



THE SKY, THE NIGHT, THE CELEBRATION (LE TARTUFFE / DOM JUAN / PSYCHÉ)

INTERVIEW WITH NOUVEAU THÉÂTRE POPULAIRE

Why Molière?

Emilien Diard-Detoeuf: Back in 2009, it was with Molière that we began the adventure of Nouveau Théâtre Populaire. Twelve years later, we felt it was once again time to tackle this great ghost. We also wanted to come together around something we all share: Molière's language. And it's not an expression. Molière managed to bring together and translate into theatre constitutive elements of French society, which still exist today. The questions of the 17th century haven't necessarily been solved, either. Where are we in our relationship to the heavens, to belief, to freedom? And to the possibility that everything could collapse around us? I think it's a safe bet to say that human beings back then were aware that those weren't trivial questions, and that they probably wouldn't find an answer in a linear march towards a state of endless happiness. And that's what I want to talk about.

Léo Cohen-Paperman: Molière is France. But he's also an artist to whom we can identify: while he questions the customs and habits of his contemporaries, he also needs to be liked and to be validated by the powers that be. He is above all a popular author, who tries to entertain crowds by using all the tools of comedy and farce. In that way, we feel close to him. Nouveau Théâtre Populaire is the heir to public theatre, while remaining fundamentally popular and entertaining, and above all close to people.

Julien Romelard: Molière also writes for a troupe, motivated by his desire to direct his actors. Like him, our theatre uses meagre technical means, but we're always striving for the right words to best showcase the actors, without much else. We have also wanted for a while, along with the other artists of Nouveau Théâtre Populaire, to try our hands at a monumental work. As performers and spectators, our experience of shows as long journeys had a lasting impact on us. Hence the idea of this seven-hour odyssey, around the monument that is Molière.

Tartuffe, Don Juan, Psyché: each of you is directing one of the plays in this trilogy. Why did you pick those, and how did you have the idea of bringing them together?

Léo Cohen-Paperman: Every new project has to first be voted on. Those three plays, each of which was put forth by one of us—me for *Tartuffe*, Emilien for *Don Juan*, and Julien for *Psyché*—were therefore chosen by the entire company. The idea of performing them one after the other came later. We felt that the 17th century had found an echo in our 21st century, with its focus on identity and religion, and that there was a process apparent from one play to the next, if placed in chronological order: first the end of a world and of its beliefs, when Orgon unmasks Tartuffe; then the confrontation to a world where the heavens are empty in *Don Juan*; and finally, with *Psyché*, the possibility of a reconciliation through music, in a heaven peopled by men themselves. To open the trilogy, *Tartuffe* will be performed in period costumes! As directors, working on one part of a whole encourages us to be all the more radical in our choices. The further we go in our own directions, the more unique we are, the best the result will be for the show. As for unity, it's already guaranteed by the set and above all by the actors, who remain the same from beginning to end.

Emilien Diard-Detoeuf: What I find fascinating about *Don Juan* is the idea to keep a part of archaism, to have the modern envelope still contain the unresolved questions of a time long gone. I am alternately reassured and horrified to think that mankind hasn't evolved much in 400 years. I am more or less this same man speaking his Île-de-France patois—part Pierrot, part Sganarelle, part Don Juan. So I decided to keep the archaic language, all while telling the audience: don't let it fool you, this isn't some historical re-enactment, since those people are dressed just like you. They may speak differently, but their words describe a reality that is still ongoing. Donna Elvira asks herself questions which, 400 years later, are still relevant.

Julien Romelard: I've wanted to direct *Psyché* for a long time. It's a *comédie-ballet*, a genre created by Molière and Lully which is in a way the ancestor of the musical. I wanted to go back to that entertaining and popular dimension, notably by working on the musical parts to turn them into a moment of great cathartic and freeing celebration. Ending the trilogy with this play allows us to give a happy conclusion to the experience we're trying to share with the audience: after putting them onstage in *Tartuffe*, then alluding to their ghostly presence in *Don Juan* with empty bleachers in the middle of the stage, we finally invite them to a cathartic celebration. Because the celebration in *Psyché* is a catharsis, to purge us of the passions of *Tartuffe* and *Don Juan*. The border with which we're playing throughout this odyssey is finally abolished: it's no longer theatre, but a shared moment of life and celebration.

Léo Cohen-Paperman: It's also a journey through Molière's language: we begin with a work in Alexandrine verse, then move to one in prose, to end with a hybrid, protean play, which mixes verse, prose, and music...

All three plays are also connected thanks to "Grand Siècle", a radio project led by director Frédéric Jessua: during each intermission, the actors join a semi-improvised, semi-fictional talk show which the audience is invited to attend...

Emilien Diard-Detoeuf: Radio is an amazing media, in that it belongs at once to the past and the present. It is a source of clashes between the dead and the living, the ancient and the modern, the fictional and the realistic, which provides a very relevant echo to the confusion Molière likes to instill. Speaking of which, are we still living through a "grand siècle"? By drawing a connection between the 17th and 21st centuries, "Grand Siècle" creates infinite variations on the question of modernisation, the Holy Grail of theatre. Its presence is the condition for the freedom of our three shows in their current form. We know it will be the main thread that will connect the fabric of all three plays to create a beautiful canvas. And there's also the fact that radio isn't intrusive: spectators are free to attend the show, to listen to it from afar, or to ignore it.

What experience do you want to share with the Avignon spectators on this journey?

Léo Cohen-Paperman: With NTP, we've always put the audience at the heart of our shows: without them, nothing is possible. Our entire work consists in creating concrete encounters with people, by developing a relationship based on trust and respect. That's why we like to multiply "off-camera" effects—with "Grand Siècle", for instance, but also by allowing the audience to see the actors getting into their costumes, to talk to them... we want them to feel that the actors aren't afraid of alterity. We want a bare-bones odyssey, and we hope that it's by doing the least that we'll most allow the audience to immerse themselves in this adventure.

Emilien Diard-Detoeuf: We would like to create a sort of theatre house in Avignon. Because theatre is an art, a place, but also a worldview. Jean Vilar defined the Festival d'Avignon with these words: "the sky, the night, the people, the text, the celebration". For our trilogy, we wanted to use that quote, without "the people" or "the text"—not to erase them, but on the contrary because those realities are already at the heart of our project: with bleachers as the key element in our scenography, we literally put the audience onstage. As for the text... there's almost nothing else!

Julien Romelard: More than a trilogy, *The Sky, the Night, the Celebration* is a moment of life shared with the audience. I try to create a theatre which in its very form would encourage a political project, that of living together. It's a very simple thing, which can be understood literally: to bring together actors and spectators, to invite them to the joyous experience that is to be together in the present. The audience doesn't only come to consume culture, but to experience it; and to experience it, they have to participate—which means we have to give them a place to do so. Hence this open theatre, more accidental than sacred. A theatre without much, immediately accessible to the audience, and in which the actors bare all, without anything behind which to hide. A theatre we can all experience together, and which is, above all, joyous!

Interview conducted by Marie Lobrichon in January 2021 and translated by Gaël Schmidt-Cleach

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