all have to face our inability to accept that we are finite. This encounter I call forbidden, because we forbid it of ourselves, is for me the practice of thought. I want to bring it into the body of the spectator immersed in my show.

In a collapsing world, and with the many failures and weaknesses of the European Union, what can we still hope from this European dream? What can we still learn from Athens?

I renamed my trilogy *Contes Immoraux (pour Europe)*, without the "I" you'd usually expect in front of Europe, thinking of a planet we could call Europe. It's a continent connected to all the others, and whose history we have to re-imagine. Finding its source in the lives of our grandmothers, who lost fathers, brothers, and husbands in the wars that tore the continent apart, it was originally created to avoid all this. "Never again". In French, the "I" in "L'Europe" makes me think of "the other", this alterity that inspires us theatre folk so much. But Europe, without that "I", it's a dream, a myth connected to Athens. To think that my goddess is called Europe is to make mine an atheistic figure. If today I yearned to believe in something, I would believe in Europe, for it is Europe that guarantees me peace, the possibility of otherness. It's a crucible of rivers, connections, and languages that tie us together. Those are places of dream. Those tales are a prayer for Europe. I don't waste time wondering if it's the other who has to come to me, I go towards Europe myself, towards this possibility of a parliament of peoples, a society of nations, a parliament of bodies.

Interview conducted by Malika Baaziz in January 2021 and translated by Gaël Schmidt-Cleach