



LE PRINCE DE HOMBOURG DE HEINRICH VON KLEIST

INTERVIEW WITH GIORGIO BARBERIO CORSETTI

Your work often takes different forms. Can you tell us more about your career as an artist?

Giorgio Barberio Corsetti: When I first started out, I was very interested in visual arts, performance, dance, etc. I wanted to integrate all those different forms to my theatre. I saw theatre as this kind of meeting place between all forms of art, where the writing would be done on stage, by the bodies of the actors, their voices, their words, their presence, and by the intervention of visual artists, musicians, multimedia artists, etc. The show was built during rehearsals, we would write on stage, as we worked. It arose from the individual characters of the artists who took part in this form of free creation. It is only later that I felt this desire to face someone else's writing, the energy of an author, a poet, and thus the starting point of his writing and his system of references. I spent a long time studying past writers who managed to create entire worlds through their writing. Kafka is the one who fascinated me the most. As I was studying those texts, written for the theatre, I soon tried to connect them to other artistic forms, like video or installation performance. I wanted to rethink the way we organise time and space, what is at the basis of our conception of theatre.

Did this reflection make you rethink the concept of venue as well?

It had to. I moved from traditional theatre houses, with their fly systems and understages—heaven and hell, with all their symbolic power—to non-theatrical locations I used to tell stories in a different way. Locations where the audience could move, not only mentally, but physically as well. For instance, I imagined a show about a blind Oedipus coming back to Roma. We played it in an entire neighbourhood of Roma. It started in a small train station near Termini, where the audience would wait on the platform for Oedipus, who was walking down the train tracks. He had a microphone and would say his text as he walked. Oedipus was played by Franco Citti, and together we imagined Pier Paolo Pasolini standing among the audience, watching us, just a little bit older, with the white hair he never had time to grow... What draws me to theatre is a deep curiosity. For the texts, but also for the different languages of theatre, and the infinite possibilities there exist to reinvent them. I like to work with artists from different fields, to bring them together on a stage and present a project: a partnership with two, three, four, five, even six different artists, a sort of challenge halfway between individual and collective adventure, in which all—actors, scenographers, multimedia artists—take part with the same intensity.

Does that have an influence on the way you work?

I think it does. I think it makes rehearsals a different kind of time, a shared time, a time out of time. The possibilities are endless when there are several of us working together, especially when we are curious and focused on the one who's missing, that is to say, the author. That's the case today with Heinrich von Kleist, whose presence can be felt through his universe, his world.

With Heinrich von Kleist, you are working on a dramatic text, not an adaptation. Do you work differently with the actors based on the nature of the text?

Not entirely. I feel that, when working with a text like *The Prince of Homburg*, I'm doing detective work, trying to go with the flow of the text, to understand its twists and turns, its grey areas. It means doing research with the actors as well, because I want them to share my interpretation of the text. We have to go deep into the text, its words and silences. It's subtle work, it requires a lot of meticulousness.

Do you always pick the texts you want to adapt yourself, or do you sometimes do it in response to outside propositions?

I like to follow my desires and pick my own texts, but I also like to respond to propositions by other artists, by friends who know my work. They come up with authors I wouldn't necessarily have thought about adapting on my own, they have a deep, intuitive understanding of my universe as a poet. That was the case with Stéphane Braunschweig, at the National Theatre of Strasbourg, when he asked me to work on Molière's *Dom Juan*. And that was the case with Olivier Py, who offered me this *Prince of Homburg*, into which I dove with enthusiasm.

How do you see Kleist now? Would you say he was a Romantic who didn't conform to the clichés of Romanticism?

I have a passionate vision of him, I can feel Kleist's presence, as a poet, beside me, otherwise I wouldn't be able to direct the play. What matters to me is the text as a living thing. And my vision of Kleist is through his work, not his belonging to a specific time period, to a specific movement. Of course, there are Romantic influences in *The Prince of*

Homburg, but it is bigger than its time. It looks like us, it touches something like our subconscious, our secrets, beyond labels and classifications. Kleist is one of the greatest writers in German language, alongside Büchner, Hölderlin, or Kafka, who all started writing out of necessity, because it was their only hope of salvation. Kleist's writing is almost surgical in its precision when it comes to his word choice, to the depth of the wounds it's exploring.

At the heart of this dramatic poem is the Prince.

Yes. The prince. The play begins with his dream and ends with his losing consciousness. In between you'll find many subconsciously deliberate mistakes, misunderstandings, and falls. The scenes follow one another in unpredictable ways. The prince goes through all the different states of consciousness, until his final enlightenment. It is an initiation journey that forces him to face the threats of death, fear, and order, and the law of fathers that triumphs in the end, terrible and unavoidable, like life itself—a life on which Kleist gave up for those very reasons, not long after writing this play. And here lies his power. The prince thus frees himself from the Romantic movement, looks nothing like Goethe's and Schiller's heroes.

The play is written in blank verse, which doesn't have an equivalent in French. Which translation did you end up choosing?

I chose the translation by Eloi Recoing and Ruth Orthmann because it translates the energy of the words, of the lines. Words come before thought, thought takes form through words. There is a power to the words that makes the world around us. One can use the rhythm of the lines to convey this surprising feeling. There is a certain lyricism to the text, of course, but it remains very concrete. The translation needs to render the power of the poetic word as well as those images, and the concrete character of the situations, of the characters' feelings, of their urges.

When Jean Vilar adapted the play in 1951, a few years after the fall of Nazism, there were a lot of debates around its political meaning, around Kleist's Pan-Germanism. What's the situation today?

It's clear to me that this isn't what we're going to talk about this time. And I think that was clear when Kleist wrote it, too. This isn't a play in which the hero is the kind of positive figure the Germans wanted to see at the time. Kleist's vision had many critics. I think the situation's different today, too. What we have is a series of mistakes and falls, and even victory isn't earned, since it is achieved by disobeying orders, and almost by mistake. If life is a war, then a battle is one episode in a life. In order to win that battle, one needs to obey the impulse to go against the orders from one's father, against the law of the fathers. Which is why we're doomed. The play begins with a dream and ends with a blackout. We are in the dark places that make up the subconscious. We enter the world of a prince that would exist alongside the real world that surrounds him. He is terrified of death, whereas his father won't think twice about offering him in sacrifice if the law demands it. We enter another world with him, in a sort of *mise en abyme* of everything that has to do with military violence. Kafka wrote that we believe Judgment Day comes at the end of our life, while it is actually more like a permanent state of siege. The strange game the father and his son play asks questions about fatherhood and power.

Have you already picked the time period in which you will set the play?

It will be set in the present, but with a memory of the past, a recent past. We made up the military conflicts, the clothes women wear, too, but they are part of our memory as well, like an old picture of our parents or grandparents...

Would you say that the prince is a reluctant hero?

Certainly, as he says himself that the victory achieved at the end would have been greater had he not interfered. He doesn't consider himself a hero, yet he dreams of military victories. This is a deeply enigmatic play. Its very construction, with its scenes that sometimes follow one another seemingly at random, reinforces that impression. Every step we take takes us in a surprising direction. After reading it for the first time, we took it for a "broken-down" play, so to speak. But today, after all the work we did on it, we understand that it does have a structure, albeit one that only makes it more enigmatic.

Will your work be to make us feel this movement towards the enigmatic, the mysterious?

I think the audience have to find their own path. Our job is to show them the questions we felt. The role of the actors is to always live in the present of the representation. When I work with actors, I listen to them, and they listen to me. Our exchanges are through the words of poetry, much more so than through the words of reason. And of course everyone finds his own path.

Your work often includes images produced beforehand. Do you think that will be the case here?

We'll be using images at very specific times, but those will be images from the subconscious. The only thing that matters to me in theatre is poetry. Whether it be produced by words, images, music, it has to be there.



You are directing *The Prince of Homburg* in the Cour d'honneur. It is a place of history, since it is there that Gérard Philipe played, under Jean Vilar's direction, the role of the prince. Is that a reference for you?

It's a great challenge. I like it, I like this place with its wall that seems never to end, like an abyss... we are at the bottom of the abyss, of the well. The Cour d'honneur is like a steep wall, a stage under an abyss..., it is where the prince faces war, fear, exaltation, desire, and death. It is where characters fall and rise again; we think them dead, yet they live still to condemn or be condemned, to forgive or be forgiven... I have often worked outdoors, in front of thousands of people. In Roma in the *cavea* of the Auditorium Parco della Musica built by Renzo Piano, for instance. I know what a challenge it is to play outdoors. What you have to do is make sure that every one of the two thousand people in the Cour actually hears the text. You have to make them forget the distance that separates them from the actors, make sure the twelve actors become part of this place, and play in that abyss, with its huge wall. When you play in the Cour d'honneur, you don't play on a crest or a summit, you play in the depths. The wall, by its sheer presence, tells you something, and there is no need to question it all the time. This place is a challenge that can take us very far, especially with *The Prince of Homburg*.

Interview conducted by Jean-François Perrier.

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