

AND

SHOW

Pure Present by Olivier Py, July 7 to 22, La Scierie

A History of the Festival d'Avignon in 72 posters
by Olivier Py, July 23 at 12:00, Maison Jean Vilar

THE WORKSHOPS OF THOUGHT

Dialogue artists-audience with Olivier Py
and the artistic team of *Pure Present*, July 19 at 16:30,
site Louis Pasteur Supamuros de l'Université d'Avignon

ANTIGONE

After Oedipus's death, Eteocles and Polynices inherit the kingdom of Thebes on the condition that they rule alternately. But when it comes time for Eteocles to cede power to his brother, he refuses, forcing Polynices to raise an army. The brothers kill each other. Their uncle Creon's first decision as a ruler is to honour the memory of Eteocles and to leave Polynices unburied. Antigone cannot accept it. Beyond the judgment of society, her brother deserves to rest in dignity, and she will do anything to honour him with one simple gesture: sprinkling dust on his body. That is why this symbolic text so strongly touched the actors-inmates of the Avignon-Le Pontet prison, "who deeply understood this idea that a man remains a man, regardless of what he's done." This is director Olivier Py's third creation with them.

OLIVIER PY

A director for the theatre, the opera, and cinema, a dramatist, but also an actor and poet, Olivier Py is a key figure of modern theatre. Director of the Centre dramatique national in Orléans, then of the Odéon-Théâtre de l'Europe, he became in 2013 the first theatre director to be appointed director of the Festival d'Avignon since Jean Vilar. As an engaged artist, he has directed many plays which use the language of theatre to put politics centre stage. On or off the stage, Olivier Py regularly comments on cultural policy in France and Europe, writes against the rise of all forms of fascism, and denounces all forms of social and humanitarian injustices. As part of its policy to make culture accessible to everyone, the Festival d'Avignon has developed since 2004 a partnership with the prison of Avignon-Le Pontet. In 2014, on Olivier Py's initiative, this partnership intensified with the opening of a workshop he co-directed with Enzo Verdet. By directing with and for the prisoners *Prometheus Unbound*, *Hamlet*, and *Antigone*, he gave the opportunity to the actors, with the help of the prison administration, to perform outside the prison.

72th
EDITION

In order to bring you this edition, over 1,750 people, artists, technicians, and organisational staff, have worked tirelessly and enthusiastically for months. More than half of them are state-subsidised freelance workers.

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INTERVIEW WITH OLIVIER PY

Like *Prometheus* and *Hamlet*, *Antigone* is a project born within the Avignon-Le Pontet prison. For the second time, you've wanted to perform a show you worked on with inmates outside the walls of the prison as part of the Festival d'Avignon. Did you choose *Antigone* together with the inmates? Are the actors the same?

Olivier Py: Not entirely. Since we first started working on the show, some prisoners have been released. Then you have the fact that they aren't all allowed to leave prison—simply because they haven't served at least half their sentence, a legal requirement to be granted a temporary leave. Being able to present this workshop outside the prison is a legal and administrative exploit, and I am particularly grateful to the administration of the prison. I think everyone believes that this collective work is beneficial on every level. Some of the inmates have been with us since the very first day, four years ago. Some were in *Prometheus*, then *Hamlet*, and now *Antigone*, like the actor who performed as Hamlet, a real pillar of the group. Thanks to them, we've been able to move towards harder and longer plays. I was the one who picked *Antigone*, whereas it was the prisoners who'd asked me to do *Hamlet*. Last year was an "*Antigone* year," and some of them saw Satoshi Miyagi's Japanese version in the Cour d'honneur during an organised trip. Sophocles's theatre is more psychological than Aeschylus's, the language isn't too hard to grasp, and the translation by Florence Dupont, on which we work, is very clear. We've been working on and performing *Antigone* for two years now: first in the prison, where they performed it for the other inmates and staff, and now at the Festival.

Do you begin with read-throughs, or directly on the stage? How do you decide on casting, and how do you rehearse with the actors?

Regardless of who the actors are, I don't like read-throughs. You have to take possession of the space right away. Which doesn't mean you can't come back to the text and rework it by cutting some parts or making small changes. But we never do that sitting down, because it's too cold in the gymnasium where we start rehearsing in early winter! Casting decisions are based on each actor's personality, and the chorus allows us to give people who come in halfway through a role. In prison, there are those who leave and those who stay. The troupe changes, you have to stay flexible. During rehearsals, you first have to find the place where a play written two thousand years ago intersects with their own questioning. I say questioning, not experience. It's important because it's those questions that move the rehearsals forward. This way of working together has created an aesthetics of performance, wide, aggressive. I often speak in terms of fighting with them. I tell them theatre is a combat sport, *agon* in Greek, a verbal jousting match between two clashing characters, and they perform it like no one else.

What's this aesthetics of performance you speak of?

Rehearsing without costumes, without sets, in a big gymnasium where your voice has to carry, together with the way we work with my assistant Enzo Verdet, creates this particular aesthetics. Each session lasts between two and three hours, and we perform the whole play every time. Work continues outside rehearsals, in particular with them learning the text, which is a very real difficulty. Some of them are in the same building and can work on it together. Others learn it throughout the day by taping it to the walls of their workplace. This relationship with a great text—which can seem dry—brings structure to their daily life. That's why it absolutely has to echo a need for them, the questions they ask themselves or want to ask society at large.

How did the actors approach the story and the characters?

They were struck by *Antigone*, who thinks that human dignity is above social judgment. She thinks her brother should be treated with dignity even though he's been found guilty. In prison, inmates talk a lot about this double penalty. They accept losing their freedom because it is part of a sort of social contract, but not the loss of dignity implied by the awful conditions of detention. Many prisons house twice as many inmates as they should, and there are about 70,000 inmates in France today, which is unprecedented. It's even worse in remand centres. Locking up three people in a 9-square-metre cell is a form of torture. The actors deeply understood the idea in *Antigone* that a man remains a man, whatever he may have done. Another fundamental topic struck them: the Law. How is it written? Where does its legitimacy come from? Who decides it? I think that the overwhelming majority of men and women seen as guilty by the Law are not intrinsically guilty beings. There's a system of social injustice that's the real culprit.

The question of politics and religion, that of Ethics and Morals, is also at the heart of *Antigone*.

The questions asked by the actors about the characters are difficult. *Antigone* rejects the Law of the State in the name of her convictions: it can make people uncomfortable today, in a secular society. However, it has less to do with religious principles than with moral principles. When someone decides to help refugees, for instance, they consider it a moral duty—saving a human life—even when they know they're acting against the Law of the Republic. That's *Antigone*. *Antigone* is no anarchist, she embodies what philosophers call Ethics. Morals and the Law tell us what we shouldn't do. But who tells us how to live with dignity, how to lead a dignified life? That's where we need tragedy, in the sense of theatre, not of catastrophe. Tragedy is there precisely to avoid catastrophes. It reminds us that we have moral duties, that to be in peace with ourselves, the others, and the gods, we have a duty to accomplish that no one else asks of us.

Interview conducted by Francis Cossu and translated by Gaël Schmidt-Cléach