

AND...

PRESS CONFERENCE with Faustin Linyekula,
July 19 at 11:00, cour du Cloître Saint-Louis

TOUR DATES AFTER THE FESTIVAL

- March 5 to 10, 2020, NTGent, Gent (Belgium)
- March 13 and 14, Kaaithheater, Brussels (Belgium)
- March 25, Theater Rotterdam Schouwburg (Netherlands)
- March 27 and 28, NTGent, Gent (Belgium)
- April 4, Stadsschouwburg, Amsterdam (Netherlands)
- May 17 and 18, Künstlerhaus Mousonturm, Frankfurt am Main (Germany)
- May 21 to 23, Wiener Festwochen, Vienna (Austria)

HISTORY/IES OF THEATRE II

After *The Repetition - History/ies of Theatre (I)*, created last year for the Festival d'Avignon, director Milo Rau offered Faustin Linyekula the opportunity to continue this reflection about the theatre. For this *History/ies of Theatre II*, the Congolese choreographer turned to his own childhood and his memories of the first show by the National Ballet of Zaire under Mobutu's dictatorial regime. Accompanied by three artists who are still part of that institution, at once memory and survivor of an ambiguous cultural policy, and by two Congolese and Belgian actors, Faustin Linyekula brings personal stories and History face to face, using the forms of his art: the presence of bodies in a post-colonial context, and the lively and generous alliance of singing, dance, and theatre. Like a house in which everyone is free to come and go as they please, the stage welcomes personal histories and national narrative, privacy and new perspectives.

FAUSTIN LINYEKULA

Born in 1974, **Faustin Linyekula** is a dancer, choreographer, director, and storyteller. After studying literature and theatre, he founded a company in Kenya before coming back to the Republic of Congo to create a "space" of exchange and creation: Studios Kabako first in Kinshasa, then in Kisangani. His shows, which are like storytelling sessions, have been performed throughout the world. Faustin Linyekula is well-known to the audience of the Festival d'Avignon.

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COUR MINÉRALE - AVIGNON UNIVERSITÉ

INTERVIEW WITH FAUSTIN LINYEKULA

Last year, director Milo Rau presented *The Repetition - History/ies of Theatre (I)* at the Festival d'Avignon. How did you approach the creation of this sequel?

Faustin Linyekula : I first met Milo Rau to talk about his show *The Congo Tribunal*. We met again a few months later when he was named director of the NTGent. He told me about his project of turning *History/ies of Theatre* into a series open to other directors and choreographers, who could use it to explore their relationship to the stage. The concept of History, and the sharing of stories, is central to my work. I'm interested in the possibility of adapting for the stage stories whose first quality was to touch me personally. They are de facto theatre stories. As soon as I heard this idea, my oldest memories of theatre came back to me: the National Ballet of Zaire, founded in 1974, which I never saw "for real" as a child but later discovered while watching Télé Zaire, in black and white, under Mobutu's dictatorial regime.

What made the specificity of African national ballets?

At the time when African states were becoming independent, Sékou Touré, President of Guinea-Conakry, was the first to establish a national ballet. It was part of a specific reflection: how to give a "sense of a nation" to a fledgling State? For those African States based on colonial borders invented during the Berlin conference at the end of the 19th century, Sékou Touré had an impressive answer: to create a space in which different ethnic groups could come together as a single nation through their dances and music. What's interesting, for a State trying to find its place in History, is the choice of the term "ballet," itself a symbol of colonialism! This model was then adapted by many young independent States in Sub-Saharan Africa. Within those countries, the ballets served as spaces of mass education; outside of their borders, they were diplomatic tools. Whenever you had a summit of African States, each President showed up with his. It was a little about who had the prettiest dancers. In short, it was a way to assert their power.

How did this ballet function in the Congo, formerly Zaire, under a dictatorial regime?

Mobutu joined the dance in 1974, the year I was born... After establishing his power through violence, he tried to gain prestige by founding this ballet and, the same year, organising the global spectacle that was the boxing match between Muhammad Ali and George Foreman. My first memories are from the 1980s, when I discovered a filmed version of the ballet on television. There was only one channel, and we'd wait all afternoon for those masks, drums, and dancers whose make-up and costumes terrified and fascinated us. There were so many reruns that after a while we knew all the songs and dances by heart.

With *History/ies of Theatre II*, I wanted to go back to that time, to give a name to those beings, a face to those masks, to all those people who made me dream. I asked myself: are some of those people I used to see on TV still alive? Are they still part of the National Ballet? In Kinshasa, I soon met three performers and invited them to appear in the show. Two of them have been part of the ballet since 1974 and appeared in *L'Épopée de Lianja* (*The Lianja Epic*), the most overtly political creation of the Ballet; the third joined the show in 1975. Lianja is a founding myth of the peoples of Northeast Congo. Mobutu used that story to talk about the birth of all the peoples of Zaire. And painted himself as Lianja, father of the nation.

How do those dancers now feel about this propaganda piece? And how did you direct them?

They talk about that period with stars in their eyes. They enjoyed financial and material comfort on a level so far unheard of in the Congo. As for the direction, I tried to rely on fragments of stories, by focusing on how each of them came to join the Ballet National. Marie-Jeanne Ndjoku played Lianja's sister in the original creation, and was only onstage for a few minutes. It was the role of her life. Everything is cast in a new light when you learn that the National Ballet has only originated four creations since 1974, and that the last one was in 1984... After *L'Épopée de Lianja*, the other three creations were moral stories about good, evil, tradition... Village stories. In 1984, the Congo entered a period of crisis. The government decided to "clean up the civil service," and the National Ballet went from eighty artists to about thirty.

You're putting their careers as dancers side by side with other stories...

The first one, which is a true story, is that of Congolese actor Papy Maurice Mbwati. His father took a competitive exam to be part of the translation team for the President, in direct contact with Mobutu. After the fall of the regime, he found himself incapable of paying for his son's tuition. In a monologue that's key to the show, Papy tells the story of this fallen father: "I grew up in a country where I felt like I was the strongest. Until the day I understood how fragile I truly was..." Oscar Van Rompay, from Belgium, explores an entirely different question, this one fictional: what would have happened if, upon independence, some Belgians had decided to become Congolese? Kenya gave Britons the opportunity to become Kenyans. If, in 1974, Mobutu had invited Flemish people into the National Ballet to strengthen his regime, what would it have looked like? The chasm between Europe and the Congo, between Belgium and the Congo, has grown so much... Today, 25% of secondary-school students in Belgium don't know that the Congo was once a Belgian colony...

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Interview conducted by Marc Blanchet
and translated by Gaël Schmidt-Cléach