

AND...

PRESS CONFERENCE

with Jana Svobodová and Wen Hui,
July 16 at 11:00, cour du Cloître Saint-Louis

TOUR DATES AFTER THE FESTIVAL

- November 5 to 9, 2019, Théâtre des Abbesses, Paris
- November 15 and 16, Archa Theatre, Prague (Czech republic)
- November 20 and 21, L'Apostrophe
Scène nationale Cergy-Pontoise & Val d'Oise
- November 26 and 27, La Rose des Vents, Villeneuve d'Ascq
- November 30, Teatro Municipal do Porto (Portugal)

ORDINARY PEOPLE

There's something exceptional about normal people. Women, men, dancers, musicians, a worker, an artist, a self-taught director, young and old, Czech or Chinese, these *ordinary people* lay themselves bare onstage in their own language. Through touches of nostalgia, moving and funny anecdotes, memorable historic events, and personal tragedies, they lead us into their lives. Fears, wounds, hopes for freedom, each in turn tells us of a trajectory derailed by the excesses of a totalitarian communist regime. China, Czechoslovakia... So far, and yet so close! Language drives them apart, but History brings them together. Memories help build a bond. The sincerity of the words answers the memory of the bodies. Dance movements, silly songs, images projected onto a screen, and the clinking of objects against mobile barriers fill the space, forever restructuring it. In a show halfway between documentary theatre and dance, Jana Svobodová and Wen Hui give us to see emotionally-charged fragments of those extraordinary lives.

JANA SVOBODOVÁ

Born in 1962, **Jana Svobodová** graduated in 1987 from the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague, where she resides. Since 1997, she has taken part in dramatic projects with a strong social and political bent. Her creations have been performed in the Czech Republic, South Africa, and the United States. She is the artistic director of Archa.lab and of the Akcent International Festival of Documentary Theatre.

WEN HUI

Born in 1960, **Wen Hui** studied traditional Chinese dance and choreography at the Beijing Dance Academy. She studied with Trisha Brown, then with Pina Bausch's company in 1995. She founded Living Dance Studio, the first independent dance studio in China, in 1994, with documentary filmmaker Wu Wenguang. Her creations use dance, text, and documentary film (*Memory* in 2008, *Red* in 2015) to tell the story of her country through the memory of bodies.

73rd
EDITION

In order to bring you this edition, over 1,700 people, artists, technicians, and organisational staff, have worked tireless and enthusiastically for months. More than half of them are state-subsidised freelance workers.

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INTERVIEW WITH JANA SVOBODOVÁ AND WEN HUI

How did this collaborative project come about? Why did you choose the title *Ordinary People*?

Wen Hui : I first met Jana Svobodová when we visited the Archa Theatre in Prague in 2012. In 2013, we programmed Jana's play *Sólo pro Lu* for our independent festival in Beijing. Then we came back to the Archa Theatre to perform *Listening to Third Grandmother's Stories*. We realised we had a lot in common. We like to show real life on the stage, we're interested in people's intimate memories. Both of us were raised under very harsh ideological regimes. With our similar stories, we wanted to create a play together.

Jana Svobodová : Yes, we build our work in similar spaces; we've both experienced life under totalitarian communist regimes and we both believe in the personal freedom of each and every human being. Wen Hui and I have long been fascinated by the idea of telling true stories onstage, of working with "real people," and we've both been looking for an original theatrical language which couldn't be replaced by something else. We both believe in the "power of the real." Rather than "create," we use the word "make." We often say: "Don't perform!" "Don't pretend!" The title *Ordinary People* came to us after President Miloš Zeman went to China. In an interview for Chinese television, he said he hadn't come to China to preach about human rights but to learn from the Chinese how to increase economic growth, stabilise social order, and create more places of work for "ordinary people." When I told Wen about it, she was perhaps even more shocked than I was. She thought the Czech Republic was the country of Václav Havel! We started wondering who these "ordinary people" politicians talk about are. Starting with the simple statement "We're all ordinary people," we tried to figure out what it means to "be ordinary."

Onstage, the narrative is made of a succession of short scenes in which memories and fragments of life take shape. How did you build the story and structure the chronology of events for each country?

Wen Hui : During the workshops, all the participants asked each other questions, from the oldest, born in 1942, to the youngest, born in 1988. We realised there were many historic events we couldn't avoid or forget about. We therefore used chronology as the backbone of the project.

Jana Svobodová : We drew inspiration from the method of experience sharing. The questions the participants asked each other were about key moments in the history of the Czech Republic and of China. They then worked on their memories of the stories they'd listened to. All those memories thus became their story. People tend to remember moments which resonate with their own experiences. From those shared memories arose the outline of the show.

Wen Hui : The creative process of the Living Dance Studio, where I work, focuses most often on the gathering of memories and real events from people's lives. We also use the memory of the body, which is tied to society and to history. During rehearsals, all participants, including the technicians and musicians, shared their memories, both mental and of the body.

Jana Svobodová : Considering all elements of theatre as equal is and has always been one of the fundamental principles of my work. The dramatic language of *Ordinary People* grew based on everyone's unique experience. Wen is at once a dancer, the show's choreographer, and she's directing the documentaries. I trained as a puppeteer and have a long experience of movement, dance, and the performing arts. During rehearsals, we like to challenge our collaborators to express themselves however they want.

Do you want the show to be a retelling of intimate moments of life, or to be closer to a social and political chronicle? Could it also be an expression of our duty of remembrance, an artistic gesture to prevent history from repeating itself, a commitment to freedom of creation?

Wen Hui : The starting point is in fact personal stories, but those can't possibly be removed from their social and political reality.

Jana Svobodová : We can't separate politics and social questions from our personal lives, from our memories, our emotions, and our personal history. All of that is part of our creative process. On the one hand, there are stories full of personal memories, of concrete details about our families, our hopes, our desires. And on the other, there are great political and historic events we have to face as human beings. What's most interesting for us is the moment where those two lines intersect.

Wen Hui : Memory defines our future. I hope it can serve as a bridge between generations, so that even the youngest can understand history and prevent it from repeating itself. That's the only way we'll ever be free.

Jana Svobodová : In the Czech Republic, we're celebrating the 30th anniversary of the fall of the totalitarian regime. Yet people seem to forget rather easily. Society is more and more divided. I think that theatre is an amazing tool for dialogue in the world. It calls on emotions, on the memories of people, and even silent voices can be heard. I think that freedom is always very fragile. But it's an essential condition of our lives. Freedom of expression, of thought, of movement, of being who we are. I spent half my life under a communist regime. Every cell in my body was contaminated by an education system shaped by ideology, as youths we lived in a constant climate of fear. Today still we think about what we can or cannot say. Protecting the freedom we enjoy in this part of the world requires constant vigilance. We also have to protect our friends' freedom, otherwise we could easily lose ours. That's why we keep working together.

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Interview conducted by Malika Baaziz and translated by Gaël Schmidt-Cléach