



THE SOLDIER AND THE BALLERINA

INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT SANDOZ

***The Soldier and the Ballerina* tells the story of two toys who have to face the challenges of the outside world. What difficulties threaten them?**

Robert Sandoz: This world is threatening because it isn't theirs. Fairy tales have the universal power of being able to tell all stories at once. Here we have two toys, which we quickly come to think of as two children. We see them as entering the world of the grown-ups on their own. It isn't an unlivable world in and of itself, but the toys simply aren't prepared for it. We'll never be able to prepare children to enter the adult world. We can tell them what it feels like, explain sensations or emotions, but they can't anticipate or understand what we mean until they've experienced it for themselves. This story is about the tribulations of two children who find themselves out of step with a world they don't know. It's important to me that there should be several different ways to understand the show. Some scenes tell us very quickly about the situation of two refugee children who, with no passports, find themselves stuck at the border. Others are about what it feels like to be an orphan or not to have the support of one's parents, or of the adults who are supposed to help you. There's a place for the story of every child in this tale. And also, maybe, for a story about the way we learn to pick ourselves up again after a fall. We all know that, one day or another, we'll fall, without being able to prevent it, but we can learn to get back up again. And those two toys discover that if what gives life its flavour is games, pleasure, and joy, it is made of much more than just that.

In this play by Roland Schimmelfennig, two actors have to play all the characters of the story. How do you play with those constraints?

Every game has its rules. Constraints have always been a part of my work. Rules and constraints exist to make playing possible. They also encourage us to come up with new ideas. Instinctively, we try to push the boundaries set by constraints, to subvert the rules... Throughout my career, I've always wanted to work on ensemble plays, with several characters whose stories and narratives intertwine. The achievement of Roland Schimmelfennig's play is to have so few actors play so many characters. It becomes a game. His writing is made for the theatre, you can see it in the text itself, there's a real trust in words. The actors sometimes only have to say "I am this character" to the audience to become it. I think this theatrical device is a source of joy, for the actors but also for the spectators. And this joy, this pleasure, helps offset, or at least lighten, the very dark and harsh way Roland Schimmelfennig paints society, in all of his plays. It's a distinctive trait of his. I see the presence of this joy on stage as necessary to play with the audience. If I were to talk to a child before the show, I'd tell them "Rejoice, it's going to rock!"

It seems important to you that the audience never feel entirely at ease with a linear, fluid story. What is the place of the spectator in *The Soldier and the Ballerina*?

I like the idea of the audience having to meet us halfway during the show. Here it's also a result of the play's dramaturgy: we don't have the time to explicitly show every location change, so you have to call on the spectator's imagination, on their desire to follow us into a story. Roland Schimmelfennig's *The Soldier and the Ballerina* is like a road movie, the characters never return to a place they've seen before. So we had to come up with a few signs that would allow the audience to follow us, the rest is up to them. To that end, I paid very close attention to the materials we use: the paper of the ballerina, the lead of the soldier, the water of the sewers, the sky... I like to work on the lightness and weight of elements, of matter, to create those different spaces. When I create a show for younger audiences, I try not to think of what I would have wanted to see as a child. Because that show would be thirty years behind the times. I think we have to be wary of nostalgia as a creative force, which would drive us to create something for the person we once were. Today's children live in a world with its own references, its own culture; you have to play with those to create things that talk to them, which is why I've chosen to focus on a very contemporary aesthetics. I refuse to treat child spectators any differently than I would adult ones. Except maybe in the sense that children have a much easier time accepting narrative skips and abrupt changes. I also think that the sociology of child audiences is even more diverse than that of adult spectators, and I like it. There's a story for everyone here.

Roland Schimmelpfennig's work is a dialogue with the original tale by Hans Christian Andersen, and he rewrites some of its key events. What is your relationship with Roland Schimmelpfennig's text?

Before I started working on this play, the Hans Christian Andersen fairy tale wasn't really part of my world. Then the Editions de l'Arche asked me to direct a text for children by Roland Schimmelpfennig for the second time—I'd already directed his *Golden Dragon*. So I delved into the fairy tale. The first dialogue to me is between Roland Schimmelpfennig and Andersen. In the original story, the reader follows the adventures of a soldier, who ends up burned in the fireplace. Roland Schimmelpfennig gives a story and a voice to the ballerina, who is no longer simply the soldier's lost love. She becomes a character to whom things happen and who feels emotions. I like the fact that the male and female characters are on an equal footing in the parallel structure of the story. The story itself then becomes the object of a game in and of itself, to the point that the Soldier and the Ballerina are able to change the ending of the fairy tale whenever they want, and thus escape their fate—even though it was announced at the beginning of the play! To all the trials and tribulations Hans Christian Andersen has them go through in the tale, Roland Schimmelpfennig responds with the brilliance of the love that unites those two characters and allows them to hold on, to endure, to overcome all those obstacles. The permeability of the characters makes for very interesting work with the actors.

Interview conducted by Lucie Madelaine

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