



THE CHEWING OF THE DEAD

INTERVIEW WITH GROUPE MERCI

Can you tell us about the creation of the company?

Solange Oswald: I started working as an actress, but I was quickly interested in direction, even though there was little room for women directors at the time. Founding my own company was a way to question how we talk to the audience. How can we summon and bring spectators to unexpected locations? I wanted to make them experience something else than the comfort of proper theatre venues, than the frontal relationship to the stage, and to offer them something sacred and tragic where no one would have expected it. Of course, others were already working on the same questions, but it's my encounter with Joël Fescl, who worked on installations, and then with Patrick Kermann while he was on a writing residence at La Chartreuse, which strengthened this desire. And it's the principle on which we founded the company.

Joël Fescl: When we first started working together in 1996, we wanted to let surprises intrude on our work. We all had our own relationship to theatre, but we saw our creations as ephemeral installations, designed in situ, which couldn't be reproduced on tour or over several days. It's in that perspective that we created *De quelques choses vues la nuit* (*Of a few things seen at night*), a text by Patrick Kermann. From there, we continued our journey with his texts, four of which we ended up adapting. *The Chewing of the Dead* was the last one, as he died the following year, leaving us to grieve our writer. We're now up to our 29th nocturnal objects. We had no idea such a long journey awaited us; we saw *The Chewing of the Dead* as one of those non-reproducible objects.

Twenty-three years later, are you trying to reinvent the original work?

S. O.: This show was created in 1999 in the graveyard of the cloister of La Chartreuse. The installation was made up of igloo tents, of black, camping-style funeral beds, and of twenty-two actors. We walked among the graves of anonymous monks and thought that would be the end of the installation. Yet from there, our graveyard—that of the play—became a travelling graveyard. We performed in villages, forests, housing projects, monuments, and abandoned factories... It has never stopped travelling, although it's remained imbued with the essence of the original location.

J. F.: Coming back here after twenty-three years is like closing a loop, but it's also an homage to Patrick Kermann, who wrote this text and committed suicide here. Coming back to La Chartreuse is a way of ending the ritual. We're not trying to recreate the original show, but we're experiencing the culmination of something. You can't carry a project for so long without being transformed by it. We haven't analysed what we've been through all these years, but now the time has come to answer the question of the end of this journey: how to finally settle down.

Solange Oswald: La Chartreuse is a place where writers work on language, look for the right words. We had to come back to the place where things are written. Patrick Kermann gave us so much in his quest for a new writing.

Your installation also has to do with the fragmented form Patrick Kermann loved so much.

S. O.: Yes, Patrick Kermann was fascinated by the writing of fragments, and the voids it created. *The Chewing of the Dead* is made up of 170 stories. It's impossible to hear all of them, to grasp all those monologues which would last four hours if put end to end, when spectators only have an hour and a half. Throughout this oratorio, spectators must therefore make choices. Their wanderings become a random gesture which belongs to them. We're all witnesses to those stories and confidants to the dead we stop to listen to.

J. F.: Taken as a whole, the fragments do not make up a story; the quest for total unity is pointless. We like to describe this installation as a constellation of voices, all buried in the fictional graveyard of Moret-sur-Raguse. If one can find echoes between what the dead say, what binds them together is first and foremost their surprise when faced with death. Each of them tries to reconstruct their stories and to understand why and how they died. But they all find themselves unable to understand what happened to them. In a way, their constant dwelling on the past clutters up the world. The spectators find themselves dragged almost against their will into this collective quest doomed to failure.

S. O.: It was a real driving force. There are deaths we might call trivial, and then there are others that crash into History with a capital H, wars in particular. The writing becomes a machine for dreaming, interpreting, recreating, and questioning. It's all curiously very playful. When the stories end, the characters die and start again with another text, going through the same thoughts again. This repetition creates an emotional barrier which proves salutary.

J. F.: The audience is constantly forced to move on. They abandon one of the dead, but they also leave an actor behind. It's part of the experience of grief. There comes a time where we're deprived of the living, of the other.

How did you dream up the scenography?

J. F.: I imagined the installation as an exhibition. We had to "put the voices on display." The question was how to make the audience hear them all at once. When I saw Patrick Kermann's writing outline—the sketch handed out to the audience at the entrance—I heard his writing as a cartography of all those voices. With his consent we cut up his book, put the pages on the ground, and started wandering among them. That's how this idea of walking through this graveyard, which later started looking like an encampment, came to be. The architecture of La Chartreuse was also very inspiring, and I enjoyed working on the contrast between those small cloth shelters that can be assembled and disassembled and the immutability of the stone of the cloister, which is much closer to eternity. I also thought about Romanesque art, with its arches and keystones. The fibreglass arches of our small tents are a humorous reference to those noble rib vaults.

This is nocturnal object #29. Is there a through line that connects them all?

S. O.: All our shows are about the metamorphoses that happen in our lives, the metamorphoses of our identities. Death is but a perspective. We all find ourselves at some point in our lives faced with a crisis we have to overcome. If we don't, we run the risk of dying. By reinventing ourselves to find a new balance, we multiply our changes, until the very last one: death.

J. F.: Our writing took form over time, by rejecting a frontal approach or by creating away from theatre stages. What seems more significant to me, from my point of view as a plastic artist, is the way we have played with what spectators sit on over time. In *The Chewing of the Dead* we hand out tripods at the entrance. In other installations, we used small piles of books. Our way of working on how to make the audience change the way they look at the actors and on the distance between them has never stopped evolving from one project to the next. The very lively gaze of the dead creates a distance, a break, while complicating our perception of a representation. And to that you can add the troubling feeling created by being so close to an actor.

An adventure unfolding over twenty-three years implies long-term partnerships and casting changes.

S. O.: Yes. Four of the actors (out of sixteen) were there at the start, and six amateurs will join us. For three weeks, they will learn to tell the story of this village, to be "haunted" in turn by our professional obsessions. This question of training is an integral part of our work and allows us to invent different choruses of spectators every time.

Has this show changed your relationship to death?

S. O.: I see our civilisation as a broken record, spiritually-speaking. We see our dead as objects, as trash. Sartre said something similar. The heavens are empty, but we have been unable to find what to imbue with meaning instead. I think that to do theatre is to try to remedy this and bring people together again around those questions. It's also a way to enter and work in places where generosity and solidarity play a bigger part.

J. F.: This visit of a small travelling graveyard is also a meditation on our own finiteness, on the meaning of our brief passage on the surface. I like to think that the living are dead people on holiday, and that they're camping at La Chartreuse.

Interview conducted by Marion Guilloux