


AND...

ACCESSIBILITY for blind and low vision people 

Touch visit of the show's decor on July 21st at 6:30, Cloître des Carmes
Audiodescription of the performance on July 21st at 22:00, Cloître des Carmes
Informations and booking : accessibilite@festival-avignon.com

THE WORKSHOPS OF THOUGHT

Dialogue artists-audience with Richard Brunel and the artistic team of the show,
July 22 at 16:30, site Louis Pasteur Supramuros de l'Université d'Avignon

PEDAGOGICAL FILE

Pièce (dé)montée produced by Canopé, available on festival-avignon.com

TOUR DATES AFTER THE FESTIVAL

- January 14 to 25, 2019, Théâtre des Quartiers d'Ivry, Ivry-sur-Seine
- January 30 to February 2, La Comédie de Valence
- March 13 to 15, Théâtre Dijon Bourgogne

THE BUDDHA IN THE ATTIC

In the early 1920s, thousands of Japanese women left for the United States, where they were reunited with their husbands and dreamt of an idyllic life in the country of the Gold Rush. But those hopes were quickly dashed... The novel by Japanese-American writer Julie Otsuka is about those arrivals, and the disappointments that ensued. From the everyday details of those "*new poor lives*," the writer weaves a story that ties together two continents until the Second World War, and tells of the stigmatisation of an entire community, which turned invisible in response. Director Richard Brunel, moved by this tragedy, decided to adapt this text for the theatre. To give voice to those diverse stories brought together by their similar outcome, he has surrounded himself with actresses and actors, with all their differences, and leads them on the way to becoming a collective "we" to better highlight those successive disappearances, both individual and collective, and to explore an American landscape which absorbs as much as it rejects. Starting from a little-known piece of History, *The Buddha in the Attic* presents us with the fates of women who dared to believe in a new life somewhere else.

RICHARD BRUNEL

Richard Brunel is an actor and director, and head of La Comédie in Valence. After learning from such prestigious masters as Krystian Lupa, Bob Wilson, Peter Stein, or Alain Françon, he led dramatic projects tackling both the canon and contemporary plays, literary adaptations and philosophical texts, and even opera. He likes to explore the journeys of individuals who, faced with society's pressure, become invisible. This is Richard Brunel's first show for the Festival d'Avignon.

JULIE OTSUKA

Julie Otsuka is a Japanese American writer. The reception by the Japanese American community of her novel *When the Emperor was Divine* and the personal stories she was told led to the writing of *The Buddha in the Attic*, published in 2011. Her incantatory, musical, and polyphonic style was the perfect match for Richard Brunel's musical sensibility. She received the PEN/ Faulkner Award for fiction for *The Buddha in the Attic*, which was awarded the Prix Femina étranger in France

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.

FESTIVAL-AVIGNON.COM



#FDA18



FESTIVAL D'AVIGNON 72^e

JULY 19 20 21 | 23 24 | CLOÎTRE DES CARMES

INTERVIEW WITH RICHARD BRUNEL

Can you tell us how you came across Julie Otsuka's novel *The Buddha in the Attic*?

Richard Brunel: I first encountered the text thanks to Anne Rotenberg, who asked if I'd be interested in doing a reading with three actresses. I was struck by this episode of American history and by the fate of those women: the idyllic world their future husbands described in their letters and their immense disappointment once they got there. How did they manage to face this deception, survive, and, little by little, adapt to their new circumstances? I fell in love with the form of the text—the multiplication of female voices—its content—this little-known period—and then I met Julie Otsuka, which confirmed my desire to direct the text. We met in New York, in Harlem, in a tea room full of noise, words, and sounds. She told me she wrote *The Buddha in the Attic* there. She generously wanted me to experience the singularity of the place where she found inspiration. She explained that it was while she was on a tour of the US to promote her first book, *When the Emperor Was Divine*, that she met many readers of Japanese descent, and that some of them had told her part of their story: how their parents or grandparents had first arrived to the United States. Those many testimonies guided her towards the collective voice expressed by the “we” of the novel.

How did you adapt the text for the stage?

First I had to pick the parts I thought would be best suited to orality, then, inevitably, I had to make some cuts. This adaptation is therefore made up of eight chapters that follow the anonymous fates of those women: from their crossing the ocean to their forced integration in the United States and to Pearl Harbor and the internment of the Japanese in camps, which drove anti-Japanese prejudices for part of the American community. I divided the text into two parts, with on one side “Japanese voices” and on the other “American voices”. That last part will be given to Natalie Dessay. After the gradual disappearance of the Japanese from cities and small towns alike, Americans were either in denial or ignorant of the situation. I followed a dramaturgic principle that inevitably forced me to explore the question of the chorus. I chose to turn the chorus into an instance of chorality. The point is not to unify this “we” into an “I,” but to explode that “we” into many “I”s who then choose to speak as one or to let us hear their disagreements. It's the polyphony that highlights the uniqueness of each story. The question of adaptation arises as soon as the goal isn't to stick as close to the text as possible but to create a complementary vision to the one developed in the novel. The work we do with the actors then becomes critical. Working with them allows me to understand what words we need to keep, what words we need to shift to the bodies or the situations.

Did you focus your research on the stage with your team on a specific topic?

I wanted to make people hear the words of thousands of women through those of about fifty of them, thanks to eight actresses. Men are also present: four almost-silent actors represent all the male figures they interact with in society or in their families: bosses, husbands, children. I think it's important that they manage to express a journey at once individual and collective to come back to the essence of incantation, to the musicality of the text, to the scansion of these “wretched” fates. The power of the writing resides in the graceful and yet brutal interlocking

of introspection and collective speaking, which reminds me of the chorus in tragedies. The team of actors and actresses is culturally very diverse; some are Japanese, others Korean, others Chinese, others yet French, and all have very strong ties to Asia in their personal lives, which allowed them to bring to the stage rich experiences conducive to improvisation. We couldn't work without opening ourselves up to other worlds, without looking for material outside of the novel.

This text asks the question of space, between their lives at sea, their travels throughout the United States, from their husbands' houses to the internment camps. How did you deal with the idea of never-ending movement?

A group of women from our present time tell this story in the past tense. They tell what happened since the initial journey by boat, this crossing towards the United States which was at once a break and a beginning. As they're crossing the Pacific Ocean, they invite us to explore their past. I'm trying to take the audience on a journey, which I'm doing thanks to an almost cinematic treatment of the subject: with close-ups, wide shots, by creating collective movements, by putting wagons on the stage and on the floor an abstract matter, an embodiment of the metaphor that runs throughout the novel, about the uprooting and loss of origins of those characters. I'm trying to shine a light on the poetic strength of the text while also revealing its symbolic power. The abstract matter covering the floor will therefore express this idea of uprooting, of the loss of a land as personal anchor. Those Japanese women find themselves in a nightmare place which they have to tame and embody. Just like they gave their bodies in different ways when they got to the US, we're giving them bodies on the stage to remember them even if we don't know their names. Because what the novel shows is how an entire community can disappear overnight and be erased from places, minds, and hearts, from memories.

One can't not hear the underlying comment about the current migratory issues we're facing...

I also wanted to direct this text because it is relevant today. It seems obvious that, as subtle as the writing is, it invites us to zoom in on fundamental issues. How does a community slowly break up in a country? How does it lose cohesiveness? On a more general note: how can one preserve one's identity? And similarly, how can one become a stranger in a country where one has lived and which, through a succession of causes, starts to stigmatise its own people? There were three phases to the arrival of the Japanese in the US. There was a first wave of men which we might want to call the gold rush, then from 1907 to 1924, a period of settling down, with the arrival of the women. Japanese ghettos started appearing in cities. Then with Pearl Harbor, doubt and suspicion began to spread in the minds of Americans. Boycotts were organised, and rumours of spying led to denunciations and to the disappearance of men suspected of working against the American government. In the end, over 70,000 Japanese were arrested and deported. According to the authorities, the goal was to prevent possible threats the intensification of racial conflicts might have caused. In their daily lives, they carried that guilt and felt like they had to prove they were loyal to the country. It's that question of loyalty I want to highlight. At some point, one of the women talks about the way they were seen by Americans in 1941 and says, “And what would have prevented one of us from going to a crowded marketplace with an explosive belt? Nothing.” The descendants of those Japanese haven't failed to see the parallel between their grandparents' situation and that of more recent immigrants to Trump's America.

Interview conducted by Marion Guilloux and translated by Gaël Schmidt-Cléach